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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 20 March 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition: Woodlands Speech and Language Centre

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Pat Ramsey has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak about the petition.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Business Committee for allowing the petition to be discussed in today's plenary sitting. I have the pleasure of presenting this petition, which amounts to 20,000 names, from people right across the constituency and the north-west who are very concerned about the proposed closure of the Woodlands centre. It is a unique centre in the city. It is a speech, language and communications centre and a centre of excellence. A number of parents have travelled all the way here just for these five minutes, but they are an important five minutes in allowing them to make a contribution.

The Western Education and Library Board has stated that it proposes to close the Woodlands centre and to relocate the children to four primary schools across the city. I think that the Western Education and Library Board has lost sight of the real issue, which is to provide a specialist and unique centre of excellence in the city. The petition has been signed by parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts right across the spectrum of the city. As you know, Mr Speaker, you, Raymond McCartney, Mark Durkan and I have attended a series of meetings with parents who have seen their child progressing in the most positive way from when they had difficulties communicating at all to the stage where they can see progression. There is a concern that the move to the primary school sector would dilute completely the entirety of this good service.

I encourage parents, teachers, governors and those in the statutory sector, who, I may add, are not part of the formal consultation with the Western Education and Library Board, to participate and make their opinions known. This is a valuable asset in the unique Belmont setting, with the Playtrail and other elements that can assist the growth of a child.

I am pleased that all MLAs in the city have united behind this. We met the Minister of Education last week, and I am pleased to say that he is in listening mode. He has promised MLAs that, before and when he receives the submissions on the consultation, he will have another meeting to enable the parents, who are here today, to make a formal presentation to him.

It is a shame on the Western Education and Library Board that is using legislation from seven years ago now. Only because of pressure from parents has the board agreed to carry out a formal consultation. As a result of that formal consultation, over a few weeks, the parents from the Woodlands have collected 20,000 names. I commend and congratulate them. They are the champions not only of their own children but of the next generation of children. They see the importance of that. I present this petition, which is hugely important for them. Well done to all the parents involved.

Mr P Ramsey moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Education and send a copy to the Chairperson of the Education Committee.

Ministerial Statement

British-Irish Council: Social Inclusion

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): In compliance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on a British-Irish Council (BIC) social inclusion ministerial meeting, which was held in Cardiff on 7 March 2012. Martina Anderson MLA, junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, accompanied me at the meeting and has agreed that I may make this statement to the Assembly.

The British-Irish Council social inclusion group held its fifth ministerial meeting, hosted by the Welsh Government, at the City Hall in Cardiff. At the meeting, Ministers agreed the publication of a comprehensive report on the contribution of the third sector to social inclusion.

The meeting was chaired by Carl Sargeant AM, Minister for Local Government and Communities in the Welsh Government. The Scottish Government were represented by John Swinney MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth. The British Government were represented by Helen Stephenson, director of the Office for Civil Society. The Irish Government were represented by Phil Hogan TD, Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the honourable Chris Robertshaw MHK, Minister for Social Care. The States of Jersey were represented by Senator Paul Routier MBE, the Assistant Chief Minister, and the States of Guernsey were represented by Deputy Carol Steere.

Ministers discussed recent developments in promoting social inclusion across the eight BIC Administrations, focusing particularly on issues relating to the contribution of the voluntary and community sector. The value of that contribution is captured in the published report, which contains recommendations on how the third sector can make communities more sustainable and socially cohesive by working together; how we can enable wider civil activity; and how the third sector can become part of the mainstream in service delivery.

Ministers noted the key role of the third sector in delivering flexible and inclusive services in communities. They also acknowledged the work that is being done actively to engage the third

sector from an early stage in policy discussions and development in each jurisdiction. Ministers commended the willingness and commitment of the third sector to support the resilience and sustainability of communities and the mobilising of voluntary effort to meet the big challenges facing people in their everyday life. Ministers thanked the third sector in each of the jurisdictions for their active engagement and valued contribution to the rich and shared learning that has emerged from the work of the British-Irish Council.

The work carried out by officials will continue to seek to strengthen and consolidate the ongoing co-operation and exchange of information, experience and best practice between member Administrations. Ministers considered priorities for future work themes and confirmed their interest in early preventative spend. While some advocated that the theme of early preventative spend has a particular focus in the context of an ageing population, others expressed the view that it should be more widely spread, in particular so as not to exclude early years. Officials will prepare a paper for further discussion, and I will consult Executive colleagues on which Department might lead in the next phase of the work. All Ministers welcomed the publication of the report and noted that the next ministerial meeting will take place in Scotland on a date to be confirmed.

Mr A Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, although I have to say that there is not really a lot of detail in the report. Given the focus on the community and voluntary sector and the substantial asset that that sector is for all of us, will the Minister elaborate a little on what discussion there may have been around the absolutely essential need to make sure that that sector is given adequate support to enable it to continue to be a key sector in our society?

Mr McCausland: All the contributors at the meeting acknowledged the importance of support for that sector, not just in terms of direct resources but in terms of good practice through early engagement with the sector, particularly in developing policy. There was a general acknowledgement that the engagement and the resources were important if the sector was to fulfil its potential in meeting the ongoing challenges. One of the things that was touched on was examples of good practice. Of all the

areas that we talked about, Northern Ireland is certainly to the fore in the standard and quality of our involvement with the third sector.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement. He talked about good practice. Are there specific examples in the report of good practice in the local voluntary and community sector?

Mr McCausland: There certainly are. I am greatly encouraged by the many positive illustrations of voluntary and community sector activity throughout the report. It is evident that the sector has a role to play in delivering services that reach into the very heart of our communities. The report contains specific references to two examples in Northern Ireland. One is the work of the Bryson Charitable Group in delivering innovative social enterprises for young people and the elderly and its wider community recycling programme. There is also a reference in the report to the Ashton Community Trust, which is in my constituency. It is promoted as a tangible example of community cohesiveness and sustainability. There are many other examples in the report of innovative, community-led action across the Administrations. I am particularly pleased to see that, across those, there was evidence of faith-based groups working to regenerate local communities through voluntary efforts.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his statement and his words since. He mentioned the Bryson Charitable Group, which is a very large organisation within the private sector, never mind the third sector. I took a briefing recently at which it was said that it had to complete 1,200 A4 pages as paperwork to get just a few dozen young people on to the Steps to Work programme. Does the Minister think that devolved government and its regulations are designed to help and facilitate the third sector to move forward?

Mr McCausland: The Member will be aware that the Steps to Work programme falls within the remit of another Department. Our engagement with the third sector is shaped by and based on the concordat between government and the voluntary sector. One of the things being taken forward at the moment is that, in regard to the general work of the voluntary sector, through collaboration with NICVA, we are working to see what can be done to streamline and simplify the requirements that are placed on voluntary sector organisations in securing funding etc and in reporting on that. There is recognition of the need to do that. In fact, when I first took over in

the Department, that was one of the things that was raised at the very first meeting that I had with NICVA and representatives of a wide range of voluntary organisations. At a meeting with NICVA, we talked about the challenges to the sector, and that was one of the things that was flagged up. They appreciated the ongoing work to simplify the process.

10.45 am

Mr McDevitt: It is disappointing to note that, although our Government, the Scots, the Welsh, the South of Ireland and the islands were all able to send Ministers to the meeting, it appears that the British Government were represented by a civil servant. Given that it was a meeting of the British-Irish Council social inclusion group, was there any discussion of the impact of the British Government's proposed welfare reform on the jurisdictions that will be directly affected by it?

Mr McCausland: That was not the subject of the meeting, but, obviously, it was in the background and in people's thoughts, particularly for areas that are directly affected by it. As the Member rightly indicated, quite a number of the jurisdictions, such as the islands, would not be directly affected. Likewise, the position in the Republic of Ireland is different. It was in the background, but it was not the subject of particular discussion at the meeting.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for the statement, particularly the part about future discussions on early preventative spend. Has the Minister compared notes with other member Administrations? If so, what lessons can be learned for Northern Ireland, perhaps about what not to do going forward?

Mr McCausland: The focus was more on good practice than bad practice. We can always learn from mistakes, but you tend not to go to these meetings wanting to broadcast the mistakes. The focus was on good practice, which is why you will see in the report a number of good examples from Northern Ireland. I am not being presumptuous in saying that, if you look across the Administrations, you will see that the standard that Northern Ireland has reached in regard to the voluntary sector is well in advance of the standard reached by most of the others. Nevertheless, there are lessons to be learned. Some examples were given in the course of the discussion. The Welsh Minister made some interesting points about how the Welsh deal with neighbourhood renewal or their equivalent of our

programme. There are certainly things that can be learned.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement. What measures are the Executive taking to promote social inclusion?

Mr McCausland: The term “social exclusion” is used to describe what can happen when people are subject to the most severe problems. We deal with that generally through measures such as neighbourhood renewal and other interventions. Social exclusion certainly has to do with poverty and joblessness, but it is about more than that; it is about being cut off from the social and economic life of our community. The Executive are committed to cutting away the roots of social exclusion and preventing the damage happening in the first place. The Lifetime Opportunities strategy describes how government will tackle the problems that reduce social inclusion and will work to prevent their recurrence. OFMDFM co-ordinates that work and monitors progress to identify gaps in provision and to propose initiatives that promote better joined-up working across Departments. Recent initiatives also include the social investment fund and the social protection fund. The development of a new childcare strategy, a disability strategy and an older persons strategy are imminent. All of those will contribute to improving social inclusion, where all citizens have an equal opportunity to participate in the social, political and economic life of the community.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Welfare reform has already been alluded to, and you have answered that question. The voluntary sector here in the North has highlighted, vociferously in many cases, the inequities of the proposed welfare reform. Do you consider it suitable to discuss the resourcing of the voluntary sector and advice agencies in particular? They will bear the brunt of dealing with the most vulnerable in our society, who will be so adversely affected by the reform.

Mr McCausland: As the Member said, I have answered the basic question on the British-Irish Council meeting. His question strays into a slightly wider field, but we will deal a lot with welfare reform over the next 12 months. It will certainly be a challenge, and the voluntary sector has a significant role to play in providing advice and in the work programme, as a range

of interventions relate directly or indirectly to welfare reform.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his statement. How do his Department and the Executive demonstrate their commitment to supporting the work of the voluntary and community sector?

Mr McCausland: The new concordat between the Executive and the voluntary and community sector outlines a shared vision of working together as social partners to build a participative, peaceful, equitable and inclusive community in Northern Ireland. The document articulates shared values and principles that underpin relationships between government and the sector. There are 12 specific commitments, which will be key drivers for change and ensure the effective delivery of the concordat. As Social Development Minister, I am required to report annually to the Executive and Assembly on the concordat's implementation. The first report is due this summer.

The approximately 4,700 active voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland employ a paid workforce of almost 27,000. They are supported by a further 88,000 volunteers. A wide range of Departments, agencies and public bodies form working relations with and provide funding to those organisations. In the four years to March 2010, some 6,400 organisations received from public sector bodies 14,500 letters of offer totalling £1.3 billion. Of course, the voluntary and community sector, like other sectors, faces pressures in the current difficult financial climate, and we are striving to maintain vital front line services and minimise budget cuts to other services.

Ms J McCann: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement, which mentioned the early preventative spend. Does he agree that developing the social economy sector, which he also mentioned, may ensure that early preventative spend is delivered in a way that benefits communities and families?

Mr McCausland: The theme of early preventative spend was identified only at the most recent meeting. There will, as I said, be some discussion between the Administrations on the exact shape of the work to be undertaken. The exact form of such discussions has yet to be determined. However, it is generally recognised that social economy projects and initiatives will play an important role in the future sustainability of

the voluntary and community sector and in delivering services.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí. The Minister referred to the discussions about good practice, and I listened carefully to Mr Brady talking about what he referred to as welfare reform. My question concerns advice provision and what lessons can be learned from other jurisdictions. That is particularly the case as we move to a new era, in which many people are loosely referred to as “the new poor”. They are out of work or face reduced hours for the first time. Specifically on welfare reform, I notice that ‘The Guardian’ today reports a massive increase —

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

Mr McGlone: — in the number of people going to tribunal because they lost out in the transition from incapacity benefit to ESA. What has been learned, or what potential is there for improving good practice in targeting advice at people who find themselves facing those dilemmas?

Mr McCausland: The work of the BIC on social inclusion has been ongoing for the past 18 months or so. As I said, welfare reform did not feature particularly. It was in the background and part of the context but not a feature of the discussions. However, it shapes the understanding and approach of particular Administrations.

The area that the Member moves into — advice-giving in relation to welfare reform — is not, I suggest, something that arose particularly in this area but will be very much on the agenda of the Assembly over the next year. As we move forward with welfare reform, it is important that we get good, sound, accurate advice to those in need of it, so that the potential detrimental effects of welfare reform in some areas are mitigated as far as is possible.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his statement and answers so far. Will he outline the benefits to Northern Ireland arising from the BIC ministerial meeting?

Mr McCausland: I welcome the publication of the report and the work that officials, including our own officials, have taken forward in this regard. The full report is available on the BIC website.

The work of the BIC provides real opportunities for learning and sharing best practice across the Administrations, all of which have different situations and problems. They have certain things in common, but there are significant differences too.

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

The report that was launched was the result of 18 months of active engagement with voluntary community organisations across the islands, and it sets out real challenges for us. A number of the recommendations are included in the Executive’s new Programme for Government. They include investing in social enterprise growth to increase sustainability in the broad community sector; developing and implementing a policy framework on community asset transfer; providing resources to address dereliction and grow investment in the physical regeneration of deprived areas; and including social clauses in public procurement contracts for supplies, services and construction. Those four areas are included in the new Programme for Government for Northern Ireland, and they are also recommendations found in the BIC social inclusion report.

Mr Allister: What does it say to the Minister and what should it say to this House and the other participants that every Government except the United Kingdom Government sent a Minister to the discussions? What does that say about the status of the east-west relationship? Could the Minister ever imagine mere civil servant representation being thought to be enough in the North/South set-up?

Mr McCausland: I am sure that the Member will appreciate that there are times for all of us when circumstance or sickness prevents us attending something. This is the first meeting of the BIC that I have attended where that has happened. It is the first. However, I think that all of us would acknowledge, if we are honest about it, that there are times when, even in the most pressing circumstances, an appointment or engagement is one that we have to forgo. The commitment of the UK Government to the BIC is well reflected in the strong representation that there is at BIC meetings on a regular and ongoing basis, meeting after meeting. This was a rare exception.

Executive Committee Business

Welfare of Animals (Permitted Procedures by Lay Persons) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I beg to move

That the draft Welfare of Animals (Permitted Procedures by Lay Persons) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

The aforementioned statutory rule will, subject to the Assembly's approval, introduce new provisions on permitted procedures that may be carried out on animals by a lay person. The regulations revoke the Welfare of Livestock (Prohibited Operations) (Amendment) Regulations 1987, which were made under the Welfare of Animals Act 1972.

I will now explain briefly to Members the background to the regulations. The new Welfare of Animals Act 2011, which the Assembly passed last year, contains powers, at section 5, to make it an offence for a person to carry out or cause to be carried out a prohibited procedure on a protected animal.

11.00 am

A prohibited procedure is defined as one that involves interference with the sensitive tissues or bone structure of the animal. The 2011 Act also contains an exemption where any procedure is carried out by a veterinary surgeon for the diagnosis of disease, for the purposes of medical treatment of an animal and any other procedure specified in regulations made by the Department.

Before I commence the powers in section 5 of the Act, to ensure that acceptable procedures such as inserting an ear tag in a cow or a microchip in a dog, which are commonly undertaken by farmers, pet owners etc, remain legal, my Department must set out in these regulations all the procedures that a lay person who is a non-veterinarian will be allowed to undertake. The new regulations will, for the first time, provide clarity by listing all those procedures. The regulations do not include the

docking of dogs' tails, as section 5 of the 2011 Act does not cover that.

The regulations contain a general requirement that all permitted procedures be performed in accordance with any relevant requirement listed in the schedules to the regulations, in such a way as to minimise the pain and suffering that it causes to the animal, in hygienic conditions, and in accordance with best practice. Lay persons undertaking those procedures must have received instruction or have experience in a procedure to the full requirement in the regulations.

A 12-week public consultation was undertaken with stakeholders from 1 July 2011 to 23 September 2011, to which there were 25 responses. Overall, the regulations were welcomed by all stakeholders, and there was significant support for the vast majority of the proposals in them. The consultation proposed that all procedures that had historically been allowed to be carried out by lay persons should continue to be allowed, with the exception of the hot branding of horses. The proposal to ban the hot branding of horses was welcomed and supported by all respondents to the consultation.

The responses to the consultation led to a review of the policy in relation to some outdated methods of identification, now that microchipping is widely accepted as a reliable method of identification. Therefore, the ear clipping of any species, the ear notching of pigs and the tagging of cats and dogs have been removed from the draft regulations and will be banned. In addition, since the consultation, the implantation of a subcutaneous hormone has been added to the list of permitted procedures for sheep.

I am pleased to say that when the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee considered the regulations on 15 November 2011, and again last week on 13 March, it indicated that it was content for the regulations to be brought before the Assembly. I am grateful to the Chair and members of the Committee for their support for the regulations. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development):

I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, which seeks to affirm the Welfare of Animals (Permitted Procedures by Lay Persons) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012.

The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, passed by the previous Assembly, makes it an offence to carry out a prohibited procedure on a protected animal. A prohibited procedure involves interference with the sensitive tissues or bone structure of an animal. To ensure that the acceptable procedures commonly undertaken by lay persons such as farmers and pet owners remain legal, the regulations set out all the procedures that may be carried out by a lay person. The regulations will provide clarity by listing all those procedures that are acceptable for a lay person to perform; they will also provide clarity around the definition of a lay person.

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development considered the proposal as an SL1 on 15 November 2011 and indicated that it was content with its policy merits. The Committee further considered the statutory rule on 13 March 2012 and resolved that it be affirmed. I can confirm that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is content with the statutory rule and that it be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mrs Dobson: The regulations set out the acceptable practices that may be performed on animals by non-veterinarians. The Welfare of Animals Act of last year was a welcome piece of legislation. Although I was not a Member of the House at the time, I know that it was debated at great length.

However, it is important that legislation, no matter how well intended or well drafted, does not have a counterproductive effect on the animals or industry that it is supposed to protect. Therefore, I welcome the regulations, as they clearly lay out the so-called permitted procedures. As any farmer will tell you, clear lines of identification are now embedded throughout the industry. Therefore, it makes sense that actions such as ear tagging are exempt from the Welfare of Animals Act.

Other common-sense procedures, such as allowing farmers to continue to castrate young male animals, are also exempt from the Act. It was already common practice before the Act came into force for any procedures that were carried out on a sensitive area of bone and skin to be done in a way that ensured minimal pain or suffering to the animals.

The regulations permit the continued routine of farmers seeing to their own animals and therefore allowing them to avoid the tremendous

cost of having to bring in a vet every time an animal loses a tag. Living on a farm, I see how often that happens. It is not in the interests of farmers or any other animal owners to put their animals through unnecessary pain. However, it unfortunately happens on a small number of occasions. I am confident that the regulations will go some way to further preventing such instances.

Today's provisions were broadly welcomed by the industry and my party. It is now up to the Department to ensure that they are properly enforced.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I offer my support for the draft Welfare of Animals (Permitted Procedures by Lay Persons) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all Members who spoke for their contributions to the debate. I am pleased to note the support for the introduction of the Welfare of Animals Regulations 2012.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Welfare of Animals (Permitted Procedures by Lay Persons) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): I beg to move

That the draft Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Go raibh maith agat, LeasCheann Comhairle. I seek to introduce the statutory rule, which, subject to the Assembly's approval, will replace the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations 2000. I will explain briefly to Members the background to the regulations.

Following the introduction of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 on 29 March last year, it has been necessary to consolidate and remake the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations 2000. Those regulations were made under the Welfare of Animals Act 1972, which is in the process of being repealed.

The statutory rule lays down rules for protecting the welfare of farmed animals, and it imposes a duty of care on the person responsible for the animal. The rule also provides for general conditions under which farmed animals shall be kept and additional conditions for some farmed species, namely, laying hens, broilers, cattle, pigs, rabbits and calves confined for rearing and fattening.

As I said, the statutory rule will consolidate and remake the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations 2000, which were the result of several EU directives being transposed into local legislation. There are no significant changes to the 2000 regulations other than the removal of the provisions that are already in the Welfare of Animals Act 2011. Those provisions relate to the powers of an authorised officer, powers of entry, improvement notices and the issue of statutory welfare codes.

