



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

Volume 8

(9 December 2000 to 31 January 2001)

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Volume 8

9 December 2000 to 31 January 2001

ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

(A = Alliance Party; NIWC = Northern Ireland Women's Coalition; PUP = Progressive Unionist Party; SDLP = Social Democratic and Labour Party; SF = Sinn Féin; DUP = Ulster Democratic Unionist Party; UKUP = United Kingdom Unionist Party; UUP = Ulster Unionist Party; UUAP = United Unionist Assembly Party; NIUP = Northern Ireland Unionist Party)

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Attwood, Alex (SDLP) (West Belfast)
Beggs, Roy (UUP) (East Antrim)
Bell, Billy (UUP) (Lagan Valley)
Bell, Mrs Eileen (A) (North Down)
Benson, Tom (UUP) (Strangford) **Died 24 Dec 2000**
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de Brún, Ms Bairbre (SF) (West Belfast)
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Doherty, Pat (SF) (West Tyrone)
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Gallagher, Tommy (SDLP) (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
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Gildernew, Ms Michelle (SF) (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Gorman, Sir John (UUP) (North Down)
Hamilton, Tom (UUP) (Strangford) **From 17 Jan 2001**
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O'Neill, Éamonn (SDLP) (South Down)
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Watson, Denis (UUAP) (Upper Bann)
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Wilson, Sammy (DUP) (East Belfast)

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<i>Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister</i>	Denis Haughey Dermot Nesbitt
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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 11 December 2000

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY: NEW MEMBER

Mr Speaker: At the sitting of 4 December, I informed Members of the resignation of Mr John Hume as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly for the Foyle constituency. I have been advised by the Chief Electoral Officer that the new Member for that constituency is to be Mrs Annie Courtney. I invite Mrs Courtney to take her seat by signing the Roll of Members.

The following Member signed the Roll: Annie Courtney.

Mr Speaker: I am satisfied that the Member has signed the Roll and confirmed her designation. Mrs Courtney has now taken her seat.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Thursday 7 December, my party was informed that today's business would include a motion from the Executive on the Civic Forum. I understand that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have withdrawn that motion and will not proceed with it at this time. I do not know their reason, but that is not relevant to the point of order.

A hole has been left in our business that could have been filled by one of a long list of motions that are queued up for consideration. May I move the suspension of Standing Orders to allow the Business Committee to consider over lunch whether it might take one of the motions from the list and put it at the end of today's sitting after all other business on the Order Paper has been dealt with?

Mr Speaker: As the House will know, sometimes the business that the Business Committee has agreed — whether a motion, a Bill or some other matter — is withdrawn. That is the case for private Members, and I regret to say that it has happened on several occasions. It also happens from time to time with Ministers and others.

The Member is correct that that alters the business, but at least Members know what the business is when they receive the Order Paper. I regret that it is not possible to table a motion for a suspension of Standing Orders, on this or any other matter, without its being on the Order Paper.

Mr P Robinson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful, but I wish to make certain that I understood what you said. I see no stipulation in Standing Order 72 that that must be done by way of a written motion.

Mr Speaker: Standing Order 12(7) states that

“Motions relating to the business of the Assembly” —

for example, suspension of Standing Orders —

“shall be taken at the commencement of public business after notice and shall be decided without amendment or debate.”

Members have not had written notice, which must be on the Order Paper. That is how we have proceeded heretofore.

Mr P Robinson: I accept that. Perhaps I should have expressed myself more clearly. I refer to Standing Order 72, which would enable us to suspend the Standing Order to which you refer, if Members so wished. There was no edge to my comments about the withdrawal of the motion. It is simply a matter of good business practice to let everyone deal with a motion sought by one or more Members in the normal way, rather than give them the afternoon off.

Mr Speaker: I understand that the Member is referring to Standing Order 72. However, a motion for suspension is no different from any other motion, and under Standing Order 12(7) a motion for suspension of Standing Orders — a motion on the business of the House — would have to be on the Order Paper. I make no comment about whether that is a good way to arrange business under Standing Orders; I am simply doing my best to interpret Standing Orders and keep everything in order. I regret that we must now move on.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS BILL

First Stage

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill to make provision to facilitate the use of electronic communications and electronic data storage.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

DOGS (AMENDMENT) BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Under the powers given to me in Standing Order 34(1) I have decided to accept a late amendment to this Bill, tabled by Mr P Robinson, on the ground of exceptional circumstances. I trust that the circumstances will indeed prove to be exceptional.

