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The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.
Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

to arrive not later than two weeks after publication of this report.

Assembly Members

Agnew, Steven (North Down)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)
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Wells, Jim (South Down)
Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 24 March 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

British-Irish Council: Social Inclusion Work Sector

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): In accordance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the sixth ministerial meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC) social inclusion work sector, which took place in Edinburgh on 11 March 2015. The First Minister and deputy First Minister were unable to attend, and, in accordance with the provisions of the Act, they nominated junior Minister McCann and me to attend in their place.

The Scottish Government hosted the ministerial meeting, and the heads of delegations were welcomed by Shona Robison MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport. The Welsh Government were represented by Mark Drakeford AM, the Minister for Health and Social Services, who was unable to be present but joined the meeting via telecon. The UK Government were represented by Jon Rouse, the director general for social care, local government and care partnerships at the Department of Health. The Irish Government were represented by Ann Phelan TD, a Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the Hon Howard Quayle MHK, the Minister for Health and Social Care. The Government of Guernsey were represented by the Chief Minister, Deputy Jonathan Le Tocq, and the Government of Jersey were represented by Senator Paul Routier MBE, the Assistant Minister at the Chief Minister's Department.

At the meeting, the joint chairs of the work sector — the Scottish and Welsh Governments — gave a presentation of the work of the sector, which included visits to all eight jurisdictions, and highlighted the models of good practice that were visited. Following the

presentation, we discussed and reviewed the final report of the work sector, 'Spend to Save: Innovative Approaches to Preventative Spend'.

We noted the many different, creative and, importantly, community-based approaches to supporting older people to optimise their independence and help them to remain in a place that they call home, in a community that they feel connected to, for as long as they possibly can. The report was unanimously welcomed and approved for publication on the British-Irish Council website, www.britishirishcouncil.org.

Turning to the future work programme, at the meeting, we discussed the proposal to have carers as the next topic for the work sector. After discussion, it was agreed that carers should be the next topic and that our officials, working closely with the BIC secretariat, should begin to consider how we can support carers by looking at best practice, new and creative policy responses and community actions across the eight Administrations. Given that the policy for carers lies with the Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, it will be for DHSSPS to represent the Northern Ireland Executive on the work sector. The BIC secretariat will confirm the arrangements for the first meeting, which is likely to be in May 2015 in Edinburgh.

To allow the work sector to complete its work on carers, it was agreed that the next ministerial meeting for the social inclusion work sector will take place in Wales in late 2017 or early 2018.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for bringing the statement to the House this morning. How important does he believe it is to move from our current model of intervention to preventative spend?

Mr Bell: The Member raises a critical point that is a thread throughout the report. We have some very good current interventions, but when we look to the future and celebrate the fact that we have a population that is growing older, living longer and, in many cases, living healthier

lives, we need to look at whether the current model is fit for the future.

Two things come through from all the good practice across the jurisdictions. One is that no one size fits all. We have taken approaches in Northern Ireland such as having the Commissioner for Older People, which is recognised across the House and, more importantly, by the elder care sector to have been a huge success and an excellent piece of legislation that has translated into excellent practice by Commissioner Claire Keatinge and her staff and by the elder care sector that provide them with advice and support.

No single model will fit everywhere. We need to look to where future needs will lie. We know that there are major concerns around social isolation, loneliness and the impact that these place on physical and mental health. There are many models of governments looking at the networks and support systems they already have, and putting money in early to prevent some of the later problems that will come about if they do not do it. It is not something that we have the option not to do. Preventative spend is the key to how we can deliver a service, to our elderly people, that is fit for purpose into the future.

To answer Mr Moutray's question directly: preventative spend is the key future intervention.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement. Regarding the final report on Spend to Save, can the Minister give any examples of models of good practice in supporting older people to remain in their home? I was speaking to an older person over the weekend, and they told me that the only things that are important to them are meat and heat.

Mr Bell: The Member has probably hit on the two critical factors for elderly people: "meet" to combat social isolation and loneliness, and the fact that, because older people are, in many cases, not in work environments, they have to heat their own homes. Through you, Mr Speaker, did I get that right?

Ms McGahan: Meat.

Mr Bell: Meet?

Ms McGahan: Eating.

Mr Bell: Eating as well, of course.

The first model that I would say is best, which was universally recognised at the time, was — when you ask a psychologist to go into science, it becomes difficult, and I am unsure of the technical term — the telerobot, I call it. Basically, it allows people to be remotely assessed by a consultant in a different venue, who is given a clear and accurate picture of their symptoms and vital signs, so that they have an interaction without being displaced. That is the first critical model.

Secondly, we realise that we face a huge problem, not just in Northern Ireland, but in Guernsey, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, with severe loneliness in our ageing population. There are a number of mechanisms to deal with that. One was the concept of the men's shed, of which we have an example in Northern Ireland. I spoke to those who run the men's shed in Belfast Castle, which is a facility for groups of men to meet through different initiatives, such as crafts. Service users reported that it was a lifeline.

We have to ensure, finally, that there is proper financial provision for the elderly, because diet is critical to their well-being; that is a given.

Mr Attwood: The report confirms that Spend to Save was unanimously welcomed and approved for publication. I note that one size does not fit all, but there were, nonetheless, a lot of examples in the report of best practice. Can the Minister outline how his Department, and other relevant Departments, will use a report that was unanimously welcomed and approved to identify other best practice that could be mainstreamed into the life of government here in advance of the next comprehensive spending review (CSR), which, as we know, if the Tories get their way, will be even more severe over the next four years than it has been over the last four? What will your Department, and other relevant Departments, do to take forward a report that was unanimously welcomed, and will there be subsequent reports to the Assembly? Otherwise, this is good work that will sit on a shelf.

Mr Bell: It is a strong question, Mr Speaker. First, what my Department does in the active ageing strategy will be embedded in the work of all other Departments, because, as the Member will know as a former Minister, once it is agreed at the Executive, it becomes an Executive strategy and all other Departments are obliged, and would want, to take it forward.

I pay tribute to the active ageing working group, which is working alongside us. The group has

asked for a further meeting, which why we have not brought the strategy forward just yet. We will have one further meeting before bringing the strategy forward together. It is based on ensuring that older people can maximise their personal independence. We have already involved older people and the age sector in the decision-making. From the very beginning, the strategy has been informed by the views of older people to ensure their participation in the work of government for their future. We know that, in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, there is an issue with care, particularly how it is received in the home or the community — wherever works best.

10.45 am

Some of the examples that we have used from other Departments are taken from spatial planning, in particular.

Spatial planning is not solely for older people. A person close to me has multiple sclerosis, and I know about some of the difficulties that can occur when you push a wheelchair. You can see the spatial difficulties that exist for people when it comes to parking, when roads are half blocked by cars, when obstacles are left on roads or when you have to negotiate your way around wheelie bins and those sorts of things. There are practical things that we can do in our future spatial planning, not only for this sector but for many other people, such as mothers with prams and buggies and different things.

In the older persons' sector, we want to move towards self-fulfilment. We want to consult with older people to see how we can maximise their potential and their contribution. The final piece of work that we are doing, which contributes to the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, is to do with dignity. How do we make sure that the care that an older person gets maximises the dignity that we can offer to them? That work will all be taken forward in the active ageing strategy and will be embedded into the work of all the other Departments. A lot of what is in the strategy will come before you all shortly and, because it was informed by older people, it will help us to deliver more for older people in our society.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the fact that British, Irish and Northern Irish Ministers are working together on social inclusion. I welcome the publication of the Spend to Save report, which looks at best practice in supporting older people, and that carers are going to be focused

on at the next meeting. However, I have to be honest; I am none the wiser as to what actual policy proposals or actions are going to be taken as a result of this particular piece of work. Why is the next ministerial meeting not scheduled to take place until 2018?

Mr Bell: Obviously, a number of pieces of work have to go ahead. In this piece of work, all eight jurisdictions were visited and the models of good practice were examined, tested and audited. The two particular pieces of good practice, which go on day and daily and for which Northern Ireland, in many ways, stands head and shoulders above others, are the work that the Commissioner for Older People is doing and the work of the telepresence robot, which, as I said earlier, facilitates older people not to have to go through that level of displacement and transportation and all the difficulties that that can bring about. It keeps people in their own areas, closer to their families and with their communities, which is the best model, in many cases, for helping an older person to heal. Those were the two practical examples.

Each jurisdiction is visited, the models are examined, and then they are brought together. I am glad that the Member has welcomed the need for preventative spend. That will put a huge challenge to us all in the House. The easiest thing to do would be to continue to throw money at an existing model, but, if we are going to future-proof the needs of elderly people in our society, throwing money at the current model will not meet their needs. A paradigm shift needs to take place where we move towards preventative spend. Initially, this will cause difficulties, because when you slice a cake, there are only so many ways to do it. If you move more money into preventative spend, you have to take it from elsewhere. Unless we make that paradigm shift in health, particularly for the elder care sector, in order to put more money into prevention, the cost will become very difficult to bear in the future. The critical lesson that was learned from this piece of work was about preventative spend.

Mr Spratt: I thank the junior Minister for his statement to the House this morning. Many old people will welcome creative and community-based approaches to supporting old people to be independent and to live in their own homes. That would be very much welcomed. What does the junior Minister see as the most pressing risks facing our older people at this moment in time?

Mr Bell: I thank Mr Spratt for his question. I will answer it in two words: loneliness and isolation. They are probably interlinked. When I think of the health service, preventative spend and what we can do to try to ease the burden and make all our lives, including older people's lives, healthier, there are certain things that stick out. Obesity is a major problem for the health service. Many of us, me included, are carrying too much weight. Then, there is alcohol abuse and smoking. Those are the three things that stick out to all of us as the issues that we are all talking about.

What surprised me at the meeting with the professionals and in the work that our officials did very well in the working group was that isolation and loneliness are as big killers — I use the word advisedly — of our elderly people as obesity, smoking and alcohol abuse. That came from a professional recommendation. It puts a major challenge on all of us as to what we do with older people whom we care for in our families. Can we realise and focus on it for a moment? Isolation and loneliness are as much of a killer of our elderly people as some of the difficulties encountered with alcohol abuse, smoking and obesity. Again, another paradigm shift needs to take place so that, when giving resources, we look at what we spend but also at what networks we currently have. How can we use what we already have to make sure that isolation and loneliness are no longer such a major threat to our elderly people?

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his report. I note that, in relation to the future work programme, there is a proposal to have carers as the next topic. It seems to me that, if sufficient resources were given to carers, that in itself would be a very progressive step in preventative spend. Will the Minister give us a flavour of what is meant by the topic of carers? In what direction does he think the various jurisdictions will go?

Mr Bell: I thank the Member for his question because I think it highlights the contributions that carers make in our society, which, all too often, we forget. It is not hyperbole to say that, as the Member indicates in his question, unless carers are properly supported, the health and social care system would literally collapse without their contribution. I know that the Member for East Belfast talked about the actual meeting coming later on, but the next meeting of the work sector that will look at that should take place in two months' time in Edinburgh.

There are a couple of things. First of all, we need to speak to carers to find out where the gaps in their support are. Secondly, we need to

find out what training and resources they actually need. In many cases, it will be physical equipment, and, in other cases, it will be training that they need, because often many carers find themselves in the situation because they just happen to be a family member. I saw it in my own family as well. What training does that person actually need? Thirdly, I do not want to do the work sector's work for it here at the minute, but, if we look at the cost of what it takes to bring a person into hospital and the difficulties that that causes in not having other operational work carried out because beds are not available, add up all of that cost and examine it against the cost of properly financially supporting a carer within the person's own home, we could well find out that, if we do it properly, we could not only do it well but do it at less cost and provide a better flow.

I speak to older people as part of the responsibility that we have in ministerial office. None of them wants to stay in hospital. They often stay in hospital because the provision of care in their own home would be inadequate to meet the dignity of what they need. Many people out there in the health service and the private sector have the skills to help keep a person in their home at a fraction of what it would cost to use a care facility or a hospital. In the future, in preventative spend, we need to look at what a person needs and what standards of quality they need in their care. It is not just a question of a cheaper service. What is the standard that we expect an older person to have? What is the training level that we need to give to a person to meet that standard? What financial resource do we need to give that carer, so that, if they have to give up work to care for somebody, as happens in many cases, they can get adequate financial support for their own families to allow them to care for the person they love? Those are the models that we are going to have to look at in the future.

We know that older people want to spend as much time with their families as possible. We know that, not always but in the majority of cases, older people are telling us consistently that they want to live in their own homes and within their own communities because that is where they get physical, mental and psychological stimulation and draw emotional support. We need to ask how we redraw a model that says, "Instead of caring for you when you take sick, we will put in resources so that we can care for you to prevent you getting sick."

North/South Ministerial Council: Agriculture

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the 1998 Act regarding the 24th meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the agriculture sector held in Armagh on Wednesday 25 February. The Executive were represented by Minister Jim Wells MLA and me. The Dublin Government were represented by Simon Coveney TD, Minister in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), and Ann Phelan TD, Minister of State at the Department of Environment and Local Government. Minister Coveney chaired the meeting on this occasion, and I have agreed my statement with the accompanying Minister Jim Wells.

Ministers had a discussion on the opportunities that exist for the agriculture sector in various EU funding streams. The Council welcomed the ongoing collaboration and cooperation in this area and agreed that every effort should be made to maximise the drawdown from these funds where it is mutually beneficial to do so. The Council noted the recent developments in plans for implementation of the common agricultural policy reforms agreed in 2013, including administrative measures for direct payment schemes. Ministers also welcomed the ongoing cooperation between the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and DARD on these issues.

The Council welcomed the continued work on the delivery of the all-island animal health and welfare strategy action plan since the last NSMC agriculture meeting. Key points of note in the action plan include: the ongoing high level of cooperation between both jurisdictions as manifested by participation in a successful and useful epizootic disease contingency planning exercise dealing with African swine fever in November 2014 and a whole-house poultry gassing exercise in October 2014; parallel applications to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) for classical swine fever disease-free status; the introduction of a common chapter in the event of an outbreak of African horse sickness on the island; and progress made by DARD on its goal of submitting an application for officially brucellosis-free status to the Commission in March 2015. DAFM is maintaining a cow cull monitor, abortion notification and post-abortion sampling, and will liaise with DARD colleagues

on the timing of the removal of the pre-movement test requirement.

Our improving animal health status and mutual contingency preparations contribute towards our reputation for the production of quality agriproduce for sale to export markets. I am pleased to note that China and Australia have confirmed their intention to visit pork establishments here in the near future, with a view to agreeing export protocols.

Ministers noted that, in October 2014, the DARD and DAFM plant health subgroup commissioned a scientific appraisal of further actions to implement the policy to contain and eradicate ash dieback in both jurisdictions. The scientific group concluded that the eradication of ash dieback was still possible and recommended a continued programme of surveillance and eradication. The Council also noted that the plant health section of the EU Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed met on 19 and 20 January and that both Britain and Ireland secured agreement from member states and the Commission for ash dieback measures to remain in place for 2015 while efforts continue to eradicate the disease.

11.00 am

Ministers agreed that, in addition to the planned proactive support by DARD and DECLG for LEADER cooperation activities, including the provision of appropriate staff resources, there should also be a focus on wider opportunities for accessing support from other EU funding programmes, not including the European agricultural fund for rural development. They also agreed the provision of funding for 2015-16, initially to support the further development and promotion of social farming, and welcomed the ongoing cooperation of officials in closing their respective current rural development programmes, preparing for the 2014-2020 programmes and developing rural recreation. The Council agreed that the next meeting in the agricultural sectoral format will take place in autumn 2015.

Mr Irwin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to a:

"discussion on the opportunities that exist for the agriculture sector in various EU funding streams."

Will the Minister elaborate on that and, at the same time, indicate when she expects the EU Commission to sign off on Northern Ireland's rural development programme for 2014-2020?

Mrs O'Neill: We are working collaboratively and in cooperation, particularly in looking towards Horizon 2020 and the opportunities that exist there.

The Executive have a Programme for Government commitment to increase our drawdown of European funding, and that is also a very clear target of the economic strategy. The Executive and DAFM in the South now have contact points in place. They work very closely together, particularly on the work that is done by the all-Ireland steering group on Horizon 2020. So quite a lot of work is going on jointly between officials to explore all the opportunities for funding collaborative research projects, and not just opportunities within the EU and Horizon 2020. They are also looking towards the US. There is a body of work ongoing that is attempting to facilitate that collaborative work.

There are opportunities for us, and we need to work together collaboratively on any opportunities. Given the financial climate that we all face, where there are areas of mutual benefit, we should exploit them to the maximum.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In her statement, the Minister referred to the potential of new export markets in Australia and China. Can she elaborate on those possible new opportunities?

Mrs O'Neill: Export markets are essential for our growth. They are at the core of our economic strategy, particularly for Going for Growth and the agrifood sector. DAFM colleagues recently provided assistance and advice to DARD following their experience of the preparation that they undertook for the US beef inspection last year, which led to the opening up of that market. That work is key for us as we also try to unlock that market. I am glad that that work at official level is ongoing.

As I said in my statement, preparations are also under way to facilitate inward inspections by China and Australia, and those will happen over the next number of months. Particularly for the pork sector, we are very keen to make sure that we get that inspection so that we can open up that market. The industry here has been keenly awaiting that.

The Member will be aware that a number of inspections have been cancelled in the past, but we are very positive that we will achieve those inspections over the next number of months. We have received confirmation of the names of the inspectors who are coming. That is further than we have ever got in the past and therefore is quite positive. China and Australia are important for the pork sector, but the Philippines is another key market for the beef sector.

We are working with the industry on the markets that it has identified as being priorities and with whatever partners that we need to work with, whether DAFM in the South or DEFRA in England, to get into and secure access to new markets. That is key for the growth and sustainability of the sector.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her statement. What lessons can be learnt from the Republic about CAP pillar 1 so that our basic payments system can be less bureaucratic and more farmer-friendly in administrative terms? Will she also outline why the Republic seems to be more successful in tackling bovine TB? It has a much lower incidence level compared with our past experience.

Mrs O'Neill: When the CAP negotiations started at European level, we went out with a clear desire for a simpler CAP. The reality is that Europe has given us a more complicated CAP. It will be difficult for the farmer to understand it and for the Department to administer it. That said, we are trying to get as much information out there as possible.

We have devised systems and practices and put them in place for the new CAP to try to keep things as simple as possible, but there is no doubt that it is a time of big change for the farming industry. We have to work with the industry to try to manage that and to give farmers all the information that we possibly can. I have attended quite a number of large gatherings and public meetings that have been very successful in reaching out and giving information to farmers. For people who wish to avail themselves of those opportunities, a number of DARD roadshows will be happening over the next number of weeks to try to get that information out there. That is key to embracing the change that is occurring.

It is certainly not a simpler system. Europe has given us something quite difficult: moving from a single farm payment to possibly up to three payments. That is quite a difficult system to manage. However, I think that we are charting

our way through that in the best possible terms that we can.

The Member's second question relates to TB. Obviously, TB levels are different in the Twenty-six Counties. We have a very strong eradication plan in place and are working hard to eradicate TB. We will continue on that path. We have our EU-approved plan. The Member will be aware that we have a TB strategic partnership in place that looks at all aspects of TB, given the complexity of the disease and the difficulties that most EU countries face in tackling it. There is quite a large ongoing body of work. I hope that we can be in a position at some stage in the future to be TB-free right across the island, which will obviously help and enhance our opportunities of getting into other export markets.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for her statement today. She mentioned that work is being done to achieve officially brucellosis-free (OBF) status in Northern Ireland. Will she expand on what that would mean for trade and on the differences in the approaches of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in working to achieve OBF status?

Mrs O'Neill: The Twenty-six Counties are already free of brucellosis. We have now applied for our free status from Europe and are on target to achieve that. We are talking about savings to the industry of £7 million for pre-movement testing for farmers. That is quite a significant financial saving and a cost that farmers will no longer have to worry about. That is significant in itself.

It is a win-win situation for us, because our free status will open up new markets in local industry and right across the island. The aim of the animal health and welfare strategy is to get us to a stage at which we have the same disease status across the island so that there are no barriers to trade. The NSMC, Minister Coveney and I, and officials, are involved with that ongoing work. There are significant savings for the farming industry by our achieving this free status.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Has the industry here reached the conditions yet to allow her to introduce compulsory bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) testing?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that I previously announced that I was minded to introduce legislation and to make it compulsory

for herd keepers to test newborn bovines for BVD. Since then, the Department has been working closely with industry in developing the legislative framework to support an eradication programme.

The Department has now finalised the draft legislation that would require all newborn bovines here to be tested for the BVD virus. The legislation is being considered by the EU Commission and could now be entered into the legislative process here, which involves consideration by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Executive before it can become law. However, before I am in a position to introduce legislation here, it will be necessary for Animal Health and Welfare NI to demonstrate to the Department that it has sufficient private sector funding to enable it to maintain the implementation of the eradication programme going forward without the need for further public funding. That will be particularly important not only because of the pressures that are on public funding but because of the need for the industry to lead in tackling this production disease. I am very supportive and commend the work that Animal Health and Welfare NI has done to date. It has presented a first draft of its viability and sustainability plan, which is under consideration by officials.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the ongoing cooperation, but considering the end of the US embargo on European beef and the very successful trade mission recently by Minister Coveney and beef producers in the South to the US and the resultant ABP deal, and considering that the Irish Government have really done the spade work here, what discussions have taken place? Does the Department have a strategy for marketing beef from here in the US?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, we clearly have a strategy: it is called Going for Growth. That is the premise. Central to that piece of work and that strategy is the fact that we need to reach into new export markets. We can only do that in conjunction with the industry because it identifies where it wants to go. So, we have a working group in place that identifies the areas and the countries, and, from DARD's point of view, our role is to make sure that everything is in place to facilitate the export licence. So, collaboratively with DETI and DAFM in the Twenty-six Counties, we are working very effectively around new markets.