Members may also wish to note that mutilations or interventions have been removed from the welfare of farmed animals legislation, as they are now covered under the Welfare of Animals Regulations 2012, which the Assembly has just approved.

A 12-week public consultation with stakeholders on the draft Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations 2012 was carried out between 4 July and 26 September. There were five responses to the consultation. The majority of respondents had no comments or views. Three stakeholders

expressed views on the powers of seizure. Those powers were not part of the consultation exercise, as they are direct powers from the Welfare of Animals Act 2011. My officials responded to the three organisations separately.

I am pleased to say that, when the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee considered the regulations on 24 January and 28 February, it indicated that it was content for the regulations to be brought before the Assembly. I am grateful to the Chair and members of the Committee for their support of the regulations.

I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development):

Again, as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate on the motion, which seeks to affirm the draft Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012. The Minister has outlined the provisions of that legislation, so there is no need for me to repeat them.

The current Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, as amended, were made under the powers of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972. Following the introduction of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 on 29 March 2011, these regulations are in the process of being repealed.

What the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is doing here is fulfilling its statutory obligation by repealing and remaking, while at the same time consolidating, the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 as amended. The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development considered this proposal on 24 January and indicated that it was content with its policy merits. The Committee further considered the statutory rule on 28 February and resolved that it be affirmed. I can confirm that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is content that the statutory rule be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mrs Dobson: Last year's Welfare of Animals Act brought together legislation relating to the welfare of farmed and unfarmed animals and substantially enhanced the 1972 Act. It is important that any regulations that we pass today do not impose any additional burdens on keepers. In fairness to the Department, I do not believe that they will. Rather, today's

regulations are a natural progression in revoking and remaking provision that was made under the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000. Therefore, there is little new here today. The regulations made 12 years ago already detail the general conditions under which farmed animals can be kept, and they contain schedules setting out additional conditions applying to various species of farmed animals.

Given that the schedule to today's statutory rule includes conditions that apply to the keeping of laying hens in different systems, it would be remiss of me not to mention the 2012 welfare of laying hens directive. You may recall that I brought the issue to the House a number of months ago and highlighted certain member states' woeful attitude. Even now, three months after its implementation date, some of Europe's largest egg producers seem blissfully negligent of the conditions of the directive.

Importantly, the 2011 Act also expanded the enforcement roles of DARD and council inspectors. Under the 1972 Act, these powers extended only to the police. My party had significant concerns about the new proposals, particularly in relation to significant responsibilities being passed to local councils without enough resources to match. Another significant amendment was that, where the inspector finds a farm animal that is likely to suffer, the inspector can now act immediately. While these proposals should be welcomed, they also mean that much greater responsibility and power will be placed in the hands of DARD inspectors. Therefore, I strongly believe that inspectors should be trained to a veterinary standard while being fully up to speed on all animal welfare regulation.

I use this opportunity to say once again that seizure must be the last resort in all cases. Farm animals falling into poor condition is not always down to complete disregard on the owner's part. Sometimes farmers, through no fault of their own, perhaps because of poor physical or mental health, can neglect the care of their livestock. The Department must recognise that entering a farm and removing animals has the potential to greatly exacerbate the situation of, for example, a farmer who is experiencing mental health difficulties. Today's statutory rule is a welcome progression of last year's Bill. However, my party had concerns then and still has some of those concerns now.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the statutory rule and the improvements in the health of farmed animals. It informs consumer choice, and the agrifood industry can market abroad how animals are farmed here. I support the regulations on behalf of our party but back Mrs Dobson's call for proper, full and adequate training for inspectors on the farm.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Again, on behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the draft Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 and concur with the Committee Chair.

11.15 am

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. I will pick up on a few points, particularly those about laying hens. The Member will be aware that the island of Ireland is now fully compliant, as is Britain. We explored the issue of a unilateral trade ban, and the Member will recall that, in December, I said that I was seeking legal advice. We still await that advice and will continue to pursue it to make sure that we are looking after our local egg producers.

There will always be a reasonable and practical approach taken to the seizure of animals. It is all about the welfare of animals. Basically, the regulations that we are discussing today tidy up the existing legislation. There will always be a pragmatic approach to seizures, but the welfare of the animal has to be key. There are also clear routes for farmers to appeal decisions, and that will be made clear to everybody who wants to go down those routes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Committee Business

In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) Treatment

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

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to fund three full cycles of IVF treatment, including the subsequent transfer of any viable frozen embryos, as recommended by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE); and further calls on the Minister to undertake a review of fertility services based on the updated NICE guideline on the assessment and treatment of people with fertility problems, which is due to be published in July 2012.

It is probably an opportune time to take a cheap political shot, but I will not, because I know that the Minister is interested in the issue, and this item of business has started earlier than expected, so I assume that he is on his way. For the record, I hope that he takes the time to look at Hansard, and I am sure that his officials are looking at the issue, too.

I welcome the opportunity to bring the motion to the House on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Approximately one in seven couples will be affected by fertility problems. Therefore, it is a significant and fairly common problem for a lot of people. We probably all know at least one couple who have had difficulty conceiving a child and opted to use IVF. We all know the great joy that comes about when IVF is successful and couples finally feel that their family is complete.

I will start by providing a brief history of fertility services here. Many Members will be familiar with the issues, as we debated the matter in the previous mandate, but I am conscious that there are a lot of new Members here today. The regional fertility centre in Belfast was founded in 1987, but, initially, provided services only to private patients. It was not until 2001 that we finally began to provide fertility treatment to health service patients. That decision was made

by the then Health Minister, Bairbre de Brún, and it was a significant step forward, as, before 2001, anyone who wanted to access fertility treatment had to pay for it.

At the same time as launching the service, Bairbre de Brún initiated a public debate about the future of a publicly funded fertility service, and a public consultation was launched in 2003. During the consultation period, the fertility service was available on a limited basis to couples without children who satisfied a number of criteria, including a maximum age of 37 for women.

Following the public consultation, new arrangements were announced in 2006. A number of changes were introduced, including changes to the eligibility criteria. Those welcome changes included raising the maximum age limit for women from 37 to 39, improved counselling services and permitting couples with children to access the service.

Following a year of operation under the 2006 criteria, the health boards reviewed the situation. The evaluation highlighted the increasing demand for treatment, as more people were now eligible. Unfortunately, the demand exceeded the available resources, and it was shown that waiting times had seriously increased.

An Assembly motion was brought in October 2007, which called on the Department to conduct a review of fertility services, including the access criteria, the waiting list problem and the number of IVF treatments that would be available to couples. The motion was passed by the House, and, subsequently, the Department carried out a review. In October 2008, the then Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, announced the outcome of the review. One of the key changes was the creation of a regional waiting list, which was welcomed by all. Previously, each health board had its own list, which had created a bit of a postcode lottery. The Minister also put in an additional £800,000 to get the waiting list down, with the expectation that, in future, the waiting time would be reduced to a maximum of 12 months.

That is a brief history of how we have got to where we are today. While I think everyone will agree that we have made good progress over the past 10 years, the bottom line is that we are still not meeting the NICE guidance on the provision of fertility treatment. The NICE guidance, which has been in operation since 2004, clearly states that a woman should be

offered up to three cycles of IVF. At this stage, I will take the opportunity to clarify what is meant by three cycles. According to the NICE guidelines, a cycle of treatment begins with stimulation of the ovaries and the collection of eggs and sperm, and the transfer of one or two resultant embryos back into the womb. If other embryos are successfully produced at the time, they are frozen. They are then implanted into the womb, if the initial embryo did not result in a pregnancy. One cycle of treatment includes the transfer of the initial embryo and a transfer of any frozen embryos, if required.

NICE recommends three full cycles of IVF. It does that for very good clinical reasons. Unfortunately, IVF is not always successful first time round. The success rates vary with the age of the woman. For women aged 23 to 35, there is a 20% success rate after one cycle of IVF treatment. That means that 80% will not get pregnant after one cycle. We can clearly see by the statistics why, in most cases, one cycle of treatment is not going to be enough. That is why NICE recommends three cycles.

We must also remember that NICE does not operate in a vacuum. It makes recommendations not only based on the effectiveness of a drug or treatment, but takes into account its price and the impact on the health service of funding it. NICE is aware of the cost of fertility treatment and has judged that three cycles is the best way of achieving a fair balance between the needs of couples and the limits that will have to be placed on funding. Therefore, in my view, we should be providing the three full cycles; providing one is not good enough. For many people, the first time round is not successful, and their only chance to try again is to go privately. Going privately will cost people in and around £4,000. If it does not work, and they try a third cycle, it is another £4,000. In total, couples could find themselves in debt of around £8,000. At such an emotional time, when couples are trying for a baby, that can create more stress.

It could be said that the Department seems to be choosing to ignore NICE guidelines when it suits. We cannot treat IVF as a service on which the Department can simply use its discretion. It has been approved by NICE and, therefore, should be provided.

The health service should not always be about disease prevention; it should be about positive

outcomes in health. Having children has many positive benefits for the parents and the wider family circle, who are much better off as a result.

If we look at what is happening in other places, we will find that 27% of primary care trusts in England are providing three cycles of IVF and 26% are offering two cycles. In Scotland, three cycles are provided, and two cycles are provided in Wales. My point is that it can be done there, when there is the will to provide the three cycles and follow the NICE guidelines. Why are we not looking to do it?

There is another issue that also needs to be urgently addressed. The Department frequently refers to providing one cycle of IVF. However, at the moment, the health service is providing only one fresh cycle of treatment. Any frozen embryos are not transferred. What happens in practice here is that couples go for health service treatment and receive one fresh cycle of IVF. If that cycle does not result in a pregnancy, that is all the treatment that is available to them. However, around half of couples will have generated frozen embryos. They are then left with a very difficult decision. The only way that they can use those frozen embryos is to pay to have them transferred, which costs around £1,500. In my view, we are on tricky moral ground here. The health service is creating embryos for people as part of the publicly funded treatment, but, in the case of any frozen embryos being available, we are allowing those to be transferred only in the private sector.

In January, in response to an Assembly question, the Minister stated that he would like to move to providing a frozen embryo treatment once the waiting list is stabilised. That is to be welcomed. However, that was the same answer provided by the previous Minister a year ago. I am worried that there does not seem to have been much real progress on the issue, and will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say later in the debate.

In the short term, we want to see frozen embryo transfer (FET) introduced in the health service. The Infertility Network, which has been campaigning for years on this issue, has calculated that that would cost only £250,000 per annum. Given that the Department has a budget of £4.3 million, surely the money can be found somewhere.

The last point I would like to make is that NICE is currently in the process of updating its 2004 guidance on the assessment and treatment

of people with fertility problems. The updated guidelines are expected to be published in the summer of 2012. The new guidelines are to be welcomed, given that there have been significant developments —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Ms S Ramsey: — in infertility practice and techniques since the original guidelines were published. The last time that the Department reviewed fertility services was in 2007. We are five years on, and I think that it is a good time for the Minister to look again at the issue, once the guidelines have been published. I welcome his views on this matter.

In finishing, Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to thank the Infertility Network for all the work that it has done in supporting the Committee in bringing forward this motion.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak as a member of the Health Committee on what is an important issue for many families in Northern Ireland today. This is a very sensitive matter, and one that needs careful consideration.

There have been many advances in recent years in improving and developing fertility services. That is particularly welcome. However, as with many areas in our health service provision, more could still be done to further improve accessibility in this particular field.

Infertility is a very distressing and sensitive condition. Unfortunately, it continues to affect many people across the United Kingdom. It is said that about one in six people, male and female, suffer from fertility problems of some kind. That highlights the importance of the issue for people here. We need to continue to develop and support methods aimed at helping those who find themselves in this situation.

Given the very sensitive nature of the issue, it is vital that we avoid the postcode lottery that previously existed, and which still continues in England. To date, there has been investment and progress on improving access to fertility services. That is to be welcomed. The 2006 announcement that saw all qualifying couples entitled to one full publicly funded cycle of IVF treatment, while also increasing the maximum age limit for women accessing the service from 37 to 39, was a positive step forward in improving and widening fertility provision.

The extension of the upper age limit helped alleviate the problem of women suffering the heartbreaking scenario of narrowly missing out, by a number of months, on publicly funded IVF treatment.

Counselling plays a crucial role in fertility treatment. It should continue to be prioritised to support couples through the traumatic fertility processes, given the very low success rate — approximately 20% — of IVF treatment based on embryo transfer.

Unfortunately, even with a successful embryo transfer into the womb, the four out of five chance of an unborn child dying can often be just too great a burden for many couples to bear. Given the unimaginable stress that would exist in those scenarios, it is vital that an adequate support infrastructure is put in place to assist those most in need.

11.30 am

We need also remember the very important issue of the sanctity of life and ensure that that is always to the fore when dealing with this very sensitive fertility issue. The practice of freezing and then destroying embryos is particularly questionable and has resulted in many embryonic children not having the chance of life. As reported in newspapers, the IVF lottery competition that launched in the middle of last year, which gave contestants a chance to ultimately win a baby for £20, is a shocking example of how such a sensitive issue can be commercially hijacked by those selling precious human life. Human life should never be treated as a commodity; rather, it should be preserved and cherished in the dignified way that it deserves.

I welcome the Minister's commitment and aspiration to see Northern Ireland widening its fertility services and I urge him to consider extending the service, without narrowing the accessibility criteria as that would result in fewer couples receiving any publicly funded treatment.

Mr Gardiner: During Question Time in September 2011, my colleague the Member for Mid Ulster asked a question about DuoFertility, which is a system based on detecting high fertility cycles in the human body. It was developed by Cambridge Temperature Concepts and was outlined on the Cabinet Office website in May 2011. It has been scientifically shown to achieve the same pregnancy rate as a cycle of IVF in the same patient population at a cost of £500, compared

with a typical NHS cost of £4,000 per cycle. At the time, although admitting that what Mrs Overend said was interesting, the Minister said that Northern Ireland normally operates under the protocol of NICE guidelines. He said that if the system that Mrs Overend referred to was as good as she had indicated, he trusted that NICE would recommend it to us. He also said that it would certainly alleviate our problems, which are largely financial. Has the Minister been able to investigate that matter since Question Time last September?

I believe that I am right in saying that the only restraint in providing the three cycles is financial. That being so, will the Minister indicate where the provision of the three cycles of IVF treatment is on his departmental wish list? Are there many items ahead of it in that queue for finances?

Mr McDevitt: I am very happy to participate in the debate and to support the Health Committee's call for three cycles of IVF treatment. Colleagues who have been here longer than I have will know that the issue has exercised the House for almost a decade. In my opinion, it goes to the heart of our equality legislation, as it affects couples who are seeking to become parents and are being discriminated against in this region relative to other parts of the United Kingdom.

It is worth noting that in 2004, NICE produced the clinical guidelines 'Fertility: assessment and treatment for people with fertility problems', which suggested a number of criteria for the provision of IVF treatment for infertile couples. The criteria suggested in the guidelines had been adopted across the UK to varying degrees, and I suppose that the point of the debate today is to find the degree to which this region is willing to accept a guideline that clearly recommends that three cycles of IVF treatment be made available to infertile couples.

There is an opportunity for the Minister to respond to this debate, not in financial terms but in social and human terms, and to signal that, irrespective of the potential financial aspect of three-cycle IVF treatment in this region, it will be delivered. It needs to be delivered because if we continue not to do so, we will fall further behind the standards of IVF treatment provided in other member states of the European Union and many other parts of the United Kingdom.

An all-party parliamentary group report on this very question was prepared in 2011. The group was chaired by Gareth Johnson MP and was able to collate a lot of statistics. The group noted that in 1999, some 595,000 babies were born in the UK, 8,337 of whom — 1.4% — were born as a result of assisted reproduction treatment (ART). In 2004, it was shown that the UK was falling behind European counterparts in the amount of fertility treatment provided and, consequently, the proportion of babies born as a result of ART.

The survey that was conducted for the all-party parliamentary group showed that in 2000, there were 580 cycles of fertility treatment per million people in the UK, compared with an average of 1,057 per million in other northern European countries. In Denmark, for example, the proportion of babies born following ART was 3.7% of the total number of national births, compared with a figure for the same period of around 1% in the UK. It is not that the system that we operate is the worst in Europe — far from it. However, the point was well made by colleagues in Westminster in 2011 that it is also far from the best in Europe. I suppose it is particularly concerning, given that the guidelines to make it possible for these figures to radically improve have been available since 2004.

In summing up my short contribution, I appeal to the Minister to continue to prioritise this area of work and I look forward to his having good news to give to the many thousands of couples who, for one reason or another, are not able to conceive in the ordinary way. I hope that he may be able to send them the greatest gift that anyone can be sent: the possibility of entering parenthood through assisted reproduction treatment.

Mr McCarthy: I am delighted to make a contribution on this very important and sensitive issue, as has been said. It is a very significant matter, potentially affecting one in six couples, according to my notes, but as our Health Committee Chairperson said one in seven, I accept her knowledge.

Infertility can be a source of incredible stress and heartbreak for many people. With advances in medical technology and techniques, we have a duty to respond where we can make a practical difference to people's lives. Since this Assembly came into being, back in 1998, considerable interest and concern has been

shown by many Assembly Members. Addressing infertility is a problem with many dimensions, as has been said. Those include the eligibility age for women, length of waiting lists, variance in access to IVF across different regions and investment in support counselling for couples.

The central issue is the number of cycles of IVF treatment that should be available in Northern Ireland. The NICE guidelines set out what the term “full cycle” is properly understood to mean, and that is fresh and frozen embryo transfer. Full cycles offer a considerably increased chance of a successful pregnancy. NICE has been recommending that health trusts offer three full cycles since as far back as 2004. The evidence suggests that such treatment substantially increases the chance of success by as much 60%. The NICE guidelines are based on clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. The guidelines are to be revised this year, and it is almost certain that there will not be any regression recommended.

In Northern Ireland, the current policy is to aspire to three full cycles, as recommended in the NICE guidelines. However, as I understand it, not even one full cycle is offered in Northern Ireland at present. Surely, we can do better. One fresh transfer is offered in Northern Ireland, but that does not constitute a full cycle of IVF, which comprises a fresh transfer and a frozen embryo transfer. People are offered the fresh embryo part only. That is a fudge, as it makes it sound as though people here are being offered one full cycle. Also, there is a knock-on ethical issue here, because people are effectively left to follow up the frozen embryo transfer themselves privately, with considerable associated costs.

Northern Ireland is not only badly out of step with the NICE guidelines but increasingly out of step with policy and practice in other parts of the UK. As I understand it, up to three full cycles are offered in Scotland and parts of England, while up to two full cycles are offered in Wales. Again, it is worth stressing that, in practice, not even one full cycle is offered in this region. It is important that Northern Ireland takes heed of NICE’s expert opinion and makes strenuous efforts to implement the guidelines at the earliest opportunity.

I expect — indeed, I would be surprised if anything other than this were to happen — that the Minister will stress his good intentions in the area but caution that he does not have the

resources to make the necessary investment to publicly offer the recommended three full cycles. We await his response with interest. However, I urge the Minister to listen to the strength of feeling on the issue in the Assembly and in the wider community and to make it a priority. Indeed, I think that it is important for the Minister and the Department to factor in some of the economic costs of not offering three full cycles.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr McCarthy: For example, there are knock-on costs in respect of counselling and dealing with mental health issues. It is critical that the Minister seizes the opportunity —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr McCarthy: — to make a real difference to the lives of many people in our community. I support the motion.

Ms Brown: I also support the motion. Children are a blessing and a gift, and we can sometimes take them for granted and as a given. However, as already mentioned, that is not necessarily the case for one in six couples or one in seven couples — take it as you will. The inability to conceive naturally is, therefore, a fairly common problem that is rarely discussed and rarely aired in public.

The inability of couples to have children naturally gives rise to a number of problems, including psychological problems, resulting in couples and individuals having to seek psychological support. That is recognised in the process of infertility treatment, as couples are given psychological support through counselling before, during and after treatment. Fertility problems are possibly increasing as couples tend to marry and have children later on in life rather than earlier. Today, many people put off having children for a variety of reasons, such as their careers or, increasingly, money and financial stability.

11.45 am

A woman’s natural fertility decreases after the age of 35 and, again, after 40. Those who delay having a family are more likely to face fertility problems and, subsequently, become highly frustrated at not being able to have their own children. There was no publicly funded service prior to 2001, and those who wished to access fertility services and specialised care had to pay

for it. That was considered and recognised to be inequitable.