The Bill was, as I understand it, listed in the forthcoming business sheet for the week beginning 15 January 2001, or later. At an earlier stage a number of points, including the matter at issue, had been raised by Mr Robinson, and a ministerial reply was expected. I understand that when the Bill was rescheduled for today the ministerial reply had not been received. I cannot say whether it was sent. As I pointed out to the Business Committee, the whole purpose of the Further Consideration Stage becomes nugatory if Members are unable to table amendments. They only know from the Order Paper of the final opportunity for amendments after the deadline for the submission of amendments.

I hope that these circumstances will be exceptional, and on that ground I have accepted this amendment. It is the only amendment on the Marshalled List, and I trust that Members have received it.

Clause 1 (Power of court to order destruction of dogs)

Mr P Robinson: I beg to move amendment number 1: In page 1, line 7, after “shall” insert

‘, unless, having taken account of all the circumstances, it appears to the court that exceptional mitigating factors exist,’.

I had expected, at the beginning of Further Consideration Stage, some explanation from the Minister as to why the Bill was being debated earlier than had been contemplated. It was on the list of forthcoming business scheduled for the week commencing 15 January 2001.

The handling of the Bill has perhaps been the worst practice of any Department that I have seen for a long time. First, the Bill was introduced without consulting those who have to enforce it, namely local authorities. To this day, they complain about aspects of the Bill and the fact that they have never been asked to comment on it. In her reply, which I eventually received, the Minister offered as an excuse the circumstances relating to the setting up of devolution in Northern Ireland as the reason why proper consultation did not take place. Of course, she and her Department did have time to consult with the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA), but she did not have time to consult with the statutory body responsible for enforcing dogs legislation — namely, local government in Northern Ireland.

Even after receiving complaints from local government, the Minister did not attempt to consult it on the issue. In

effect, if it had not been for the exercise of the Speaker’s discretion, the Department would have succeeded in time-barring the Assembly from putting down any amendments. I shall quote the undertaking given by the Minister at the Consideration Stage, when she could not answer the questions that I had asked:

“As regards the other questions to which the Member seems to think he has received no answers, I am perfectly open in saying that I have not answered all his questions because I had no notice of them. There are issues involved which I, as a Minister, would be foolish to address off the top of my head.”

10.45 am

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development undertook to answer in writing, and she made it clear during the course of the debate that if Members were dissatisfied, they could table amendments at this stage. Therefore it was not unusual for a Member to hold back before tabling an amendment to see whether the Minister could resolve the difficulties raised at the earlier stage.

However, I had to ring the Minister’s Department last Thursday to ask for a copy of a letter that it said had been sent to me. Indeed, it was sent to me, after the request had gone to the Business Committee to consider this matter for this week’s business. Therefore, in effect, when I received the communication it was too late, according to the Standing Orders, to put down any amendment. However, with the exercise of your discretion, Mr Speaker, it has been possible for this amendment to be taken.

It is important that I set my amendment in context. As Members will know, a district council has no discretion at present — if a dog is proven to have attacked a person or to have worried sheep, the council must seek a destruction order in the courts. Equally, the courts have no discretion if they find that a dog did attack a person. “Attack”, in this sense, it is worth pointing out, has a wider meaning than would otherwise be assumed. The interpretation given in the Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 includes not only a physical attack on a person but the case in which the dog has behaved

“in such a manner so as to cause a person apprehension of being attacked”.

At present, if a person is left with the apprehension that he or she is being attacked, that is sufficient for the courts to make a judgement on the matter, and they have no choice on what that judgement should be. They have to issue a destruction order on the dog.

It is obvious that this piece of legislation is intended to give some limited scope to the courts. In fact, the Bill itself does not offer any discretion to the council. It will still be necessary to take the case to the courts, and the courts will then have only limited discretion as to what they may do. They can, of course, issue a destruction order, or they can consider some other measure that should be taken by way of what might be described as

punishment if it has been proved that an attack took place.

The Bill does not provide the courts with the discretion to determine that the dog should be exonerated in all the circumstances. How can the Minister argue that it is right to let the courts have discretion to determine whether the dog should be destroyed or whether some measures falling short of destruction should be applied, while not giving them the discretion to determine whether no action should be taken?

When the case comes to court, if an attack has taken place and the dog has been found guilty, only the extent of the punishment is to be determined. The Department is, in effect, saying to the Assembly that there are no circumstances in which a dog might attack or behave

“in such a manner so as to cause a person apprehension of being attacked”

that can be justified. A dog can never be justified in attacking an individual. That is the Department’s argument. I do not agree. I mentioned one such set of circumstances at the Consideration Stage.