The Twenty-six Counties have been very successful recently, particularly in relation to China and America, and all credit to them. We obviously want to be part of that, and we are

working very closely to learn from the experiences that they have had, and, as I said in a previous answer, along with DAFM officials and DARD officials, they worked around a mock inspection and looked at best practice and how best we could secure the markets.

There are a number of markets open to us, and I think that if the Twenty-six Counties are successful in opening doors, we will not be behind the door about making sure that we also can avail ourselves of some of those opportunities. As I said, Philippines, China and Australia are all potential markets for us, and we are very close to being able to secure increased access in some cases and new access in others.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement this morning. Paragraphs 8 and 9 speak of the ash dieback scourge that arrived on this island a few years ago. Thankfully, it seems that that is on the road to eradication. Can the Minister give the Assembly any recent figures for incidents of ash dieback taking place here in the North of Ireland in recent times?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have any figures with me, but I am happy to provide them to the Member. Suffice it to say that I am delighted that we are not at the stage where we are writing off the disease. We are at a stage where we still believe that there is an opportunity to eradicate the disease. The strategy that we have in place is very much a flexible strategy, which allows us to adapt to a change in circumstances and has served us well over the last number of years in dealing with the disease.

We have a very strong scientific group in place, which is working very hard to contain the disease and eradicate it. So, it is very much a work in progress, but I will provide the Member with figures on the numbers of outbreaks, and you will be able to analyse those for yourself.

Mr Allister: The statement purports to look to the future of the industry. Research and development is obviously key to the future of any industry. Why is it then that the Minister is contemplating, it seems, the closure of the plant testing station at Crossnacreevy, which has done, and continues to do, such vital work?

Mrs O'Neill: I agree with the Member that research and development is key for going forward. That is why, for Horizon 2020, there is a particular focus on research and development and exploring all the opportunities that are there for us here at Executive level and also working

with partners in DAFM in the Twenty-six Counties or working with DEFRA in England.

In respect of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and its considerations around the future of its site, we all have to look towards the sites that we have. We need to look at efficiencies, and we need to look at the future of AFBI's needs for research and development. There are no proposals on my desk for any closures. We are working our way through all the issues with AFBI. The Member is very aware of the financial position that we are in because of the cuts to the block grant and the ongoing raiding of the block grant from the Tories. We have to deal with that situation, but there are no proposals on my desk at this time. I have a very healthy portfolio of work ongoing with AFBI — £40 million-plus in research and development. That is work that we are very much committed to taking forward.

AFBI will bring forward proposals on its future as an organisation, and we will have to consider all the issues that come forward in the round.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease while we organise the top Table.

11.15 am

Executive Committee Business

Pensions Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for Social Development, Mr Mervyn Storey, to move the Bill.

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): First, Mr Speaker, may I apologise to the House for not being here on time?

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Moved. — [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

Mr Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list. There is a single group of amendments — amendment Nos 1 to 6 — that deal with consequential and technical issues. I remind Members intending to speak that, during the debate on the amendments, they should address all the amendments in the group on which they wish to comment. Once the debate on the group is completed, any further amendments will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Clauses 1 to 24 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 25 to 32 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 33 (Power to prohibit offer of incentives to transfer pension rights)

Mr Speaker: We now come to the single group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 2 to 6. The amendments deal with consequential and technical matters. Members will note that amendment Nos 4, 5 and 6 are consequential to amendment No 3. I call the Minister for Social Development, Mr Mervyn Storey, to move amendment No 1 and to address the other amendments in the group.

Mr Storey: I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 17, line 16, leave out "section 89(1A)" and insert "section 96D".

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In schedule 12, page 55, line 27, at end insert

"The Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2015

43A. In section 97 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 (benefit cap), in subsection (8), before paragraph (a) insert—

"(za) state pension under Part 1 of the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015;".— [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

No 3: In schedule 17, page 84, line 26, leave out "applicable rules" and insert "scheme rules".— [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

No 4: In schedule 17, page 84, line 37, leave out sub-paragraph (6) and insert

"(6) In sub-paragraph (4)—

(a) the reference to "scheme rules" is to be read in accordance with section 96B of the Pension Schemes Act;

(b) "benefits" means—

(i) money purchase benefits other than money purchase benefits of a prescribed description, or

(ii) benefits of a prescribed description."— [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

No 5: In schedule 17, page 91, line 3, at end insert

"(2A) In section 96B(2) (meaning of "scheme rules": occupational pension schemes)—

a) in paragraph (a), after sub-paragraph (x) insert—

"(xi) regulations made under Schedule 17 to the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015;";

(b) in paragraph (b), after sub-paragraph (vii) insert—

"(viii) regulations made under paragraph 16 of Schedule 17 to the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.".— [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

No 6: In schedule 18, page 94, line 11, at end insert

"(2A) In section 96B(2) (meaning of "scheme rules": occupational pension schemes)—

(a) in paragraph (a), after sub-paragraph (xi) (inserted by Schedule 17) insert—

"(xii) regulations made under Schedule 18 to the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.";

(b) in paragraph (b), after sub-paragraph (viii) (inserted by Schedule 17) insert—

"(ix) regulations made under paragraph 6 of Schedule 18 to the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.".— [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

Mr Storey: The amendments are minor technical amendments. Amendment Nos 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are in consequence of the Pension Schemes Act 2015, which received Royal Assent on 3 March 2015. Members may recall that, on 26 January, the House agreed a legislative consent motion relating to the provisions of the then Westminster Pension Schemes Bill, including provisions in schedule 4 to the Bill relating to rights to transfer benefits. Schedule 4 to the new Pension Schemes Act makes consequential amendments to the Pensions Act 2014 and includes references to it in other legislation.

The Pensions Act 2014 is the Westminster equivalent of the Pensions Bill. As our Pensions Bill has not completed its passage through the Assembly, schedule 4 to the Pension Schemes Act 2015 could not make corresponding amendments for Northern Ireland. Amendment Nos 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 make the necessary amendments. They do not denote new policy and, in line with the legislative consent motion, would have been carried in the Pension Schemes Act 2015 had the Pensions Bill been enacted.

Briefly, amendment No 1 updates a legislative reference. Amendment Nos 3 and 4 replace references to "applicable rules" with references to "scheme rules" as, following changes made

by the Pension Schemes Act 2015, the term "applicable rules" is no longer used and is subsumed within the definition of "scheme rules" in section 96B of the Pension Schemes (Northern Ireland) Act 1993, as inserted by the Pension Schemes Act 2015. The definition of scheme rules in section 96B provides that references to scheme rules refer to the rules of the scheme except in so far as they are overridden by a relevant legislative provision. Scheme rules also include any relevant legislative provision not included in the scheme rules. I am sure that Members are following all that intensely. I am just checking that everybody is doing that.

The effect of amendment Nos 5 and 6 is to include provisions of schedules 17 and 18 to the Bill in the list of relevant legislative provisions in the definition of scheme rules in section 96B of the Pension Schemes (Northern Ireland) Act 1993.

I turn briefly to amendment No 2. It amends the Welfare Reform Bill to ensure that the agreed policy that the benefit cap should not apply to state pension continues when the new state pension scheme comes into operation.

In conclusion, I merely restate that these are minor technical and consequential amendments.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for bringing forward the Consideration Stage of the Bill. Notification of the amendments was provided to the Committee by the Department on 5 March, which was after the Committee had completed its scrutiny of the Bill and had reported on it.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member point the microphone towards him.

Mr Maskey: Sorry. Gabh mo leithscéal.

The Committee considered the Department's notification of the amendments at its meeting of 12 March and noted that they were of a consequential and technical nature. At that time, no members of the Committee raised any concerns with the proposed amendments, and, therefore, there was no further consideration in detail of the amendments. As I said, the Committee accepted that they were mainly consequential and technical, and they have already been outlined by the Minister to the House this morning.

I appreciate that this stage of the Bill is mainly to consider the amendments, but, with your indulgence, I would also like to refer briefly to some of the key issues considered by the Committee and the related recommendations proposed by the Committee in our report. As part of the Committee's consideration of the Bill, a public call for evidence was issued in November 2014. The Committee sought submissions from stakeholders through advertisements placed in the local press. The Committee also proactively contacted the stakeholders who had contributed to the Department's consultation on the Bill to determine whether they also wished to make a submission to the Committee. Notwithstanding that effort, the Committee received only three substantive written submissions to the call for evidence, as well as three email responses.

Throughout its consideration, the Committee took oral evidence from the three stakeholders that provided substantive written submissions, and regular written and oral briefings from the Department. The Committee welcomed the Department's proactive approach in addressing in a timely and comprehensive fashion the issues raised by stakeholders and for providing detailed briefings on these matters. I place on record the Committee's thanks to departmental officials who attended each evidence session and were, therefore, able to give almost simultaneous responses to questions and concerns raised by stakeholders.

The Committee's report outlines a range of issues raised by the Committee and addressed by the Department. Therefore, I intend to confine my remarks to the key issues raised by stakeholders and the related recommendations made by the Committee.

Members will note the inclusion in the Bill of changes to bereavement benefits. I thank Cruse Bereavement Care and the Childhood Bereavement Network for providing evidence to the Committee about the introduction of the bereavement support payment. Cruse expressed concern at the replacement of a number of benefits, including widowed parent's allowance, with a single bereavement payment and the likely impact of that on widowed parents with dependent children. The Committee recommends that the Department monitors the impact on widowed parents with dependent children as a result of replacing widowed parent's allowance and other bereavement benefits with a single bereavement support payment.

The Committee noted that the bereavement support payment will not extend to surviving

unmarried cohabiting partners, which is also the case with the payment of widowed parent's allowance. It noted that the main stated reason for that is the difficulty in officially verifying such relationships. However, the Committee shares the concerns of Cruse and the Childhood Bereavement Network that that might impact negatively on the children of such a relationship. It therefore recommends that the Department investigates how verification of such relationships can be established with a view to providing access for the surviving partner of such a relationship to the bereavement support payment.

The Committee was concerned that those with multiple part-time jobs or in zero-hours contracts might struggle to make the lower earnings limit required to trigger National Insurance contributions and, therefore, not reach the minimum qualifying period of 10 years' contributions to ensure a state pension. That issue was also raised by the Commissioner for Older People when giving evidence to the Committee.

The Department noted that National Insurance was an excepted matter and, therefore, fell outside the remit of the Assembly. However, the Committee was informed that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HMRC were looking at this matter for the longer term. The Committee noted that the number of people who fell into this category was likely to be very low. According to the most recent figures, for 2012-13, only 110 people who put in a claim were getting a pension of less than the 10-year amount.

The Committee recommends that the Department provides an update when HMRC and DWP make progress towards effectively capturing information on those with multiple jobs and struggling to reach the lower earnings limit to ensure, in the context of this Bill, recognition of their service to society and that qualifying years can be accumulated accordingly.

The Committee highlighted the importance of making sure that informal carers received formal credit for their work that might otherwise go unrecognised, for example the carers' allowance, to ensure that that contributes to the number of qualifying years. The Committee noted that an officially recognised carer could potentially obtain a full state pension depending on the duration of their caring responsibilities. It therefore calls on the Department for Social Development to work with stakeholders and other Departments, particularly DHSSPS, to maximise the number of informal carers

officially recognised as carers to ensure that they receive an appropriate level of state pension.

On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the introduction of a single-tier pension. It provides simplicity in an otherwise complex area. It also provides greater certainty in respect of what an individual can expect to receive on retirement. It is, and has been, described as a mixed bag and is, of course, part of ongoing wider changes and reform of pension provision.

I hope that I have given a fair reflection, a Cheann Comhairle, of the Committee's concerns on the broader issues, and I thank you for the latitude you gave me to do so. On behalf of the Committee for Social Development, I support the amendments and passage of the Bill.

Mr Beggs: As we progress this Pensions Bill, it is important, when considering any amendments, to consider the complexity of pensions legislation. For example, in the legislation, there are references to the Pensions Schemes Act, which the Minister mentioned, welfare legislation, the National Insurance (Northern Ireland) Act 1966 etc. It is all tied together, and any changes must be very carefully considered.

11.30 am

Equally, changes to pension parity with the rest of the United Kingdom, if included, would have to be carefully considered as they could have huge implications for our block grant and the cost of and ability to deliver any adjusted pensions locally. I am thankful that, to date, parity has been retained and that the amendments will continue such parity.

Turning to the amendments, it appears that they are consequential and technical in nature. Whilst I acknowledge that the Committee was advised early in March of the intention to bring forward amendments, it was disappointing that the formal notice of amendments was not issued to the Assembly and published to Members until 16 March. It would have been better if that had been done earlier to ensure that all Members were aware of changes.

Turning specifically to amendment No 6, it would be helpful if the Minister could provide some elaboration and explanation. The note that was given to the Committee about that amendment refers to the "Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Act 2015", which, of course, is not in place. We were advised by his officials

that that had originally been removed from the early drafts of the Pensions Bill as a consequence of the delays in the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill. This amendment brings it back in. We are still facing delays, so it would be helpful if the Minister could, when he sums up, give an explanation and state whether there has been progress on the Welfare Reform Bill, because the amendment refers to an Act, and give us some clarity on whether it is proper to refer in legislation to an Act that does not yet exist.

Mr Attwood: I apologise for being delayed. I was at another meeting and missed the beginning of the debate. I missed the new broom and his contributions on this occasion. I also apologise on behalf of Dolores Kelly, who has pressing personal responsibilities and is unable to attend the Assembly today. Consequently, I am speaking, no doubt inadequately, in her place.

I should, as all Members should, declare an interest, because I am far too close to 65, 66 or 67, and some of these provisions will affect me. I have on my left one of the youngest MLAs, if not the youngest, for whom the retirement age will no doubt be 75, 76 or 77. Maybe we should all declare a bit of an interest in this matter.

I am advised by Dolores Kelly that the amendments are technical, as was indicated by the Chair of the Committee. Consequently, we will support them, but there are some broader comments that I want to make, if I am allowed, in respect of where we are in relation to all of this, noting that we reserve the right, as a party, to table amendments at Further Consideration Stage, subject to conversations with the party and Mrs Kelly.

There are points that I ask the Minister to take on board, although, in part, they are really the responsibility of DFP. It was not long ago that the Assembly passed legislation in respect of pensions globally, which included a lot of the Hutton proposals. As Members will be aware, at the Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage of that legislation, with a lot of drafting help from the Bill Office, amendments were tabled and approved by the Assembly, and then further amendments were tabled after backroom negotiations between DFP and ourselves and other parties. Those amendments were aimed at mitigating the effects of pension change for appropriate categories of worker.

At the cuts action day on 13 March, members of the Fire Brigades Union spoke to me and my colleagues about the provisions in that

pensions legislation as they affects firefighters. Provision was made in that legislation, Minister, to do some further review and assessment — the full details of which escape my mind at the moment — of other categories of workers that might be protected when it came to general pension provisions, given the nature of their work. I think that firefighters and police officers were protected under that legislation but that nurses, porters and teachers, who work in very strenuous physical and other environments, were not.

Should the debate go on beyond Question Time, my question is this: where are we with the review provisions that were in that legislation, if my mind is correct on that point? For reading across to this legislation, that is relevant, because it raises the age levels at which people will be entitled to their pension and covers various circumstances around their entitlement to a pension. That will then make even more acute the fact that there are certain categories of workers who, because of the nature of their work, are under particular physical, mental or emotional strain and, as such, might deserve some protection. However, in the Bill before us, the time at which they will get their state pension is to be adjusted. As a consequence, a spike will legitimately arise for people and their pensions where they are seeking early retirement because of ill health. How does that work itself through to any and all of this?

My next comment will not necessarily surprise the Minister. We argued at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill for a dedicated Committee of the House to interrogate welfare matters. Given the scale of pension changes that are already in law and those that are going to be in law following the passage of the Bill, we again make the argument — we are going to write to the relevant authorities in the Assembly in this regard — to have a Committee of the House to look at welfare and pensions.

A trip was organised, I think, last Friday by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) to Glasgow, where it and various other organisations involved in welfare advice and provision met members of the welfare rights community in Scotland and people in and around the dedicated Welfare Reform Committee of the Scottish Parliament, which is a model that we urged the House to adopt at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill. It met people involved in the delivery of welfare and the oversight of welfare change in Scotland. I think that all the parties were invited to attend. We

certainly sent one of our senior policy people on that trip to get better informed about the roll-out of welfare provision in Scotland. I think that a lot of people came back from that trip saying that there was merit in having oversight of welfare change in the Assembly. I broaden the argument, Minister: given the scale of pension change through not just your Ministry but DFP, there is a need for dedicated oversight of welfare and pension change and provision arising from this Bill and the other legislation.

The third general point that I make is that pensions and changes to pensions are very much on the radar of the Conservative Government. Although last week's Budget was substantially the reheating of the Chancellor's autumn statement, there were still further pension changes in the Budget narrative. Just as we have seen significant changes through Hutton and the adjustment of the entitlement age for a pension, I anticipate that, if the Tory Government are re-elected, we have not seen the half of it, not just with austerity, whereby the Chancellor is making it very clear that the scale of austerity as he sees it will be greater over the lifetime of the next Government than it was with the previous Government.

On the scale of welfare reductions, he has put into the Budget statement — it was not just comments or briefings to the media or statements issued through his office but was in the Budget statement — £12 billion more of welfare cuts. He has already declared his ambition to reduce the tax burden on individuals without explaining how that will be funded. It is my view and that of the SDLP that, just as welfare and austerity are in play, pensions will be in play with the next Tory Government — if there is a next Tory Government. All that confirms that we should have more oversight —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

We should have more oversight of what is passing through the House today and what is yet to pass in terms of the ambitions of the Chancellor as he competes to become the next Prime Minister. They will all be outdoing each other. They will all be saying, "I can go further on austerity, pension change and welfare reform than you can. I'm the true Tory. I'm the successor to Margaret Thatcher". I certainly get the sense that the Chancellor very much views himself in the image of Margaret Thatcher, so those are not idle words. These things could come to pass in the next 50 days, because, as we have said in this House before, on the far side of the Westminster election, if the Tories

are re-elected, they will do what they did in 2010. They will have a replay of an election in May and an urgent emergency Budget in June, which will be about accelerating austerity in the early years.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will be aware that I have given him considerable latitude to introduce some wider aspects. I think that it is time to return to the amendments. You have been asked for an intervention, so the same health warning goes to the person who wants to intervene.

Mr Attwood: I will give way to the Member.

Mr Beggs: I will take the Speaker's advice, so I ask the Member whether, considering the amendments — he mentioned that he thought that there should be greater oversight of pensions in the Assembly — he will acknowledge that the place to adjust such legislation is Westminster. If excesses are occurring there, that is the place to go, and Members from Northern Ireland should fight the changes there. In reality, we do not have the funds in our block grant to make significant changes here.

Mr Attwood: As you might have anticipated, I will conclude by replying to that question. If it is the case that there is an emergency Budget in the image of the hard Tory right on the far side of the election in May, and it is across the life of pensions, welfare and austerity, the obligation is to try to impede and block that and to vote it down. Given that it is highly likely that there will be a hung Parliament, it is not good enough for people to say, as they said last Friday, that there could be welfare negotiations after the election with a future Labour Government if there is no future Labour Government because the votes are not there to bring it into power. Mr Speaker, I have never in my life quoted the 'Daily Mirror' in the Chamber —

Mr Speaker: Do you really need to do it now?
[Laughter.]

Mr Attwood: Its deputy editor — I think that he is the paper's chief political correspondent — wrote yesterday that the scenario that now faces us is Labour having insufficient numbers to form a Government in its own right, and with fewer numbers than the Tories. The scenario is that Labour comes second but goes into power, because, as he put it, the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the SDLP, the Greens and the remnants of the Lib Dems will bring it into government.

Mr Speaker: OK, I think —

Mr Attwood: That is the political point revolving round this legislation.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to resume his seat, and I call Mr Kieran McCarthy to bring us back to today's topic for debate: the amendments.

11.45 am

Mr McCarthy: Mr Speaker, I will bring you back; I will not be very long. Like Mr Attwood before me, I am speaking on behalf of a colleague who sits on the Social Development Committee. Also like Mr Attwood, who declared an interest — it was an almost-interest, I think, if I am correct from what he said — in what we are discussing, I declare an interest, and I am delighted to be where I am. I do not think that what we are discussing will have any effect on me, although having listened to Mr Attwood and his dire forecasts about the Tories coming in, I am a bit nervous that what we have will be shattered and interfered with by an incoming, relentless Tory Government. Anyway, I will continue.

The Bill will provide the means to implement reforms to our state pension system to ensure that it is on a par with that in the rest of the UK. The key changes are the creation of a single-tier pension system, changes to the pensionable age, bereavement support and alterations to the law on private pensions. Part 1 of the Bill introduces a single-tier pension that is to start from April next year, increasing the number of qualifying years to 10 and the number of qualifying years for a full pension to 35. That presented a number of concerns to interested groups during the Committee Stage. The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland in particular expressed concern that women may be more adversely affected than men. Following discussions with DSD, the Committee was content that impacts would ultimately be ironed out. Let us hope that that is the case.