Arrangements were then put in place to develop a publicly funded service, initially on an interim basis. Criteria for access were developed at that time. In 2003, a full consultation entitled 'From People to Parents' was issued. In 2006, after a long period of consultation and engagement with numerous stakeholders, changes were made to the criteria. In 2007, another review of policy was carried out at the request of the Assembly, with changes implemented in 2009. The length of time that people waited on the list was a prominent issue at that time. Additional money was provided to try to reduce that and, therefore, speed the process from referral to treatment.

The focus of the debate is the provision of three full IVF cycles rather than one, which is the case under the health service in Northern Ireland. Any additional cycles can be undertaken privately, of course, as a private patient. As has been mentioned, it is stated that there is a 60% better chance of success if three cycles are completed. That can, therefore, provide a couple with hope, as well as increasing their chances of success in having a family.

Unfortunately, as is the case with many things, money and resources are central to the issue. The Minister is on record as stating that we cannot afford it. Officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety told us in Committee that their main focus is to ensure that couples wait no more than 12 months for treatment. It remains an aspiration, in line with guidelines that were issued by NICE in 2004, that we reach a stage when women can be offered up to three cycles. I believe that it is worth looking into that to see whether three cycles or at least one full cycle of IVF can be funded. I also want to ensure that the Department takes account of the findings of the review that is being undertaken by NICE into the provision of IVF and fertility treatment in general.

Ms P Bradley: I, too, support the motion as a Member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It is distressing for any person to live with infertility. How a family choose to cope with that situation depends very much on their values and beliefs. For families who enter into in vitro fertilisation treatment, the decision often comes after much discussion and soul searching. The process that they will

enter is complex. The combination of necessary hormones to produce the required number of eggs for harvesting, the stress that is involved in completing the treatment, and the length of time that people wait to access the service through the NHS mean that the process can put extraordinary stress on people's emotional health.

The sad fact is that one in six or seven couples will experience infertility and will have to face a number of decisions as a result. This year will mark 34 years since the first IVF baby was conceived and born. Every year, throughout the UK, many babies continue to be born via IVF. Having children is a choice for people, and infertility cruelly removes that choice. We have the technology to help to take control of that once again. There are a number of reasons why a person may experience fertility issues that make conception difficult. Couples can access counselling before and during treatment to help them to manage the stresses and strains of that treatment. We must ensure that we give couples the best possible opportunity to conceive through the NHS.

As has been said, women are more likely now to delay having children until they are established in their careers. I am pleased that, from April 2007, the age limit for females was raised to 39 years. That has meant that women who experience fertility problems in their early thirties are able to access that important service. I am also incredibly proud that Northern Ireland has some of the least restrictive criteria for accessing NHS funding for IVF treatment. Women in Northern Ireland can be confident that personal circumstances will not restrict them from joining the waiting list for access to IVF treatment. I am also very proud that we have managed to reduce the waiting lists so that couples can now access IVF services in a more timely manner. In some respects, that will help to alleviate the stress of infertility on couples and their wider family circle.

I agree that the time is right to increase the number of IVF cycles that couples can be offered, in line with NICE principles. I believe that the Department should move to ensure that NICE's 2004 recommendations are implemented. Advances in technology may mean that there will be new recommendations, and we should endeavour to put those in place as soon as possible to enable us to continue to provide the best healthcare, which the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

Funding for IVF is like any other type of funding: there will always be those who support the provision and those who would like to see the money spent in other areas of healthcare. The fact remains that infertility can seriously affect a couple's emotional and mental health. The feeling that their family is not complete is a reality for a lot of couples. I support the funding of IVF to ensure that we, as a society, give couples the maximum chance of having a family. Some couples end up spending their life savings trying to complete their family, and some can put themselves into serious debt in order to achieve that dream. We, as a society, should ensure that we provide as much help and support to those couples as we can. NICE has achieved that by identifying that access to three cycles of IVF gives the optimum chance of conceiving.

We must also remember that not every person who conceives will go on to have a baby at the end of pregnancy. Sadly, miscarriages and stillbirths are still very much a reality and every couple's nightmare. Imagine a couple who have had their one chance of IVF and have experienced a miscarriage or a stillbirth, only to realise that they cannot continue to try to conceive. Of course, another cycle of IVF does not guarantee that the outcome will be different, but it is well known that the statistics suggest that if a woman has conceived once, she is likely to conceive again. Therefore, I suggest that we owe that couple the chance to have another cycle.

Obviously, access to IVF cannot and should not be unlimited. There has to be a limit at some point. Some couples are fortunate to conceive at their first attempt and realise their dream of having a child. Therefore, it is not anticipated that every person who joins the waiting list will need three full cycles, while many others will decide not to go down the route of IVF.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close, please.

Ms P Bradley: However, for those who are not fortunate enough to conceive at the first attempt and who wish to carry on, we should ensure that they have that opportunity regardless of economic standing.

Mr McCallister: Like other Members, I do not think that there is much in the motion that is terribly controversial. There was support from all parts of the Committee, and having listened

to the debate, I know that there is support from around the House.

There are several issues that are worth mentioning and focusing on. The counselling aspect is important. Many of us will know friends, family members or constituents who have been through the process and will know of the heartache and disappointment for some and of the joy of starting a family for, hopefully, many others. That is something that many people cherish and will remember for the rest of their life. It is important to get that counselling support for families and couples as they go through treatment.

It is vital that, where possible, we follow the NICE guidelines. Too often, we look at NICE guidelines and then decide how we can follow them in the cheapest way to deliver the service that is required. If NICE has suggested that we should endeavour to follow its guidelines, we should not penalise people by giving them a lesser service than they can expect in other parts of the UK. We should strive to deliver the same standards.

We have heard from previous contributors that the statistics show that chances of conception improve if couples can undertake the recommended three cycles of IVF. That is something that we should strive to deliver. I am quite sure that the Minister will be keen to deliver on that and make sure that we match the NICE recommendations and the support of the Committee and Members of this House with action on delivering it.

We must make sure that new advances in our fertility centre are constantly looked at, as was mentioned by my colleague Mr Gardiner, and that any new advances or practices are quickly adopted here and used to deliver the best outcomes for couples that we can possibly deliver and the best outcomes for money. It is all about getting a good result for couples — the birth of a healthy baby — and about supporting them on the journey through the treatment. Huge disappointments and setbacks can befall couples who go through the treatment, and it can be a very challenging time. However, the hope is that, with a family at the end of it, the process is worthwhile. We all support that, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's contribution.

Mr Allister: I had not intended to speak in this debate but having listened to it, I find that there are issues that need to be ventilated.

The previous contributor told us that there is nothing controversial about this issue, but there are ethical issues that touch on it. All of us, of course, who have had the privilege of being parents know the great joy of that and can understand the great disappointment of couples who desperately want to be parents and have not succeeded. Therefore, I am sure that all of us can empathise with finding solutions for their difficulties, and there is nothing wrong in that.

However, there are three tangential issues that touch on the matter and give me some questioning concern. The first pertains to the fact that, ultimately, as part of the process, there is destruction of unused embryos. A human embryo is, biologically, a living human being at the earliest stage of its development. Of course, it is dependent on the mother to nurture it and give it life, but, genetically, it is a distinct organism, different from both the egg and the sperm from which it grew. It does, in effect, need nothing more than the nourishment of the mother to grow into a recognisable human being. That is a point on which those who might take a religious perspective and those who might take a purely scientific perspective can probably agree. We have an arrangement where, ultimately, some embryos are destroyed. There is an ethical issue.

The second issue that I have concerns about is the development of processes, particularly in the United States, for sex selection in IVF treatment. Perhaps the Minister can tell us how far, if at all, that is permitted in Northern Ireland's arrangements.

The third issue that concerns me — it is not referred to in the NICE guidelines from what I can see — is the question of the use or abuse of IVF treatment by lesbian couples. There was a case in Scotland just a couple of years ago in which a lesbian couple challenged the health service's refusal to afford them IVF treatment. They got the backing of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and public money to do it, and they were preparing to take themselves into court on the issue when the health service backed down.

So I would like to hear from the Health Minister what the position is in Northern Ireland on that. Is IVF treatment available to lesbian couples, who can, as it were, be treated equally under legislation with other, regular couples desperate to have a child?

12.00 noon

Therefore, when someone says that there is nothing controversial and nothing touching upon ethical issues about this, that is a naive misconception. There are ethical issues that need to be addressed. Of course we all want to help as many childless couples as we can but we cannot stampede through the ethics of the matter with no regard to what is right. With those few thoughts, I conclude my remarks.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I welcome the opportunity to hear the views of MLAs on this motion and, indeed, I welcome the opportunity to respond to it. I thank the proposer of the motion for raising this important issue, which has been the subject of several letters to the Health Committee over recent months. I recognise that infertility can be a shattering problem for those affected and can impact on all areas of their lives. There is nothing so disappointing as when a couple get together and try for children for it not to happen, and I can fully understand the heartbreak that is involved for couples in those situations.

Fertility services may not always be as high a priority as other specialist services that, essentially, treat disease, but the impact of fertility services is hugely significant in that they provide couples with the opportunity to have a family, which, previously, would not have been possible for them. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the first baby born in Northern Ireland as a result of IVF. Publicly funded fertility services with interim access criteria have been available since 2001. As a result of public consultation, initial criteria that were agreed in 2006, including the upper age limit being raised and allowing women with dependant children to access the service, enabled more women to access the service. A further public consultation took place in 2009 and resulted in widening the access criteria further. For example, the need to prove a stable relationship was removed, which one may question.

Our current access criteria are wider than those in many parts of the UK and allow more women to access the service. It should be noted that some areas of the UK do not offer fertility services at all or place access restrictions, such as having children from a previous relationship or either parent having a living child. The current NICE guidance was published in 2004,

which was before my Department entered into agreement with the organisation. Therefore, the 2004 guidance has not been endorsed as applicable for health and social care. Despite that, we aspire to meet the recommendation of providing up to three cycles of treatment. However, current available funding makes that unachievable. The NICE guidance is being reviewed and is expected to be published in July 2012. The revised guidance will be considered for its applicability when published.

In Northern Ireland, we offer one fresh cycle of treatment to those who are clinically suitable for treatment. Although, as I have already indicated, that is less than the recommendation of up to three cycles, our access criteria offer more women the chance to avail themselves of treatment. Increasing the number of cycles offered would require additional recurrent funding, and in the absence of additional funding, offering up to three cycles would result in other criteria having to be tightened and could severely limit the number of women who could access the service. Following the 2009 review, the intention was that once the waiting list was stabilised at 12 months, a priority was to offer frozen embryo transfer. That was to be the first step in attempting to meet the NICE guidance recommendation.

The Health and Social Care Board has agreed with the Regional Fertility Centre that one treatment of FET should be offered to women who are clinically suitable. That will be offered to new referrals from 1 April 2012. That is a great step forward and should be applauded as it will offer women a further chance of having a family. There is just over £3 million recurrent funding for fertility services, and the investment has enabled the waiting list for treatment to be reduced to 12 months. As it costs approximately £3,500 for a cycle of IVF and £1,700 for FET, to increase the number of cycles offered from one to three would require a considerable investment in the service.

Our current waiting list targets are for a referral in nine weeks, a review in three months and treatment in 12 months. Those targets and the investment in services have shortened overall time from referral to treatment from around 24 months to 17 months. Again, that is good news. At February 2012, there were 575 on the active waiting list for treatment: 235 for IVF and 340 for intracytoplasmic sperm injection. In addition, there were 65 patients awaiting an

initial appointment, all of whom had received a partial booking letter asking them to contact the service to book into an appointment slot.

I appreciate that those who use fertility services are keen to have access to the maximum number of cycles possible. However, I trust that the information that I have passed on has demonstrated that the service that we are providing is the best that is possible with the existing funding. I would like to be able to make three cycles of fertility treatment available to those who need the services, but, unfortunately, that is not possible with the current funding. Despite the financial constraints, we intend to offer FET to new referrals.

I will deal briefly with some issues that have been raised. All those in the Committee support counselling, and we recognise the importance of counselling for people who are unable to have children and, indeed, for people who are receiving treatment. In the past few years, additional recurrent funding of £51,000 has been made available for counselling of that nature.

I was asked about the NICE recommendations for the three full cycles. As I indicated, we will offer frozen embryo transfer as part of the package now, and that should be a significant asset. Across the UK, on average, 32.3% of such treatments are successful for those under 35. It falls quite dramatically by the time people are 39, and beyond that, it falls even more dramatically. Perhaps we need to look at and address that. If we were to up the number of cycles, should we look at excluding those areas where it is less successful? All that would have to be taken into consideration.

There was also a query about whether we have had the chance to consider the test that Mrs Overend raised at one point. That has not yet been considered by NICE, but we will get new NICE guidance in July 2012, and I trust that it will have had the opportunity to look at that issue and give guidance on it.

Mr Allister raised the issue of sex selection. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority gives guidance on the storage of embryos and the length of time that they are stored for. That is governed by the HFEA. I certainly would not approve of any sex selection. That has been used in countries such as China over the years, and it is a huge human rights violation. There has been somewhere in the region of 400 million cases of infanticide, and the population is now

much more predominantly male than female. I believe that such tampering with nature is hugely retrograde and will damage that society in due course. Mr Allister also raised the issue of same-sex couples. IVF treatment is available to all couples who meet the criteria in Northern Ireland, as set out by previous guidelines.

I can give an assurance that when the revised guidance is issued by NICE in the summer, we will consider its application. We will take the views expressed this morning into full consideration at that time.

Mr Wells: My wife and I are privileged in having three children, and I concurred with Mr Allister when he referred to the happiness that that has brought us. However, I am also aware of friends, neighbours and members of my church who have found it difficult, if not impossible, to have children and the huge amount of pain that that has caused those couples. That was reflected in many of the comments made today by various Members. Infertility can be a heartbreaking condition, and not being able to have children can have a serious impact on couples' health and well-being.

It is obvious from the contributions of the Health Committee and other Members that we in the House take the issue seriously. We are also aware, as the Minister has pointed out, that budgets are extremely tight at the moment. However, the point was raised by many, including Mr McCarthy, that by not making three full cycles of IVF available to couples, we are, in fact, breaking the guidelines set out by NICE in 2004. We recognise that progress has been made over the past 10 years but we believe that a lot more work is needed.

The Chair of the Committee succinctly set out the current situation. One in seven couples has problems conceiving. There has been some progress, but the NICE guidelines are that there should be three full cycles. Sadly, 80% of those who have only one cycle of treatment are not successful. That must be an extremely distressing period in their lives. The overall cost quoted was £250,000 per annum, which sounds like a lot of money, but, of course, that is set against a very large health service budget.

Gordon Dunne was the first of many MLAs to raise the very complex moral issues associated with IVF treatment. Those were expanded on by Mr Allister and referred to by the Minister. I have absolutely no doubt that, for some Members,

certain aspects of IVF treatment throw up desperately difficult moral problems. Sam Gardiner mentioned the contribution by Mrs Overend in September 2011. The Minister responded to that, but it was an interesting point that she raised. I am sure that through Assembly questions for written answer, we will be able to dig a bit deeper on that very important point.

Conall McDevitt was his usual articulate self and made some very interesting contributions about the differences between Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe. Some of the statistics show that we are very out of line with our European friends.

Kieran McCarthy highlighted the ethical risks involved with dealing with frozen embryos and called on the Minister to make that a priority. I think that Mr McCarthy has included that line in every speech that he has ever made in the Assembly. The problem is that if the Minister were to make everything that Mr McCarthy wanted a priority, nothing would be secondary and everything would be at the top of the pile. That would be difficult, but I certainly understand the points that he made.

Pam Brown brought to the debate a very interesting new point about the number of couples marrying and having children much later. The demands of modern life mean that people feel that they are not in an economic position to have children early, or perhaps they wish to pursue career opportunities. Therefore, the point of first birth is getting later and later — my mother had her last child when she was 46, so I have very clear memories of the difficulties that that can cause. That is one of the reasons why fertility rates are dropping quite dramatically. Ms Brown's point is one to be applauded.

12.15 pm

Paula Bradley alerted us to the fact that it is over 30 years since the first IVF child was born. In Northern Ireland, I understand that it was 25 years ago. She mentioned the enormous emotional distress that infertility causes couples who are unable to conceive. We need to constantly remember in this debate that we are dealing with real humans who are hurting desperately. Some couples have been able to put it behind them and move on with their lives because it has not haunted them, but it has caused the most dreadful trauma for other couples. During any conversation, they are very

quick to raise the fact of the pain that has been caused as a result of their childlessness.

Ms Bradley also stated that Northern Ireland has some of the least restrictive access criteria in the United Kingdom. That is to be welcomed. She made the very valid point that it cannot be limitless; there has to be a threshold, which is set by NICE at three cycles. In other words, even in the very easy-going approach to this issue in the rest of the United Kingdom, couples cannot come back for a fourth or fifth cycle of treatment. There has to be a point at which couples have to accept that, unfortunately, it just is not going to happen. The limit of three is relevant, but, of course, in Northern Ireland, we do not even have that at the moment.

John McCallister raised a novel point about the importance of counselling to the couples who are going through that traumatic period in their lives. He also said that we should not always look at what the cheapest option is but the one that is best for couples in that situation.

Jim Allister made an interesting contribution about the ethical problems that are associated with IVF treatment. He mentioned his concern about the destruction of unused embryos. I was quite alarmed to hear — perhaps it happened under direct rule; I am certain that it did not happen under the present Minister's regime — that there is no test now about whether there is a sustainable relationship ongoing before IVF treatment is administered. I believe that children are best brought up by married couples. Therefore, given the fact that there are huge demands on the resources of the Department to provide IVF treatment, it should be prioritised for those who can give the best upbringing to the children, which, in my opinion, is married couples. They should take priority. I am very worried that the guidelines have been amended in the past to allow, basically, people who have no relationship with anyone to have IVF treatment. That worries me in the context of limited resources.

Mr Poots: To clarify: that was amended in 2009.

Mr Wells: That happened under the previous Administration and Mr McGimpsey. I do not think that the Assembly was made aware of that change. Had it been brought to the House, several Members would have expressed their concern about it. That has slipped through and it needs to be looked at again.

Mr Allister raised the issue of sex selection. I am glad that the Minister forthrightly said that he was totally opposed to any form of sex selection when it comes to IVF treatment. We have seen the whole issue of sex selection in abortions, which are clearly being practised in other parts of the United Kingdom. Many of us in the House find that utterly repugnant, so I am glad that he has made that absolutely clear. I am concerned, however, that IVF treatment may be administered to same-sex couples. Again, given limited resources and the fact that so many married couples are desperate to have the treatment, priority should be given to them.

This has been a timely debate and one in which very important points have been made. We accept, of course, as the Minister said, that we are down to the issue of resources and so many competing priorities. The point has been made that we are talking about £250,000. That would still equate to three consultants or eight or nine senior nurses, so you have to look at it in that context. Equally, however, as a person who lives in the United Kingdom, we need to avoid a —

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Deputy Chair for giving way. I accept that, in these grave times, we are looking at every penny. However, on the back of what was said in the debate about counselling and some people experiencing a lot of pressure in their lives, sometimes we need to spend a pound to save a lot of money. If people got a third cycle of IVF using the amount of money that we spend on counselling, it might save money in the long run.

Mr Wells: I agree with the Chair and Member for West Belfast. The difficulty that the Department faces at the minute is firefighting; we need to save money now. The savings that she indicated are long term. It may be that we do not have the luxury to take those into account. We are not talking about a huge amount, but at the end of the day, there are so many competing priorities and so many people tugging the Minister's heart strings to encourage him to spend extra money. It is a Wisdom of Solomon situation.

I go back to the point that I made earlier: we are part of the United Kingdom — some of us like that and some do not — and, therefore, it is important that when it comes to this vital treatment, someone in Basingstoke is treated the same as someone in Belfast. Our long-term aim should be to move to the situation in which couples in Northern Ireland can, by right, have

three cycles of IVF. It was quite shocking to hear in the Chairman's comments —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Wells: — the costs involved and to learn that couples are running up huge bank debts to achieve what many of us are blessed with, which is a happy family and children.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to fund three full cycles of IVF treatment, including the subsequent transfer of any viable frozen embryos, as recommended by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE); and further calls on the Minister to undertake a review of fertility services based on the updated NICE guideline on the assessment and treatment of people with fertility problems, which is due to be published in July 2012.

Marine Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 6 July 2012 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Marine Bill (NIA Bill 5/11-15).

On Tuesday 6 March 2012, the Assembly referred the long-awaited Marine Bill to the Committee for the Environment for scrutiny. The Bill sets out a new framework for the seas around Northern Ireland that is based on marine planning, sustainable development, improved management for marine conservation and a streamlining of some aspects of marine licensing.