I shall refer to it as the “Rover to the rescue” scenario, in which a dog comes to the rescue of its owner if the owner is under attack. One could perhaps hypothesise about several other possibilities: if a dog were the subject of severe brutality, it might be justified in its attempts to extricate itself from those circumstances. I have not tried to stretch my imagination too far in providing those examples, but I am sure, given the vivid imagination of some Assembly Members, that they could provide other examples. However, that does raise the question of why the Minister is insisting that a dog must be punished in those circumstances.

Does the Minister not trust the courts to exercise their discretion properly? One can only assume that she has confidence in the courts, otherwise she would not be giving them that additional element of discretion. Indeed, given the courts’ past practice, there is no justification for not giving them this further element of discretion. My amendment is framed to ensure that the courts know that only in rare and manifestly justifiable circumstances will they be able to exercise their discretion to the extent of exonerating the dog.

Mr Speaker, you set an excellent example when you exercised your discretion and said that you are prepared to do so only in very limited circumstances. The amendment is framed in such a way that it is made clear to the courts that they can exercise their discretion only in very rare and limited circumstances. It would be unreasonable for the Minister to resist the amendment.

I have attempted to determine why, in her response to me, the Minister was not prepared to accept the substance of the amendment. I suppose that when attempting to guess other people’s motives, one is treading on dangerous

territory, but it strikes me that this is, perhaps, departmental arrogance. Is it a question of “Our officials framed this piece of legislation; the experts drafted it. How dare those Assembly Members think that they will be able to find some imperfection in our handiwork.” Perhaps there is a direct rule legacy in the Department — “We are the people who will decide these matters, and we do not want any interference in the process from elected representatives.”

Even in the correspondence that I received from her, the Minister gives little glimpse as to why she would turn down the amendment. From her correspondence, I can only deduce one explicit reason that she offers and, perhaps, one implicit reason. I want to deal with both of these. In her letter to me, she says:

“I fully understand the kind of situation you describe, i.e. where the dog is defending his owner and bites an attacker or intruder, and in those circumstances I could foresee the courts operating with a fairly light touch.”

That is a telling sentence. It is a recognition on the part of the Department and the Minister that they recognise a set of circumstances as being valid. However, in dealing with that, all the Minister has to say is that she recognises that that set of circumstances could come about, and she hopes that the courts will let the dog off lightly “for its gallantry”. That is only a “hope”, of course, because it is left to the discretion of the courts as to how they interpret the legislation. That seems to be a strange approach by the Minister. I suspect that if a soldier were to come to the rescue of a member of the public he would be mentioned in dispatches.

If another citizen came to the rescue of a member of the public, he or she might be awarded a medal. The press might even bestow some credit on that person. However, if a faithful dog that loves its owner is prepared to put itself in harm’s way in order to protect its owner, the Minister’s answer is, “Well, you do not necessarily have to kill it; you can just punish it slightly.” That does not seem to be a very humane approach to the matter, and it is a definition of mercy and compassion that I would not want to share. I can see no logic in the thinking behind that.

The other implicit reason given by the Minister in her correspondence for making no change in the Bill is that, based on past experience, there would be very few such occasions. The Minister said

“There are relatively few destruction orders made each year; in 1999 there were 40 attacks on people and 16 attacks on livestock; and I would envisage only a very few of those raising issues which might lead the Courts to consider that measures other than destruction could be taken to prevent the dog being a danger to the public or to livestock.”

I do not know for how many years we might expect this piece of legislation to be in force in its present form. The last similar piece of legislation came forward in 1983. Therefore, for the purpose of my calculation, I am

going to take a period of 17 years. On the 1999 figures provided by the Minister, that makes about 1,000 cases that may come before the courts.

I do not know — and neither does the Minister — how many of those cases would be of the kind for which the amendment might be applied. I do not think that it is a sensible approach for the Minister to say that it is not worth making the change that we could make today with so little effort. She would rather punish gallant dogs and be unjust than allow her Bill to be changed in any way.

Mr Speaker, you will know from your experience in another place that amendments generally fall into one of three categories. First, amendments can be tabled with the intention of doing violence to the Bill, of changing its direction, of attempting to undermine the key principles. In those circumstances, I would never be surprised if a Minister were to oppose an amendment. The second category is where somebody takes the opportunity that the Bill raises of riding his hobby horse across the pages of the Bill and putting down an amendment to extend it in some direction. I would seldom be surprised if a Minister might resist his or her Bill being used in that manner of convenience. However, there is a third category where Members try to improve the legislation to enhance the intention of the Bill, and are being helpful to the Minister and the Department.