Another issue that I am keen to ensure is effectively monitored is the increase in the years of National Insurance contributions required to qualify for a state pension. The Committee was concerned that, in a changing labour market, with many people being underemployed, many would not meet the earnings threshold for National Insurance contributions. They would ultimately not qualify for a pension after 35 years because, even if they have worked, they would not have earned enough to make National Insurance contributions. However, I have hope that, with

HMRC and DWP discussions, there can be a solution that means that years of work can be counted towards pension entitlement.

Part 2 of the Bill will also raise the pensionable age to 67. As a society, we need to recognise that we are living longer and that, therefore, the pensionable age should be adjusted to reflect that. Nonetheless, it is vital that the Department effectively communicates those changes to allow for effective financial management for those approaching pensionable age. Furthermore, I am also reassured by the assertion that any further increase in the pensionable age will require additional primary legislation to come before the House.

Part 5 of the Bill institutes a bereavement support payment. The Committee expressed concern that unmarried couples would not benefit from that payment, and it urged the Department to investigate means of validating long-term relationships to allow payments to be made. After all, it is important that the spirit of the bereavement support is upheld and that those most affected by loss are properly and, indeed, justly supported.

In conclusion, let me say that the Alliance Party supports the Bill at this stage, as well as the departmental amendments, which, as has been said, are mostly technical. I urge the Department to continue to scrutinise the progress of the Bill's implementation, particularly for those groups that have been identified as most at risk of being considerably adversely affected. We must ensure that our pension system is fit for purpose and fits the needs that the 21st century will place upon it.

Ms P Bradley: I welcome the opportunity to make a few very brief comments on the Consideration Stage of the Bill. As I said previously on the Bill, changes to our pension scheme are necessary not only to make it in line with Westminster but to meet the changing demographics of our society. I agree with the Chair's comments, especially in highlighting the concerns about cohabitants and informal carers. I hope that the Department will undertake to review and monitor that situation.

The Bill was thoroughly scrutinised, debated and agreed in Committee, and as this debate is about focusing on the amendments, all of which are technical, there is very little else to say. Of course, I will not prolong the debate any longer, other than to say that I support the amendments.

Mr Storey: I thank the Members who took part in the debate. Mr Attwood referred to me as the new broom, and I think that one or two bristles of the new broom are starting to disappear because the last few weeks have been challenging. However, like others, I may need to declare an interest as I am now heading towards the category that becomes part of the outcome of the Pensions Bill. As one who turned the big five-0 recently, I have a vested interest.

I thank the Chair of the Committee, and, in his absence, I want to say how much we appreciate the detailed work carried out by the Committee on this issue. I know that the Committee sent out an extensive trawl to get information, and I assure the Chair and the members of the Committee that the Department is giving detailed consideration to the Committee's recommendations that followed on from the report. Those were referenced by a number of Members, and we trust that we will be in a position to reply shortly to the issues that were raised in relation to the recommendations.

Mr Beggs raised the important issue of parity, which we always need to keep in mind when we deal with these issues. Of course, I can confirm that this is a parity measure, and it is a matter that has been addressed. In reference to the tabling of amendments, the Pension Schemes Bill only completed its passage and received Royal Assent in early March, and the admissibility of amendments to the Welfare Reform Bill is a matter for the Speaker and for the House. I defer that issue to those authorities.

I will clarify one point. I can understand why the Member may have made the reference that he did. He referred to amendment No 6, but it actually is in reference to amendment No 2. It may have been that it has subsequently changed. What does amendment No 2 do? It inserts a paragraph into schedule 12 to the Pensions Bill, which deals with amendments consequential on the introduction of the new state pension. The new paragraph will amend clause 97(8) of the Welfare Reform Bill to provide that the new state pension cannot be caught by the benefits cap. This continues the agreed policy that the state pension cannot be included in the benefits cap. That leads us on to the question —

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Storey: Yes.

Mr Beggs: For clarification, the Minister is in fact correct. I referred to amendment No 6, which is what it was in his earlier correspondence. He is correct that it is amendment No 2 on the Marshalled List.

Mr Storey: Thank you. On the point that the Member raised on the Welfare Reform Bill, I am, along with my colleagues, continuing to work extensively to ensure that, as far as my party and I are concerned, we deliver the deal that we agreed on. I have heard Members today talk about the fears and the worries of an incoming Tory Government, but they had no fears or no worries about an incoming Government when they signed the petition of concern. Obviously, if they were so concerned about protecting those whom they claim they want to protect, they would have allowed the progression of the Welfare Reform Bill when I stood in the House two weeks ago. Then we might not have had the crocodile tears that we have seen over the last number of days in trying to outdo others on an issue. I think that that is shameful; it is using people to score political points.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Minister for giving way. He makes a very important point, but I expect that the concern that he has talked about is more a concern for people's own party political position than for the poor. Can he assure us that, just as the parity principle is important in pensions, in any discussions that there have been, there will not be additional money made available to those who sought to blackmail the Assembly when they did a U-turn on an agreement that they made just before Christmas?

Mr Speaker: I will point out the obvious, which is that that point is well beyond the scope of the debate. I ask Members to return to the subject matter.

Mr Storey: Suffice it to say that I will confirm, as the First Minister and Finance Minister have confirmed, that we are working within the financial envelope agreed by the parties in the Stormont House and Stormont Castle agreements. I am working, along with my colleagues, to ensure that that is what we deliver. It is time for others to make progress and come to a position where we can bring the Welfare Reform Bill back to the House and continue to make progress on the other issues, such as corporation tax and all the other financial benefits that flow from that agreement.

Returning to the Pensions Bill and to Mr Attwood's remarks. I have to say that he never

fails. One thing about the Member is that he is consistent: the day of doom and gloom is coming. With the previous Welfare Reform Bill, it was that I was working under subterfuge with DWP, who were pulling my strings. Now it is the case that we have an impending Tory Government, and all is going to come to an end. There is no doubt that, irrespective of the outcome of the general election, we will continue to face challenges in the weeks, months and years ahead. It does not matter whether it is a Labour Government, the sister party of Mr Attwood's. They will face the same challenges, but let us remember that it was that Administration that got us into the difficulties that necessitated the search for changes to the economic prosperity of our nation.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Would he agree with me that, however much concern a Tory Administration delivering Tory cuts would cause the House and those of us sitting on these Benches, the prospect of a Labour Administration, which got this country into the mess it is in, being propped up by the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the SDLP, which is fiscally and financially illiterate, would scare the wits out of all of us?

Mr Storey: Yes, and be assured that when my party's members return to the House on 8 May and thereafter, following what I trust will be a successful election for us, the DUP MPs will continue to ensure that the best interests of Northern Ireland are protected and put to the fore.

In relation to the public service —

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for giving way. I have to say to him that, rather than sounding like a new broom, he now sounds like a broken duster. Putting that aside, would you not agree that it is a very strange place that, when your colleague to the right says that Labour were responsible and that that necessitated what had to be done, your party opposed the bedroom tax most of the time? Is the Member to your right —

Mr Wilson: Your party introduced it.

Mr Attwood: Well we have dealt with that at a previous debate, when the argument was overwhelmingly against Mr Wilson's —

Mr Speaker: I will rule any further digressions out of order. I have reminded Members a number of times, and I want to remind the Minister: it applies to you as well. You have brought the business before the House. Let us

do the business that you brought before the House.

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Speaker and, at the risk of being named, as has happened already this week, I think we will try and make progress on this issue.

Let me come to the point that the Member raised about the public-service pensions, and he made reference to a number of other categories. Public-service pensions are not a matter for my Department and, as I think he said, they fall to DFP and other sponsoring Departments.

There is merit in the Member raising those issues. I am quite happy to seek clarification from the Finance Minister and will come back to him.

12.00 noon

He also referred, in the debate on the Welfare Reform Bill, to the special committee for what is now welfare and pensions and to a very successful visit by NICVA to Scotland to see how they deal with operational matters. I have to say, as I said then, that the primary responsibility for the scrutiny of legislation belongs to the statutory Committees established in and by this House. The Social Development Committee did a very good piece of work on the Bill before us. I have a particular bias as former Chair of the Education Committee, but I think that the work of our Committees in scrutinising issues, gathering evidence and listening in an impartial, open and transparent way to the arguments is the way in which it should be done. That is where those issues should rest. Of course, we have already referred to the future, and we look forward to the outcome of our national election. We will deal with the consequences and outcomes of that in the weeks and months that lie before us.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for giving way again. Going back to the point about the Committee, in a year's time, come what may, the Committees of this Chamber will be reconfigured because the Departments are being reconfigured. At that stage, welfare will be in the Department for Communities, which will be of a vast scale. I put it to the Minister that, in anticipation of the scale of that Department and of changes to welfare and pensions — and more is likely to come — that there is an argument that we should anticipate what will happen next year by having at this stage a Committee that looks at other DSD

business and another Committee dedicated to looking at welfare and pensions.

Mr Storey: The Member makes a valid point. Post-2016, we will have nine new Departments, all of which will have been enhanced and enlarged and have taken on considerably different responsibilities and emphases and new roles, but I still believe that the Committees that would then be created to mirror the nine Departments need to be able to continue the work that has been done. I do not think that any Member in this House questions the validity and the value of the work that is carried out by existing Committees. It is one of the best elements in what goes on here. A lot of work is done by our Committees that sometimes does not get the credit it deserves. If you start to do a trawl of the Committees in this House, you would see the extensive work that they do. I do not believe that by creating some other subset — of course there is, maybe, one way that it could be done. If the Committee for Communities or whatever new Committee is established, were to decide to establish an ad hoc Committee, as it did for the Welfare Reform Bill, then that would be up to that Committee, but I believe that that is their responsibility and duty to hold me, as Minister for Social Development, and whoever is the Minister for Communities in 2016 to account.

I move on to comments made by Mr McCarthy. I recognise that, unfortunately, some Members who contribute to the Social Development Committee have other duties and cannot be with us. I appreciate that he was speaking on behalf of his colleague. He made reference to the issues that were raised about the bereavement support payment, and, as I said in response to the Chair, we are considering the recommendations that flowed from the Committee's report, and we will be, very soon I trust, in a position to respond, at which point Members will be able to see the detail of that response.

He also made reference to the question of the 35 qualifying years. It might be useful to give some context to that issue. We are merging the two schemes; the 30 qualifying years required for the full basic state pension and up to 52 years for the state second pension. It strikes a balance between enabling the majority of people who contribute to achieve a full state pension and retaining the contributory principle. It avoids the unnecessary complexity of a phased approach in which the value of the new state pension qualifying years could differ from the different cohorts.

By the mid-2030s, 80% of people reaching state pension age will get the full new state pension. In 2020, around 90% of males and 80% of females under the new state pension will have 35 or more qualifying years. This is true both at state pension age in 2020 and for all pensioners under the new state pension in 2020, so no one will be disadvantaged by the increase to the 35 years. Under the current scheme, 30 qualifying years provides a full state pension entitlement of £115·95 from April 2015. Under the new scheme, 30 qualifying years will provide a state pension entitlement of £129·64. I trust that that helps Members and places that on the record.

Those are all the comments that I want to make about the matters that have been raised by Members. I thank Members for their help and indulgence and I also want to place on record my appreciation of my officials for the work that they have done, particularly for the extensive work that they did — it was mentioned by the Chair of the Committee for Social Development — when the Bill was being considered at Committee Stage. A lot of this is technical and very detailed, and I appreciate all the work that my officials did to inform the Committee and, subsequently, the House.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

Clause 33, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to clauses 34 to 49. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group these clauses for the Question on stand part.

Clauses 34 to 49 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to clauses 50 to 54. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group these clauses for the Question on stand part.

Clauses 50 to 54 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to schedules 1 to 11. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group these schedules for the Question on stand part.

Schedules 1 to 11 agreed to.

Schedule 12 (State pension: amendments)

Amendment No 2 made:

In page 55, line 27, at end insert

"The Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2015

43A. In section 97 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 (benefit cap), in subsection (8), before paragraph (a) insert—

"(za) state pension under Part 1 of the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015;"— [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

Schedule 12, as amended, agreed to.

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to schedules 13 to 16. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group these schedules for the Question on stand part.

Schedules 13 to 16 agreed to.

Schedule 17 (Automatic transfer of pension benefits etc.)

Amendment No 3 made:

In page 84, line 26, leave out "applicable rules" and insert "scheme rules".— [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

Amendment No 4 made:

In page 84, line 37, leave out sub-paragraph (6) and insert

"(6) In sub-paragraph (4)—

(a) the reference to "scheme rules" is to be read in accordance with section 96B of the Pension Schemes Act;

(b) "benefits" means—

(i) money purchase benefits other than money purchase benefits of a prescribed description, or

(ii) benefits of a prescribed description."— [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 5 is consequential to amendment Nos 3 and 4.

Amendment No 5 made:

In page 91, line 3, at end insert

"(2A) In section 96B(2) (meaning of "scheme rules": occupational pension schemes)—

(a) in paragraph (a), after sub-paragraph (x) insert—

"(xi) regulations made under Schedule 17 to the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.";

(b) in paragraph (b), after sub-paragraph (vii) insert—

"(viii) regulations made under paragraph 16 of Schedule 17 to the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.".— [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

Schedule 17, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 18 (Power to restrict charges or impose requirements in relation to schemes)

Amendment No 6 made:

In page 94, line 11, at end insert

"(2A) In section 96B(2) (meaning of "scheme rules": occupational pension schemes)—

(a) in paragraph (a), after sub-paragraph (xi) (inserted by Schedule 17) insert—

"(xii) regulations made under Schedule 18 to the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.";

(b) in paragraph (b), after sub-paragraph (viii) (inserted by Schedule 17) insert—

"(ix) regulations made under paragraph 6 of Schedule 18 to the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.".— [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

Schedule 18, as amended, agreed to.

Schedules 19 and 20 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Pensions Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Private Members' Business

Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

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.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern that men outnumber women by nearly three to one in high-level science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) posts; welcomes the statement by the Minister for Employment and Learning on 4 June 2013 reiterating the importance of women in the STEM sectors; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to publish a strategy and action plan that addresses specifically the issue of gender imbalance in the STEM sectors.

Our economy needs more skilled scientists and engineers, and that need will not be met unless greater efforts are made to retain women in STEM careers. 'Addressing Gender Balance', a report published in 2013, identified the fact that, while high-level STEM posts constituted over 11% of the workforce, men outnumbered women by nearly three to one in those roles. That is not a problem that is particular to the North or to Britain, but it is a problem for the island of Ireland. Figures in 'The Irish Times' recently identified the fact that, of 118,000 people working in STEM, only a quarter were women.

In the North of Ireland, we do not have a strategy that specifically addresses the issue of women and gender imbalance in STEM careers. The most relevant government strategies are Success through STEM and the gender equality strategy. Success through STEM contains 20 recommendations, one of which pertains to the issue of gender imbalance.

12.15 pm

As we commence our debate, I take the opportunity to commend the much good work that is done in our primary and secondary schools by the Executive to tackle gender

stereotypes in education. At the same time, raising the importance of engagement with the STEM industry needs to be part of teachers' continuing professional development (CPD). After much inquiry in Britain into this important matter, no new issues have been uncovered on the topic of gender diversity in STEM subjects. While problems and solutions have long been identified, more needs to be actively done to improve the situation. While competition for jobs is beneficial for science, careers should not be constructed in a way that deters talented women from remaining and progressing in STEM.

Despite clear imperatives and multiple initiatives to improve diversity in STEM, women remain underrepresented at senior levels across every discipline. The gender imbalance in STEM is caused by a range of factors. While it is commendable that an emphasis is placed on inspiring young women to choose STEM subjects, such efforts are wasted if women continue to be disproportionately disadvantaged in STEM subjects in comparison with men. It is disappointing that biases and working practices result in systemic and cumulative discrimination against women throughout STEM study and academic careers.

The inquiry in Britain found that scientists are susceptible to the same unconscious gender bias as the rest of the population. It is unfortunate that some are unwilling to accept this simply because professional research requires them to be objective. As employers of academic STEM researchers, our universities and higher education institutions have ultimate responsibility for employment conditions and the greatest obligation to improve STEM careers for all researchers. While there are many examples of good practice in diversity management, some higher education institutions across these islands appear only too willing to devolve responsibility for working hours, career support and promotion to research groups. More standardisation is required across the higher education sector.

I am pleased to inform the House that the Athena SWAN Charter is the most comprehensive practical scheme aimed at improving STEM careers and that both our universities, Queen's University and Ulster University, are members of the Athena SWAN Charter. The charter, founded in 2005, is awarded to universities that accept and promote the six charter principles: to address gender inequalities requires commitment and action from everyone at all levels of the organisation; to tackle the unequal representation of women in science requires

changing cultures and attitudes across the organisation; the absence of diversity at management and policymaking levels has broad implications that the organisation will examine; the high loss rate of women in science is an urgent concern that the organisation will address; the system of short-term contracts has particular negative consequences for the retention and progression of women in science that the organisation recognises; and, finally, there are both personal and structural obstacles to women making the transition from PhD into a sustainable academic career in science that require the active consideration of the organisations.

Recommendations from the report commissioned in Britain call for diversity and equality training, including unconscious bias training, to be provided to all STEM undergraduate and postgraduate students by their higher education institution. In addition, it was found that such training should be mandatory for all members of recruitment and promotion panels for STEM jobs and all line managers and supervisors of staff. A lack of career advice and support for academic researchers can affect women disproportionately. Higher education institutions should encourage mentoring, support networks and seminars at the research group level and monitor this practice. Such activities are encouraged by the Athena SWAN Charter that I mentioned.

As scientific research cannot always take place within regular working hours, it is recommended that research departments should determine and operate appropriate core working hours, with flexibility outside those core hours. That would ensure that most staff members were available for key meetings and that those with caring responsibilities were not disproportionately disadvantaged.

Fellowships and academic positions should be advertised with the option of working part time unless there are insurmountable obstacles to such arrangements. All higher education institutions should review the working hours of their academic staff and the management of research groups to ensure that practices are in keeping with the needs of employees with caring responsibilities. Such matters should not be devolved to research groups. Line managers who pressure staff into long working hours should be held to account by their employer.

The time has come for the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to publish a strategy and

action plan that address specifically the gender imbalance in the STEM sectors. Many excellent schemes have attempted to stem the loss of talent. If applied with energy and determination as part of a coherent strategy, such initiatives have the potential to make our region one of the best places in the world to work in science and technology, a destination of choice for talented women, with spin-off benefits for the wider role of women in our society. I believe that we have the means of developing an integrated comprehensive and coordinated strategy for change. That will require political vision and commitment from leaders and organisations in academia and business and a major cultural change in attitudes and approach. Finally, I commend the great efforts by the South West College in promoting STEM. I wish it every success in its engineering careers fair that will take place this Friday and Saturday in Dungannon.

Mr Buchanan: It is a known fact that gender imbalance is an age-old problem that has increasingly been highlighted across the board, especially in science, technology, engineering and mathematical courses. It is, I suppose, inconceivable that men outnumber women in high-level STEM positions by nearly 3:1, but that stark reality goes deeper than the high-level positions. In most spheres of life and for a number of reasons, women have been relegated to the sidelines and have got used to watching on as men fulfil roles and do jobs that they feel they are incapable of doing. Many underlying beliefs accompany that gender imbalance. Traditionally, from an early age, there are roles that are seen as male and those that are seen as female. That is also transferred into the workplace. Many jobs are seen as traditionally female or traditionally male, and that entrenched notion has filtered down many generations. To change that, we need to break the pattern by radically addressing the underlying issues that lead to such imbalance in our workforce.

The future success of the Northern Ireland economy depends on increasing numbers of skilled workers in the STEM sector. That means that we must encourage all our young people, especially girls, into that area. Of course, that starts at the primary school level. Rather than persuading our girls to go down more traditional routes, we need to actively promote all school subjects as being enjoyable and accessible to all. To realistically achieve that, I agree with the suggestions in the report by Queen's University entitled 'Addressing Gender Balance - Reaping the Gender Dividend in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics', which was published in

2013. It pushes for a greater collaborative effort by businesses, government and education to engage, encourage and inspire young women and girls. Collaboration is the key point.

We need to look to other countries that have already seriously started to address the issue. In the United States of America, the National Girls Collaborative Project was set up to actively promote girls' participation in STEM projects, culminating in STEM careers. That body addressed all the issues that have detracted from a workforce in which women lead the way in STEM. In the UK, the Women in to Science and Engineering (WISE) campaign actively seeks to increase the gender balance in the UK's STEM workforce from 13% to 20% by 2020. In light of the types of body that have been set up in other places, I feel that it is time for a similar body to be put in place specifically to address this problem in Northern Ireland. Today, I call on the Minister to develop a DEL-backed collaborative project in conjunction with the main universities here to bring together all the main stakeholders of government, business and education to have a focused, progressive and innovative approach to redressing the imbalance.

It is imperative that this is done as soon as possible to encourage females into the STEM sector. Women are very important to the STEM sector. As an economic driver going forward, it makes good business sense. By recruiting more women, the workforce talent pool is enlarged, which ensures that recruiters can employ the best staff they need for their work. Women make up half the population. By having such a small group of women employed in the STEM industrial sector, businesses miss out on the needs of customers, as their staff are male-dominated and are not best placed to understand the needs of female customers.