On 8 March, the Environment Committee agreed to call for written submissions from interested organisations and individuals. In addition to signposting notices in the press, 48 stakeholders were contacted directly, and a number have already indicated their intention to respond to the Committee's request. The Environment Committee believes that it is also essential that all 26 councils are given the opportunity to comment on the Bill. There is clearly a need for compatibility between marine and terrestrial planning, particularly where there is an overlap of responsibilities at the coastline. It is intended that marine planning will remain with central government, so in anticipation of the devolution of planning powers to a local level, councils will need to have an opportunity to comment on the Bill.

The Committee is fully aware that in Northern Ireland, marine functions are spread over several Departments. Thus, we have contacted all relevant Departments' scrutiny Committees, seeking evidence on any clauses that may be relevant to them. All of this will take time, so we have allowed until 27 April 2012 for responses. The Committee anticipates a high volume of submissions, from which it will select a number of respondents to provide oral evidence.

The Committee feels that it is essential that it is afforded the time to exercise its scrutiny powers to the full. I ask the House to support the motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Marine Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 6 July 2012 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Marine Bill (NIA Bill 5/11-15).

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon 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 sitting was suspended at 12.23 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Speaker: Questions 7, 9 and 12 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Single Farm Payments

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the processing of single farm payments. (AQO 1563/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): The single farm payment represents a significant part of the income of farm businesses, and my Department has a good track record in processing payments. The 2011 targets I set last November were exceeded, with over 85% of claims paid in December and over 90.2% in January 2012, compared with the targets of 83% and 90%. I anticipate that between 93% and 94% of all 2011 single farm payments will be completed by 31 March. In total, more than £246 million has been paid out to date. That leaves fewer than 7% of claims left to process, with a maximum of £21 million potentially still to be paid for the 2011 scheme year. Those claims are outstanding for a number of reasons, including the need to apply inspection findings, probate or, in some instances, simply because the claimant has not provided bank account details. Not all the remaining cases may be due a payment because of ineligibility or the application of penalties under scheme rules.

This has been a challenging year in relation to the 5% of claims that required on-farm checks to verify the eligibility of land. Those checks identified a large number of changes in respect of field boundaries and ineligible land. In many cases the changes date back to 2005 and involve retrospective land area adjustments, which are complex and take longer to process.

Although I am pleased that my Department has met its targets and is also likely to meet EU

requirements on payment processing, I am concerned at the level of payments still to be made. I recognise the difficult financial situation that some claimants now find themselves in, and I have asked my officials to develop a plan to speed up the processing of those cases. We have found a number of ways of improving the situation, including diverting staff to that work, introducing some software modifications and adjusting the detailed processing arrangements. The situation is being monitored, but early indications are that this has all helped to increase the number of payments being processed.

Let me add that, in light of the difficult financial circumstances that some claimants have identified, I have sought a meeting with representatives of the main banks. I intend to meet them over the next number of weeks. It is important that we impress on the banks that, in a lot of cases, just because payment has been delayed, that does not mean that the claimant will not receive it. They may, in fact, receive it further down the line. That is important work.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister that there is a time limit.

Mrs O'Neill: Those are the investments that I am currently implementing in the Department.

Mr I McCrea: In her opening remarks, the Minister referred to the payment being a significant part of farm income. Certainly, having listened to what she said, I can only take it that she takes the matter very seriously. I could fill her desk with letters from constituents, but that will not get us any further.

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

Mr I McCrea: Can the Minister give an assurance that the actions that she has detailed will ensure that the payments will be made by 31 March?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I assure the Member that I am doing everything that I can in the Department to speed things up. As I said, we have met the targets. However, if you are in the percentage of people waiting for payment, it is obviously very frustrating. Things like putting in additional staff and modifying the software will all improve the payments. I asked the Department to look at it with a twofold approach: to look at the things we can do immediately to improve the situation

this year with regard to the 2011 claims, and to ensure that, next year, we are not sitting in the same position, with a small percentage of people remaining to be paid after the date.

Mrs D Kelly: I note from the Minister's answer that some of the remedies have been tried before by the previous Minister. I want to know what this Minister has done differently to ensure that payments will be made. Can the Minister give us any indication of the number of appeals and when they will be heard?

Mrs O'Neill: It is important to say that 93% of all payments have been made. That is £246 million that has been paid out to rural businesses and into farmers' hands. That is a positive thing. However, I understand the frustrations that some people have had. As I said, this year has been particularly difficult, with the land parcel identification system (LPIS) project and remapping. A lot of staff have been put into that area of work. We have now asked 12 members of staff to go back to this work to make sure that we get the remaining people paid as quickly as possible. The appeals process will come after that date, and I am happy to keep the Member up to date on that.

My priority is to get the money into people's hands as quickly as possible. We are ahead of our target, but I understand that there is still a lot of frustration and that people are in genuine financial difficulty because they are waiting for their single farm payment.

Mr Murphy: The Minister has, of course, accepted that this had been a difficult area for some time. Will farmers who have an inspection in this and future years face the same delays in getting their payments?

Mrs O'Neill: We have plans to speed up the processing of next year's inspection cases. My work was twofold: trying to get this year's claims out as quickly as possible and looking at how we can speed up the inspections process for 2012. In particular, I am working to start inspections earlier for 2012 claims so that they can be completed earlier. The Member will be aware that the Commission does not allow payments to be made until all inspections are completed. If we were in a position to get those completed earlier, payments could be processed earlier. This year's teething problems with new software should be resolved by next year. Those are all positive things that point to the fact that,

hopefully, we will not be in the same position this time next year.

Mr Swann: Thank you very much, Minister. You mentioned actions such as additional resources and software changes to accelerate payments. Your Department also advised that a refinement of processes was applied to accelerate payments. What refinement of processes did your Department carry out?

Mrs O'Neill: We are looking at the particular delays in each part of the process, from when an application is received right through to inspection and what comes back into the Department. I am happy to give the Member a lot more detail in writing of all the ins and outs.

Common Agricultural Policy: Reform

2. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what engagement her Department is having with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the European Commission to help to ensure that Northern Ireland's views are included in negotiations regarding reform of the common agricultural policy post 2013 and, in particular, the mandatory greening measures of pillar 1. (AQO 1564/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have had a number of meetings on CAP reform with the DEFRA Ministers Caroline Spelman MP and Jim Paice MP. Those included meetings around the EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council in October and November 2011 and joint meetings with the other devolved Ministers on 25 October and 14 November 2011. Further meetings with Ministers Spelman and Paice will follow in the coming months, and I will attend upcoming EU Council meetings.

I met the EU Agriculture Commissioner, Dacian Cioloş on 14 November and again during a visit to Dublin on 19 January this year. I plan further meetings with Commission officials, including a meeting in April with Georg Häusler. It is my intention then to submit a position paper on CAP reform post 2013 to ensure that our views are well known within the Commission and that we provide firm views on the proposals.

The Member will be aware that I recently undertook a consultation on CAP reform. I thank all who responded to the consultation and availed themselves of the recent round of stakeholder meetings, when I went out and about and listened to views. Those roadshows

were hugely beneficial in gathering information and hearing the views of farmers and the rural community on CAP reform. Not surprisingly, greening was a massive issue and was consistently raised at each of those meetings.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for her reply. The Minister will be aware from the consultation responses of concerns about pillar 1 being weighted too heavily towards environmental issues rather than food production. Does the Minister agree with the views of many that aspects of pillar 1 have already been achieved in Northern Ireland through measures in pillar 2?

Mrs O'Neill: I agree with the Member that we have farmers who are very mindful of the environment. That is their livelihood, and they protect their future. The point that we are making to the Commission is that one size does not fit all. We have very good greening here, and our farmers actively do that.

It would be easy for me to say that I supported the principle that CAP needs to deliver for the environment but could not support the principle set out in the CAP proposals because the greening requirements would have a severe impact on our farmers' competitiveness. However, our farmers are already doing a lot of that. Our fantastic agrienvironment schemes are commended across the board by environmental agencies. I think that we are doing a good job with greening, and that is the position that we will put to Europe.

Ms Boyle: Has the Minister had or will she have any discussions or engagement with Simon Coveney?

Mrs O'Neill: I have a very good working relationship with Minister Coveney TD, and CAP reform has been discussed at all the recent North/South Ministerial Council meetings, held in July and October and, more recently, in February. I will continue to have further discussions as the CAP reform negotiations progress.

I am pleased to say that there is a lot of common agreement on the positions that we are forming on CAP reform. Our respective officials work together and remain in close contact, as they have done over a number of years. I have often talked about the "Team Ireland" approach when it comes to CAP reform, and I am still very much wedded to that.

All the proposals on CAP reform will go through the Commission and the Parliament, so it is important that we have our 15 Irish MEPs on board to fight our corner out in Europe and that their approach is consistent with the one that we have been taking.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for her responses. Given that she is due to meet the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the appropriate Minister for agriculture in Britain in the next few months, will she detail the subjects that she is meeting them to discuss? Will she also provide assurances that she will work to protect the needs of farmers in Northern Ireland to ensure that the principle of conacre is honoured in the CAP reform and that the principle of an active farmer is honoured, so that all payments go to an active farmer rather than a landlord?

Mrs O'Neill: Whenever I meet the DEFRA Ministers, it is to discuss CAP reform, so the discussions will be about that general issue. We differ in our opinions on the overall budget for CAP reform, because the British Conservative Government would obviously do away with the CAP in the morning. We differ on that, but we do not differ on a lot of the individual issues, particularly active farming, greening and food security. So, we will continue to use all alliances that we have to make sure that we have a strong case in Europe.

I am totally sympathetic to the view that it should be active farmers who receive the payment and not non-active farmers who are just landowners. That is the position that we need to get to. When it comes to CAP reform, there are three main principles: maintaining the budget, simplification and flexibility. They will be key. You talked about the conacre market, which is a situation unique to us. Again, we need to ask the Commission to be flexible so that we can suit the needs of our own industry.

Single Farm Payments

3. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what changes are likely to the single farm payment scheme if the common agricultural policy reform proposals are adopted. (AQO 1565/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The proposals for the reform of the single farm payment published by the EU Commission on 12 October would result in a

number of changes to the current system. The single payment would be replaced by a number of payments, including a basic payment, a greening payment and a top-up payment for new entrants. In addition, there are options to introduce coupled payments and payments for areas of natural constraint. The proposed changes, if accepted, would inevitably increase the complexity of the direct payments process. Another feature of the current proposals is a move away from historically based payments towards a flat-rate payment system, which would lead to the redistribution of payments among claimants. However, those proposals are up for negotiation and could change before a final agreement is reached.

As I said, I am using every opportunity and avenue open to me to ensure that the final agreed reforms meet the needs of local stakeholders. I plan to submit a paper to the European Commission in the near future to ensure that my position on the needs of farmers and rural communities in the North of Ireland is clearly heard.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for her answer. However, the answer indicated that there will be an additional workload if the reform goes through. What would be the costs to the Department of administering that? What would be the staffing implications of the changes that would come through the CAP reform, if it were implemented?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have any such costings at this stage. We are getting the framework correct, which means working on flexibility, simplification and maintaining our budget. However, your point is very valid, because the Commission is proposing to move from one single farm payment to possibly as many as six for all the different elements, whether it is for greening or new entrants. That would be a nightmare for the Department to administer and a nightmare for the farmers. In all the roadshows that I have done over the past month or so, people clearly said that they do not want to see that kind of system. We are still at the negotiation stage, and the negotiations will really intensify over the rest of this year.

2.15 pm

Mr Hussey: Is the Minister concerned that, due to its overcomplexity, the payment system will have the potential to increase the risk of future infraction fines?

Mrs O'Neill: My Department engages with Europe and administers European funding probably more than any other Department. One thing that I have found very frustrating is that the Commission sets policies and then, five or six years later, may decide to audit how those are implemented and you find yourself faced with fines. The proposals on the table would be so hard to administer, even in terms of defining an active farmer and measuring income. It would also be very hard to administer a move from one payment to as many as six payments, and I talked about that earlier. The Commission would be watching over every stage. As I said, we are at the negotiation stage, and we have to try to make the process as simple as possible.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister and her team for engaging with the farming community in different parts of the Six Counties in the last few weeks. Indeed, the meetings ended up in Loughgiel. I am sure that the Minister will join me in congratulating Loughgiel Shamrocks on becoming All-Ireland club champions.

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

Mr McMullan: What is the Minister's overall reaction to the CAP reform package?

Mrs O'Neill: I had that public meeting in Loughgiel last week, and I absolutely congratulate Loughgiel Shamrocks on their win.

Overall, what I have said to date on CAP reform is that it is a work in progress. It is very much at the negotiation stage. What is on the table could not be described as anywhere near acceptable. The biggest disappointment is in respect of simplification. As I said, what is proposed is nowhere near simple. Concerns around the greening proposals stem from the fact that they will shrink our arable sector and make us move closer to a grass monoculture, which would be environmentally undesirable. As I said, it is a work in progress. It is a big negotiation that will intensify in the year ahead.

Strangford Lough: Horse Mussels

Mr Speaker: I call Mike Nesbitt. *[Interruption.]* Order.

Mr Nesbitt: Do they call me leader?

Mr Frew: Will they call you leader?

Mr Nesbitt: Not yet.

4. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether any decisions have been taken on the protection of the horse mussel reefs in Strangford lough following the meeting between her officials and the European Commission on 24 January 2012. (AQO 1566/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: This is an important matter that remains a priority for my Department and DOE. Following the publication of the Queen's University report in the summer of 2011, the Departments developed revised proposals for the future restoration of modiolus which we discussed with the Commission on 24 January. The Commission has confirmed that our proposals are insufficient, and we will consider carefully what additional measures are feasible.

We have just received formal confirmation of the Commission position. We will give careful consideration before responding in the next number of weeks to ensure that the Department's actions meet the Commission's expectations. I intend to meet fishermen to discuss options in the near future. We remain committed to the process and will work hard to implement timely actions that will meet the expectations expressed by the Commission and the Assembly.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister. Would the Minister care to confirm whether we are looking at a multimillion infraction fine and update us on that side of the fence? Does she accept that it is a failure on the part of her Department and one other that we find ourselves in this unpleasant position?

Mrs O'Neill: The issue has been going on for some time, as I am sure the Member is aware. Actions have been taken down through the years, such as increasing the exclusion zones and putting a management plan in place. The Queen's University report was key to taking an evidence-based approach to moving forward.

It is important to point out that the Queen's report, on which the Commission based a lot of its concerns, contains no evidence of a direct link between banning pot fishing and increasing the exclusion zones and restoration of the modiolus. In fact, there are areas in Strangford where no pot fishing takes place but there is still a deterioration of modiolus.

In moving forward, we have to be mindful of trying to maintain modiolus levels but also that people's livelihoods are dependent on pot fishing in Strangford. It is about taking a balanced approach, and I am committed to taking that forward. I am also committed to taking whatever action is necessary to ensure that we avoid any further fines, which could be up to £9 million if we are not able to crack the issues that the Commission has addressed.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. How many vessels fish Strangford lough? What method of fishing is used? What is the value of the catch?

Mrs O'Neill: Strangford lough is restricted to vessels of 40 feet or less, and it can only be fished by pot fishing. Seven vessels fish there for longer than seven months a year, and they support over 20 people on a part-time basis. In 2009, the lough provided landings of langoustine, velvet crab, brown crab and lobster valued at £139,000. Therefore, there is a small industry there. Livelihoods depend on pot fishing on the lough. Therefore, any decision on the way forward has to be a balanced one.

Mr McCarthy: I commend the Minister for her efforts towards the fishermen on the lough. Has the Department considered compensation for fishermen who may find themselves unemployed because of European instructions?

Mrs O'Neill: I confirm to the Member that I intend to meet the fishermen over the next number of weeks, and I am sure that that issue will come up. I will be happy to explore it with them. However, first, we need to deal with the Commission and get an acceptable way forward. Once we do that, we can be in a position to explore any of that. However, it is important that I consult the fishermen on the way forward.

Mr Dallat: I wish to avoid the pessimistic mood that Mr Nesbitt appears to be in these days. What meetings have taken place between the Ulster Wildlife Trust and Queen's University, with a positive view to restoring the modiolus reef to favourable recognition in the European Union, rather than talking about the infraction measures that have been mentioned?

Mrs O'Neill: The Ulster Wildlife Trust decided to go straight to Europe as opposed to talking to the Departments here, and that is disappointing. However, we are addressing the issues that were raised in the trust's letter to

the Commission through the Department of the Environment and my Department.

As I said, there is no evidence in the Queen's University report to suggest that banning pot fishing would lead to a restoration of modiolus levels. That needs to be borne in mind when a decision is taken on the way forward. There are also areas in Strangford where no pot fishing happens, and the modiolus levels are still pretty low. Therefore, given the fact that people's livelihoods depend on this, we need to take a balanced approach for the way forward.

Local Government: Rural Funding

5. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in order to avoid unnecessary redundancies, what action is being taken to provide funding to ensure that council staff who deliver rural funding through local action groups and joint committees can continue to do so until the next European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development becomes available. (AQO 1567/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Council staff who carry out administrative duties to assist in the delivery of axis 3 of the rural development programme are employed under a service-level agreement with joint council committees, with which my Department has a contract to deliver the programme. The Department is not the direct employer of those staff.

Each joint council committee is permitted to utilise, by way of an administration budget, an amount equivalent to 20% of the funds disbursed on project grants. That means that, for every £5 spent on a project, £1 may be used towards administration. It is up to each joint council committee to manage those funds within the allocation and conditions linked to project spend.

The shape of the next programme and how it will be delivered is still under consideration. Indeed, the proposals from the European Commission are not yet agreed. As you will know, in December I announced a refocus for axis 3, which, in part, was driven by the low project spend and high administrative spend. I have asked for all areas to urgently examine their progress and to refocus by reallocating to higher investing measures and to target strategic projects. We must see the results of that coming forward to ensure that we do not return funds to Europe.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. The Minister acknowledges that there will be a future scheme to deliver rural development funding. Obviously, it is important that there is a seamless transition from this scheme to the new one. As the Minister will know, staff are on fixed-term contracts, so all steps should be taken to avoid unnecessary redundancies in anticipation of a future scheme.

Mrs O'Neill: The point is well made. In respect of CAP reform, the rural development programme has an end date, as the Member has pointed out. Therefore, it is important that there is some contingency in place if the timescale in Europe slips.

Mr Lynch: Is it still the Minister's intention to invest further funds in rural broadband?

Mrs O'Neill: I have made broadband one of my priorities in the Department. That is why I recently announced that DARD will invest £5 million from the rural development programme in broadband. However, it is fundamental for me that future investments eliminate more of the "not spots" and areas where people have lines of under two megabits. It is key that that money is targeted at those areas and is not just put into a wider pot.

Mrs Dobson: I wrote to the Minister on this issue last month, raising the concerns of the rural support networks, including TADA in my constituency, about the lasting damage that funding uncertainty could wield against the valuable work that those groups conduct in rural communities. It is regrettable, Minister, that you are not able to agree to a meeting. However, can you tell the House whether you have had any meetings with representatives of rural support networks to hear their concerns on the issue?

Mrs O'Neill: I meet many groups many a time. I think that there are nine rural support networks, which do valuable work, and I appreciate the work that they continue to do. It is not always possible to meet everybody all of the time. If the Member wants to talk to me afterwards about any particular concerns about a network, I will be happy to discuss them.

Mr Allister: Is there any prospect, Minister, of the LAGs and joint committees doing their work more efficiently, given that figures recently supplied by you indicate that, whereas £14 million has been paid out of this funding, £7 million has gone on administration? Will you join

me in urging the rejection of the preposterous proposal before the Armagh committee to refurbish the IRA monument in Crossmaglen?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs O'Neill: With regard to efficiency, I think that the level of administrative spend when any new programme is brought into being is higher at the start. You are right: you picked out that £7.5 million was the council's administrative spend. That sum is out of a total of £21.5 million, so £14 million was paid out in projects. The level of administrative spend is not unusual over the first years of any programme, although I think it is fair to say that the project spend has been lower. That has a lot to do with the current economic climate. That is why I announced in December that I wanted all clusters to urgently refocus on strategic projects and the reallocation of funds across the better spending measures.

I have told the Member before that the application regarding Crossmaglen is with the joint council committee, and it will make the decision on the way forward.

Mr P Ramsey: I want to follow on from the Minister's answers. Will she outline to the House the potential implications and costs for staffing going forward?