It is obvious that this amendment does no violence to the principle that the Minister has included in this Bill. It is consistent with the purpose of the Bill, which is to allow the courts to have more discretion. I do not see how the Minister could argue that the amendment takes the Bill off in another direction — it is riding the same path that the Minister is riding. The only issue is whether it is right that in certain circumstances it might be opportune for the court to have the discretion not to destroy or to instruct that measures be applied to punish the dog for any action in which it has been involved.

11.00 am

As my amendment seeks only to improve and enhance the stated intention of the Bill, any attempt by the Minister to defeat the change will leave her defending the incomprehensible and appearing obstinate and arrogant. She will be seen to be defending her Department's shortcomings with the same vigour as she might defend her honour or virtue.

Mr Speaker: For the sake of completeness, I should say that there is at least one type of amendment in addition to the list that the Member has given. It is not uncommon for probing amendments to be put down. Their purpose is not to wreck or divert the Bill or divide the House, but to ensure that the Minister will put something on the record. That could be by way of an undertaking for a later stage, which is not relevant at this stage of the Bill, or something might be said by the Minister that could, subsequent to the *Pepper v Hart* judgement, be used by

the courts in the interpretation of a piece of legislation, if it were unclear what the legislation intended.

The Member has helpfully referred to the fact that there are different kinds of amendments used by the House, and by Members, in different ways. This amendment has, however, been tabled and proposed.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I intend to accept the amendment. Does that remove the need for a debate?

Mr Speaker: It is possible for the Minister to respond by way of acceptance, but normally Members could make some other remarks if they wanted to do so. Some of those remarks may be tempered by the Minister's intervention.

Mr S Wilson: I support the amendment. I know that the Minister has said that she will accept the amendment, but I cannot leave this issue without reiterating the criticism of the handling of the Bill. There has not been the kind of consultation for which one would have hoped for, especially with those who will have to enforce the legislation. As has been said, this is not unique to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. There is still a pervading sense in Departments that the expertise lies with their own legislative draftsmen. How dare anybody from outside criticise that?

We shall also find that problem with other Bills. Ministers ought to give due consideration to the people who have to implement legislation. They know where difficulties arise and where problems have occurred in the past. Therefore, they can see the flaws in the legislation, which in many cases is drawn up from the point of view of academic expertise rather than experience.

I shall reinforce my Colleague's point. I am glad that the Minister has accepted the amendment, for a couple of reasons. First, one thing that has attracted much bad publicity to councils — and it has been the case in the council on which I serve — is when a destruction order on a dog has been made that, in the circumstances, has been patently unfair. Councils have no powers of discretion. The officer on the ground cannot make a judgement.

He cannot say, "There are mitigating circumstances that persuade me not to pursue this case in the courts." Under the terms of the Bill, the courts will not be able to exercise discretion in the circumstances that were described by my Colleague. Ultimately, the council will be at the front line when it comes to making destruction orders and will therefore attract all the bad publicity. The Bill gives the court some limited discretion, but, without the amendment, it does not give the court the discretion to do nothing.

It was ironic that the Minister had to rely on the argument that a court might "deal lightly" with a dog "in certain circumstances". What does that mean? The options

open to a court, if it decides not to require that a dog be put down, are to muzzle it, confine it, exclude it or neuter it — all that from a Minister whose party has complained vigorously about the Government's attempts to muzzle terrorists.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr S Wilson: I am trying to draw a parallel.

Mr Speaker: Order. I can think of another parallel — how the Speaker should deal with Members. The Member should review what he said about the meaning of the phrase “dealing lightly” in tomorrow's Hansard. He should be cautious about making comparisons with other areas, as the Speaker might be tempted to do so as well. The Member must remain tightly within the confines of the amendment and not wander too far from it.

Mr S Wilson: I hope that you were not considering the fourth option that I mentioned, Mr Speaker. I could have gone on to speak about exclusion orders or incarceration, which the Minister's party has deemed to be inappropriate for terrorists.

The clause sets out how a court might “deal lightly” with a dog that has been protecting its owner or his owner's property. The Department should accept the amendment. We must be vigilant about allowing Departments to think that they know better and that they can railroad measures. That would be against the whole ethos of devolution.