I believe that there is a way forward. There is something that the Minister, his Department and his Executive colleagues need to do. It is time that something was moving and something was put in place to address the imbalance that we have. I support the motion.

Mr Rogers: I support the motion, and I thank the Members who brought it to the House. Only a few weeks ago in the Chamber we discussed another motion on STEM, and International Women's Day is just two weeks gone. The gender imbalance in the uptake of these subjects in schools was frequently noted in that debate. Gender imbalance in the STEM sector must be addressed as a matter of gender equality and economic urgency.

A very recent report by the Confederation of British Industry, 'Engineering Our Future', highlighted:

"Women currently make up 46% of the UK's workforce, but just 15.5% of the core STEM workforce."

Repeated studies down the years have done tremendous work to highlight how vital STEM subjects are to the economy. This is not to disparage the arts or humanities and the important role that they play in personal education, fulfilment, society and the knowledge economy, but the lack of uptake of STEM subjects is worrying. If we are to generate a high level of research and development, we need engineers, technicians and skilled scientists working in Northern Ireland.

The demand for STEM graduates is increasing at a time when Northern Ireland faces a brain drain, with so many young people studying and working abroad on a one-way ticket out of Northern Ireland. This was aptly summed up in the Science and Technology Committee's report, 'Women in Scientific Careers', which was helpfully provided by the Research and Information Service. It asserted:

"the UK economy needs more STEM workers and we cannot meet the demand without increasing the numbers of women in STEM."

The shortfall in the sector will increase if it is left unchecked.

Various reports have noted the concern that there is a gap that needs to be bridged between STEM education and what industry requires. We cannot have a discrete departmental approach to this. The Minister for Employment and Learning, the Minister of Education and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment need to come together to ensure that the STEM curriculum is attractive to employers and equips young people with the skills that are prized by industry.

A Member mentioned earlier the good work that goes on in primary and post-primary schools. I agree, but there is not enough of it; it is not universal across the system. I am particularly concerned about the reduction in the Sentinus budget. There is one STEM bus that travels round schools in Northern Ireland. That one bus is not even enough. With less money now, we are in a serious position.

STEM is not confined to graduates. A study in 2013 by the CBI reported that 42% of UK

employers had struggled to recruit STEM-proficient staff at every level, ranging from apprentices to postgrads. There is an important role here for further education colleges in helping to bridge that gap.

We must build the foundation of STEM in schools. Likewise, it is vital that students get correct career advice that is tailored to them as early as possible. STEM is male-dominated. Reasons for the lack of female representation in the industry are varied, but tackling these barriers in schools is one of the first steps that we must take. Informative and correct career advice should ensure that more girls and young women are fully aware of the benefits that studying these subjects can bring. It is not a case of forcing students into taking subjects that they have no interest in, but no student should choose not to take up a STEM subject because of a lack of information or a misperception of it being a boys-only club.

12.30 pm

Mr McKinney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Tuesday, I was due to be in the Chamber to ask a question of the Agriculture Minister, but, unfortunately, I was not here to do so. I was in the Building but at another meeting that distracted me, so I apologise to you and the House.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for coming to the Chamber to do that personally. Your apology is noted. The Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.31 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Question 12 has been withdrawn.

Boxing Clubs: DCAL Funding

1. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what departmental funding opportunities are available for boxing clubs. (AQO 7861/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank the Member for his question. Sport NI recently opened the third round of the Active Awards for Sport funding programme. The programme is a lottery-funded small grants programme that is primarily aimed at organisations that are delivering grass-roots, community-based sport. Eligible groups, including boxing clubs, can apply for grants ranging from £1,000 to £10,000. The closing date for applications is 13 April of this year.

In addition, DCAL, through Sport NI, is currently investing £3.27 million in boxing through the boxing investment programme. So far, that investment has provided boxing equipment to the value of almost £170,000, which has been distributed through the Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) to 94 boxing clubs. It has committed £2.5 million in capital investment, which will provide improved facilities for 40 boxing clubs across the North, and has provided funding for a club development manager, who has been appointed by the IABA to work closely with clubs to improve governance arrangements and build capacity in clubs.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her answer. As she knows, some boxing clubs perhaps lack the capacity to formulate applications. Can the Department or someone else give any help or advice to boxing clubs on how to formulate applications?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree with the Member's sentiments. I have visited most of the boxing clubs. In fact, I have visited some of the clubs in his constituency. They are all doing great

work, but their focus is on looking after children and young people. They are not there to look at due diligence and governance, although all of them are perfectly willing to do so. However, it is not their primary function. That is why we asked that money go towards boxing and a support worker for boxing.

If the Member writes to me, I will give him details of the people whom he needs to talk to. I can also put him in contact with Sport NI. If he gives the information to Sport NI, a representative can give it back to the clubs, because it is important that they have access to the money. This is not about those clubs who have the smartest people putting in applications and getting the money. It is about it going to where there is need, and, more often than not, it is usually for groups that do not have the capability to put in applications in the first place.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. How can DCAL continue to support and assist those boxing clubs that will not receive funding in this phase of the programme?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said in answer to Mr Alex Easton, I realise that the boxing fraternity is reliant on public intervention. As we have agreed in the past, it is a sport that has not received as much funding or support as it felt it needed. Sport NI is working with a number of other organisations, including the Department for Social Development and councils, to ensure that there is a partnership approach taken, not only to funding clubs but to trying to give some of them support. For example, my local council, Belfast City Council, has come forward with its own boxing strategy to match the funding awarded through Sport NI. Therefore, it is about making contact with your council and its councillors, MLAs and Sport NI to ensure that the boxing clubs that need support get it.

Mr Ramsey: In response to Mr Easton, the Minister referred to small grants. Will she tell the House whether that money is available to boxing clubs that want to purchase defibrillators and to help ensure that they have the capacity to manage and use them?

Ms Ní Chuilín: This is primarily to do with revenue, but there are small capital grants available as well, and boxing clubs and any other sporting organisations are perfectly entitled to make an application to Sport NI. I know that some clubs and bigger governing bodies have bought defibrillators. A player at a game in the Member's own county of Derry took very unwell last year, and it was only through

the use of a defibrillator and the intervention of some spectators who were professionally and medically trained that the man's life was saved. In this case, it is about trying to get some money in — small grants — to help the sporting clubs. For boxing, that has proved to be very successful, and I know that it has been very successful for other sports as well.

Mr Allister: Why is the Minister continuing to cling to the discriminatory practice operated by Sport NI of refusing to fund clubs that are not affiliated to the IABA, and when will she embrace the freedom of choice of clubs as to which governing body they affiliate to?

Ms Ní Chuilín: This is not the first time that this Member has accused either Sport NI or me of being sectarian or of operating discriminatory practices, all of which I completely refute. I think that the Member should put it on record that he withdraws his remarks. I think that they are disgraceful. The Member continues to make disgraceful, unsubstantiated comments in the House during Question Time, and I think that it needs to stop.

Budget: EQIA

2. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the outcome of the equality impact assessment (EQIA) on the draft budget and departmental spending plans, including what actions are being brought forward on any gaps that have been identified resulting from the EQIA. (AQO 7862/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. Following the Executive's agreement on the 2015-16 Budget, DCAL published detailed savings delivery plans that summarised each savings measure, outlined the impact on front-line services, and addressed the potential impact on equality. It also published a high-level equality screening of its spending proposals. Overall, the Department's high-level impact assessment of its savings plans is revealed as largely neutral, but with some minor negative impacts for some aspects. The consultation ended on 9 March. Officials are now considering the representations that have been made and are preparing complete and appropriate responses to them. That process is ongoing, and I intend to publish a summary of the representations and the Department's responses to them.

Meanwhile, there were equality-related representations over concerns affecting cuts on people with disabilities, disability arts, the library

service and sports, which are some examples, but others have been raised.

Ms McGahan: I thank the Minister for her response. Will the Minister detail DCAL's statutory requirements under section 75 in relation to the budget?

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department, like every Department in the Executive, has a statutory obligation to meet its section 75 obligations. Certainly, with regard to our equality duties, we have a legal duty to consider the likely impact on budget proposals, particularly on section 75 groups, and make final budget decisions, having given consideration and due regard to competing or other factors. So we must evaluate the impact, particularly on section 75 groups. Measures proposed in my Department have been in the middle of our consultations. However, we need to ensure that equality impact assessments are built in to any consultation responses. All the groups that apply will get a response. When the exercise has been completed, we will publish the responses on our website.

Mr Lyttle: What message do the Executive have for our world-class artists — poets such as Michael Longley, writers such as Glenn Patterson and young actors such as Jayne Wisener — who say that the scale and level of reductions applied to the arts in Northern Ireland are wrong? What, if anything, can she do to help the organisations whose very existence seems to be threatened by the scale of those reductions?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am saddened that we are in this situation. I encourage the Member to talk to his party leadership and to join with most, if not all, other parties. We need to put the blame for these cuts on our block grant firmly where it belongs — with the Westminster Government. We have lost hundreds of millions of pounds of public money that could have been spent not only on our local economy and our local infrastructure, but on supporting our local indigenous economies such as our artists and all the rest. While that is going on, I am sure that the Member knows that, even in his constituency, the Eastside Arts/East Belfast Partnership has been awarded funds. We want to make sure that people who have never received support from government bodies and agencies get funding and get it because they deserve it and because it is the right thing to do. I ask the Member to join with the rest of us to convince his party that we need to firmly convince the Westminster Government not to continually take money from our block grant.

Cultural and Creative Hubs: Derry

3. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether, as part of the City of Culture legacy, cultural and creative hubs in the southern part of the Derry City Council area will be considered for support and investment. (AQO 7863/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The development of cultural and creative hubs is a key element of my Department's focus on north-west development to ensure a lasting legacy from the 2013 City of Culture year. It is also important for communities to have local access to equipment and support to improve skills development and training and ensure that people of all ages benefit from having access to cutting-edge digital and information technology.

In the current financial year, 16 hubs across the north-west have been supported, including those in Castleterrace, Strabane and the city of Derry. All those hubs are in areas of significant need and where current provision is inadequate.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí a thug sí go dtí seo. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her answer thus far. She recently visited the Cornstore Creative Hub. What support will that project, and the Seamus Heaney Centre in Bellaghy, receive from DCAL?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. He is right: I recently visited the Cornstore Creative Hub. Through the north-west social and economic development programme, DCAL has provided that facility, with £30,000 for a minibus for community transport and £20,000 for the continuation of a key rural music programme.

I was impressed by the work done by Paddy Glasgow and everybody else in that facility. It is clearly an example of how a small investment in a rural community has a wide reach. The transport has certainly helped that.

The Member will be aware that we are conducting an economic appraisal of the Seamus Heaney Centre. When that has been completed, I expect the Member, with the delegation he brought to my office, to come back and we can give him the outline and outcome of the proposal for what we now do about having that facility in Bellaghy in the future.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her responses so far. What is the total budget for legacy issues next year across a wide range of spectra, bearing in mind the successful Londonderry UK City of Culture?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Member will be aware, the budget set for 2013 was for activities in that year. That was supported by the entire Executive. I was delighted that the Executive also supported the legacy programme, even though that was not in the original programme. We felt that there was such momentum, particularly in the city, that the surrounding areas needed to have some of the benefits of that.

So far, we have spent £6 million looking at the legacy. We are continuing to go around the neighbourhood renewal areas and areas at risk to try to get investment and establish community groups. We have not got an indicative figure for that yet because it is work ongoing but I am certainly committed to try to get money and to work with the Department for Social Development, Invest NI, councils and other partners in government to try to make sure that people are not disappointed after expectations were built up and that there are tangible outcomes for them in their areas.

Somme Centenary Commemorations: South Antrim

4. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the funding her Department has provided for Somme centenary commemorations in South Antrim. (AQO 7864/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. As yet, no funding has been allocated by my Department or its arm's-length bodies for activities earmarked for commemorations in South Antrim.

An extensive and diverse range of activities, events and initiatives exploring the decade of centenaries is being delivered by organisations including the Ulster Museum, libraries, creative learning centres, PRONI and the wider arts sector. Many plans are still in development but will reach out to and include people and communities across the region.

Groups and individuals in the south Antrim area, for example, could develop ideas and proposals to match the objectives of existing funding programmes of bodies such as the Arts Council and NI Screen. Such programmes are not exclusively for the decade of centenaries

but proposals with First World War themes might also address the underpinning creative and TV and film production goals of those arm's-length bodies.

The community festival fund operated by local councils, and supported by my Department, can also support events promoting inclusive approaches to marking historical events in the Member's constituency.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that any commemoration should recognise that those who fought and made the ultimate sacrifice were from across the religious and political divide, and, indeed, from every part of the island of Ireland?

2.15 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly do. The approach that the Executive took in 2012 to the decade of centenaries was based on inclusivity, respect and making sure that we provided opportunities for people to commemorate and celebrate those events. I find it important to acknowledge, along with other initiatives, the sacrifices that people have made, and the remembrance and commemoration of those events needs to be done in an inclusive and respectful way. I am consistent in that approach and will remain so. Hopefully, our ALBs and other opportunities can help people, particularly in local council areas, to use the Community Festivals Fund to bring forward initiatives in their constituencies.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. The centenary of the battle of the Somme falls into the budget year 2016-17. Has any provisional budget sum been decided on to cover the run-up to July 2016?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am finding it really difficult to hear some Members' questions because there are at least three conversations going on at the same time.

Some of the councils have approached me, and I have worked with some of our ALBs to try to ensure that some of the events, particularly those around the decade of centenaries, are celebrated. If people bring forward ideas as early as possible, we can try to get a funding plan and a package for some of those events. Certainly, I am committed to trying to get additional money not only for the activities and the commemorations in 2016 but right up until 2022, to ensure that there is a legacy and a funding stream well after this mandate ends in 2016.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, I ask for your ongoing cooperation to ensure that both questions and answers can be heard clearly.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her responses so far. What is the Creative Centenaries initiative, and how much funding has your Department allocated to it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Creative Centenaries initiative was launched by the Nerve Centre, with support from DCAL, to bring information and resources about the decade of centenaries and to work with the creative sector in commemorating those events. Some examples looked at showcasing digital storytelling and educational resources to highlight the role that the creative industries and the wider cultural sector can play in exploring some of the defining periods in our history.

For younger people, a comic book was recently launched, telling personal stories from the battle of the Somme and the Easter rising, which is linked very closely to the school curriculum. Early in March, the Nerve Centre, the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund held a Creative Centenaries resource fair at Titanic Belfast. I am sure that the Member is aware that over 250 delegates attended that to share ideas about the projects.

Commonwealth Youth Games: DCAL Support

5. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what departmental support is being provided to the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council to send a team to the Commonwealth Youth Games in Samoa in September 2015. (AQO 7865/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I can confirm that the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council intends to send a team of athletes to the Youth Games in Samoa later this year. Sport NI is assisting the Commonwealth Games Council to prepare a business case for investment in 2015-16 that includes funding towards sending a team in September. In parallel with that, I am considering the draft resource budget for my Department and its ALBs. As the Member will be aware, the funding from Sport NI to organisations, including the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council, will be finalised following confirmation of those budgets. Any funding provided by Sport NI to the Commonwealth Games Council is likely to

cover a range of costs, including support with the running costs of the council itself and support for the Commonwealth Games team and the youth team.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the support that there is in the Department and that the Minister has given to the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council. The Minister may be aware that the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council is considering making a bid for the 2021 Youth Games. I am not asking the Minister to make any financial commitment, but will she look sympathetically at that, probably in conjunction with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, when it comes before her?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that I have been very consistent in my support, not only through finance. My colleague Arlene Foster and I have been very supportive through continued funding for initiatives and events. The Commonwealth Games Council has received ongoing support from my Department.

The Member will be happy that I will soon meet the Commonwealth Games Council about preparation for the 2021 bid. I anticipate, after that, having some representation from the Member and others about how we take it forward. We are all approaching the event with a "Let's see" and, hopefully, a can-do attitude, depending on budget.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Will the Minister confirm who has the responsibility for nominating competitors from the North?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It has been and will remain the case that responsibility for nominating players and competitors for any international sports competitions — in this case, we are talking about the Commonwealth Games — rests, in the first instance, with the governing body. The governing body may choose to nominate players for such competitions in accordance with arrangements that have been mutually agreed between the body and the council responsible for sending a local team to a competition. In the first instance, it is the governing body in conjunction with the Commonwealth Games Council.

Orange Order/GAA: Cultural Awareness Programme

6. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans she has to continue the funding for the cultural awareness programme involving the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland and the Gaelic Athletic Association. (AQO 7866/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland and the Ulster Council of the GAA have successfully delivered the objectives of the three-year strategy. However, given the current financial climate, I have to take difficult decisions across the Department's budgets. In that context, it has not been possible to extend funding for the cultural awareness strategy beyond its original three-year lifespan. Both organisations involved in the programme know that it was always intended that it would end on 31 March this year.

At the heart of all my Department's work and programmes are the core principles of tackling poverty, inequality and social exclusion. Therefore, my Department's work and programmes are aimed at encouraging respect, understanding and tolerance for all cultures and improving the lives of communities across the North. I encourage both organisations to build, through their respective education and outreach programmes, on the levels of cooperation, respect, understanding and tolerance that both projects have demonstrated to date.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she recognise the good work of the cultural awareness programme? There has been positive engagement in schools and with young people, especially in the maintained sector, involving the Grand Orange Lodge and the GAA. Will she give us a commitment that she will endeavour to find funding to support the positive programme of educating our young people —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I think that the Member has asked his question.

Mr Dunne: — about the differences of culture?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am keen to try to give support to groups, particularly when they do work across the community and work outside their comfort zone. I flagged it up as late as last year that I would not, given the indicative budget, have the money to continue beyond 31 March this year. When the project ends, I will ask for

an evaluation to be completed. I anticipate that the evaluation will show that a lot of good work has been done and possibly look at an opportunity to do it through other government programmes. It is not fair to give any organisation a commitment that, after its funding ends in one month, you will find it in the next month. I cannot do that, but I certainly hope to use the evaluation to see what support I can give them in the future. I will try my best to do that, but the funding ends on 31 March this year and there is nothing to replace it.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. An dtig liom iarraidh ar an Aire cad é atá idir lámha aici le measúnú a dhéanamh ar an straitéis feasachta cultúrtha? What action is the Minister taking to evaluate the cultural awareness strategy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will have heard from my primary answer that I will be looking at an evaluation when the programme ends. We have had interim evaluations that have looked at ways in which the two groups work together, as well as working independently in their own community. I am looking at having an evaluation, but I encourage — I said this in response to the question — both organisations to build on the cooperation that they have achieved and to continue, in their own organisation, aspects of that work. However, in the current financial situation, it is important that we get an evaluation. If that evaluation comes back positive, the groups can build on that. That is the situation. A review is key, not only for this work but for other aspects of work that we are looking at to see how much value and what added value they bring to the community. On that basis, we will decide whether they represent value for money and whether we can find the funding in the future.

Mr McKinney: It is clear that the money is gone, but what other specific strategies does the Minister have in mind that could be employed to build on what she describes as the other good work that has been achieved?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are other cultural strategies. This is not the only cultural strategy in DCAL. There are others, particularly around celebration, festivals, music and art. I do not know whether the Member was present when I answered an earlier question about the legacy of the City of Culture. Part of the strategy for that has been to widen things beyond the city to other areas in the north-west.

The cultural partnerships came together very late as part of the World Police and Fire Games in 2013, and those cultural partnerships are still working together. They came together almost to try to provide a strategy for festivals, activities, discussions, lectures, art and competitions, and they continue to do so, despite the fact that they have not received as much funding as they would like and as they received in the past. I intend to ask the arts sector — I have already started this — to come together to bring about an overarching strategy for the arts and culture in the same way as it receives Executive support for sport. That has been missing for decades, to be frank. Unless it has the full support of the Executive, the arts sector and cultural practitioners will not get the support that they deserve without having a robust strategy.

Ms Lo: I am glad to hear the Minister say that the programme will be evaluated. I am sure that she will agree with me that we are now a multicultural society and that a cultural awareness programme should have included other cultures.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member has asked a similar question before, but the criteria for this cultural awareness strategy — it was in the Department as far back as 2008 — when I asked that the GAA be included, meant that it was primarily for all-Ireland groups. That is not to say that groups from minority ethnic backgrounds are not all-Ireland in complexion now. As you know, many people who have made these shores their home have family in all counties across Ireland. I look forward to making sure that it is not just, as you say, the two big traditional communities but other communities that are included in any future funding. That missing link is crucial, but, for this bit of the funding, the criteria were that groups had to be all-Ireland in complexion. When we made the decision, those were the only two groups that met the criteria.

Sporting Facilities: Girdwood

7. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the sporting facilities being developed in Girdwood. (AQO 7867/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The Department for Social Development currently leads on the master plan conceptual framework for the regeneration of Girdwood, which includes a community hub, sports pitch, indoor sports facility, mixed-use economic units and housing.