Mrs O'Neill: I am not particularly sure what element of the costs the Member means. Some £7.5 million has been the administrative cost to date, and I have explained why I think that that is the case. The economic climate has meant that, if you compare that with the project spend, the figure looks distorted. However, I am happy to pick up the issue with the Member afterwards.

Mental Health: Rural Areas

6. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the priority that should be given to addressing the issue of mental health in rural areas. (AQO 1568/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Providing a comprehensive service to address mental health issues in rural areas is a high priority of mine. As you are aware, as Chair of that Committee, the Health Department is the lead Department with regard to mental health provision. However, it can be a particular issue in rural areas due to their remote and isolated nature, and the stigma attached to

mental health means that it is not always openly discussed. I have met a number of mental health charities to discuss ways in which the Department can assist them in the work that they are undertaking in rural areas and to help to raise the profile and remove the stigma around mental health issues and suicide awareness.

I recently announced a £16 million package of measures aimed at tackling rural poverty and social isolation. Under that framework, my Department will be working in conjunction with the Public Health Agency and health trusts to provide a rural communities health checks programme. Through that programme, it is expected that 2,500 rural dwellers will avail themselves of a comprehensive screening service that may and could include signposting to various mental health services.

I have met many groups over the past 10 months, such as the Níamh Louise Foundation and Aware Defeat Depression. There are fantastic groups out there working in urban and rural settings and carrying out fantastic work. I want to continue to support them to do what they do, because a lot of the things that they have identified and raised with me are specific to rural areas.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is not that often that a city slicker like me gets to ask the Agriculture and Rural Development Minister a question. You are right: mental health does not know any borders or boundaries. I am delighted that it is a high priority. I am also delighted, Minister, that you have taken the opportunity to meet charities. Can you outline to us the issues that they have raised and the action you are taking to address those issues?

Mrs O'Neill: One of the issues raised by the mental health charities was that there appeared to be a stigma around mental health in rural areas. It is as if it is a taboo subject, and people do not want to talk about it. Sometimes, a culture of self-sufficiency can lead to reluctance to seek outside help, particularly with mental health issues. There are social factors in small rural communities, such as fear about confidentiality and about going to your GP for help and things being talked about. Those fears and tackling the issue of stigma is something that we need to address seriously.

I am working with two charities, the Niamh Louise Foundation and PIPS, that are organising

a conference to promote mental health and well-being in rural areas. I am delighted to be part of that project. I look forward to bringing that conference into a rural area and the continuing work that will fall out from that.

2.30 pm

Employment and Learning

Mr Speaker: Questions 3, 7, 9 and 10 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Youth Unemployment

1. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures he will take to tackle youth unemployment to ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of the Work Programme in Britain. (AQO 1576/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I am pleased to inform Members that since I last reported on youth unemployment at Question Time, the proposals put forward by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to address youth unemployment have been accepted by the Executive. The core elements of the new strategy will include early intensive diagnosis of employability skills; opportunities for taster work experience for clients while on benefits; individual skills and careers-focused assessments; sector-based work experience and training in areas of skills shortage; a new employer subsidy for up to one year; a new emphasis on continuing skills development and growth; and a range of new measures to help young people not in education, employment or training. These measures will be additional to existing provision by being targeted at skills development for economic growth. It is important to acknowledge that the measures are informed by local needs and circumstances as well as best practice from other jurisdictions, including Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

The measures will mean that due to earlier intervention than is currently offered, skills development can begin after 13 weeks of a benefit claim rather than at 26 weeks, the current mandatory trigger for entry to Steps to Work for 18- to 24-year-olds. The new measures will make provision for job-ready young people who, but for the current economic situation, would be in work, and for those who are some distance from the labour market and require considerable support to address their barriers.

I am also planning to include what I will refer to as a skills premium for employers; a training grant of up to £750 to assist employers with formal training costs or £300 for shorter training on accredited courses.

I was pleased that the economic strategy endorsed by the Assembly last week recognised the impact that the recession has had on young people and included a commitment to actions and targets to directly address this issue. I am now engaging with the Finance Minister over the finalisation of this policy, including the critical issue of resourcing the new initiatives. Once the resourcing has been agreed and the policy finalised, I will make a fuller statement to the Assembly.

I believe that the policy will make a significant contribution to linking social and economic policy by building the skills base of our unemployed young people to prepare them for the jobs that will rebuild and rebalance the economy. At the same time, the measures will seek to ensure that no young person is left behind. We must build opportunity for all our young people, regardless of their abilities and circumstances.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister of the time limit. If the Minister needs more time, he can certainly ask for it.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for his answer. Are the Minister and the Department learning any lessons from the JobBridge programme in the rest of Ireland? Are there similarities or flaws that they can look out for in our particular situation?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I assure him that what we are doing is primarily about addressing the local circumstances in Northern Ireland. However, of course our experience of youth employment is mirrored across these islands and, indeed, much further afield. We are very happy to learn lessons from other jurisdictions, whether those are the good lessons or the lessons of what to avoid. We are very happy to look at what is happening in the Republic of Ireland.

What we are about to undertake in Northern Ireland, and I must stress to the House that this is subject to financing decisions being made, will be very innovative. It is something that is desperately needed to address the situation for our young people.

Mr Beggs: Often it is lack of experience that holds back many of our young people who are seeking full-time employment. The Minister listed a number of programmes that he is running. However, is he receiving sufficient employment opportunities in which young people can receive that experience? What is he doing to try to increase the opportunities that are available to those young people?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his interest in this. I stress that what I am announcing today are intended to be new initiatives on top of what is currently offered to young people. However, it is only a policy in development. We are still awaiting decisions on the financing of the policy and are working actively with the Finance Minister on that. We have very good engagement with employers on this and, obviously, support from employers to give placements is absolutely critical to its success. Therefore, we are focusing very heavily on work experience. I have had meetings with all the representative employer bodies and other individual employers, all of whom were very enthusiastic about this and see an opportunity not just for them but for the wider economy in Northern Ireland.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's announcement today, and I look forward to tomorrow's meeting of the Employment and Learning Committee when he will go into more detail. Will he outline to the House any discussions that he has had with the Minister of Education, following on from Roy Beggs's question regarding post-16 work placements with regard to clearer objectives and outcomes?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ramsey for his interest in this and look forward to fuller engagement with the Employment and Learning Committee tomorrow. Certainly, the Minister of Education had an input into the paper and expressed a number of views. I also plan to meet the Education Minister as part of a routine bilateral in the next couple of weeks. No doubt, we will discuss how we can take the scheme forward and any particular interests that his Department may have in it.

Prison Officers: Skills Training

2. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the Minister of Justice about

offering new skills training to prison officers who avail themselves of the voluntary staff exit scheme. (AQO 1577/11-15)

Dr Farry: I have not had any specific discussions with the Minister of Justice about skills training for prison officers who avail themselves of the voluntary staff exit scheme. Through the careers service, my Department offers free, impartial careers information, advice and guidance to clients facing career decisions. Prison officers who wish to avail themselves of the service may do so through the NI Direct web-based service, where they will find useful careers information and details of how to contact a careers adviser in their local area.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that it is important that prison officers who have given many years of service in difficult conditions are afforded the opportunity to retrain and that it is within his remit to ensure that those opportunities are provided?

Dr Farry: I recognise that this is a particular cohort of people coming through the system with a particular set of needs. We are not talking about a redundancy situation. This is, essentially, an early retirement situation. Those people will have the ability to make a further contribution to the economy. The careers service of my Department is available to everyone in Northern Ireland, including adults. It is an all-ages service. I strongly recommend that anyone in that circumstance makes contact with the careers service through their local jobs and benefits office and makes an appointment to discuss their future opportunities. We are extremely happy to help in that regard.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given the vast amount of money that has been set aside for severance, does the Minister agree that when an enhanced package like that is taken up, people should not be allowed to go back into the service and that a clause should be put in to state that?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. It is important that we distinguish responsibility. My colleague the Minister of Justice is probably much better placed to respond to that question. My Department is not providing a particular dedicated response to that cohort of workers. However, I stress that there is an all-ages careers service available to everyone in Northern Ireland, and it is available to people who are going through this scheme, as it is

available to anyone else in Northern Ireland who wants careers advice. In today's society, people do not stay in the same job for their lifespan, and they want to change careers more frequently. Therefore, we are trying to place more emphasis on a careers service for adults.

Mr I McCrea: Although I agree with the initial question — it is important that work is carried out to ensure that prison officers can go into other employment — does the Minister accept that with regard to the wider loss of jobs in Northern Ireland, whether from a factory, industry or whatever, it is important for people to be more aware of the service available so that they can move into other types of jobs, and will he ensure that that information is more readily available?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. He made an incredibly important point, and it follows the previous answer I gave. People will be leaving or changing jobs or finding themselves out of work through no fault of their own, and it is important that we provide a full range, all-age service of careers advice to signpost people to the opportunities for retraining that are out there. The economy is our number one priority and our people are our number one asset. We cannot afford any inefficiency in the system where we do not make full use of people's skills, ability and potential to contribute to our economy.

Employment: People with Disabilities

4. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to assist people with disabilities in finding employment. (AQO 1579/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has a range of pre-employment and employment programmes and services to prepare and support people with disabilities to find and retain employment. Specialist provision offered by the disability employment service includes an occupational psychology service, which carries out employment assessments for individual clients, including retention assessments for existing employees; the Workable programme, which provides long-term, in-work support, such as a specialist job coach, and may include disability training and education for employers; the Access to Work programme, which provides a variety of practical supports, such as assistance with travel

to work and funding for specialist equipment; the condition management programme, which is delivered by health professionals to help people with disabilities to manage and overcome their work-related health problems; the return to work credit, which is a weekly grant of £40 paid to eligible benefit recipients earning less than £15,000 per annum; the job introduction scheme, which is a short job trial for someone with a disability trying to enter the labour market; and support for approximately 70 employees with disabilities at the Ulster Supported Employment Limited factory.

The Department is also about to tender formally for a new work connect programme, which will replace New Deal for disabled people. This provision, which will be available to clients on health-related benefits, will include flexible pre-employment support options to help people with disabilities to progress towards and move into employment.

The Department's provision is delivered on a pan-disability basis by staff, healthcare professionals and specialist employment providers who have the range of expertise required to meet the needs of people with disabilities who want to progress towards employment or to find and retain a job that is right for them. All provision can be accessed through specialist employment advisers based in jobs and benefits offices and jobcentres across Northern Ireland.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline what extended eligibility is available for guaranteed training places for unemployed 16- and 17-year-olds with disabilities? Does he agree that it is crucial to get those people into employment?

Dr Farry: I thank Mrs Dobson for her interest in this area. Following the recommendations of the disability working group in 2008, the Department's Training for Success programme introduced a pre-entry training support service for potential entrants who have a disability. The programme offers extended eligibility for trainees up to the age of 22 who have a disability, and for those up to the age of 24 if they have a background in care. Participants are paid a non-means-tested education maintenance allowance. In addition, a supplement may be payable in respect of participants with a disability to assist providers in offering a significant additional input of resources, such as training time, equipment and support.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline the typical range and type of barriers that prevent people with disabilities finding meaningful jobs? What percentage of people with disabilities are categorised as unemployed?

Dr Farry: I will have to write to the Member with the specific statistics that he requested. Barriers are often more perceived than actual, and I am very much of the opinion that every person in this society, with the proper support and encouragement, whether through their family or the state through the employment service or from companies has the potential to make a contribution to the economy and society. What is important is that we invest all that is necessary to unlock people's potential. The barriers that people have are very few and are often the perceptions of others rather than genuine barriers to people making a contribution. Where there is an issue, the workplace can be adapted to allow people to make contributions to various companies and the public sector.

2.45 pm

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. Does the Minister believe that it is necessary to review work schemes for disabled people following the closure of Remploy in Britain?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I appreciate that what is happening in Great Britain is causing concern. However, I stress that employment matters are fully devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Indeed, we are the only region where employment matters are fully devolved. Rather than follow suit, we will do what we want to do in Northern Ireland. I have already made a commitment to Ulster Supported Employment Limited regarding the organisation's future. A lot of people appreciate its contribution. It recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, and I certainly see it having a very positive future in society.

Education Maintenance Allowance

5. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on any proposed changes to the education maintenance allowance scheme. (AQO 1580/11-15)

8. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on

the education maintenance allowance scheme, including the steps he is taking to ensure that it is targeted at students in greatest need. (AQO 1583/11-15)

Dr Farry: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 8 together.

My Department and the Department of Education are committed to the retention of the education maintenance allowance (EMA) scheme. It is clear, however, that the funding needs to be better targeted. Findings from our joint review, which began in April 2010, with the final report presented in December 2010, highlighted that the scheme is not as effectively targeted as it could be. That was because some two thirds of students receiving education maintenance allowance indicated that they would have remained in education even if they had not received it. The previous Committee for Employment and Learning also agreed that the scheme could be better targeted. However, we cannot ignore that, in some cases, it does make a real difference.

I am determined to ensure that young people from lower income families continue to be assisted to stay in education and training. My Department and the Department of Education are considering a range of options for the scheme's future. Once finalised, the options will be presented to the Executive, and a public consultation will follow. Any proposals to change the current provision will also be subject to the appropriate equality considerations.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he briefly indicate how the income assessment will work?

Dr Farry: It is probably fair to say that Mr Dunne's question is a little premature. We are looking at a range of options for the future of EMA. That is subject to ongoing discussions between my Department and the Department of Education because it is a joint policy. A consultation will roll forward, and decisions will then have to be taken by the Ministers in question and, ultimately, the Executive. We will certainly give full and proper consideration to all the viable options before us.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, can the Minister give a categorical assurance that EMA will be retained? Would he consider including members of the Give and Take scheme on the entitlement list for EMA?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Maskey for his question. I can certainly give him a categorical assurance regarding the retention of EMA. We are not in the business of abolishing EMA but reforming it. I am certainly aware of the interest in extending EMA to pre-vocational schemes, and we had a detailed discussion about that in the House. There are a number of parity and legislative issues that we would have to consider. It is certainly not a simple issue for us. It is important to understand the rationale for introducing EMA in the first place. It was very much linked to full-time school and FE provision. We are aware of the concern that has been expressed about this. I would certainly like to see more money being invested in young people. We need to consider whether the extension of an EMA-type scheme is the most effective way of helping young people or whether other types of scheme may be more productive in achieving the result that most Members want to see.

Mr Nesbitt: I note the Minister said that his research suggests that EMA makes no difference to some two thirds of those in receipt of it. Can he inform the House of the total sum of money that we are talking about?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Nesbitt for his question. It is not so much my research but research by PricewaterhouseCoopers, which was commissioned back in 2010, that illustrated that. At present, the total budget for EMA is about £28 million or £29 million. It is in that range. Given the current economic situation in Northern Ireland and the financial pressures that face a lot of households, there is an upward pressure on EMA costs at present. However, there is potential for some efficiencies to be found and for money to be used for other more productive purposes.

Mr McDevitt: Can the Minister tell us whether any areas of overlap have been identified between the ongoing review of EMA and the proposed strategy for young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs)? If so, what are they specifically?

Dr Farry: These are areas that we are extremely mindful of. The NEETs strategy is on schedule to be put before the Executive in April this year. It is important to stress that the work that we are undertaking with the Department of Education is a discrete piece of work on EMA, as it is currently conceived, that looks at different options around all that. The wider considerations that, I think, the Member is

talking about will primarily be addressed through the NEETs strategy.

Engineering Skills Working Group

6. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the establishment of an engineering skills working group. (AQO 1581/11-15)

Dr Farry: I recently identified manufacturing, specifically in relation to food processing, advanced engineering and advanced materials, as a priority sector for my Department in light of its importance to the rebalancing of Northern Ireland's economy. Employers and their representative bodies from the advanced manufacturing sector have recently been expressing to me their concerns about a shortage of appropriately skilled engineers who are available to work in the industry. Skills are widely accepted as the key raw material in the modern knowledge-based economy, and they are one of the main drivers in achieving our economic goals. A matter of key importance to me is addressing identified skills shortages and skills mismatches in priority sectors. I have asked my adviser on employment and skills, Bill McGinnis, to meet a range of employers in the sector to discuss their specific skills needs. That will build on the findings of his report, 'Identification of Priority Skill Areas for Northern Ireland'.

The adviser's findings will form part of a scoping exercise to identify and examine the specific skills issues that face that diverse and complex sector. Recently, as part of that exercise, officials met a number of employers and their representatives to move the information-gathering process forward. When the scoping exercise is complete and the issues have been identified and analysed, I will take a decision on the appropriate way forward to ensure that effective action can be taken as soon as possible.

That work builds on work that is being advanced by my Department on skills shortages in the food-processing sector. I have established a future skills action group to identify the sector's current and future skills needs. It is working on an action plan, which I expect to publish shortly.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. How soon will the working group be up and running? Will there be specific focus on rural areas where

engineering has been a mainstay of the local economy?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Lynch for his question and his interest in the matter. At present, we are doing a scoping exercise. Certainly, I am pressing my officials to do that as quickly as possible because I am very aware of the issues that are coming through. Members of the House are also picking up on them. We will have to see what the precise means of intervention will be, based on evidence that comes before us, after that exercise is complete. It may well be a working group that is similar to the ICT working group that we are looking at currently.

With regard to the rural aspects of that, again, I am very mindful that the issue has been raised by a number of rural MLAs. In particular, we have heard proportionately more concerns being expressed from the west of Northern Ireland than from other parts. Certainly, we are very mindful of factoring that into our considerations.

Mr Kinahan: As we are discussing better engineering skills, I wonder whether the Minister would praise Ballyclare High School on its brave defensive skills, which failed to win it the schools' cup yesterday. How will the scoping exercise affect schools?

Dr Farry: I pay tribute to all schools involved in yesterday's competitions, including my old school, Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock, which was extremely successful in the football. We have great sporting prowess coming through, which is, again, very much to Northern Ireland's advantage.

The Member's specific point about schools is critical. Through the model that we are pursuing for ICT, we are trying to bring the Department of Education and the employers around the table to talk through the particular issues in the curriculum. If the issue is with the curriculum in schools, we will encourage intervention at that level, and if the problem lies in colleges and universities, our focus will be there. We will scope it out and follow the evidence.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister mentioned ICT in his response to an earlier question. Will he give the Assembly an update on the ICT working group?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McCarthy for his question. In some respects, the ICT working group may be the model for the way forward. The group has met twice and is due to meet again this Thursday.

The various actors around the table are discussing a draft action plan. I hope that we will make a great deal of progress in finalising that over the next couple of months, with the intention of having a final action plan in place by June. This was always designed as a short, targeted intervention, rather than something that is drawn out and wastes people's time. We want to see results as quickly as we can and are focused on a short timescale.

Mr Speaker: Question 7 has been withdrawn, question 8 was grouped with question 5, and questions 9 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Step Ahead

11. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the plans he has for the Step Ahead programme when funding ends. (AQO 1586/11-15)

Mr Kinahan: I was not expecting that.

Dr Farry: You are back again. I previously indicated to the Assembly my intention to reinstate a variant of the Step Ahead strand of the Steps to Work programme. However, the budget allocation for my Department in 2012-13 does not allow me to do so. A bid may be made for additional resources in the June monitoring round. If successful, it will allow me to introduce a variant of Step Ahead.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am a little caught out. If the Step Ahead strand is replaced, how will it be made to work for local areas?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Kinahan for his supplementary question. That strand would be available across Northern Ireland. Through it, we would respond to the particular needs of the voluntary and community sector. As the Member will appreciate, the Step Ahead 2012 programme was introduced at the beginning of January for a 10-week period. That was a short-term, targeted intervention made possible through monitoring round moneys. It was targeted at 18- to 24-year-olds, lone parents and those over the age of 50.

Mr Speaker: The Member is not in her place for question 12.

DEL: Dissolution

13. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether his Department has had

any discussions with trade union representatives regarding the proposed dissolution of the Department. (AQO 1588/11-15)

Dr Farry: I recently met representatives of the Northern Ireland Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NICICTU) to discuss a range of employment law matters. The Northern Ireland Committee raised the issue of my Department's dissolution and indicated that it would respond to the First Minister and deputy First Minister's exercise to take the views of key stakeholders. The committee wanted to understand whether there would be any implications for staff. I should stress that any decision about the future of my Department will be taken by the Executive and the Assembly, not by me.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister assure the unions that their considerations on future employment will be fully understood and accepted by the Executive?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Byrne for his question. It is a serious question, as the current uncertainty feeds through to employees thinking about their situations. Ultimately, those staff members are employees of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and will be treated and absorbed as such.

I have been at great pains to ensure proper communication in my Department, from the permanent secretary down through our human resources section. The door is very much open to employees to discuss the political situation and to reassure them about how the future will unfold. Hopefully, that has been a successful exercise. It is an area that we have chosen to be proactive in.