DCAL is represented on the DSD Girdwood project board and is committed to working in partnership with DSD and Belfast City Council to develop the indoor sports facility that has been agreed as part of the framework for the site. A dedicated sports facility at Girdwood has the potential not only to be a focal point for DCAL's cross-community youth sports programme as part of the T:BUC strategy but to act as a catalyst for promoting social inclusion and tackling poverty in the surrounding areas. The plan for the indoor sports facility is at an early stage, and funding has not been secured. However, the addition of the indoor sports facility is being considered as part of the overall package, and, to that end, business cases and appraisals will be adjusted and funding bid for accordingly.

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

2.30 pm

Irish Language: TV Campaign Costs

T1. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the cost to her Department of the current television campaign, which is encouraging people to learn the Irish language. (AQT 2301/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I know that the cost is not any more than it was last year, but it is a smaller ad campaign that costs anything up to probably £17,000. I will happily get the Member the correct figures and forward them to him.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Minister agree that the money used for the campaign would be better spent on keeping libraries open longer, for example, and on supporting the arts against more drastic cuts?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member obviously does not realise that language is part of the arts and of a cultural package and cultural awareness. I believe that it is money well spent. I intend not only to continue to fund and support Líofo, but I will continue to fund and support Ulster Scots. People see languages and arts and culture as things that can be done without. Libraries need more money, arts and culture need more money and languages need more money. That is the situation that I am in, and I will continue to give them all due regard and to support them.

Library Opening Times Review: Criteria

T2. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the criteria used in the review of library opening times. (AQT 2302/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The consultation is ongoing, but I will send the criteria to the Member. The consultation on the reduction of library hours closes on, I think, 18 April, and I encourage as many people as possible to feed into it. The Member may remember that, in the draft Budget consultation, I received more responses about libraries than about any other sector. I anticipate that, when this consultation ends, as many people will still feel very dearly about their libraries. I will happily get the Member the exact criteria and send them to her.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Can she confirm that consideration will be given to those libraries that are in neighbourhood renewal areas, such as Rathcoole in north Belfast and other parts of north Belfast, where there are considerable problems with low educational attainment? What role does the Minister believe libraries should play in that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I believe that as many services as possible should be retained in neighbourhood renewal areas; they are neighbourhood renewal areas because they suffer multiple deprivation. Multiple deprivation, poor educational attainment and poor health go hand in hand, and removing or reducing a service in those areas has a bigger impact, and it is harder to reach those communities than any others.

It is as simple as trying to get as many people as possible to use libraries. If that means community groups using them to have meetings or for cultural or social activities, all the better. People do not need to go to libraries just to borrow books. I certainly encourage all Members to feed into the consultation in their constituencies. In areas such as Rathcoole in particular and in my constituency, which is at the other end of north Belfast, deprived areas need libraries.

Belfast Festival: Queen's University Funding

T3. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the importance of the Belfast Festival at

Queen's in the cultural life of Northern Ireland and to state whether she agrees that it is almost unimaginable that Belfast, our capital city, will not have a major arts festival. (AQT 2303/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, I share the Member's disappointment at the position that the Belfast Festival finds itself in. I have not heard the festival organisers themselves say that they are not going to have a festival, but the reduction in support from Queen's and, indeed, the reduction in support from the Ulster Bank last year, has put the festival under a lot of pressure, but the festival will come back, and I look forward to seeing its scale. It still has Arts Council support.

Mr McCausland: Does the Minister agree that there is some uncertainty, or lack of transparency, about the funding issues that led Queen's University to make the decision that it did, in that there was a reference to a deficit in one year but there seems to have been a surplus in other years? Would she agree to meet the festival organisers to get to the bottom of the facts so that we are clear on the situation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am happy to meet the festival organisers. As the Member knows, I am happy to have meetings with many people to discuss a range of issues, particularly those relating to DCAL. However, I make one thing very clear: I will not have the money and do not have the budget to fund any deficit for the Belfast Festival at Queen's. I do not want to get the group's hopes up. Last year, in 2014-15, it received almost £240,000-plus. I am sure that the Member will agree that that is a significant amount of public money.

Arts Sector: Cuts

T4. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she is aware of the palpable anger amongst the arts community in relation to the cuts that have been made by her Department, whether she has listened to people, such as the eminent playwright Martin Lynch, who have condemned the cuts as unfair and disproportionate and whether she agrees that the cuts are definitely unfair and disproportionate. (AQT 2304/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do think that there is a huge sense of support and solidarity in the arts sector, but the difficulty for people like Martin Lynch, Sir Kenneth Branagh, Dan Gordon and many others who have made commentary in recent times is that that sense of palpable

anger is not shared in other sectors. I encourage the Member and his party to join my party in putting the blame where it lies with the Westminster Government, which have taken hundreds of millions of pounds of public money from the block grant. We need to protect our front-line services, and, for me, arts and cultural sectors are included in that.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her reply, although I do not find it that satisfactory, and nor will members of the arts community. I will put the blame where the blame lies, with her and her party and with the Executive, which passed a bad Budget. The Minister is —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Has the Member a question?

Mr A Maginness: The Minister is supportive of that Budget. Will she now withdraw her support from that Budget?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I take responsibility for my Department, and I will stand and fall on my own sword. I am proud of my party and of Martin McGuinness because, when we make a decision, we try to protect those who are vulnerable as best as possible. We do not pay lip service, and we do not play politics with poverty. We do not play politics with disability, and we certainly do not take the money and then go out and carp about what we did or did not get. We go in and fight for people, and we do it all day every day, not just at Question Time, and at the last five minutes of it. It is pathetic.

Disability Sport NI: Funding Cuts

T6. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she accepts that the effect on the disabled community of the significant financial cuts to Disability Sport NI will be disproportionate when compared to funding reductions in other areas of her budget. (AQT 2306/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I share the Member's disappointment that, potentially, £16,000 of Disability Sport NI's budget will be cut. That £16,000 means an awful lot to it and goes an awful long way. However, as I have done in previous years, I am looking at potential end-of-year funding and potential bids along with Sport NI to try to increase that, looking through its Activ8 and sports programmes, particularly for people with disabilities, in communities and at grass-roots level. The Member may also be aware that Disability Sport has been protected

at 10% while others in the sporting community have received a cut of over 11%. I am happy to try to make an argument for Disability Sport in the future.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that update. She did say to Mr Maginness in reply to a previous question that she would do all that she could to protect the vulnerable. Does she believe that the reduction to Disability Sport NI is protecting the vulnerable?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will not take any lectures from your party. I think that you were party leader when you hitched your wagon to the Tories, so do not be lecturing me about protection. I intend to ensure that Disability Sport, in particular, which provides an excellent service, is protected as much as possible. I will make a commitment to try to get as much support as I can because I believe that it provides a valuable service on behalf of government and opportunities for inclusion and outreach to people who, by and large, face isolation and marginalisation more than any other members of this society.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Paul Givan is not in his place.

City of Culture: DCAL Funding

T8. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money her Department gave to the City of Culture. (AQT 2308/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The City of Culture received £12.3 million for 2013. The Member may have been here when I responded to a previous question about legacy. At this stage, that is totalling £6 million and is certainly a legacy for the city. We included areas in the north-west to ensure that the benefits and, indeed, the outcomes that were achieved very well by Derry as part of the City of Culture are felt by others in the surrounding areas.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, and I thank the Minister for that detail. Indeed, I thank the Minister for her investment in the city and the wider region. Given the fact that the Minister has outlined the £12 million and wider legacy issue, as well as the fact that she had introduced a legacy plan for the city and the north-west, which was additional to the Executive's financial commitment —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Could we have a question?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: What is the entire investment in the city and the wider north-west, at this point?

Ms Ní Chuilín: At this stage, the investment is almost £19 million, taken in the round. That is substantial money, but I make no apology for making that investment on behalf of my Executive colleagues, who make no apology either. The legacy programme funding has not only been spent in the city of Derry, but we are looking at areas such as Coleraine, Portstewart, Castlederg, Strabane, and we are looking at areas in Limavady, Dungiven and in Ballynascreen. The programme is ongoing, and it is important that, additionally, we try to make bids to ensure that groups that have received funding from other Departments get additional funding to make sure that the services that they provide to people, most of whom are marginalised, are good and give a good outcome, with the people feeling that there is something for them that meets needs in their constituency. So it is important that we continue to make those bids.

Paddy McNair: International Debut

T9. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, on a happier matter, albeit that we all want to see much more money for the arts, whether she will join him, as a great fan of football, in wishing every success to Paddy McNair in his full international debut at Hampden Park tomorrow night. (AQT 2309/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, of course. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. Given the support there was for rugby last weekend, will she also wish the whole team great support for tomorrow night and for football to get as much support as rugby does?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely, and indeed the women's team. More often than not, we talk about male athletes in the House. The women deserve a special mention as well and should enjoy all our support.

Scéime Pobail Gaeilge

T10. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure an dtig liom ceist a chur ar an Aire faoi stádas reatha na scéime pobail Gaeilge? (AQT 2310/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I think the Member was asking me about the status of scéime pobail Gaeilge.

Mr Ó hOisín: Yes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: OK. The Member may be aware that Foras na Gaeilge conducted a consultation into this, and there was a lot of feedback. I know that members of his and neighbouring constituencies fed into that. I will happily meet with some of those groups and will certainly be working with Foras na Gaeilge to ensure that there is additional support for this programme.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members to provide a translation, so that all Members can understand questions and answers. I call Cathal Ó hOisín for a supplementary.

Mr Ó hOisín: Tá mé buartha faoin sin, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Rinne mé dearmad den aistriúchán. I forgot about the translation.

I further ask the Minister, given that scéime pobail Gaeilge is one of the most important deliveries that Foras na Gaeilge administers, will she bring the matter up with it and ensure that that will continue to be the case? Go raibh míle math agat.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am happy to do that. I thought the Member was testing my skills in Irish, and I hope that my teachers were watching to see that I fully understood the question and was able to respond to it appropriately. Yes, I will continue to raise that issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We have completed topical questions to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments, as the next Question Time commences at 2.45 pm.

2.45 pm

Education

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Questions 6 and 7 have been withdrawn.

Newtownabbey Community High School: Bus Passes

1. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Education whether pupils of Newtownabbey Community High School, who will be displaced to the Monkstown site of Abbey Community College from September 2015, will be considered as exceptional cases in relation to

the issuing of free school transport passes. (AQO 7874/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The education and library boards, which are responsible for determining eligibility, inform me that pupils attending Newtownabbey Community High School who are currently in receipt of transport assistance will have their eligibility protected for the transitional period between moving to the Monkstown site and the establishment of the new school. Once the new school is established and open, all pupils in receipt of protected transport assistance will have their eligibility reassessed to the new school. This may mean that some pupils lose the eligibility that they held prior to the establishment of the new school.

Pupils who attend Newtownabbey Community High School and who are currently eligible for assistance will be reassessed against the Monkstown site following their move, which may result in some pupils losing their transport as well. These transitional arrangements apply only while pupils remain enrolled in the amalgamating schools; where they leave and apply to other schools, normal transport arrangements will apply.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree that every effort must be made to ease the transition for pupils who are going from Newtownabbey to the Monkstown school, given that they live in an area of high deprivation in north Belfast? Does he also agree that there is at least a moral argument that pupils should not have to meet the three-mile criterion?

Mr O'Dowd: The boards are showing some flexibility, as I explained in my original response to the Member. I accept that amalgamating schools can be a difficult process for teachers, pupils, parents, families etc, but we need a transport policy in place that is fair to everyone. The Member may be aware that we have recently undertaken a review of the transport policy; we will publish the consultation later in the year. I believe that the board has shown flexibility.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister indicate when he is likely to bring forward recommendations on the basis of the recent transport review?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. At this stage, it is likely to be after the summer recess. Quite a detailed document has

been published by the review team, which contains a significant number of recommendations. I will consult with statutory bodies and other Departments affected by the review before going out to full consultation.

Schools: Car Parking

2. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Education how the new Education Authority will budget for and deliver upgrades and enhancements to parent/carer car parking facilities in schools. (AQO 7875/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Authority will have a duty to manage its available budget, as set out in the Education Act 2014, in accordance with the priorities that I identify as Minister with responsibility for education. The 2015-16 capital budget for minor works is severely constrained, and priority will be given to inescapable statutory requirements, such as health and safety, and obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act, as well as to contractually committed works.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his answer. Needs are often based on the health and safety of pupils and, of course, ordinary pedestrians near the school. In many cases, it may be more cost-effective, efficient and immediate to put in place a patrol crossing. Does the Minister agree that, in most cases when schools are denied a patrol crossing, common sense, flexibility and discretion should be used?

Mr O'Dowd: I hope that common sense guides most decisions in the education world. Each school will be assessed on its own needs. The boards, and then the Education Authority, will assess each school to determine whether a school patrol person or an upgrade of car parking facilities in the school grounds is the best option financially and for health and safety. Each case will tell its own story, so it is very difficult to stand here at the Dispatch Box and decide whether one case or another has more merit. Procedures are in place; they have to be fully applied, and I would hope that common sense prevails.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. An dtig leis an Aire suas chun dáta a thabhairt dúinn ar bhunú an ESA? Will the Minister provide an update on the establishment of ESA?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a ceist.. ESA will be established

on 1 April. All appointments have now been made to the Education Authority from all the nominating bodies. We have appointed an interim chief executive, and the body will move into functioning mode from 1 April. There is a lot of work for the new authority to be getting on with in amalgamating five education boards and the staff commission into one efficient and effective delivery mechanism. The Education Authority is also facing quite a difficult budget in the months and years ahead.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Given that the original question and answer focused on road safety, will the Minister consider 20 mph speed limits around all schools?

Mr O'Dowd: It is not within my power or gift. That is a question for the Minister for Regional Development.

Schools: Job Losses

3. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Education how many of the projected 1,500 job losses that he warned of recently will come from schools in the Southern Education and Library Board area. (AQO 7876/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: At this stage, it is estimated that 500 teaching and 1,000 non-teaching posts will be made redundant during the coming financial year. It is too early to determine the number of redundancies that may occur in the Southern Education and Library Board area. It is for individual employers to determine their staffing requirements, and it is not possible at this stage to determine the actual numbers of posts that will be declared redundant.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his answer. What criteria will he establish across the whole of Northern Ireland to make teaching staff redundant? Will he guarantee that the redundancies will be evenly applied across all schools and sectors?

Mr O'Dowd: The driving criterion at this stage is the financial situation that we find ourselves in. Schools have to ensure that they balance their budgets, so they will have to establish what staff complement they require to deliver the curriculum. All schools are affected across all sectors, and each sector and each individual school will have to make decisions on staffing levels. Non-teaching staff will be affected not only by the decisions taken by schools but by the decisions taken by the Education Authority in the months ahead.

Miss M McIlveen: Given the difficult budget situation that many schools find themselves in, has the Minister given any consideration to using the school surplus fund that is available to his Department in a more creative way to offset schools' needs?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member raises a very interesting point. It is worth noting that, despite a very difficult term in the 2014-15 financial year, there is still a £47 million school surplus. I am not suggesting that the majority of those schools should now spend that surplus, but there are quite significant surpluses that in some cases run to over £500,000 accumulated over several years. That money is given to schools to spend on the educational well-being of pupils now. I have said before that some schools tell me that they are saving it for a rainy day, but my answer is, "Well, I tell you what, it's raining". That money needs to be drawn down in a responsible way and used. Perhaps there is a need for an Assembly debate or, without stepping on the Education Committee's toes, further research by the Committee as to how that surplus, if it is not drawn down within a reasonable period, is reinvested in education. We cannot continue with the scenario that allows £47 million of unspent moneys in education.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What efforts is the Minister's Department making to protect front-line services?

Mr O'Dowd: We have invested a significant amount of money since the draft Budget in our aggregated schools budget, which amounts to an additional £80 million, to front-line school services. Schools are still facing significant pressures moving ahead, although, as I said in response to the previous question, there is a £47 million school surplus pot that needs to be drawn down. A significant amount of it needs to be drawn down this year, otherwise the Assembly and the Executive may want to look at it in a different light than they have done in previous years. I have done everything in my power to achieve efficiencies in my Department and across the education sector. The Education Authority in itself will ensure that there are savings within education over a number of years.

We are attempting to look everywhere to see if additional moneys can be provided to education. In terms of European funding, we have seen the recent intervention during the Stormont House talks in relation to funding for shared education and integrated education, and

I am seeking other avenues of funding, but it is a very difficult financial year. When you listen to comments following the Westminster Budget and you hear both the Conservatives and Labour saying that they are going to continue to cut front-line services for the next three years, it is a very worrying and difficult time for public services. We have to look at how we deliver public services in a different way in the years ahead.

Mr Rogers: Minister, I think we are all concerned about the budget situation, but we know that education should be for all. How do you reconcile the increasing need to ensure that our special educational needs children have access to the full curriculum while at the same time 1,000 classroom assistants are going to lose their jobs?

Mr O'Dowd: First of all, it is not correct to say that 1,000 classroom assistants will lose their jobs. The non-teaching staff who will lose their jobs will be across a wide range of support staff within our schools. That is an estimated figure. The final figure will be known when schools make their decisions as to how many staff they can afford under their current budgets. Schools now have to go through their budgets, including their surplus — the £47 million surplus that is sitting out there and that is now required to be spent in education. It is not correct, and I think it is alarmist, to say that 1,000 classroom assistants are going to lose their jobs. That is not correct.

Schools: Community Accessibility

4. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered making school facilities more accessible to the local community. (AQO 7877/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am committed to promoting greater use of school premises to help meet the needs of local communities. Existing legislation and a range of departmental policies such as Every School a Good School, the extended schools programme and the full service programme already enable and encourage schools to make their premises available for wider community use. In seeking to enhance levels of community provision, my Department also published and issued guidance to all schools in January 2014 entitled 'Community Use of School Premises: A Guidance Toolkit for Schools', which is designed to assist principals and boards of governors in providing for community access to school facilities.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answer so far. In terms of the whole community, and given the constraints on his budget, will the Minister actively consider marketing the facilities along with the individual schools, not just to the local community but to the third sector and, indeed, the private sector, to make use of the facilities?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member makes an interesting proposal. As I said in response to Mr Maskey, we are going to have to look at how we deliver public services in a different way and how we ensure that our public services, particularly our schools, are used to their full extent. If there are opportunities for them to raise revenue in working with the community or to save revenue from another Department, whether it be Health and Social Services or whatever it may be, we have to look at doing it in a different way, because we are not going to have the moneys in the future to deliver the same range of public services in the same range of buildings as we currently have. We should certainly look at our schools estate to ensure that it is used to its maximum ability. I am more than happy to explore further if there is a way that the Department of Education can assist schools in marketing their premises to the community and to other sectors.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer so far. Will he detail what powers he has to intervene in cases where school facilities are not openly accessible to the public?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. I have very limited — if any — powers in that area. The day-to-day running of schools is down to the boards of governors. We have done everything within our power to assist boards of governors and encourage them to open up their school facilities to wider use by the community. At one stage, it was suggested that perhaps we need legislation. I would like the toolkit that we have sent out to schools to be in place for at least another year before we consider bringing in legislation to impose it on schools to take measures.

We currently have around 81% of schools opening up their doors to the community in one way or another. We now want to encourage the rest to do likewise. To me, it is a no-brainer. Schools should be open to the entire community. They should be a community facility. It is good for the schools, good for education and good for the community, so to me it is a no-brainer.

All the information that schools require is now with them. My Department is open to engaging with any school that requires further information and support. At this stage, we want to encourage schools, but, at some stage in the future, particularly if the economic climate continues to move in the way in which it is moving, they may find that legislation has to be brought in to ensure that they are open for other community uses.

3.00 pm

Mr Ramsey: I welcome the response from the Minister, particularly the comment that 80% of schools currently open their estate to the community. One of the greatest worries for boards of governors and principals is the ongoing insurance burdens and pressures on schools. Is there anything that the Department can do to ease those pressures to enable schools to open their doors more than they do now?

Mr O'Dowd: The guidance toolkit that we have issued to schools gives case studies of how other boards of governors have overcome those hurdles in real, practical terms. The 80% of schools that currently open up to the community have also faced issues around insurance, public liability and so on. All those things have been overcome elsewhere, so there is no reason why they cannot be overcome in the remaining 20% of schools. The toolkit provides information to schools around all the issues, and I encourage them to use it.

Primary Languages

5. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Education how he is prioritising the development of primary languages. (AQO 7878/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: While modern languages are not a statutory part of the curriculum at primary level here, it is a matter for primary schools to decide whether they wish to teach an additional language. To protect front-line services and the aggregated schools budget in particular, it has been decided that the funding earmarked for the primary modern languages programme, which has been running from 2007, will cease with effect from 31 March 2015. My Department recognises that teaching modern languages in primary schools has many benefits. I regard building capacity among class teachers as the most sustainable approach to primary language provision. I encourage primary-school principals who would like a language to be delivered in their school to

apply for ERASMUS+ funding to build the capacity of their teachers to teach an additional language.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for that answer. In advance of the decision that you have taken on funding for foreign languages in our primary schools, was any assessment made of how that could work itself through as an impediment to our people competing in the global market, developing job skills or being able to take job opportunities in the longer term, never mind how it might impact on the creation of a modern, inclusive and open society?

Mr O'Dowd: Over the seven years that the programme has been running, we have actually seen a slight slippage in the number of young people taking GCSEs and A levels in modern languages. To use your analogy, that would suggest that the programme was not delivering for the economy and encouraging young people to continue to take languages. However, I did not use that analogy.

I encourage schools to promote modern languages teaching. The question is this: how do we fund it? Our schools have a budget. They have a restricted budget, but they have a budget. There is an opportunity for schools to continue with the programme. We are talking, in some cases, about a couple of hours a week. In some instances, tutors were in schools for a couple of hours a week. In other schools, depending on their size, it was more expansive than that. Schools will perhaps want to look at whether they can continue the programme from their own budget, and I accept that there is a challenge there. There is also an opportunity for schools to seek European funding. We will provide further information to them around European funding opportunities. We will also attempt to source other funding opportunities for schools to move forward.

This funding, which was provided by the Department, was additional to the school budget. It was there to support schools to deliver the primary languages programme, but there is nothing to stop schools from continuing with it. Another objective of the programme was to upskill teachers to assist them to deliver modern languages in the classroom. In some instances, that has been successful, but, in other instances, it has not been as successful as we would have liked.

As I have said throughout Question Time today, we will have to look differently at how we deliver public services. We face a very difficult financial year in schools. I can navel-gaze for the next year and say how terrible things are —

they are — or I can lift my head and start looking for alternatives. We all need to start looking for alternatives in how we deliver public services. This is a case in which I believe that, if we use our imagination and know-how, we will be able to secure funding from a variety of sources to allow the practice to continue in schools.

Mr Kinahan: Does the Minister recognise that the heavy workload on teachers makes it extremely difficult for them to have the time to learn and to teach foreign languages? If he is looking for a way of doing things differently, he should maybe drop the sacred cows like the Irish language school in Dungiven. He should park it for the moment. We still want Irish language in the future, but why does he not put that money into languages that help children to learn so that they can get jobs worldwide?

Mr O'Dowd: Let me get this right: you are suggesting that I should not drop the primary modern languages programmes but should close down Irish language schools.

Mr Kinahan: You should park it.

Mr O'Dowd: OK. The Irish language is a modern language and is, therefore, part of the overall delivery of language provision. I do not think that it makes sense for me to close down Irish-medium schools to provide funding for tutors, some of whom only work several hours a week, to provide modern languages in schools. The evidence that it encourages young people to continue to take languages at GCSE and A level is inconclusive. If we are to do something, let us do it on an evidence base rather than having a simple knee-jerk reaction and saying, "Tell you what. We need money. Close down the Irish language sector, because we do not like it".

Mr Kinahan: I did not say that.

Mr O'Dowd: No, but it comes across that way. You have to understand that when you —
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. Continue, Minister. Sorry. Only one person should speak at a time.

Mr Kinahan: Apologies.

Mr O'Dowd: I suspect that Mr Kinahan did not mean it that way, but when you say something you have to understand that those listening may take it in an alternative way. That applies to us

all. There is an opportunity for the programme to continue in a different way; it could be funded directly by schools or directly through European or other funding. We will continue to try to source that.

My mantra for the next year may be that we will have to do things differently, because, regardless of who goes into Downing Street, they have all committed to cutting public funding. If we want to continue to deliver public services, which we all do, we will have to do things differently.

Mr McCausland: The American car manufacturer Henry Ford said that you could have any colour of car that you wanted as long as it was black. When the Minister's Department abandons a programme that offered three languages — Spanish, Polish and Irish — and, at the same time, another part of his Department is seeking to initiate a new programme to bring Irish into schools, is it not a case of "You can have any language that you want as long as it is Irish"?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will be aware that I am looking at a new model as well — an Ulster-Scots model to introduce and enhance Ulster-Scots provision in our primary schools. The Member met me recently, along with a number of colleagues, to discuss how we can do that. I hope to call together a seminar in the near future to bring together schools that have delivered Ulster-Scots language and culture to see how we can advance it across the board. I have given the Member a commitment to do that. I am not providing only one model; I am providing at least two, and schools can continue to provide as many as they wish.

Mr Lunn: The Minister must be aware that, across the education spectrum here and abroad, it is widely acknowledged that a second language is beneficial to a child's education, whether that second language is a modern language or Irish — we could argue about that. Does he think that he gave the subject sufficient priority when assessing what had to be cut and what had to continue?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member makes a valid point. Schemes have lost funding in this budget round that, in normal circumstances, I would never have gone near. However, our Budget has been cut year on year since 2010; the education budget has been cut year on year since 2010. We have seen a reduced Budget of £1.5 billion in the Executive since 2010, so we simply cannot continue to deliver the same services with less money as we did

last year, the year before that or the year before that.

When I discussed the budget with the Education Committee, I think that I said that we were now in among the sacred cows. That is where we are. Many of the areas that have received cuts or have been stopped are, in my opinion, sacred cows, but I do not have the money to continue them. It is as simple as that. We have to look at doing it in a different way. Perhaps we need to look at the entry qualifications for teacher training and whether our newly qualified teachers should be proficient in a modern language. Is that the way forward? Is that the long-term thinking in ensuring that we encourage modern languages in schools? It might be a long-term solution, but we need a short-term solution.

Schools: Capital Investment

8. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Education to outline the capital investment projects that are planned for East Londonderry in the next five years. (AQO 7881/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: With a constrained capital budget position, I currently have no plans for a further capital announcement at this stage.

In June 2012, as part of 18 projects, I announced Rossmar School in Limavady. It is anticipated that this project will be on site in 2015. In January 2013, the combined Listress, Craigbrack and Mullabuoy primary school was identified as one of 22 projects to be taken forward in planning. The development proposal for this amalgamation was approved in August 2014, and work is currently under way on the feasibility study. When it is complete, a supporting business case will be provided prior to the appointment of a multidisciplinary design team to take forward the detailed design of the new school. In June 2014, I announced 16 capital projects that included Roe Valley Integrated Primary School. A draft feasibility study has been received for this project, and work is ongoing on the business case. Currently, I cannot offer definitive timescales for the commencement of the construction works for those projects due to the constrained capital budget position.

In July 2014, I announced the first of three major projects under the shared education campus programme, one of which is in Limavady. This project will provide two new shared facilities: a shared sixth form on the St Mary's High School site and a shared science, technology, engineering and maths centre on

the Limavady High School site. Work is under way on the feasibility study and business case for this project.

Finally, there is one school enhancement project in the constituency. This is for the Coleraine Academical Institution to upgrade the mechanical and electrical services at an approved cost of £1.7 million, with site work commencing in April 2015.

I think that the Member can agree: you are doing OK.

Mr G Robinson: I am actually looking for more. I am asking for Millburn Primary School in Coleraine, which has been on the list for quite a long time. Are there any plans to upgrade or replace the old Millburn school?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said at the start of my answer, I am not in a position at this stage to make any further announcements on the capital budget. I have to assess where the capital budget, which is much reduced, is, how much we can deliver in this financial year and, in projecting forward, what schemes are likely to move ahead in time. When that work is complete, I will make a decision on whether I will make any further capital announcements in this mandate. If I do, I will keep the Member's comments under consideration.

Education Authority: Training

9. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Education to outline the training to be provided to the members of the board of the Education Authority. (AQO 7882/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A bespoke training programme has been delivered to board members in advance of 1 April. A one-day training seminar was provided by my Department on 19 March that focused on governance and accountability, roles and responsibilities of board members, managing key relationships, financial and risk management, ethical standards and code of conduct.

A follow-up training seminar was also provided by my Department on 23 March that focused specifically on education issues, including the key education priorities, the 2015-16 budget and the Education Authority's role and relationship with DE. General induction training is also being provided to members on issues such as the Education Authority's organisation and structures, arrangements and format for board meetings and human resources issues.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. Does any aspect of the training that the Minister has talked about involve financial responsibilities?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for his question. Yes, we have covered financial issues. That would obviously be very important training for board members, both in ensuring that financial processes are followed properly and in dealing with what is quite a difficult budget for the Education Authority moving forward. It will be one of the major challenges for the authority in its first year, along with many others. It faces difficult financial times ahead, so training has been and will continue to be provided.

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

Schools Estate: Maintenance Regime

T1. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Education what assurance he can give that the schools estate, particularly classrooms, is up to a fit and proper standard, with the maintenance regime stepped up, albeit that the difficulties that he is having with his finances are understood. (AQT 2311/11-15)

3.15 pm

Mr O'Dowd: I cannot assure the Member that the maintenance scheme will be stepped up, because our maintenance budget faces quite a significant cut this year. Over previous years, we have spent tens of millions of pounds on maintenance — moneys directly from the Department of Education and moneys provided from OFMDFM as part of its economic strategy. I assure the Member that we have to ensure that, where there are health and safety issues, they are dealt with quickly and robustly.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate that answer. I know that the Minister accepted an invitation from Creavery Primary School and visited it last year. However, I am sure that he was as horrified as I and other representatives from the area were when we heard that the classroom ceiling fell down. Fortunately, no children were injured, but the school has highlighted the substandard nature of the classrooms. What can you do, Minister, to make sure that the board ensures that appropriate action is taken

to bring not only that classroom but the rest of the school facilities up to a good standard?

Mr O'Dowd: I am aware of the circumstances. I visited the school at the invitation of the Member. I understand from the board — it will be the Education Authority by that stage — that a permanent replacement to the mobile will be in place by 20 April. Work will commence and continue over the Easter holidays to ensure that the mobile is replaced by 20 April. Other schemes around the school are awaiting planning permission. As far as I am aware, planning permission has been sought for other elements that require improvement around the school. In a very limited minor budget programme and in a limited maintenance budget programme, I will ensure that the board and the authority focus in on the needs of that school.

Anti-bullying Legislation: Progress

T2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on progress with anti-bullying legislation. (AQT 2312/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Consultation for the legislation has now closed. There were almost 4,000 responses to the consultation, and I am pleased to say that many of the responses were from young people who are often the victims of bullying in our schools. I am now analysing the consultation responses. I will share them with the Education Committee and set out my way forward.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Whatever measures the Minister introduces, will they include training for education staff?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. We will set out the way forward in the weeks ahead for how we see the legislation being shaped. I also believe that education staff and boards of governors will require training on how the new legislation will affect them and how they can best deal with and prevent bullying in their schools.

Ulidia Integrated College: Eco-school

T3. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Education whether he will join him in congratulating Ulidia Integrated College in its 20th year as an eco-school. (AQT 2313/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I will, yes. It is quite an achievement for the college. I believe that it was among the first schools to achieve the accolade. I think that it is now on to its second flag, so well done to all involved.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. I know that he has been talking a lot today, as has everyone, about resources, but, since it has been such a success, can he outline what guidance is available to other schools that might want to follow the same route and become eco-schools?

Mr O'Dowd: I understand that, as the boards did previously, the Education Authority, working in conjunction with local councils, will distribute information to schools as to how they can achieve eco-school status. Quite a number of our schools have been very successful at that. I think that over 200 schools have achieved that status. So, well done to each and every one of those schools. That work will continue through the Education Authority, in conjunction with our local councils.

Careers Inquiry: DE Recommendations

T4. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Education how his Department has dealt with the recommendations specific to it from the Employment and Learning Committee's inquiry into careers education, information, advice and guidance. (AQT 2314/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: We joined with the Minister for Employment and Learning in the overall review of careers education and advice in our schools, which reported earlier this year, or just before Christmas, and those recommendations are currently being worked through by my departmental officials, in discussions with DEL officials.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. What is the Minister's view on recommendation 3, which is that careers should become a compulsory subject on the curriculum?

Mr O'Dowd: Instead of picking out each recommendation and giving a response to it, I think that we, in conjunction with the review carried out by the Minister for Employment and Learning, should respond to the collective recommendations across the board. A number of elements are called for as compulsory elements of the curriculum, but I do not think that they can be viewed in isolation. An overall

review of the curriculum may be required in the years ahead to decide which parts of the curriculum should be compulsory. However, it is worth saying that, in recent inspection reports, careers advice has seen a significant improvement on previous years, and we want to keep that trend going.

Computer Programming: Primary Schools

T5. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Education approximately how many primary-age children are studying computer programming. (AQT 2315/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department does not keep information of that level. Computer programming is not a compulsory element of the primary-school curriculum, although I am aware that many schools are involved in computer coding clubs and that a number of schools are involved with IT companies in their vicinity which, commendably, provide training to primary-school children.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he takes the point in my question. In response to a recent Assembly question, the Minister said that 14,480 year-12 pupils sat GCSE in design and technology, which is a pointer. Is the Minister prepared to introduce an early introduction to programming? I take it from his previous answer that he is unable to give me an example of that and of how such a programme could be expanded, but I do see the need.

Mr O'Dowd: There are numerous examples. I have given you a number of examples of how schools are working with local industry and involving themselves in local computer coding clubs. As I said in response to Mr Hilditch, I do not believe that you can pick one element out of the economy or education and say, "That's going to be the next compulsory element of the curriculum." To do that, you would require an overall review of the curriculum and decide on the weaknesses and strengths of making a subject compulsory at any level.

I am aware that they have made coding compulsory in schools in England, for instance, but they have not provided any funding to back it up. I could say that coding is compulsory in all schools, but I have no funding to back it up. The ways in which a number of schools are approaching this matter are innovative and inventive, and we should continue to encourage them down that road for the time being unless and until a review of the curriculum takes place.

Class Size: Key Stage 2

T7. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Education whether he heard the choir from Dromore Central Primary School singing in the Great Hall this afternoon, whether he is aware of the school's active campaign for a 28-base classroom and what he believes should be the optimal class size at Key Stage 2, bearing in mind multiple ability and reduced support staff. (AQT 2317/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, I did hear the school singing; I thought they were celebrating their new school. I have many schools in with me who, quite rightly, complain that they are not getting a new build and that they desperately need one. We have heard examples of school roofs falling in on pupils, so, at this stage, my mind is concentrated on providing suitable accommodation for schools that have not had an announcement for a new build or for which the maintenance backlog is such that we have roofs falling in on children. I think there is much to sing about in Dromore Central.

The Member asked about the optimum class size. The most important element in any classroom is the teacher and the ability, skills and leadership of the teacher.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. You walked right into my supplementary, so I thank you for that, Minister. You said that it is the quality of teaching that matters most, not the class size. Given what you have said, what should the pupil:teacher ratio be in a Key Stage 2 class, considering that modern classrooms have a smaller square footage?

Mr O'Dowd: I am not going to walk into the trap of deciding how many pupils should be in each class in Dromore Central. Dromore Central has made decisions in relation to the number of classes that it is prepared to run. I think that its model is not financially viable going into the future, but that is a decision for the board of governors of Dromore Central. I have provided a new build to that school, and I think they have done very, very well. I have bought land to build a new post-primary school in Dromore. I am dealing with roofs falling on children's heads and that is where my priority is at this time; it is not to provide more classes to a school that has a suitable new build coming.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): David McIlveen is not in his place, Alastair Ross is not in his place, and Ross Hussey is not in his place. That is the end of topical questions for today.

Private Members' Business

Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly expresses concern that men outnumber women by nearly three to one in high-level science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) posts; welcomes the statement by the Minister for Employment and Learning on 4 June 2013 reiterating the importance of women in the STEM sectors; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to publish a strategy and action plan that addresses specifically the issue of gender imbalance in the STEM sectors. — [Ms McGahan.]

Mrs Overend: I am very pleased to participate in this afternoon's debate on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, although everyone seems to be leaving the Chamber. Thank you for your support, Leslie.

It is clear that, whilst the working environment for women has improved markedly over the years, there remains a prominent gender imbalance in the STEM sectors. We often hear about job opportunities that are brought about by successful local companies as well as the foreign direct investments that come into Northern Ireland and the importance of having the correct skills base to fill those jobs. However, if more than 50% of the population do not see a career in STEM sectors as a viable option, we will fall a long way short of achieving our economic potential.

As I said during the debate on STEM in schools a couple of weeks ago, the importance of matching the skills set of our young people coming up through school and into the world of work to the demands of the workplace is a central issue that we should focus on and is another example of how a proper joined-up Government would be successful. We need to give all our young people the right advice about their future career, so that the focus should be not simply on the further and higher education sector but on our schools. Indeed, we need to take that skills focus right back to primary schools. The responsibility is not just with the Employment and Learning Minister but with the Education Minister.

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

Women in Northern Ireland are more likely to attend university than men: 58% of those in university are women. However, when it comes to women in STEM subjects, the figures are shocking. Only 30% of those who study STEM subjects at university — outside medicine — are women. Careers advice is one tool that must play a part in addressing that disparity, and I look forward, as the proposer mentioned, to seeing how that is done well at the South West College's Get Engineering careers fair this weekend.

Such a strategy, as proposed in the motion, would bring a much-needed focus on achieving targets in that area. A number of worthy initiatives are playing a part in tackling the imbalance, and I have the great privilege of being involved in one of those: the Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies Alliance (SEMTA). SEMTA and the Engineering Training Council's Women into STEM programme, of which I am patron, set out to support 20 SMEs and four large companies to develop 50 females in a successful STEM career, to promote STEM to 1,000 schoolgirls and to establish a women's network to mentor and develop women and girls in those industries. Initiatives like the SEMTA Women into STEM programme are vital in addressing the issue.

I commend steps taken by one of Northern Ireland's major employers to encourage more women to take up scientific and technical jobs in its workforce. SQS, which is a local company in the digital ICT sector, has signed up to a STEM equality charter. The STEM charter was launched by the STEM business group with the Equality Commission in June 2014. To date, 28 STEM organisations, including several other major IT companies, have signed up to the charter to demonstrate their commitment to equality for women in STEM posts. The charter is about assisting businesses to make their workplaces more welcoming and supportive for women, and thus improve the gender balance.

In 2013, when the Employment and Learning Minister made the statement to which we refer today, he highlighted a review of the cross-departmental gender equality strategy as well as the drafting of a Northern Ireland childcare strategy that should address childcare as a barrier for women returners. Where are we now on those two strategies? It is notable that the proposer avoided mentioning OFMDFM at all, yet it is the lead Department on gender equality. In Dr Farry's statement of 3 June 2013, he mentioned a joint economic inactivity strategy with DETI. In responding to the

debate, I hope that the Minister can provide the House with an update.

3.30 pm

The most recent figures show generally promising economic figures. However, 27.8% of working-age people in Northern Ireland are defined as economically inactive. This is the highest of all UK regions. That has been the case for a long time and, worryingly, there is no downward trend.

It is obvious that gender imbalance will not be served overnight. We all need to work together towards the same goal despite differences we may have on how we get there. An Executive strategy and action plan that addresses specifically gender imbalance in the STEM sectors should go a long way in setting out the road ahead.

Ms Lo: The fact that men outnumber women by nearly three to one in STEM posts is not surprising. While female students tend to do better than their male counterparts in GCSE and A-level results and are more likely to enter higher education, less than 30% of females graduate in STEM subjects. The under-representation of women in STEM jobs is not just a gender equality issue. There are wider economic consequences for our economy and international competitiveness.

The workforce of the future will need to be skilled in STEM to meet the growing demands from an economy increasingly dependent on ICT and innovation from research and development. Therefore, it is vital that more young people are encouraged to study STEM subjects. If we fail to inspire our young females, we are not maximising the potential pool of talent from both sexes.

As public spending cuts deepen, there will be fewer teachers in schools and a reduction in administrative and social policy jobs in the Civil Service, so women and girls will have much better job prospects with qualifications in not only STEM degrees but the traditionally perceived men's trades as technicians or electricians. It is not easy to replace a "scientist equals man" image, which is deeply embedded in our culture. We need a culture shift to make those sectors more attractive to women and to make young women more aware of the wide range of career options available in those industries. We need enthusiastic parents, teachers and career advisers to encourage girls to embark on STEM careers. Role models are important for inspiring females to take up

technical subjects and pursue careers in male-dominated sectors.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. Would the Member agree that when she talks about role models, she has and we have in our own deputy leader an example of a role model who is a qualified engineer by trade — Naomi Long?

Ms Lo: Oh, absolutely.

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

Ms Lo: Thank you. She is certainly an excellent role model with her degree in civil engineering. Media focus on prominent women scientists, engineers and STEM teachers as role models can change the perception that those are careers for only men.

Minister Stephen Farry and his Department are aware of the challenges and have led in the production and implementation of the STEM strategy, Success through STEM, which has been endorsed by the Executive. The strategy aims to encourage more of our young people, particularly females, to study and pursue a career in STEM.

DEL has been working on a gender action plan as well as taking into consideration gender bias in career and apprenticeship reviews. However, it is very disappointing that the Education Minister has decided to cut 50% of the budget for Sentinus, which promotes STEM subjects in primary and secondary schools. That is another example of silo mentality in the Assembly.

Of the 25 recommendations in the STEM strategy, five are for businesses to carry forward. To address the problem of under-representation comprehensively, the approach must be collaborative and include parents, schools and agencies. To deal with the business-specific recommendations, the STEM business subgroup was formed, with a DEL-funded post of business coordinator. An example of the success of the work undertaken by the group to address gender bias is the initiative Women in STEM, Addressing the Gender Balance, which supports women into management positions in manufacturing and engineering companies.

The initiative supports companies to develop females in a successful career in STEM, promote STEM to schoolgirls and establish a women's network to mentor and support women

and girls. In June 2014, the Equality Commission, in conjunction with the group and DEL, established a STEM CEO charter for businesses to show their commitment to taking steps to recruit and retain more women in the workplace. It is by working together that we can begin to see a change in the historical deficit of female representation in the STEM sector.