3.00 pm

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Invest NI: Financial Assistance

1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given that Invest NI has handed back £39.1 million over the previous two monitoring rounds, what steps are being taken to re-examine its criteria for providing financial assistance. (AQO 1590/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The current uncertainty in global markets and challenging business conditions have resulted in many companies slowing down or deferring their investment plans in the immediate short term. That is entirely understandable and sensible, but the knock-on effect has been that support from Invest NI has not been drawn down in-year as originally intended. Invest NI is only a part funder of these projects, and I know that it has attempted, whenever possible, to work closely with affected companies to do everything possible to maximise project spend. In addition, Invest NI has sought to mitigate the effect of the slowdown either by allocating support to new projects or by accelerating existing projects.

Recently, Invest NI launched various initiatives under the Boosting Business scheme in order to respond to the economic environment, including a fund to support business owners in creating jobs, developing skills and promoting exports. Various other measures have been introduced to respond to the harsh economic environment, including export promotion, research and development, ICT and skills support. In addition, a number of practical business seminars have been held to help companies to develop their efficiency and maximise potential opportunities.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for her reply. In my question, I was asking for some detail on whether Invest NI would re-examine its criteria for providing financial assistance. Is she confident that all that can be done is being done by Invest NI to maximise our job promotion strategy?

Mrs Foster: The answer to the second part of the question is yes. I am confident in that regard.

The Member will know that it is very difficult to change criteria that are regulated, as it were, by European selective financial assistance rules. We always have to be very careful that we do not breach those rules. Last year, however, in that context, we launched the Boosting Business programme, which tries to look at innovative ways of helping businesses, whether through seminars, as I mentioned in my substantive answer, through the jobs fund or, indeed, through practical advice and assistance. He will also be aware that we recently launched our access to finance strategy, which has five funds to try to help with the gaps in access to finance that have developed as a result of the actions

of the banks. I very much hope that those funds will make a difference to our small and medium-sized businesses, because there is an access to finance gap, which is becoming more of a problem for us in Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan: Does the Minister agree that it would have been entirely reckless for Invest NI to have given out that money in the absence of other partner funders coming forward and that there is a duty on the body to ensure value for money for the taxpayer? Will she also comment on when the small business loan fund will come on stream to support those small businesses in our community?

Mrs Foster: We have tried to help with access to finance by having a number of schemes available, one of which is the Northern Ireland Spin Out (NISPO) fund; I always get that wrong by calling it the NIPSO fund. It has been operational since 2009 and has a total fund of £12 million. The co-investment fund, which has been operational since July 2011, has £16 million. The development fund, to which the Member referred, has £30 million of equity, and the growth loan fund has £50 million of unsecured debt. He will be aware that Braveheart Investment Group has been awarded that contract, and it is hoped that we will be able to start lending from that fund by May 2012, because I know that a lot of businesses are awaiting that.

On the question of the handing back of money, as opposed to handing it out without rules and regulations, I am quite sure that the members of the Public Accounts Committee would not want to have to call us in to look at how we had spent the money. Instead, however, Invest NI gave the money back to the centre, and that, of course, enabled the resource to be redistributed to pressure areas, including health and education. It is important that Invest NI took those decisions promptly so that we were not left, at the end of the year, with money that we simply could not spend because of the economic circumstances in which we have found ourselves. I have no apologies to make for the way in which Invest NI has dealt with the matter. I support the way in which it has dealt with the matter. With the budgetary tightness that it finds itself in, it has to hand back money in-year and cannot hold it from year to year.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat. Given what the Minister said about some of the constraints

when you are looking at the money going into other projects, can she give us an assurance that Invest NI could reprofile the money in other ways for job creation, such as through the jobs fund? Job creation is a very important aspect of building the economy and taking families out of poverty.

Mrs Foster: Indeed, that is what has happened with the Boosting Business scheme. As the Member knows, we were able to achieve £19 million for the jobs fund in the previous budgetary negotiations, and we are now able to augment that with our Boosting Business scheme, which gives practical advice. I met some companies recently that have been very complimentary about the advice and assistance that they received from Invest NI. That includes companies that, in the past, would not have been so-called Invest NI clients, such as those working in the social economy and those that are made up of one person who has felt under pressure. They have come to the focus on finance seminars and found them hugely beneficial, so that has been money well spent.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What practical steps can be or are being taken to ensure that the underspend situation does not repeat itself, especially at a time when local businesses need all the financial assistance that they can get?

Mrs Foster: On the matter of the underspend being repeated, I cannot, unfortunately, predict how much money the banks will make available for match funding to companies that want to grow. That is why we have brought about the growth loan fund, which, we hope, will allow some of those companies to grow. It is anticipated that the budget adjustments that we made in 2011-12 will not, hopefully, cause budget pressure for us in 2012-13. One of our difficulties is that if we hand money back into the centre, the pressure for that money may come on us in the following year. A lot of these things have just been delayed as opposed to not happening at all, but we are content that we will be able to manage that in the coming years.

Golf Tourism: North Down

2. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans there are to promote golf tourism in North Down, particularly

with Holywood being the home of the world number one golfer, Rory McIlroy.
(AQO 1591/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has been working with North Down Borough Council and, in particular, Holywood Golf Club since Rory McIlroy won the US Open last May. As a member of the Tourist Board's quality assurance golf scheme, Holywood Golf Club has the opportunity to promote the club through a range of marketing and promotional activities nationally and internationally. A number of press familiarisation trips hosted recently by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board have included the golf club in their itineraries.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answer. How does the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment plan to manage successfully the delivery of the Irish Open golf event?

Mrs Foster: We are all looking forward to the Irish Open golf event very much, and as you know, interest in the event is growing. We have not staged an event such as this for nearly 60 years. As a Department, we are working in partnership with our colleagues at Royal Portrush Golf Club and Coleraine Borough Council, along with other partners in the Department for Regional Development. We realise that we need to have a delivery structure in place to ensure effective co-ordination across all Departments and local authorities. Therefore, we have established a steering group of all the key organisations to deliver what, I confidently predict, will be a hugely successful event. As I said, considerable interest has been shown in sponsorship, and we will work with the European Tour to ensure that we get the most out of this for the European Tour, the golfers and, most importantly, Northern Ireland in 2012.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree with me that we should look at promoting GAA tourism, particularly hurling tourism, given that we now have some of the best hurling teams in the world in north Antrim, especially the new all-Ireland champions, Loughgiel Shamrocks —

Mr Speaker: Order. This is very focused on golf. *[Laughter.]* Order. Let us move on.

Mr Nesbitt: I guarantee a golf question. As the Minister knows, Rory McIlroy plays next at the US Masters in Augusta. Does she have any plans to use that event to begin marketing Royal

Portrush as a suitable venue for one of the other three majors in professional golf?

Mr Weir: The US Open could be held there.

Mrs Foster: I do not think that the US Open is coming to Royal Portrush any time soon. It is not a question of us starting to look at the Open coming to Royal Portrush. It has always been my desire that the Irish Open is a precursor to the Open coming to Royal Portrush and I very much hope that that will happen in the coming years. We have already had a number of visits from the R&A, and when it sees the way in which we are able to run the Irish Open at the end of June, it will be only too happy to bring the Open back to Royal Portrush.

Mr Dallat: I am suitably entertained by both hurling and golf, so I have no axe to grind.

Minister, you have been involved in the north coast, which I am sure you agree is the centre of excellence for golf. Can you give us some indication of the level of collaboration that you have got from your Executive colleagues in ensuring that the north coast is looking its best for the forthcoming Irish Open?

Mrs Foster: I am pleased to report that I have had a wide range of Executive co-operation on the matter, not least from the Minister from the Member's party on making Portrush look as well as it should coming up to not just the Irish Open but the range of events that will take place on the north coast. There is co-operation from the Minister for Regional Development on the transport links, which are critical and which will, I am sure, work very well. Indeed, we have been able to build a very good partnership with local government. When everybody sees the way in which we are able to deliver the Irish Open, they will very much realise that we can deliver such an event. Therefore, we should look forward to the Irish Open coming to Royal Portrush.

Business: Finance

3. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the ability of local business to access finance. (AQO 1592/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Access to finance has become more difficult for local businesses over the past three or four years. National schemes, such as the enterprise finance guarantee scheme, have had less impact in Northern Ireland than

elsewhere in the United Kingdom. UK Trade & Investment (UKTI) has introduced schemes to help businesses raise additional finance for export sales. The schemes are new to Northern Ireland and will take some time to gain traction.

Invest NI has developed an access to finance strategy, which, through five equity and debt funds, should provide more than £100 million to growth-potential businesses over the next five to six years. That should ensure that high-growth-potential start-ups and growth-potential businesses are not prevented from achieving their potential due to a lack of finance. Local businesses that export or plan to export would be particularly attractive for those funds, as they will contribute most to economic growth.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister highlighted her Department's access to finance scheme, including the five funds. Does she agree with me that the success of the existing schemes and the demand for those new funds highlight that no matter what the banks tell us about hitting their lending targets, there remains a significant access to finance gap in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: There is not only an access to finance gap, but, as I am sure the Member will agree, a growing credibility gap for the banks when they tell us that they are ready and willing to lend, yet, in our constituency offices, businesses and individuals tell us weekly that they cannot get finance or they are being told that their overdrafts are being withdrawn or whatever. That is why we felt that we had to intervene through the access to finance pieces of work. They are not the only things that we are doing. We are in discussions with the banks to see whether there is some way that we can help in relation to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which is becoming more of a difficulty for a lot of small companies in the way in which they do their business.

3.15 pm

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It would be wrong of me not to use this opportunity to congratulate St Michael's, Enniskillen, on their fantastic sporting victory yesterday in the MacRory Cup final.

Returning to the question, does the Minister feel that the introduction of a credit review office or agency, which would give small businesses the opportunity to appeal unsuccessful loan

applications, would prove beneficial in getting businesses more access to finance?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, that is a scheme in the Republic of Ireland. Both junior Ministers have looked at that issue in the context of the economic subgroup and it is a matter that we are discussing in that group. As I understand it, there is a mechanism for people to appeal to their banks and then that is looked at by an independent panel. The Finance Minister would be able to speak about that more fully. However, I do not think that that panel has a lot of powers to do anything after the appeal is heard. The two junior Ministers have looked at it, and we are open to seeing whether there is any way in which we can put additional pressure on the banks.

I also congratulate St Michael's in Enniskillen. It would be wrong for me not to do so.

Mrs Overend: Given George Osborne's announcement of the national loan guarantee scheme yesterday, how will the Minister ensure that SMEs from Northern Ireland are aware of and can avail themselves of the scheme?

Mrs Foster: As I said in my substantive answer, UKTI has introduced schemes. We will work with UKTI. Indeed, the new chief executive of that organisation was with us in Northern Ireland just two weeks ago and he has given a commitment to work more closely with us so that we can avail ourselves of national schemes. I think it is fair to say that none of the national schemes that have been launched to date has made a huge impact in Northern Ireland, so there is a need for us to see whether there is some way that we can get more benefit from the national schemes.

Visa Waiver Programme

4. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made on a visa waiver scheme similar to that introduced by the Irish Government. (AQO 1593/11-15)

Mrs Foster: It is important to note that visitors from the 16 countries included in the Irish visa waiver scheme can enter Northern Ireland on a valid UK visa. I have discussed with Her Majesty's Government the potential for a reciprocal scheme whereby visitors with valid Irish visas could be permitted entry to Northern Ireland. However, security and resource

implications currently prevent the introduction of such a reciprocal scheme.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister accept that not having a dual system means that, particularly in relation to tourism, there are some issues that are losing out because of not being able to travel?

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately, the ball is really with the Irish Government because they need to come up to the appropriate level of security for the UK. Given the resource implications, at present that is not possible, but I hope that it will be possible in the coming weeks and months.

Mr Girvan: What work is being done to attract new routes into Belfast International Airport on the basis that if they are travelling to the international airport, they will not require a visa if they are going to stay within the United Kingdom?

Mrs Foster: If people have a UK visa, they will of course be able to travel not just in Northern Ireland but to the Republic of Ireland because of the visa waiver scheme. We have been working quite closely with Belfast International Airport. Obviously, we had a huge success in retaining the Continental service to Newark, which was made possible only because we were able to negotiate with Her Majesty's Government to get the power to reduce the level of air passenger duty into Northern Ireland to zero. Also, Tourism Ireland is concentrating on the Canadian route and a route into Germany. As well as that, I had some good and meaningful discussions in the Middle East when I was there a number of weeks ago. We are using the reduction of air passenger duty to zero as our door opener into a number of areas, and we will push that agenda very firmly.

Business: Independent Retail Sector

5. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assistance her Department provides to the independent retail sector. (AQO 1594/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I fully recognise the contribution that the retail sector makes to the economy and I am always happy to meet its representatives. I met delegates from Menarys Bangor and from Bangor and Holywood town centre management in January, and, most recently — just last week — I had a useful and informative meeting with the Lisburn Road business association.

Together with Executive colleagues, I propose to carry out a comprehensive consultation with the independent retail sector to identify areas of difficulty and to develop a co-ordinated approach to help the sector to overcome those. At present, Invest NI provides a range of advisory support to businesses, including those in the retail sector. That includes information and communication technology (ICT) advice and access to the various practical initiatives under the Boosting Business campaign. Retail businesses will also be able to benefit from Invest NI's new £5 million small business loan fund, through which three- to five-year unsecured loans of up to £50,000 will be available to viable businesses in all sectors.

Mr McDevitt: The Minister will know from her meetings with the Lisburn Road trade association last week that the independent retail sector is in a state of considerable stress. Given its key role in sustaining communities in our cities and rural parts of Northern Ireland, can she assure us that the small business loan fund will be grown in the years ahead and that more money will be made available to businesses in the sector should they be eligible for support?

Mrs Foster: The small business loan fund has not yet become active; I think that July is the anticipated date. It currently has £5 million budgeted to it. If there is a need for us to revisit that amount of money, we will look at that when we see the demand. The Member will recognise — this is reflected in the fact that I intend to have a consultation with Executive colleagues and the retail sector — that the sector relies on a number of Departments to help it. That is true whether it is the Lisburn Road, Bangor, Enniskillen or wherever. I will talk to my colleagues in the Department for Social Development, the Department of Finance and Personnel and probably also the Department of the Environment. All those Departments have a role to play. We all need to get together to recognise the value of the retail sector and to try to help it to overcome the difficulties that it faces.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be more than aware of the very strong independent retail sector in parts of my constituency, namely Magherafelt and Cookstown. Will she detail whether any of those businesses will be able to avail themselves of the jobs fund? It would certainly help businesses to sustain themselves.

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately, the jobs fund does not apply to the retail sector, although the Boosting Business campaign does and is there to give advice. When the Member got to his feet, I was going to say that he was “looking good, looking great”, but that, of course, is the Cookstown slogan. He would expect me to know that. A wealth of advice is available to the retail sector. The Scots have many big conversations with different sectors right across their economy, so, to borrow a line from how they do it, we want to have that big conversation with the retail sector to see what exactly we in government can do to help.

Mr Cree: The Minister referred to some Departments that she is working with. Will she outline how her Department is working with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) to support independent retailers that come from the creative industries category?

Mrs Foster: We work closely with the creative industries and with Invest Northern Ireland in particular. DCAL is about to launch its creative industries strategy, which it has been working on. I think that a lot of people in the creative industries have been waiting on that. I hope that it will give them the confidence that both Departments are working closely together. If what we are told about the Chancellor's announcement this week about TV tax relief in respect of production and television is accurate, we would very much welcome that here in Northern Ireland because we stand ready to take advantage of that tax relief and to make more and more productions here in Northern Ireland.

Belfast International Airport: New Routes

6. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline her Department's plans to develop Belfast International Airport's route access by connecting with key markets in Germany, Austria, the USA and Canada. (AQO 1595/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Convenient, competitive and direct access is essential to the development of the economy, for both tourism and foreign direct investment to Northern Ireland. My Department recently invested £1 million in Tourism Ireland's co-operative marketing activity with airlines and airports to drive demand for air services to Northern Ireland from our key overseas markets in GB, North America and mainland Europe. I

have also appointed expert aviation consultants to work with my officials to advise on further actions we can take to develop air access to our key markets.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for that answer and her answer to question 4, a few minutes ago. Does she agree with me that to encourage inward investment and tourism, her emphasis should be on improving links to the more successful economies and the affluent nations of Europe in particular: namely the countries that are mentioned in the question, plus, perhaps, Scandinavia and the Netherlands?

Mrs Foster: As my previous answer indicated, we are proactively looking to connect back into Canada as a priority. We have not had that link for years, and I strongly believe that it would be beneficial, in respect of not just tourism but foreign direct investment. Many of our people who work in Bombardier Shorts travel back and forth to Canada frequently, and that is just one company. Germany is one of our priority areas. Given that it is one of our tourism priorities, we need to have direct access. As well as that — I think that this follows the Member's line of questioning — we believe that we need direct access to the Middle East, moving on to the Far East and Australia.

Mr Weir: What level of co-operation exists between the Minister's Department and the Northern Ireland airports?

Mrs Foster: We have good relations with all the airports. Obviously, we want to see Belfast International Airport take advantage of the air passenger duty reduction that will happen and collaborate with us to make the most of that.

As I indicated, I had some useful meetings recently in the Gulf. One of the advantages of that was, because they do not watch 'Parliament Live' or 'Stormont Today' all the time, they were not aware of the air passenger duty reduction. However, they were interested when we told them about that and they talked to us about the area that that could open to them. We are doing some expert work in that whole area and we hope to share it with various people so that they look at Northern Ireland as a possible place to bring a direct access flight into.

Mr McLaughlin: In reference to the tourism product and services, does the Minister think that being able to vary the rate of VAT could be of essential significance for maximising the benefit of tourism? Is that something that she

and her colleague who has just joined us — the Minister of Finance and Personnel — might consider?

Mrs Foster: I congratulate the Member for bringing that into a question about airports. That is not really a matter for me; it is a matter for the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I believe that I know what answer that he will give, and, in that respect, I wholeheartedly support him.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate the Minister on trying to improve air links with other countries. Is it a restriction that Belfast City Airport and Belfast International Airport have only road access from the city centre? Should efforts be made to approve the connectivity between the centre of Belfast and the two airports?

Mrs Foster: Had we an open-ended budget, that would be one of the areas that we would like to see improved. Unfortunately, we do not have an open-ended budget. Therefore, we have to deal with what is in front of us. However, it is important that we are able to signpost, are able to make sure that we have the connectivity, if not by rail then by bus and taxis, to make sure that everyone is aware of what is available to tourists when they arrive in Northern Ireland.

I commend all our taxi drivers for the marvellous work that they do to sell the Northern Ireland product. When passengers arrive in Belfast, taxi drivers give them a free guided tour of Belfast, and I commend them for that.

3.30 pm

Finance and Personnel

Mr Speaker: Questions 4 and 5 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

DFF: West Tyrone

1. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many staff employed by his Department are located in the West Tyrone constituency. (AQO 1605/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Currently, 80 staff employed by the Department of Finance and Personnel are located in the West Tyrone constituency, but, of course, that is not the end of the matter. Across the Northern Ireland Executive, 921 people located in the West Tyrone constituency are employed by various Departments.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for his answer. The figure of 921 across 12 Departments might sound great, but does the Minister not accept that much more decentralisation of public sector jobs is required, particularly in areas west of the Bann, to achieve greater economic rebalancing?

Mr Wilson: The Member raises this question regularly. I am sure that his constituents will notice that he represents only half of the constituency, because Omagh is one half and Strabane the other. However, given his diligence on the matter, I am pleased to tell him that there are proposals that will increase the numbers employed by DFP in the Omagh area. A lateral transfer process is under way for DOE planners who have mapping/charting officer duties, and three to five of them will be located in Omagh. Also, IT Assist, along with the properties division, is looking at the availability of unoccupied office space so that people living in Omagh can operate a teleworking initiative. I am sure that the Member will be pleased that his diligence is bearing fruit.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister agree that flexible working conditions for civil servants could be a contributory factor in the greater decentralisation of civil servants from Belfast? There is a lot of traffic congestion to be faced in coming into the city every morning.

Mr Wilson: It is one of the ways in which we are looking at how we reduce the cost of office space as well. Where flexible working conditions can be applied that suit the job and opportunities are available, we will, of course, apply them. One of the targets that we set in the Budget was to make considerable savings on the amount of property that we use to deliver some services from Departments. Where there are opportunities such as the Member has suggested, of course, we will look at them. As he will know from my answer to the previous question, we are already doing that in the case of Omagh.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister referred to the 921 jobs in the West Tyrone constituency. Given that Mid Ulster is a neighbouring constituency and that Omagh has a high number of public sector jobs, if the opportunity arose to move such jobs, could consideration be given to Magherafelt or Cookstown in my constituency?

Mr Wilson: I do not know whether the Member wants me to move the jobs from West Tyrone to Mid Ulster — we could start a turf war very

easily. However, I can tell the Member that there are currently 687 public sector jobs in the Mid Ulster constituency.

I have given this answer time and again in the Assembly: in a time of economic constraint etc, we endeavour to get best value for our office estate and to have a spread of public sector workers across Northern Ireland, but that must always be set against what is economically feasible.

Mr Cree: The Minister will know that all politics is local. How many staff are employed by his Department in the whole of North Down?

Mr Wilson: The Member may well regret asking me that. When we take Belfast out of the equation, the second highest number of staff employed by DFP is in North Down. DFP employs — where are we? — 239 people in North Down. I nearly got the figure wrong, and I did not want him to come back on me about it. That is the second highest figure, once one goes outside Belfast, so the Member's constituency is well represented as far as DFP employment is concerned.

Mr Speaker: The Member is not in her place for question 2.

Superannuation Bill

3. **Ms Ritchie** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the aims of the proposed Superannuation Bill. (AQO 1607/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The proposed Superannuation Bill has a number of aims. First of all, it is to remove the requirement whereby DFP must secure the consent of trade unions to introduce detrimental changes to the current terms of the Civil Service compensation scheme for Northern Ireland, and, secondly, it is to introduce new requirements for the Department to report on the consultation it has engaged in with trade unions with the aim of reaching agreement on detrimental changes. As a result of that consultation, the Department must lay a report before the Assembly that describes the consultation process it undertook, the proposed changes and how they would affect the reducing level of compensation payable to civil servants on redundancy. My officials are still required to consult unions with a view to reaching agreement. However, the main change will be the removal of a trade union veto where there are detrimental changes to the compensation scheme.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for his response. Does the Minister agree with me that it is a fundamental requirement in any collective bargaining arrangement that you have the involvement of trade unions and that the removal of trade unions from that process could be perceived as being detrimental to bringing staff and trade unions together?

Mr Wilson: No, that is not the case. If the Member had listened to me carefully she would have understood that all we are doing — it is a reasonable thing for any employer to do — is removing the trade union veto over any changes in the compensation scheme. The Superannuation Bill will still place a duty on the Department of Finance and Personnel to consult with a view to reaching agreement. The only difference is that, if agreement cannot be reached, the trade unions cannot have a veto over any proposals put forward. Furthermore, the Assembly will be kept informed of those negotiations and how the Department has fulfilled that duty. We have to bring a report showing that consultation did take place, what steps were taken to try to reach agreement and whether such an agreement was reached. I do not think that that is an unfair situation. What would be unfair is for one party to have a veto over any negotiations taking place about a compensation scheme.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his answers. What would be the implications of breaking parity with GB on this issue?

Mr Wilson: There would be a number of implications. We have kept parity with GB throughout the past. If we broke parity, there would, first of all, be administrative costs because parity provides the primary source of legislation. If we did not have parity, we would have to have different forms of scheme amendments and differences when it comes to communications with regard to booklets, leaflets and correspondence for staff and employers, the legal advice, the policy guidelines and the common IT system. There would be those administrative changes. Of course, there would be the cost of the actual difference in the benefits, which would have to be borne by the Northern Ireland Executive because, I suspect, if we were breaking parity it would only be because we wanted a more generous scheme, not a less generous scheme.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister agree that a far greater threat to parity comes from somewhere

other than the Superannuation Bill — the detrimental change, suggested by the Treasury apparently, of introducing disparity in regional pay? I think he recognises the threat that that poses to future Budget income and to rebalancing our economy and building the public contribution to our economy.

Mr Wilson: I am glad the Member has raised that issue, because it does concern me. I do not know if that will be announced in the Budget tomorrow. It has been floated by the Treasury Ministers, and it has now been floated in the press. It is something that we knew the Treasury was looking at. I have already made a robust presentation to the Treasury Ministers on the effect of such action.

Basically, if the Government decide to do it, it will simply be a grab for cash from the regions. It will deflate the economy in so far as it will cut the spending power of those who are involved in the public sector. Some private sector organisations have said that it is a good idea, but, if they thought about it, they would realise that it is not a good idea because it impacts on the private sector and on the purchase of goods and services by the people who have their income frozen.

Of course, the other thing, which has not been mentioned so far, is that, if we decide to reduce, in real terms, the wages of people who work in the public sector, the next step, if we are not going to distort the labour market, is to have reductions in benefits as well. Otherwise, if benefits go up in line with inflation and wages are frozen, the gap will close and it will not be worth while working. The aim of the current Government is to make work pay: I cannot think of a proposal that would make work pay less than the one that is being proposed by the Treasury Ministers.

Mr Speaker: Questions 4 and 5 have been withdrawn.

DFF: Revenue-raising Mechanisms

6. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the revenue-raising mechanisms currently being utilised within his Department. (AQO 1610/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department currently raises revenue through the provision of services to the public, other Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments and public bodies. Money made

from services provided to the public mostly consists of fees that are charged by the General Register Office for items such as duplicate birth certificates. Land and Property Services also raises considerable revenue through land registration and the selling of maps etc. Shared services to other Departments and public bodies include IT, HR, accommodation, training, procurement and legal services.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his reply. Will he advise whether his Department is selling the expertise of its economists, business consultants and the like to raise funds for his Department?

Mr Wilson: We are aware of opportunities to use the internal expertise that we have and sell it to other Departments, where there will be hard charging for it, or to other public bodies. I cannot say for certain that we have raised huge amounts by selling expertise to private bodies. Nevertheless, where those opportunities arise, we take them. Of the Department's budget of £275 million this year, £90 million was raised through charging for services that the Department is able to provide.

Mr D Bradley: How much money from asset sales has been factored into the budget? What are the sources of that money?

Mr Wilson: For this year, the Department has identified four particular assets that it wishes to sell. The Andersonstown jobs and benefits office was recently sold. There was a strong lobby for that sale from the Member for West Belfast Mr McCann: not only was there some financial benefit to the Department, but there was a lot of social benefit to the area, as it removed an eyesore that was causing an awful lot of difficulties for people who lived adjacent to it because of vandalism etc. We have also had an offer accepted on 1A Belt Road, Londonderry.

There are two other properties that we had listed as surplus: Northland House, Belfast, on which I had a discussion with a potential buyer just before I came in here, and the property on George Street, Ballymena. However, both of those properties have been a bit more difficult to move. Given the likelihood that property prices, especially in Frederick Street, will be impacted by the University of Ulster's move to that part of north Belfast, it might well be that the Department will want to reconsider whether to sell now or wait until property values go up.

3.45 pm

Mr Ross: Did the Department identify any further revenue-raising policies during the Budget 2010 process? Does he intend to bring any of those policies forward?

Mr Wilson: We did. In fact, I mentioned some of those policies during the Budget debate last year, so they are probably on record in Hansard. We have a huge art collection, for example, some of which could be sold. However, I suspect that that would probably not be the best idea in the current economic climate. I see the art guru from South Antrim shaking his head and saying that it is probably a wise decision not to try to dispose of those paintings at present. I am glad that he endorses the Department's financial wisdom on the issue. We also looked at charging district councils for valuation services, including keeping the valuation list up to date, but that would simply have involved a transfer of costs from local government to central government. The other issue that we looked at was car parking charges for civil servants. Again, it was decided that that was probably not politically opportune, especially given the freeze in public sector pay.

EU Structural Funds

7. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions have taken place on future EU structural funds, including a Peace IV programme. (AQO 1611/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The European cohesion policy is a reserved matter, and UK input into the scrutiny of the draft legislation is led by the Minister of State for Business and Enterprise. My officials are engaged in discussion with UK representatives as part of that scrutiny process. Future EU programmes will depend on the EU financial framework, or budget, and draft regulations for 2014-2020 being agreed. Neither the budget nor the regulations are likely to be agreed until the end of this year.

I support the Westminster Government on this issue. They are playing a hard game and insisting that, at a time of austerity when we are making cuts across the United Kingdom, Europe gets its budget under control before we make hugely increased contributions to it. Look at the way in which the European budget is squandered at present. Top civil servants in Europe seem to think that there is no austerity, and the European Court has ruled that their pay

should go up by well above the rate of inflation etc. The Westminster Government are correct in insisting on hard negotiations about what our contribution should be, especially since we are one of the biggest net contributors.

Until the budget and regulations are agreed, we will not know for certain how much money will be available for Northern Ireland or exactly what it will be spent on. However, my officials are engaged in meetings with the various stakeholders to discuss the possibilities.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his very thorough answer. Are the negotiations on framework programme 8 looking at how it can be better taken up than its predecessor and whether it might include helping our towns and villages, which will need massive assistance?

Mr Wilson: As we are still at an early stage in agreeing what the budget contribution will even be and, therefore, how much money will be available for the various programmes, it is not possible for me to give the Member an answer on the detail of any of the programmes. The one thing that I will say is that, when it comes to devising the programmes, there will be extensive consultation, as that is the nature of this. I hope that the kind of point that the Member has made will be raised in that consultation. I represent a constituency that is very similar to his. There has been a general view that, as far as European funding and spending are concerned, there has been neglect of areas outside greater Belfast. That may be one of the things that needs to be looked at again when we devise future spending programmes.

Mr Craig: What steps will the Minister take to reduce bureaucracy in the application process, as that has been a major issue in respect of delivery? Will the Minister ensure that the money is spent in Northern Ireland and not in other jurisdictions?

Mr Wilson: As I have said in the Assembly on many occasions, I know the impediment that bureaucracy causes for groups and businesses not only when applying for European money but in ensuring that they actually comply with the maze of bureaucracy. Sometimes, groups find that they have not complied, and they are then penalised, or we as an Assembly find that we have clawback from the European Union because the bizarre bureaucratic rules that are sometimes applied to European funding have not been properly followed.

We will, of course, look at the regulations. The new regulations will include measures to simplify the application and payment processes through harmonising the eligibility rules that cover the different funds; to allow for communication between the applicants and the European agencies to be carried out online; and to increase the scope of simplified accounting methods, which will include payments by result and flat-rate expenses. I will expect officials to engage in the discussions to ensure that those kinds of things are taken forward. Hopefully, that will help to ease the bureaucratic burden, which many groups do not wish to engage in at present.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Are discussions ongoing about how we could draw down an additional €100 million from the EU seventh framework programme over the next two years to fund research and development and to promote innovation?

Mr Wilson: That job is not purely down to the Department of Finance and Personnel. The Member will be well aware that we have set a target of a 20% increase in European funds to be drawn down by the Executive collectively over the period of the Programme for Government. A lot of that R&D funding will fall to and be the responsibility of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, although the Member will know that it requires co-operation between not only businesses but educational institutions. Therefore, the Department for Employment and Learning will have a role to play. Furthermore, it has to be on the basis of co-operation and partnerships with organisations in other European countries. All those things need to be put together.

The Member is probably right that we have not been as diligent in drawing down the funds as we could be. We have set ourselves a target, but how we go about implementing that target will be the responsibility, mainly, of the two Departments that I mentioned.

Mr A Maginness: Since 2009, the European Union has permitted funds to be drawn down in relation to energy efficiency in homes. Will the Minister ensure that, in the 2014-2020 round, energy efficiency in our homes is a priority? It would be a very useful use of those funds.

Mr Wilson: The Member will know how much resource the Executive have allocated to that issue. As energy prices go up in relation to —

Mr A Maginness: European funding.

Mr Wilson: Maybe the Member will let me answer. Energy prices go up, very often, as a result of directives from the EU and its obsession with CO2 emissions. Whether it is through demands that we have greater energy output from renewable sources or, as the Government at Westminster have done, we have a carbon price floor to meet European directives or the European emissions trading scheme, all that has added to electricity prices. If we foolishly follow those directives, it makes sense that we need to find ways of alleviating the fuel poverty that those directives cause. That is one of the reasons why we have sought to reduce people's energy bills by better use of energy and insulating homes. Of course, if there is funding for that, we should push for Europe to compensate us for some of the folly of the environmental policies that it has dictated and imposed on us.

Civil Service: Equal Pay

8. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the residual equal pay issues. (AQO 1612/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Northern Ireland equal pay settlement has been implemented in line with the terms that were agreed with the trade union, the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, and approved by the Northern Ireland Executive. Although concern about the exclusion from the settlement has been raised on behalf of the NIO, the PSNI and former staff, I have no plans to extend the agreement to include groups of staff who have no entitlement under the terms of the scheme.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he accept that this is a hugely sensitive and delicate matter? Is he satisfied that his Department acted as a good employer in informing retirees of their equal pay entitlement?

Mr Wilson: We did. The legal requirement for retirees' entitlement was that people had to be employed six months prior to the claim being put in. Anybody who had left the Civil Service before August 2008, I think it was, would not have been entitled. That is what the law says. If we were to set aside the law and simply say, "Let us open the possibility of paying those who are not legally entitled", the Member and his party would be the first to ask questions at the Public Accounts Committee on why the law was not followed on the issue. Of course, I still have to get an answer from the Members opposite,

who keep raising the issue and raising false hopes on it. How far back do they intend us to go on this? Where do we have the cut-off point? Do we go right back to 1974? If so, how do we finance it?

Lord Morrow: Why are PSNI staff excluded from the settlement, when Policing Board staff are included?

Mr Wilson: I will deal with the Policing Board staff first. They were not entitled to the lump sum payments. They were paid in error on the basis of incomplete information. Later, information came to light that changed the Department's view on the entitlement, but the payments had already been made to the staff. No attempt has been made by the Policing Board to recoup that money. Let me make something clear: that payment was made in error. There was no entitlement. The Policing Board did not present all of the information at the time, and, therefore, the payment was made.

I move now to the PSNI staff. The agreement that was negotiated was negotiated by Northern Ireland Civil Service staff and NIPSA, and it was agreed with NIPSA. It was for Northern Ireland Civil Service staff only. The police have money for the equal pay claim. That money was negotiated with the Treasury and sits in the police budget at present. The Police Service of Northern Ireland, which is the employer and has the pay delegation, has to show that there is an equal pay entitlement. It has not been able to do that to date, so no equal pay arrangement has been made.

I understand that a court case has been lodged with the County Court alleging a breach of contract by the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the PSNI. That will be heard towards the end of the month — on 26 or 28 March, I think. The legal opinion that I have received is that, since pay delegation was granted to the Northern Ireland pay group, including the Police Authority, in 1996 and remained in place until the devolution of justice in April 2010, there is no entitlement for police staff to have access to the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay settlement.

4.00 pm

Mr Speaker: I ask the House to take its ease as we move to the next item of business.

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

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we move to the next item of business, I wish to inform Members that the Budget Bill has received Royal Assent. The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2012 became law on 20 March 2012.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Bangor Town Centre

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members wishing to speak will have seven to eight minutes.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak today on what is one of the most important issues in my constituency of North Down. I am delighted to have the Minister for Social Development with us to respond to the points made in the Adjournment debate.

I start by saying that Bangor has a rich and proud history. Its maritime history combined with its proud Christian heritage has helped it become the country's premier tourist destination, attracting tourists from throughout the greater Belfast area, the rest of Northern Ireland and, indeed, Scotland, the mainland and further beyond. Its Victorian architecture mixed with picturesque views and splendour overlooking the sea has appealed to many and sets Bangor aside as an ideal seaside resort.

Unfortunately, however, things have changed. Bangor has suffered many setbacks. The town is now a shadow of what it once was. The seafront has become particularly run-down, with the notorious Queen's Parade becoming, regrettably, the greatest eyesore in North Down. That area is certainly one of the greatest concerns amongst our constituents. Those of us who have canvassed in the past year would admit that that is the number one issue in our area. It is of great concern to locals that something is done and something is seen to be done to try to address the problem.

The Harbour ward of Bangor has seen a major shift of residents leaving. It hosts a high level of social deprivation, an unsettled community and quite a large number of houses in multiple occupation. That results in a lack of ownership and real commitment to the area. High vacancy rates and poor quality mean that what once were Victorian buildings are now past their

economic life. They have become easy targets for vandalism and hotspots for antisocial behaviour. These problems leave many difficulties in attracting redevelopment to the Queen's Parade area.

Bangor has over 530 business premises, with 118 in the High Street area alone. The current vacancy rate is 13.7%, an increase from 12% last year. Since 2009, the town has lost 65 businesses, including some large retail multiples with up to 30 staff and other small independent businesses employing just a few members of staff.

Bangor's out-of-town shopping centres have had a major impact on the town centre. They have moved the commercial centre of the town right out to those retail centres. All major investment in retailing has been in the shopping centres and has, effectively, created a vacuum in the town centre. What is certainly perceived as a relaxed planning policy in relation to out-of-town shopping centres has allowed the creation of many large shopping centres, including the Bloomfield development and other large out-of-town retail developments such as Springhill and the old Clandeboye site, which is now a major retail site. All of that has resulted in low footfall in the town centre and high footfall in those shopping centres.

Despite that fairly gloomy picture, much positive work has been ongoing for many years to actively promote and regenerate Bangor town centre, and North Down Borough Council has been at the forefront of those efforts. In the 1980s, the council recognised the need to try to regenerate the town and, as a result, invested in the marina, which has been very successful in its own right. One of its major aspects was to act as a catalyst for town centre investment and regeneration. Unfortunately, that has not developed in the way we would like. In many ways, it has created a great bonus to the local economy, but it still remains to be fully developed. The town centre location of the marina is a great benefit, and we want to see regeneration built around it.

Tourism continues to play a key role in our locality, and that is reinforced with North Down Borough Council's budget of £1 million to promote tourism. The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum is in the area, and we can build on that spin-off. Many major events have been promoted in Bangor, not least the BBC Proms in the Park,

which was a great success, and Snow Patrol has had concerts in Ward park. In many ways, it has been described as the events capital of Northern Ireland.

The council's investment in the walled garden, which the Minister visited recently, is most impressive. We recently invested £2.6 million in the Pickie fun park, which is about to reopen. I visited it recently and was most impressed by the work that has gone on. Again, that will be a great boost to the local area.

Much work has been carried out by the council. Work on the new 50-metre pool is under way and will be finished fairly soon. The fact that we will be able to promote full competition facilities will bring in tourists and be a great bonus to the area.

The Bangor master plan, which was launched in 2011, provides a strategy and an overarching framework for regenerating Bangor town centre. It is most welcome, and Minister McCausland has shown great commitment to it. He was at its launch, and we very much commend the work done by the Department for Social Development (DSD) and its staff, particularly Damian Mulholland, who has worked excellently with the council in the development of the plan and is now working alongside us on the steering group. The master plan aims to develop a road map to help to regenerate the town centre and the implementation steering group has now been set up to develop it. It is important to have a vision to create a diverse town centre and a thriving tourist economy. In improving the town centre, we must ensure that that is implemented and delivered.

Our constituents expect action, and action is long overdue. We, as elected representatives from the North Down area, must do all that we can in the Assembly to keep the focus on the area and to ensure that central government supports local government in trying to deliver results. The local population is frustrated and worried that the town seems to be deteriorating, that confidence has gone and that things are moving backwards when they should be moving forwards.

As I mentioned, the town centre steering group is now in place. It aims to take a multi-agency approach involving all key stakeholders, including the developer for Queen's Parade, the council, local residents and businesses, and DSD, which is, of course, crucial to its success. It is vital that constructive cross-departmental

work is done on this issue. The Department for Social Development must assist the developer in getting planning permission through the Department of the Environment. We urge the two agencies to work together on the planning application, which I understand will be lodged fairly soon. Another element of the work that must be completed is the acquisition of land owned by the Crown Estate, and that is an important role for the Department for Regional Development.

The Flagship shopping centre in the town centre is another area of concern. It is very much open for business and is actively canvassing new businesses despite recent setbacks. The key objectives in regeneration will be maintaining and improving accessibility and sustainable transport links and improving the environment. The proposed environmental improvement scheme in the master plan is key to trying to create the right environment for regeneration.

Another aspect of the scheme is traffic management. It is vital that the transport system in the town is right. Traffic management is so important in getting people moving. The Bangor town centre traffic scheme has never been a great success. From my years of working on the council, I know that Roads Service struggled for years with the idea of implementing the one-way system in the town. It was never felt to be an ideal solution, but Roads Service had to do something. As a result, we have what I believe to be a rather ineffective and inefficient traffic management system that needs to be revisited, revised and changed.