Mr Hilditch: In supporting the motion, I acknowledge the Minister, his Department and other relevant Departments that have contributed to the progress that has been made in recent years to increase the overall number of males and females studying the STEM subjects and the work that they have done to help bridge the gender imbalance. However, there is a lot of work to be done, as we have heard.

Sentinus, the Department's front-line STEM delivery partner should also be commended. It has secured in excess of 57,000 primary and post-primary pupil engagements annually across a portfolio of STEM enhancements and enrichment programmes. Hopefully, it will continue despite some doubts, as it provides the Insight into Engineering programme, which is specifically designed for girls, utilises female role models to help dispel misconceptions regarding engineering careers for females and helps bridge the gender gap.

I congratulate some local schools in my constituency for the work that they have been doing to encourage more young people to take an interest in the science subjects. In January, St Killian's College just outside Carnlough won three awards in the BT Young Scientist competition in Dublin. Three other schools in the Larne borough — St John's Primary School, Larne High School and Linn Primary School — celebrated their success in this year's prestigious F1 in Schools challenge. Linn Primary School was awarded third prize overall at the NEC in Birmingham just two weeks ago. Further to that, Carrickfergus Grammar School is going to Japan to represent Northern Ireland in the world finals. I congratulate and praise all those pupils on their achievements and their hard work that has paid off, which demonstrates some of the talent that exists in Northern Ireland.

It is those types of initiatives that are encouraging young people into the science subjects, and it is clear, when we look at the ratio of males to females in the teams that entered and won their category, that those types of events and competitions are making headway on bridging the gender gap in the

STEM sector. There have been a number of suggestions of causes for those gender imbalances, including stereotypes in the education system; a lack of female role models to aspire to be like; norms governing gender roles in the household that constrain a woman's choice of occupation; and employers' attitudes to family formation and childbearing. In short, progress on reducing the gender gap in some subjects has been slow because there are those multiple barriers to challenge.

We must ensure that we break down those barriers and incite social change, as increasing female participation drives up skill levels, produces a wider talent pool and empowers women to ensure that Northern Ireland can compete in the highly competitive global economy.

However, we have to ensure that parents and influencers recognise the importance of STEM subjects as a career choice. The choice of subjects must mirror the employment opportunities in Northern Ireland. If we are to reduce the detrimental brain drain, we must ensure we develop a knowledge-based economy to compete for inward investment in the future. Our greatest resource and economic driver is our skilled and talented people, and we must ensure that they are made aware of the opportunities available in Northern Ireland with STEM subjects in order to tackle that unconscious bias.

To achieve more equal numbers of male and female students, it is necessary for social norms to evolve. However, things are changing, albeit slowly. Employers' attitudes are changing, and our education system is slowly moving away from gender stereotyping.

Nevertheless, I question whether our society will ever be able to change social norms to achieve gender equality when choosing subjects at school. The motion states that men outnumber women by three to one in STEM posts. I am sure that the same could be said for women who choose nursing or teaching careers. Maybe the onus lies more with the student at times to take in the information. Worryingly, young people are still not seeing the benefits of choosing a STEM subject, but, hopefully, our schools and colleges can change their mindset and actions, and, in collaboration with others, they can learn how financially rewarding and life-changing those careers can be.

Students see scientific subjects as academically challenging, but some students are aware that they can lead to innovations,

such as in medicine, that change the world and people's lives. Let us also be mindful of the shift in the economic balance of power. Not only is China following America in terms of STEM publication output; it is set to surpass it in the near future. It is also producing high rates of STEM graduates, with 41% of all university graduates completing a degree in a science-, technology-, engineering- or maths-related subject. There seems to be a greater drive among international students, specifically Asian students, who venture abroad to study STEM subjects. The UK and America report that the number of foreign students enrolling in those subjects has risen sharply —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member should bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Hilditch: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I look forward to the formation of the new ministerial Departments of Education and the Economy. Hopefully, we can move the subject forward. I support the motion.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome this important motion, and I thank my colleagues for bringing it forward. It is a huge issue, and I hope that our local media pick up on it. When we consider how instrumental STEM-related subjects and the STEM industry are becoming to our economy, the fact that up to three or four times as many men prosper in it than our local women is a massive issue, so I hope that our local media pick up on that.

When the Education Committee had a motion on STEM, I used the example of a recent 'Guardian' article where a child was sent home with a school exercise to talk about a famous scientist. They were asked questions such as, "What did he look like?", "Did he have a family?" and, "Was he married?". That shows the type of embedded bias that exists naturally about sciences; that it is a man's game. It is very important that we challenge that. As I said, with STEM becoming ever more important and present in the growth of our economy, it is very important that we tackle that.

We have seen some educational realignment in recent years for the growth of STEM. We have seen the revised curriculum, where schools are now given flexibility to allow a wider range of pupils to prosper. Vocational subjects, such as engineering and car manufacturing, are being looked at in school to draw in pupils who might have fallen by the wayside in the more academic side of things. It is important, now that we have done that, to assess whether we

are getting the gender balance right. The Education Minister, in reply to the Committee's STEM report, said recently that we are getting the balance right in qualifications; there is no real difference between young girls and boys when they sit those exams. However, there is maybe a wee bit of a difference in subject-specific areas. We have plenty of young women going towards medical sciences but maybe not enough going into engineering, technology or mathematics.

I welcome the work that the Employment and Learning Minister has done with the Department of Education on careers. It is important that the parents and teachers giving advice to our young people have the wherewithal about the changing world and the globalised workplace. It is very easy for parents sitting at home to say, "Law is a good degree" or "Go and get yourself a good history degree". They may not know about the changes in computer coding or ICT, so it is very important that we get careers advice right.

We have also had the Education and Training Inspectorate review of the World Around Us, which might have been touched on earlier. One of the changes to the revised curriculum gave the space to create the inquiry and everything else, but there was the thought that perhaps primary-school teachers did not have the capacity or the confidence to delve into the scientific subjects. Continuous professional development is very important. I welcome the very positive response of the Education Minister, John O'Dowd; he is willing to work around that.

3.45 pm

I think another very important educational thing coming out of schools is role models. We need to develop role models for our young women in this. The Education Committee recently went to the science park, and it was great to see so many young women involved. It was exactly the same, actually, when we went to the BT Young Scientist exhibition in Dublin lately. There are a plethora of young women who have won that competition, and they are very inspiring to speak to. We spoke to the recent winner from Cork — a very inspiring young lady. We need to work out a way to get the experiences of those young women, who are international winners and went on to win in the European context as well, into our local schools as well. BT Young Scientist, of course, has now developed links with Queen's University, so perhaps there is a platform there to build this model of scholarships and role models and to go forward.

I also want to refer to the CBI 'Step Change' report, which calls for a move away from the exam factory basis of our education. There is this fear of failure; we do not allow young people the ability to explore and to fail, if necessary. That is very important, as is building partnerships with business. As important as that is, it is also important that we keep in the forefront of our minds at all times the role of women, because when it comes to exams in schools, we know that our young women are perhaps more capable than our young men in doing the exams.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Hazzard: We need to do that, but really what we want to see today from the Employment and Learning Minister is a strategy. Let us identify the barriers that still exist. Let us implement a strategic plan, and let us evaluate in a few years' time.

Mr Anderson: As a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, I offer my support to the motion. It highlights the need for meaningful action in an area where there has been gender imbalance for some time. The Northern Ireland education system has always given both boys and girls every opportunity to excel academically, from primary level through to secondary level and, in many cases, on to university. Traditionally, some subjects and some career paths have been regarded as being more suitable for males than females, and vice versa.

Thankfully, that is changing, but not on a radical enough scale. That is evident from new entrants and enrolments in higher education courses in 2012-13, as contained in the labour market bulletin entitled 'Women in Northern Ireland' and released last September by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). In 2012-13, more females than males chose courses in the following areas: medicine and dentistry; subjects allied to medicine, including nursing and pharmacy; biological sciences; law; social studies; languages; creative arts; and education. Males, on the other hand, tended to be in the majority in most STEM and STEM-related subjects: physical sciences; computer science; engineering and technology; and architecture, building and planning.

What can we do to redress the imbalance? I feel that the whole area of school careers advice needs to be more focused on encouraging all our young people, but

especially girls, to pursue STEM subjects. The system continues to produce too many graduates in areas where it is very hard to get permanent, well-paid jobs. As a result, we are losing too many of our most capable young people as part of our brain drain. Northern Ireland's economy, like the rest of the industrialised world, is facing radical and ever-accelerating change. The older manufacturing industries are declining or gone, and in their place there are new areas of growth. I am sure the Minister will not be too annoyed if I quote his words at a recent event, organised by SEMTA and held in Parliament Buildings, to highlight the issues raised by today's motion:

"The workforce of the future will be strongly reliant on STEM skills to meet the demands of a growing economy and it is increasingly important that more young people are encouraged to study STEM subjects. I would specifically urge young females to consider studying STEM subjects in school and pursue careers in STEM."

A key area of opportunity is the IT sector and digital technology. Just recently, 200 teenagers, male and female, from 80 schools and colleges, came together at St George's Market for an annual event organised by the NISP Connect team at the Northern Ireland Science Park. The American producer Will.i.am, of TV show 'The Voice' fame, was the guest speaker at that event, and he encouraged young people to get excited about a career in the entrepreneurial knowledge economy.

The event also gave the young people the chance to talk to some of Northern Ireland's most influential start-up entrepreneurs and tech founders. That sort of event is extremely valuable, as it helps to get the message out, but we have to go further if we want to increase the number of women who study STEM subjects and who are able to compete for well-paid jobs in the local labour market.

The motion refers to the Minister's statement of 4 June 2013, but that will soon be two years ago. I know that we face stringent budget cuts, but, if anything, such cuts require an even greater focus and concentration on STEM subjects. Within that framework, gender imbalance must be robustly tackled. That will require full Executive involvement, as the motion indicates, and I see a key role for the Department of Education, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning.

The colleges and universities must constantly assess their recruitment strategies and continue

to tailor their courses to meet modern industry's needs. The business sector also has a key role to play, and I welcome that some bigger companies, such as Allstate NI, have committed to doing all they can to promote gender balance in STEM and IT. The SMEs can also play their part. I support the motion.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thanks very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I support the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate.

Women are significantly under-represented in STEM, and the need for more to enter the sector is vital if we are to meet that demand. Indeed, if we are looking ahead to the future and if corporation tax issues get resolved, it is precisely that demand that will hopefully increasingly be in the local economy. It is particularly important and relevant that we start preparatory work for that now. In fact, it should have started long ago.

In his statement on 4 June, the Minister acknowledged that this is not a new issue, and nor is it a small issue with a quick fix. We are trying to overcome numerous barriers, which will take time. In addressing the gender imbalance, we need to initiate and, in some cases, strengthen collaboration between the Government, business and careers guidance in schools. Indeed, going wider than that, I venture that childcare certainly factors in to it for many families, when many young women especially are considering what career, if any, they should choose to go with. I also think that it is important that, at this particular moment when we are discussing so much about welfare reform, its true aspect is also looked at, which is to help and support people in their transition from benefits and into meaningful work. The requirement for improved childcare certainly cannot be ignored, and whenever you are out and about, you find that it is an issue that very frequently comes up with young families.

We are trying to overcome numerous barriers, which will take time. Although the motion specifically calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to act, other Ministers have a role to play. As my colleague Mr Rogers highlighted, the Education Minister has a role to play to ensure that the seeds are planted early. We need to ensure that young girls are encouraged to take an interest in STEM subjects and are not led to believe that those subjects are just for boys. Tackling that misperception and capturing interest early on are key if young women are to keep on the relevant subjects up to A level.

There is a lot to be said for the importance of careers guidance in schools, especially considering that the age of 16 is the critical point at which women are lost to a potential career. Imbalance in STEM begins post-GCSE, despite the fact that girls are now more likely than boys to achieve A* to C grades in maths, core and additional science, and in each of the three individual sciences. Of girls who took GCSE STEM subjects, 76.3% achieved the higher A* to C grades compared with 75.6% of boys. Despite high achievements in GCSE and A level, it has been reported that females account for only 29.8% of those graduating from higher education in STEM subjects. More males tend to study STEM subjects, particularly computer science, engineering and technology.

That indicates that the issue is not a lack of ability and talent but a lack of information, opportunities and the support that is required to help people into those types of work. Individuals who have STEM qualifications are in demand. Wearing another hat as Chair of the Enterprise Committee, I can say that, through our inquiry into the opportunities in a lower-tax environment, which we hope will be created through the lowering of corporation tax, the evidence that we have taken already shows that skills, including the acquisition of new skills and improved skills as part of a growing economy, has emerged as a key issue for many employers in the North.

A STEM qualification puts a person in a stronger position in a competitive job market. Studying STEM subjects opens up a wide variety of exciting and rewarding career opportunities. It can be hard to make the link between what you study in the classroom and the opportunities available in the world of work, and I think that a key element is going out to visit businesses. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you have seen that in your previous role. There has to be a strategic approach between schools and businesses. The interconnection is sporadic at the moment. There can be good employers in an area that have no connection with schools. It is important that that link be formally and strategically developed and established, not just left to the goodwill of a good careers teacher. It can be hard to make that link, but the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment needs to work with the Minister of Education, the Minister for Employment and Learning, and, of course, Invest NI, to ensure that the STEM subjects that we teach in our schools, colleges and universities equips our young people with the skills that industry looks for in its employees.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I strongly welcome the motion, which acknowledges the existing work of government and other stakeholders in society. In particular, it reinforces some of the themes that I have sought to pursue and address during my period in office. The debate reflects two overlapping objectives of developing skills and maximising economic participation. The first is that of investing in higher level skills in general and, in particular, delivering a critical mass of people with skills in the STEM areas: science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The second is that of achieving a greater balance of gender participation in our workforce.

The need for higher level skills, especially those in the STEM areas, is increasingly well understood. Investing in skills is the most effective way of transforming our economy, including increasing productivity and wage levels. STEM subjects are of particular relevance to many of the fastest-growing sectors in the economy. The skills strategy, 'Success through Skills — Transforming Futures' is the governing document for skills in general and has some specific targets in relation to STEM. The STEM strategy itself, 'Success through STEM', is the cross-departmental Executive strategy document that focuses directly on STEM.

Female participation is important for equal opportunities and for mobilising all of our talents. Members have already commented on the stronger educational performance of women and on the strong segmentation of people in different areas by gender. Some may say that this is natural and should really not matter, but it does matter when you consider some of the most important and fastest-growing areas of the economy. There is a moral or ethical aspect to this in terms of ensuring equality of opportunity. It is important to ensure that people have the chance to compete and operate in some of the most fast-growing and innovative aspects of the our economy. There is also a strong economic imperative. We need to maximise our local skills base to the full. Businesses and other organisations will not be maximising the potential of local talent if at least one half of the market in skills is constrained. Put simply, we cannot hope to compete in the global marketplace if we cannot make best use of the local marketplace of skills and talent.

OFMDFM leads on the cross-departmental gender equality strategy. That is a 10-year strategy running from 2006 to 2016, and my Department has, over the years, contributed to that strategy by providing actions for inclusion in the overarching document and the gender

quality action plan. Obviously, that will have to be renewed by the Executive after 2016. Members and the motion have made reference to my statement to the Assembly in June 2013. Following that, I asked my officials to take steps to promote gender equality and to set out a departmental gender action plan. That plan has now been drafted and it outlines actions to address gender inequalities that fall under the remit of my Department. This is a matter of ongoing further development, in particular to reflect the challenges of retention and progression in the workplace. The strategy details 20 recommendations to promote STEM and outlines how government and business intend to encourage more of our young people to study and pursue a career in those subjects and aspects of our economy.

My Department has led on the implementation of the strategy, which was produced in collaboration with five local Departments: Education; Enterprise, Trade and Investment; Agriculture and Rural Development; Culture, Arts and Leisure; and Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

4.00 pm

Recommendation 4 of the strategy, which falls under the responsibility of business to take forward, addresses gender bias. In November 2012, to help business to take this and other relevant recommendations forward, my Department funded the seconded post of STEM business coordinator. Significant progress has been made by the coordinator in the area of gender balance, in partnership with my Department and the Equality Commission.

In November 2013, a report, 'Addressing Gender Balance: Reaping the Gender Dividend in STEM', was launched. The report demonstrates the business case for gender diversity and contains several tools to help business to engage with the issue, including a STEM CEO charter, good practice guidelines and case studies. The charter, which enables STEM organisations to demonstrate their commitment to equal opportunity for women in their employment, has recently had its thirtieth and thirty-first signature, by the NACCO Materials Handling Group and Fujitsu. Other organisations that have signed up to date include Allstate, Atkins, Asidua, Bombardier, Intel, Liberty IT, Magellan Aerospace, Michelin, Moy Park, Schrader Electronics, Seagate, Ulster University, Queen's University and the Open University. It is almost a who's who of the Northern Ireland economy. The coordinator has also established a STEM employers'

equality network to help employers to benchmark their practice against the 22 good practice guidelines and identify areas in which they would like further support. The sharing of existing good practice by the STEM organisations is integral to the network.

To further highlight the issue of gender in STEM, the coordinator has worked with the three main daily newspapers to produce four 24-page supplements focused at crucial decision-making times of the school year. The supplements have highlighted the world-class opportunities available in the STEM companies across Northern Ireland and featured many female role models.

In my statement to the Assembly in June 2013, I outlined a number of departmental initiatives to address gender inequalities and increase female participation in STEM. These included the reviews of apprenticeships, youth training and careers. The new Northern Ireland strategy on apprenticeships, which was published in June 2014, highlights the importance of upskilling to raise productivity, increase social inclusion and help Northern Ireland to compete in the global marketplace. Apprenticeships will form a key part of a new skills landscape and underpin the STEM strategy.

A number of projects have been established to take forward the implementation of the strategy on apprenticeships, including one that will aim to support participation through a series of interventions to secure a greater gender balance across apprenticeships. A central service will also be established, informed through new partnership arrangements. The service will lead focused campaigns to demonstrate the value of apprenticeships to employers, young people and their parents. That will include support in key areas, especially in STEM.

The Careers Service also plays an active role in encouraging the uptake of STEM subjects and raising awareness of current and future job opportunities in STEM sectors, including for females. The Department is working to develop a central work experience website to provide guidance and information to pupils, schools, employers and parents on the benefits, selection and organisation of work experience, including opportunities in STEM-related careers. Under the higher education strategy, the universities have also committed to rebalance their profile of courses so that the subject areas offered more closely reflect the needs of the economy.

Of course, maintaining this momentum will become ever more difficult as a result of the budget cuts being faced by my Department and others. However, given the importance of the STEM and skills agenda to the future economic prosperity of Northern Ireland, both universities are working to protect undergraduate STEM places from any cuts in the incoming year.

My Department continues to take forward opportunities to encourage more females to study and pursue careers in STEM. Gender considerations are also central to action plans that have been developed for the engineering and advanced manufacturing sector, and the ICT sector. For example, I am providing funding of £71,000 through the skills collaboration fund for the Women in STEM — Upskill to Compete project delivered by industry partners, Semta NI, which is the sector skills council for science, engineering and manufacturing technologies in Northern Ireland. The aim of the project is to address the gender imbalance that exists in the advanced manufacturing and engineering services sector. The project supports SMEs and larger companies to develop female employees in STEM roles, to promote STEM to schoolgirls and to establish a women's network to mentor and support girls and women who are progressing on a STEM careers' pathway. I am delighted to endorse and support the project, and I hope that it will encourage and inspire more females to study STEM subjects and to pursue careers in STEM.

I have also committed significant funding to promote the ICT sector as a career choice to all our young people. ICT has traditionally been perceived as male-dominated, and an important aspect of the Bring IT On programme, which I support, is addressing the gender imbalance. In addition to the wide range of activities available to both genders, the programme provides an opportunity for young women to hear directly from inspirational women in ICT. Feedback has been positive, with a large proportion of the young women attending enthused and considering an IT-related degree or career as a result of the intervention. Other female-specific opportunities include the computer club for girls, which has 20 industry-sponsored schools enrolled on the programme this academic year and ongoing work to design and deliver women-only programmes.

In July last year, I also arranged for eight of our further education students to attend a STEM summer camp at the prestigious Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts. Four of them studied the women's leadership strand of the programme. Feedback was extremely

positive, and it is hoped that we can send a further cohort in 2015.

Ensuring that our young people, specifically women, make the right choices to maximise their potential is critical not only to their own success but to our economic prosperity. I am, however, aware that there is more work to be done and that many of the actions will take time to deliver results. It is vital that we continue to do all that we can to combat and to address negative stereotypes that exist around STEM subjects, in particular among females.

Much of this debate and the actions highlighted have focused on entry into STEM. I want to stress that, while this debate focuses on the issue of gender and STEM, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that there are broader challenges to better participation by women in the workforce, including retention and progression. With women entering the labour market in ever greater numbers, we still have to ask why women continue to face barriers to remaining in the workforce and to progressing in line with their male counterparts. Much more must be done in that regard.

A key challenge is to encourage employers to engage on this important issue and to offer schemes such as flexible working and childcare provision to help females to thrive in the STEM sector. With the agreement of the Assembly, I have already introduced the new right to shared parental leave and pay, which has a clear gender equality focus. By extending greater flexibility and choice to working parents and challenging assumptions that women will necessarily stay off work for a prolonged period following the birth or adoption of a child, I think that we have taken a small but important step forward. Other steps relating to the culture of business and other forms of employment will be required, and government has a key role in encouraging and facilitating challenge and change.