It is vital that we get the right infrastructure in place to attract investment and retail opportunities. We need incentives for businesses to upgrade frontages in order to improve the whole environment of the town centre. I understand that DSD will look at this further downstream, but it is important that we create the right environment in our town centre. The environmental scheme, which should come to fruition within the next two years, will certainly help, but we must do all that we can to ensure that we have the right environment for existing businesses and to attract the right type of business back into the town centre.

All in all, it is most important that we stay focused on Bangor's regeneration. Bangor has great potential, as does North Down in general. We need to actively promote our town

centre, assist in any way we can and work with existing traders and the council. There is a need to re-establish Bangor as the premier, quality destination that it once was. We need to use and improve the existing assets and infrastructure. We need to make Bangor town centre a location that people want to visit, live in and work in, and we need to attract businesses to locate there.

I thank the Minister for his attendance today. I urge him to continue the work that is being done to help the regeneration of Bangor town centre and to make it a central priority in his Department.

Dr Farry: I almost feel like an oppressed minority in the Chamber at the moment, surrounded as I am by the massed ranks of the DUP. I congratulate Mr Dunne on securing this debate. His election to this Assembly has opened up the wonderful new horizon of the world beyond the extremities of Holywood. I welcome the focus on Bangor town centre.

I agree, as I am sure many of my colleagues do, that North Down already has an awful lot and, moreover, has great potential. We have this bizarre contradiction in that, on the one hand, Queen's Parade has been identified as Northern Ireland's top eyesore and, on the other hand, Bangor has been named in other surveys as being among the most attractive places, if not the most attractive place, to live in all of Northern Ireland. That shows the real potential that exists in the area.

4.15 pm

We have great natural assets such as Belfast lough and Bangor bay. They are natural arenas not just for water-based sports and other activities but for scenery. We have wider infrastructure for sport, including the Ballykillaire complex and the new 50-metre pool and leisure centre, which we are very much looking forward to coming on stream next year. We also have real, considerable spending power in our community, but the difficulty is that a lot of money has been leaking from North Down into other areas. We do, of course, have to take a wider Northern Ireland perspective. Nonetheless, that leakage has consequences for the fabric of Bangor town and for its retail offering. Indeed, as Mr Dunne said, we will see leakage to, and a strengthening of, out-of-town or edge-of-town retail, in which North Down has

considerable strength. Again, that contrasts with what is happening in Bangor town centre.

I think that few towns in Northern Ireland have the same sheer scale of population relative to the size of the town centre as Bangor. We have a very small town centre relative to the size of the population. That issue has not quite worked itself out over the past number of decades.

Bangor and North Down have a long and proud heritage going back to early Christian times. The area was one of the real lights in the spread of Christianity around the world. Indeed, if you look at the Mappa Mundi from the 14th century, in Hereford Cathedral, you will see that Bangor is only one of four locations on the island of Ireland that is mentioned. In later Victorian times, we, of course, had the development of Bangor through the advent of railway, and in the latter half of the 20th century, there was real growth when a lot of people moved into Bangor and North Down from other parts of Northern Ireland.

Bangor had a great tourism tradition, and it was very much a place to go. However, times have moved on. Bangor's traditional bucket-and-spade tourism disappeared as people went overseas, and that highlights the need for the town to be reinvented. I do not think that we can turn back the clock in respect of the nature of retail, because people today want to go to shopping centres. The challenge now is to create something different in Bangor. For me, it is about tourism hospitality, which is a growth sector for the Northern Ireland economy as a whole. North Down and Bangor are well placed to take advantage of that. It is about hosting a lot more events. The concerts in Bangor over the past number of years have certainly been highlights. Bangor's ability to attract major international headliners, such as Snow Patrol and Eminem, is a real testimony to its potential.

We have an evening economy, which does not necessarily involve people downing lots of alcohol; it is much broader than that. There is potential for new offices and for people to come back to live in the town centre. It is all about increasing the throughput of people and the spin-off economic activity that will flow from that. The redevelopment of Queen's Parade is central to that, and it has long been identified as such by the council and many other stakeholders. Leaving Queen's Parade as it was in the early 1990s was never an option. Redevelopment had to take place.

There has been a lot of frustration at the lack of progress right across the town over the years. Bangor town centre obviously faces a major challenge. It has been a long and difficult journey. I have certainly been central to that journey over the years and have experienced all the ups and downs. There have been difficulties because the responsibility for urban regeneration has been spread among different bodies.

I welcome DSD's involvement and the lead that the Minister is giving. There has been difficulty with the location of the town centre; assembling the various land interests together; finding agreement among stakeholders on what to build — again, building in a town centre is always controversial — and the current underlying economic and financial conditions. However, beyond all of that, it is important that we do not lose sight of the big picture. The investment of over £100 million in Bangor town centre, if it comes to fruition, will be a major catalyst. It is not just about the mix of retail, leisure, evening economy and theatre that is there or the offices and apartments: it is about the spin-off that will flow from that. It will be about the sign of confidence that that will give in Bangor's future.

Certainly, I welcome the Minister's involvement. DSD needs to redouble its efforts. I am sure that the Minister views Bangor as his number one priority among urban regeneration projects to be taken forward and, certainly, as the one with the greatest potential. The master plan is of central importance in conjunction with what can be done with the developer for Queen's Parade. I thank Mr Dunne for securing the debate.

Mr Easton: I, too, welcome the Adjournment topic that was brought to the Assembly by my colleague Gordon Dunne. In some ways, it comes on the back of a debate that took place last Tuesday in North Down Borough Council, where we discussed the closure of businesses in Bangor town centre. We looked at the limited ways in which we could help that scenario.

Bangor has an awful lot going for it. Sometimes, there is maybe too much doom and gloom in our outlook. It is important that we try to promote Bangor and North Down in the most positive light. The area has major assets, such as those that my colleague mentioned, Bangor marina, the new leisure centre that will open with a 50-metre swimming pool, major concerts, the walled garden and Pickie fun park. North Down has major hotels, right up to those with five

stars, to take in tourists. There are fantastic beaches, such as those at Groomsport, Ballyholme and Helen's Bay, which we maybe do not utilise. There are fantastic parks. There is also the Ulster Way at Clondeboye. When you go walking there, you see that it is underused. Not many people actually know about it. It is a fantastic place for scenery and wildlife. There are deer, red squirrels and all sorts of wonderful things that the people of North Down actually do not know about. Of course, there is also Helen's Tower, which is seldom visited despite being on that pathway.

We all know that Northern Ireland is suffering in the recession. In many ways, we are at the mercy of whether money comes to Northern Ireland from Westminster, what is going on in Europe and the crisis in countries such as Italy, Spain, Greece and other regions, and bankers and the mess that they have made of the world economy. Certainly, money is very tight at the moment, and we need to recognise that. That is why it is important that we try to make the most of what we can in Bangor.

Certainly, with regard to Bangor seafront, a bit of a fiasco — in my own words — has been going on for at least 20 years. It had been going on for 10 years before I was elected to council in 2001. You would have thought that over 20 years, something could have been done to try to resolve the issue much sooner. Maybe too many plans were submitted over the years. Perhaps we should have stuck with the original plan, on which we had all agreed, and taken it forward. Now that we are in lean times, things are maybe not moving as quickly as we would like.

DSD's Bangor master plan is fantastic. It can take us forward positively. Certainly, I will push the Minister to try to get planning applications through as soon as possible and to take it from there. In the meantime, we need to take as many small measures as possible to help the local economy in Bangor and to improve its town centre. I know that the Assembly has done quite a bit to help businesses. Measures include the freezing of business rates and the introduction of the small business rate relief scheme, which has helped many businesses in North Down. However, we need to look at what we can do to keep the town's regeneration on track. That includes small things at a local level, such as the awarding of grants for tidying shopfronts. By making shops more attractive, we can get

people into the town, build up business and get more money flowing.

We need the banks to start lending again, so that we can find more money for the Bangor master plan when it finally gets up and running. We also need to improve consumer confidence, as improving Bangor seafront will not work without consumers coming into the town to build up trade in the local shops. We have a huge job to do in trying to advertise Bangor in order to attract the people, money and investment that will make Queen's Parade a better place.

Bangor is the first town in Northern Ireland to offer free access to Wi-Fi across the board. We in North Down are the first in Northern Ireland to pilot and drive that forward. We need to make better use of the internet to promote sales, our town and our businesses so that we can develop Bangor. We also need to look at car parking issues, and under the Bangor master plan, there is huge scope for that. I encourage the Minister for Regional Development to help to promote our towns by reducing car parking charges, but that is obviously for another day and a different Minister. There is a whole raft of things that we can do to promote Bangor.

My way forward is to keep and promote what we have while trying to get the right economic packages and conditions together to make the consumer feel good. That will allow the Bangor master plan to come to fruition, and, hopefully, we can get the funding to move that forward.

Mr Weir: By a process of elimination, apart from the Minister, I will be the last contributor to the debate. Probably the biggest single complaint that we hear from retailers in Bangor — it is probably the biggest single problem — is the lack of footfall in the town. Starting on a slightly negative note, I, therefore, find it a little disappointing that only four of the six MLAs from North Down are here. However, I am sure there are very good reasons why our two colleagues from other parties are missing, and we look forward to hearing those in due course.

It is important to be positive, and a lot of what has been said today has been positive. There are positive aspects to Bangor, and as a lifelong Bangorian, I think that it is important that we extol its virtues. It is noticeable that almost every satisfaction survey tends to put North Down, particularly Bangor, pretty much top of the list of places to live in Northern Ireland. Indeed,

in the UTV poll of the best places in Northern Ireland, North Down featured fairly heavily.

Although there are problems that I will come to, we should not fall into the trap of talking ourselves down or believing that the problems in Bangor town centre are unique. The same problems face towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. There is no doubt that other town centres have to cope with tough economic circumstances. As other Members said, some of those problems are largely outside of our control. We cannot have a great deal of say in the overall world recession, which is probably the biggest single factor.

There is a range of trends in retail, some of which we can impact on. Out-of-town shopping centres were mentioned, but probably the biggest single change in retail over the past five to 10 years has been a growth in the internet market. Indeed, if you talk to any experts in retail sales, they will tell you that over the past few years, the out-of-town shopping market has remained more or less static — it has made gains on one side and lost them on the other. Sales have tended to go down in town centres, and there has been a rapid growth in internet sales.

We are not in a position to turn that around, but we can look at where we can give particular added value to Bangor.

4.30 pm

Some of the investments that have been made, largely through the council, albeit with support from Departments, have resulted in a very ambitious set of capital announcements. We are in the process, within the next year, of opening the new leisure centre, which will have the only 50-metre swimming pool in Northern Ireland and a range of other excellent facilities. That is the anchor at one end of Bangor town centre. The walled garden is already in place, and we are, within the next few weeks, to see the reopening of the refurbished, revamped and improved Pickie pool, which can operate as an anchor on the other side of Bangor.

The problems happen in some areas in the middle, however, and there is no doubt that the elephant in the room in Bangor town centre is the state of Queen's Parade and the overall appearance of the town centre. There is no doubt that a change in that situation is not going to happen overnight and there will be a limited amount that we can do, given that some of those

things will be dependent on private investment. I am glad to say that the current Minister has proactively engaged with and provided a leadership role for the Bangor master plan, and he is trying to drive forward the Queen's Parade scheme. It is important now that, having seen the arguments that there have been, even among residents, we have schemes that have got people on board, and that everyone seems to be pointing in the same direction. I look forward to the Minister helping to drive that forward.

There is a wider context in which Bangor is one of the victims of the town centres situation. I welcome, as part of the Programme for Government, the commitment to investment in town centres. That is something that DSD will drive forward. I also welcome a range of conferences that will take place in the near future across Northern Ireland, one of which I hope to see in Bangor, on how we can give added value to town centres. It is important that that has a focused outcome in which all those involved concentrate on a sense of partnership, which is the key to solving the problems of providing added value. It is about partnership between Departments, local councils and traders. It is important that we listen to the voices of traders and the local population.

There have been some good examples of joined-up thinking. Mention has already been made of the help that has been given to small businesses. Nearly 900 businesses across North Down have benefited from the small business rates relief scheme. That has put money in people's pockets and has provided a degree of practical help. There are other areas that need greater attention. It is vital that, as a key part of the master plan, DRD has a central role in the issues of roads and parking.

The issue of swifter planning has not been touched on. There is a real concern at present about the slowness of planning, particularly in the Downpatrick office. I spoke to a developer today who expressed grave concern about the length of time that it would take to simply get a change of use for a major development that could happen in North Down. The concern is that the length of delay from the Downpatrick office will cause the developer to go elsewhere rather than on the main street in Bangor.

It is about providing a degree of joined-up government and looking forward with positive solutions. The commitment given last week by

North Down Borough Council to spend the capital money on the free Wi-Fi scheme for Bangor town centre shows its innovation. It is about building on North Down as being the events capital and the maritime capital of Northern Ireland, and building on those additional qualities, be it the cafe culture that, hopefully, we can further develop in North Down, or ensuring that there is an artistic and cultural side of things. It may well be about providing something that is unique in Northern Ireland and has a unique selling point. There is no single solution that will improve things for Bangor; it is about a cocktail of measures.

I am sure that all of us, as MLAs for North Down, or at least those of us who are here for the debate, look forward to the Minister's reply and to working, particularly with DSD in the very positive way that it has embraced trying to improve things for the people of Bangor. I have confidence that despite the current problems, which have largely been created by the recession, in the long run, there is a brighter future for the centre of Bangor. All of us look to embrace that.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I thank Mr Dunne for giving me the opportunity to discuss the regeneration of Bangor, and I thank the other Members who spoke for their contributions. It is clear from all their comments that they appreciate the value of regeneration work to our towns, cities and communities. One of the Northern Ireland Executive's top priorities is to develop business and to grow the economy, and as Minister for Social Development, I am committed to focusing urban regeneration to help to deliver that priority.

Urban regeneration is important to our economic development because town centres are vital to economic life in Northern Ireland. I do not need to tell any of you how important towns such as Bangor are to economic activity, jobs and in providing services for our community. I am fully aware that traders across all our towns and cities are finding trading conditions very challenging as a result of the current economic recession. It is very disappointing and, indeed, worrying when you hear that shops and businesses are closing because that has a direct impact on the vitality of town centres.

Bangor was always renowned as a thriving holiday destination, drawing visitors from across Northern Ireland and much further

afield, especially Scotland. Unfortunately, the seafront and promenade area have not developed in recent years, resulting in a steady decline in the number of visitors to the town. Therefore, my Department is committed to working in partnership with everyone that has an interest in Bangor to make it a thriving tourist destination once again. You will be aware that I have invited Mary Portas to Northern Ireland to see how we can learn more about the measures that are needed to reinvigorate and revitalise our town centres. Bangor is one of the towns that I plan to discuss with her.

Across Northern Ireland, I have been keen to encourage investment in our towns to provide attractive, shared spaces that residents and visitors can enjoy and to support local trade and enterprise. With that in mind, I published a master plan for the town centre in July last year. The master plan was developed following extensive consultation with public bodies, business representatives and the local communities. The plan is now widely accepted as the blueprint for the future development of the town centre, and I welcome the fact that North Down Borough Council has established an implementation board to take forward the many actions that are set out in the master plan. My Department will do all that it can to support the council in this work.

You only have to look at some of the planned investments to see that Bangor is indeed a forward-thinking town and that there is a genuine commitment to make it one of the premier destinations in the United Kingdom and Ireland. The opening of Pickie fun park demonstrates the council's commitment to the town centre. Construction work on the new world-class swimming and sporting facility is in full swing, which demonstrates the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to Bangor. Undoubtedly, that magnificent sporting facility will bring more people to the town.

I must emphasise that regeneration succeeds best when it is based on partnership between business, government and the wider community. My Department has been working closely with the council, public bodies, the local community and the developer to take forward a major mixed-used development in the Queen's Parade area of the town centre. Redevelopment of the Queen's Parade area and the marina offer a unique opportunity to transform Bangor. Taking forward any development, particularly one of this

scale, is always challenging, especially in the current difficult economic times. However, I believe that this is the right time to plan for the future.

The scheme will lead to significant private sector investment, many new construction jobs and, once the development is complete, several hundred permanent jobs. More importantly, I believe that the high quality of the proposal will once again make Bangor a highly attractive destination for shopping and leisure activities and the envy of many other towns.

I appreciate that it will take a number of years before construction commences on the Queen's Parade area and that the town has many more immediate needs. My Department is, therefore, working with the local community, the business sector in the town and North Down Borough Council to develop a revitalisation project in the town centre. That will include shorter-term actions and measures to improve the appearance of the area and to encourage more people into the town centre.

There are many other proposals in the master plan that, if delivered, will help to sustain the current traders and encourage and stimulate new businesses. For example, my Department and North Down Borough Council have agreed to commence design work on the public realm works that were identified in the Bangor town centre master plan. My Department has included £2.5 million in its forward work programme for public realm works in the town centre during 2013-14, subject to all approvals and funding being available.

I think that the contributions that were made during the debate indicate that many Members appreciate the value of the regeneration work that DSD is carrying out in our towns, cities and communities. I will pick up on a couple of points that some Members made. There was reference to traffic. Transport and traffic issues are certainly important for the regeneration of any town centre. That is why the Department has funded a traffic study for Bangor town centre alongside the master plan. That study allows us to examine how any proposed development will affect traffic movement, and DRD has agreed to work with DSD to implement any changes that can be demonstrated to improve traffic in the area as part of the wider regeneration.

One of the representatives of the area mentioned rates and welcomed the fact that the Executive have agreed changes to rebalance the non-

domestic rating system over the period of the economic downturn. The 20% small business rate relief will be provided on eligible premises with a net annual value of £5,000 to £10,000, which will roughly double the level of overall help and increase the number of recipients by around 50% under the main scheme.

Car parking was mentioned, and the work that was done on the preparation of the Bangor master plan did, indeed, include an analysis of parking provision in the town centre. Generally speaking, Bangor town centre is well served with parking spaces, and unusually for a town centre, one of the main car parks close to the centre at Queen's Parade and the seafront is free of charge. However, it is recognised that there is parking pressure in a couple of specific locations, such as close to the train station. On the basis of that analysis, the master plan includes proposals for a number of additional areas of car parking. I am also aware that there are some issues with residents' parking for people who live in or close to the town centre. That is, however, an issue for the Minister for Regional Development.

Finally, Members mentioned tourism and the many historical and cultural attractions that Bangor has. I must commend North Down Borough Council for its work in exploring the various tourist packages that might be put together and the product that might be made available there for visitors. As was said, the town has a tremendous history going back to its early Christian heritage. Indeed, it was also involved in the start of the unofficial settlement of east Ulster in 1606 before the Flight of the Earls and before the plantation of Ulster under Sir James Hamilton. So, 1606 was really the start of modern Bangor, and it has gone from strength to strength since then. I am sure that the piece of work that the council did on that and on other tourism matters to create the tourism product will certainly help to draw people into the area, and all the developments that we have been talking about through commercial support and support for the shops in the area will give those people ample opportunity, when they are there, to spend lots of money in Bangor.

Adjourned at 4.45 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Minister. They have not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Regional Development

Regional Development Strategy 2035

*Published at 12:00 noon on
Thursday 15 March, 2012*

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I am pleased to inform Assembly members of the publication of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035 on 15 March 2012.

As the spatial strategy of the Executive the RDS informs and supports the PfG, Budget decisions and the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. It provides an overarching strategic planning framework to facilitate and guide both the public and private sectors.

The RDS 2035 addresses key challenges on rebuilding and rebalancing the economy, population growth, the location of jobs and houses, infrastructure provision, climate change and the protection of our natural and built environment.

The document and associated Impact Assessments are available on the Internet at www.drdni.gov.uk/RDS2035 and in the Assembly Library. However if any member would prefer a personal hard copy, it can be obtained by contacting Jackie King on (028) 90540669.

Please note the above statement is embargoed until 12:00 on Thursday 15 March 2012.

Roads Service

*Published at 12:00 noon on
Thursday 15 March, 2012*

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): In recent months, the relationship between Roads Service and the rest of my Department has been subject to review. As a result, I have agreed that Roads Service, in line with a number of other public sector organisations, will cease to be an Executive Agency within the Department from 1 April 2012.

Roads Service will retain its branding and continue to deliver the same services as before, but as a business area within the Department rather than as an agency. This is largely an administrative change and will have no impact on the daily work of the majority of staff.

Please note the above statement is embargoed until 12:00 on Thursday 15 March 2012.



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