I assure Members in closing that, within government, we are very much seized of this issue. In my Department, we have a gender action plan, which is being refreshed and renewed, and which we are committed to publicising in the near future. That will, of course, be a living, breathing document, which will evolve in line with new challenges and new opportunities to address these issues. Obviously, a lot of the changes that are required to culture and working practices lie beyond the remit of my Department, but the Executive are themselves committed to gender equality. There is a strategy in place, which will very shortly require to be renewed, and I am

sure that the comments made by Members today will be reflected on when it comes to drafting that revised strategy over the coming years.

I also want to respond to some comments that have been made by Members. It was, I think, Sandra Overend who asked about economic inactivity. Although that does not necessarily fall under the label of STEM, there will be a STEM element to some of the work that is being conducted in that area, and there is clearly an issue around economic inactivity where participation levels are lower for many women, often because of child and family commitments. Our economic participation level for females is significantly lower than that for males, which points to some of the broader challenges that we have to address. The strategy is currently before the Executive, and I hope that it can be cleared in the coming days. I have no doubt that Members will encourage their party colleagues who are on the Executive to ensure that that is agreed by the Executive as quickly as possible so that we can begin its implementation.

I am happy to endorse the motion, which is a reflection of a very serious debate. It is about equality of opportunity for everyone in society, including women, but also about ensuring that we maximise the full economic potential of the region. If we do not encourage the fullest participation in what are the most high-profile, high-growth areas of the economy, we are in danger of selling ourselves short.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his words today. Over this past while, the Committee for Employment and Learning has seen the teaching of STEM subjects as an essential part of the curriculum. We see them as an element of learning that had in the past not matched what were seen as the more prestigious roads to travel when seeking higher levels of education — subjects such as law, teaching and medicine.

We have argued that the earlier that you get people interested in what are called STEM subjects, the more likely it is that children will buy into these subjects. We have heard it said in Committee that eager young minds are enthusiastic when it comes to learning different subjects. We heard from a scientist who gave evidence to the Committee on the question of careers. He said that, when he went into primary schools to speak to children about the importance of science, they played an active role in his presentations but that, when he left, the traditional thought process of many

teaching staff re-gear young minds to a different road to travel when it came to academic importance to one's future career.

I have heard the Minister speak about the need to teach STEM subjects, but he has also said that STEM should feature prominently as part of the curriculum for all students. There is no doubt in my mind that he is totally committed to the need not only to promote STEM subjects but to equip students to meet the needs of a changing world of employment.

All reports on the provision of STEM see it as crucial for our future needs. I read recently that some of the new jobs that the Executive have fought hard to bring to the North could be impacted on by the lack of experience in STEM subjects. The Minister talked several weeks ago about the importance of STEM to the local economy and the need to address the gender imbalance in STEM sectors, with men outnumbering women by three to one. I have read the answers to a number of questions that have been asked of the Minister in the House on the matter. I have browsed a number of reports on STEM, and I welcome the Minister's commitment to tackling the issue of gender imbalance in the STEM sectors. He gave a speech to a conference on 10 March organised by Semta NI to celebrate the success of women in STEM in addressing gender imbalance.

The motion is trying to ensure that there is a joined-up approach taken to tackling the serious imbalance of men over women in the STEM sectors, and it argues for the Minister, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to produce an action plan that specifically addresses the issue of gender imbalance.

I will now deal with some of the comments made by Members. The Minister dealt extensively with quite a lot of them and even encouraged Members to speak to their party colleagues at the Executive table to do something about the issue. Bronwyn McGahan spoke at length about the need to tackle the conditions that impact on women taking STEM subjects. She said that the will exists to move on the matter but that it will take the Executive as a whole to be a part of the process if the situation is to move on. She commended the South West College for the work that it has carried out on STEM.

4.15 pm

Tom Buchanan said that it was inconceivable that, in this day and age, that imbalance exists in the make-up of the workforce and that it needs to be tackled. He spoke about good

practice in the USA that we can learn from and maybe look at setting up similar bodies here.

Seán Rogers said that the Assembly discussed STEM some weeks ago, concerned at the worrying lack of take-up of STEM subjects. The North is experiencing a brain drain; demand for STEM jobs cannot be met. There is a need to bring more women through the STEM process.

Sandra Overend said that responsibility lay not only with the Employment and Learning Minister but with the Education Minister. The motion could deliver the much-needed strategy. The Women in STEM project is working to promote more women in STEM. She asked where the childcare strategy to encourage women into the workforce was and spoke of the need to work together to achieve a proper gender balance.

Anna Lo said that the workforce of the future needed to be STEM-educated. Women and girls would have a much better chance at employment if they were involved in STEM careers. There needs to be a focus on women scientists as role models, and that could be one way of encouraging women to take up STEM subjects. By working together we can achieve the objective of dealing with the imbalance.

David Hilditch congratulated schools in his constituency that have excelled in STEM subjects. The imbalance of women in STEM could be dealt with effectively only when the barriers that prevent women from participating are dealt with. He asked whether society would ever get to grips with many of those imbalances. He spoke of the role of China in education in STEM subjects.

Chris Hazzard said that he hoped that the media would pick up on the debate. The stereotype of scientists needs to be tackled. We need to constantly assess the problem of imbalance. He congratulated the Employment and Learning Minister on his work on careers, especially on continued professional advice for educators, especially at primary level, building a model of scholarship that will encourage young women to participate.

Sydney Anderson said that every effort should be made to ensure that every child at primary and secondary school and university should advance in STEM. He spoke about the need to go into STEM subjects. Males go into STEM subjects while females go to different subjects. There are new elements of growth. The future will be built on STEM-trained personnel for new jobs. Events that promote STEM can be invaluable and need to be encouraged. He

sees a key role for a number of Departments in the matter.

Patsy McGlone spoke of how women were significantly underrepresented in STEM programmes. There is no quick fix. There is a need to strengthen the connection between government, business, education and, of course, childcare. Childcare came through on a number of issues raised by Members. Other Ministers have a role. Young girls need to be convinced that it is not just a male programme. Females shine through with higher grades. Individuals involved in STEM are sought after. STEM subjects open many possibilities. There is a need to work together with a strategic approach.

Stephen Farry, the Minister, spoke at length, again, about the need to reinforce the work that he has done with his Department and the need to get better balance. STEM subjects are relevant. Female participation is important. It is the fastest-growing part of the economy. There is a need to maximise the workforce. We cannot go forward when 50% of the workforce is not given or does not take up the opportunity. His Department has led on the strategy. He spoke about addressing gender imbalance. A report contains a number of recommendations to deal with imbalance. Major companies have signed up to STEM programmes. He has initiated strategies that will help to deal with the gender imbalance. The Careers Service plays an important role in STEM advice, especially for females, but it could be impacted on by budget cuts. Both universities are working to protect STEM, and £71,000 has been provided to help promote STEM among women. The Minister also spoke of the number of programmes that his Department is involved in that will help to promote STEM, especially among women.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern that men outnumber women by nearly three to one in high-level science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) posts; welcomes the statement by the Minister for Employment and Learning on 4 June 2013 reiterating the importance of women in the STEM sectors; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to publish a strategy and action plan that addresses specifically the issue of gender imbalance in the STEM sectors.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Policing: Upper Bann

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to debate this issue in the House and thank the Business Committee for allowing it to go ahead today.

At the outset, I would like to say that every person in Northern Ireland deserves the right to live safely and securely in their home, free from the fear of crime. Fundamental to that right is that people can be safe in the knowledge that, when an emergency occurs and 999 is called, help is on its way as quickly as possible. Locally located response teams are central to speedy response times for all emergency services, which brings me to the point of this debate.

The plans for a radical shake-up of neighbourhood policing in E district, which encompasses Upper Bann, are frankly unworkable and unacceptable. They would see neighbourhood policing teams relocated from Portadown and Banbridge police stations to Armagh and Lurgan. That would affect policing in all towns and rural areas across Upper Bann. In recent years, in Banbridge, we have witnessed the loss of neighbourhood policing teams from Gilford, Rathfriland and Dromore, with responses now centred in Banbridge station. This is an issue that is worrying for local people but also concerns the members of the Banbridge chamber of commerce. It was the first issue raised with me when I met them recently.

While I very much welcome the ongoing and open dialogue with Superintendent David Moore, who will be the new district commander for the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon policing area, I am concerned that this decision has been handed to him from above. Indeed, in a recent lengthy meeting, we raised considerable concerns around response times, burglaries, reducing incidences of violent crime and responses to road traffic accidents, not least on the A1 dual carriageway and our

country roads. The A1 dual carriageway is the main corridor between Belfast and Dublin and has been utilised by criminals seeking a speedy exit from the town. We also discussed how the PSNI works with the policing and community safety partnership (PCSP) to raise awareness of the harm caused by use of illegal drugs; the impact of rural crime, which is a very real concern locally, especially for vulnerable elderly people; the fear that hearing that teams will not be stationed locally could cause those elderly people; and the future of neighbourhood watch teams — in short, the key policing priorities across the constituency.

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

I am deeply worried that decisions are being taken by PSNI management on a short-term basis rather than as part of a real, long-term strategic vision for the future of policing in the area. Residents across Upper Bann, including our rural areas, are set to suffer the consequences. The lack of consultation is shocking. Community groups across the constituency have built up and are building up good working relationships with the police through individual officers working on the ground. Where is their voice in all of this?

That work is vital in establishing a network that can help to combat crime, and I am sure that I am not alone in being able to recount examples where those relationships have led directly to positive policing outcomes.

Like the health service or any other Department that comes under the remit of the House, the budget for policing in Northern Ireland was set in 2011 in a Budget that my party opposed. If we were discussing the closure or relocation of key staff from a health centre or fire station, we could hold the responsible Minister directly to account — local accountability for decisions that will affect local families and our local communities. In the case of the most radical shake-up of community policing for decades, in which communities are set to suffer, different rules apply.

The fact that we are discussing the future of policing in Upper Bann and there is no ministerial response shows a total lack of accountability and responsibility for those who will be affected. I understand that the Minister deemed, as he does with questions for written answers, that the issue is an operational matter that is within the remit of the PSNI. In short, elected representatives at all levels are simply informed and PCSPs are briefed. I am in no way arguing for the direct involvement of the

House in policing priorities in Northern Ireland; those systems are in place. However, I am concerned at the lack of local accountability that has been a direct result of the way in which policing and justice was devolved to the House. When it comes to radical decisions, such as the relocation of response teams, there should be local accountability.

I am also concerned at Deputy Chief Constable Drew Harris's comments yesterday, when he said:

"We are facing unprecedented financial cuts and it is inevitable these cuts will impact policing."

He continued:

"By April 2016 we will have around 200 fewer officers due to high number of officers retiring and limited scope for recruitment."

He further continued:

"Going forward there is likely to be further reductions in officer numbers."

Those comments, coming on the same day as it was announced that the police are to hand back a £14 million underspend from last year, simply beggar belief. It does little for public confidence to hear that operational policing is set to totally move out of local stations. It does even less to hear that a shortage of front-line officers is looming while unspent money is being handed back.

The future of policing in Upper Bann is an extremely important issue for each and every family. I pay tribute to the officers of the neighbourhood policing teams in stations across the constituency and commend them for the work that they do to keep our community safe.

I appeal to the Justice Minister, if he takes the time to read the Hansard report of the debate, to look at how those radical proposals will impact on the future of policing in Upper Bann; to consider the increased potential for serious road traffic accidents as response vehicles travel further distances across our rural roads to respond to emergencies; and to consider the impact on communities in already isolated rural areas and the damage that will be wielded to important policing work that is under way.

I would also appreciate his assessment of the use of the community prioritisation index, which underpins the proposal to centre command in

Banbridge and remove operational policing. Two of the key indices are deprivation and crime levels and, when applied to Banbridge, we simply do not score highly enough. Is that really how that decision has come about? Good work on the ground by police reduces crime, and Banbridge should not be penalised for successful policing. I would also appreciate an assurance that the current teams in Banbridge will be kept in place until at least October and will not be removed before then.

As it stands, I understand that the PSNI still does not know how the new proposed system will work in practice with the role profiles and shift patterns for officers. It is also frightening to think that, as Lurgan requires armoured cars, we could have the farce of officers responding from Lurgan and travelling in armoured vehicles and possibly arriving in Banbridge to get into their standard response vehicles to go out on duty and then return to Lurgan in their armoured cars. Their plans could increase costs rather than decrease them. When you think of the cost that is incurred in moving officers in a greater number of vehicles and increased fuel and travel times, frankly, it does not add up. That is not even thinking of the increased response times that people could face. These proposals are dangerous and totally unworkable.

4.30 pm

Mr Anderson: I rise to take part in this important debate on the future of neighbourhood policing across Upper Bann. I thank Mrs Dobson for bringing forward the Adjournment topic.

We are in difficult and uncertain times for policing. However, we, as politicians, must never be found wanting when it comes to highlighting provision for our district. I have always taken an active interest in community policing. I believe it to be fundamental to ensuring community confidence and safety for my constituents. I was a member of the Craigavon District Policing Partnership and the Craigavon Community Safety Partnership, which have now been taken over by the relatively new PCSP. I believed in those organisations, which I saw as powerful tools to deliver community policing. I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to all who have been involved in them down through the years.

Crucially, neighbourhood policing connects the police with the people. Local knowledge and locally known faces instil community confidence. By building up a strong level of

local knowledge, local police have more credibility and a better standing in the community. If we can encourage communal confidence in day-to-day policing, that can only be to society's benefit. Sadly, this is all about to change with the restructuring of neighbourhood policing across our district. I have grave concerns about that, and, for that reason, I regard this debate as being of considerable importance.

As we stand, I feel that we are at risk of decimating neighbourhood policing in Upper Bann and undoing all the good work. It is as serious as that. There is a sense of worry and unease in our communities, both urban and rural. That must be addressed if we are to maintain community confidence in our policing structures. Patten envisaged a new dawn for policing, with peacetime officers in the region of 7,500, but this is no longer the case. One has to ask whether these proposed changes to neighbourhood policing fly in the face of Patten.

Only last week, I, along with my party colleagues Stephen Moutray MLA and David Simpson MP, met local police and the Assistant Chief Constable to raise our concerns. We all understand that we are in difficult economic times, but proposed massive cuts to the most visible element of the PSNI operation, that of community policing, is, in my eyes, foolhardy and short-sighted at best. Just yesterday, we were utterly astounded to learn that the PSNI has declared a £14 million underspend. On one hand, we are repeatedly told that front-line police services must be cut and senior police are rarely out of the media as they warn of stringent and visible cuts. Now, they are handing back £14 million. That raises serious questions about budget mismanagement. As my colleague David Simpson said yesterday, it seems absurd and a complete contradiction. Just a small amount of that £14 million would go a long way towards addressing the problems that we are highlighting in this debate. The police, in this case, I believe, have a lot of explaining to do.

My constituency will now be served by four neighbourhood policing teams in the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) area. Banbridge will, in turn, be served by the Armagh team. That will effectively leave a major rural town, which has one of the biggest drug problems in Northern Ireland and a strong nightlife culture, with no neighbourhood policing team at all. That is a real shame because so much good work has been done in recent years through neighbourhood policing in the Banbridge area in tackling drug-related crime, domestic abuse, attacks on the elderly and

general rural crime. As a result, a positive relationship has been built up between the police and the people who are now at risk. We all know about the ongoing security problems that the Lurgan and Craigavon area continues to face as well. In Portadown, illegal activity is, sadly, a prominent problem.

On top of that, Portadown town does not even have a proper, modern, up-to-date police station. That says it all.

I sense a real unease in the community at large in Upper Bann. Crime levels remain too high. I could take you to a local shop in my constituency, which was raided last month for the fifth time, and, as I understand it, no one to date has been brought to book for that. While it is getting no better, we propose to cut the PSNI budget in such a way that we have fewer officers and less resource. The police and the Justice Minister are well aware of the difficulties and issues that they face in my constituency and in the wider ABC area.

A dangerous combination of dissident activity, drug crime and organised gang crime, which continue to blight our community, are all big issues. I urge the police to sit down again and to rethink this reorganisation. Proper policing is important to us all. It is, in many ways, a basic human right. We owe it to our community to get it right. It is time for us to stand up and try to protect our constituents in the ABC area in relation to the changes.

Mr Moutray: I will be brief. I also congratulate Mrs Dobson on bringing this important matter to the House. It is very sad that the Justice Minister and three MLAs from our constituency have not found the time to come to the Chamber for this debate.

If the decision goes ahead, it will impact many people across Upper Bann. Like my colleague, I sat on the DPP in Craigavon council from its inception, and I saw the good that was done by community policing across the borough of Craigavon. I saw the police interact with people and communities whom they never could have interacted with before, and, slowly but surely, relationships were built up. I fear that, if the mooted proposals go ahead, we will seriously lose out. Relationships will not be there, and trust will not be there to the same extent.

Last week, our MP, David Simpson, Sydney Anderson and I met senior police officers at Knock and expressed our concerns. We were not convinced by what we were told. I believe that this is a budgetary exercise, and that is the only thing that is driving it. I know from police

officers on the ground that they also have concerns and are not one bit happy about this moving forward. We will all be the worse for it. I believe that this is probably the most retrograde step in policing since the Patten reforms in the early 2000s, and we know the impact that those had for many years. I appeal to the Justice Minister to use whatever persuasive power he has, and I appeal to senior police officers to do it before they make a decision that will impact on the lives of people.

In Lurgan, we still have a very serious dissident republican threat, and Mrs Dobson outlined how police have to travel around in armoured cars. In Banbridge, as my colleague Sydney Anderson said, we have a massive drugs problem, with several deaths over the past few years. There are other problems with Portadown and with the new communities that have come to live there. I hope that the police will listen, even if Members and the Justice Minister are not here today to listen, and that they will back off on this move.

Mr Hussey: I am sure that Members are wondering why I have taken some time to sit here this evening and participate in the debate. I will begin by declaring an interest as a member of the Policing Board and as a former member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, where I served as a part-time officer.

When you hear about the proposals, they do not make sense. In my career, when I worked with Pearl Assurance, I travelled all over Northern Ireland. I know the area that we are talking about very well. I travelled regularly from Belfast to Newry and from Newry to Portadown up into Rathfriland, which is the area that we are talking about. It does not make sense to me from a security point of view — I will deal with that first — why we would send officers from Lurgan towards Banbridge in an armoured police car.

We are going to set up patterns. To a certain degree, we could have officers targeted because of these changes. We all know that the dissidents have not gone away, and we all know that the dissidents have already murdered police officers in this constituency. We have to remember that a police officer is on duty 24 hours a day. None of us wants to walk behind another cortège of a police officer going to his grave, having served this community.

The area that we are talking about is very rural. One of the things that sticks in my mind is the number of thefts of agricultural equipment and machinery that there have been. I asked

questions on that of the police at the Policing Board. It was fascinating to discover the number of implements and vehicles that had been stolen and never recovered.

If you want to make a quick getaway out of Banbridge, the A1 is the way to go. You can be in Newry before you know it; you can be in Belfast before you know it; you can be totally out of sight very quickly. Sometimes, good roads create problems of their own and, certainly, the A1 is a major issue.

I also have concerns in relation to road traffic accidents. We have had major accidents and fatalities on the A1. We need to have the police there quickly. If they have to travel from Lurgan in an armoured car, there is a speed limit within which they can travel, and then they have to get an ordinary police car to that point. It is a ridiculous situation that I do not want to see.

The drugs issue is also a major one. None of us wants to see criminals prosper. Criminals will prosper if there is no police activity or sign of police activity. We have made reference to Patten several times during the debate. During the Patten proposals, there were, of course, proposals to extend part-time police officers. We do not have an extension of part-time police officers; in fact, part-time police officers are virtually disappearing. We need policing with the community and in the community. If the officers are not known to the locals, they will not have a rapport, and they will not speak to them or pass on information. One of the last debates I took part in on policing, Mr Deputy Speaker, related to your constituency, when we were talking about the police having to go down the glens of Antrim from Ballymena.

This has not been thought out, and it cannot be forced on a community without some form of consultation. Successful policing has been seen to happen in Banbridge. Successful policing is there because of the fact it has a relatively low crime level. Take away the police and what do you have? You basically have an open door for criminals, drug pushers and that ilk who want to use this. I have major concerns for the safety of the people of Banbridge, and I am prepared to sit here tonight with my colleague. I agree with others who have said there should be more in the Chamber. This is not just about Banbridge or Upper Bann. It is about policing in Northern Ireland.

It is a disgrace that we do not have a Minister here to make a response. The Minister is, supposedly, the Minister of Justice. Where is the justice for the people of Banbridge if the Minister cannot even come here to make a

statement? Yes, the Chief Constable is ultimately responsible for the Police Service of Northern Ireland, but he is not being given the budget. That is another major issue. Yes, £14 million was handed back. That is ridiculous. It is ridiculous that £14 million had to be handed back, but that was because he is unable to carry money forward. That is because of a ridiculous situation that exists in our policing legislation. It should be sorted by the Minister of Justice, so that the police can hold such money and use it properly for the people of Northern Ireland — for the people of Banbridge, the people of Upper Bann. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Adjourned at 4.44 pm.



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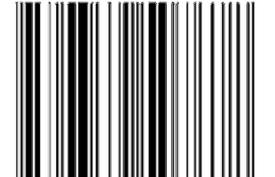
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