Mr P Robinson: I am aware of the practice of tabling probing amendments, and deliberately did not mention it lest it give the Minister an easy route out.

The courts often consider the intentions of legislators. There is a sentence in the Minister's letter that follows on from what my hon Friend said about the four specific measures mentioned in the Bill. In the letter the Minister says

“The kind of restrictions mentioned in clause 1 sets the parameters for the restrictions which the court could place on a dog but there is no reason why the courts should not, if it thought circumstances so dictated, define other measures sufficient to prevent the dog being a danger to the public or to livestock.”

I simply put the matter on record because the courts may want to know that they have that additional measure of flexibility.

Mr S Wilson: It is important to have that matter on the record because — as Mr Robinson pointed out — the courts will often look at the intention behind legislation when it was being debated.

Finally — and I know that this has been raised before — there is concern as to how this legislation is to be enforced. The restraining, confining or exclusion of dogs will mean additional work for a local authority, although that is not being made clear. If that is to be the case, perhaps the Minister will clarify whether she intends for

additional resources to be made available. Will those funds have to be found by local councils?

Ms Rodgers: It seems that the mover of the amendment has pre-empted my thinking and has presumed that I would not accept his amendment. Perhaps he underestimates his own powers of persuasion. He is very good on rhetoric but sometimes not so good on substance. It was interesting; perhaps he is not used to dealing with people with open minds. I am pleased that the Members opposite recognise the value of devolution and hope that they will continue to recognise it.

I did not have any amendments at the Consideration Stage, but Members will be aware that the Bill passed Committee Stage and — as Mr Robinson acknowledged when speaking at Consideration Stage — missed some key points. It is interesting that the Committee, of which he seemed to be somewhat critical, is chaired by his party leader and includes two more of his party members.

The timing of the Bill is not a matter for the Department, as the Member will probably be aware. The issue of consultation has been discussed at length in the House and at Committee Stage, and the reasons have already been given. I do not intend to go over them again. As regards additional resources, application of the legislation would be a matter for the RUC.

I have carefully considered the proposed amendment to clause 1. It seeks to further extend the courts' discretion on whether to order the destruction of a dog or apply a lesser penalty, such as muzzling or confinement, where the dog has attacked people or livestock. The clause was drafted on the basis that if it were proved to the satisfaction of the court that an attack had taken place, the court would take any mitigating circumstances into account. Nevertheless, the court would still have to apply a penalty provision at whatever level it thought fit, in accordance with the provisions in the Bill.

That said, insofar as the terms of the proposed amendment offer the court the option of not applying a penalty at all, I am happy to accept it on the grounds that it is limited to circumstances in which exceptional mitigating factors exist. As such, it will offer the courts the widest possible discretion in any case of a dog attacking a person or worrying livestock. The Bill will therefore be amended accordingly.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has said that the timing of the Bill is not a matter for the Department. That, of course, is correct. It is, however, a matter for the Executive Committee, under Standing Order 12(4). It was at that Committee's request that the Bill was introduced at this time.

Mr P Robinson: The Minister is right in saying that I am somewhat surprised that she has accepted the amendment. It is not because of her ability to take into account any reasoned argument put forward, nor is it

because I consider the Minister to be incapable of comprehending reasoned arguments. When the Minister wrote to me regarding the matters that I raised, which included this one, at Consideration Stage, I expected her to say that she was willing to accept an amendment, or to put down an amendment herself. She did not; therefore I tabled the amendment. I am pleasantly surprised, if not delighted, that the Minister is prepared to accept it.

11.15 am

I do not wish to appear churlish, but the amendment does improve the Bill considerably. Despite the Minister giving me what might be described as dog's abuse in her remarks, I must say that at no stage did I offer any criticism of the Committee — neither at Further Consideration Stage nor at Consideration Stage in November 2000. My criticism was of the Department, which has a responsibility to consult with those persons responsible for enforcing legislation that passes through the House. A Department cannot assume that a Committee will do the work for it. Instead, Departments should be managing the wider consultation, especially in the light of the amount of work with which Committees are faced. It is not possible for Committees to bring in various interested parties for every Bill that comes before them.

The Minister may think it a telling point when she says to us that there is a value in devolution. I do not know where the Minister has been, but the Democratic Unionist Party is a devolution party. We believe in devolution. We believe that devolution is in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland for precisely the reasons she is explaining. Certainly, we have major difficulties and objections to the form of devolution being exercised in Northern Ireland, but that does not detract from our adherence to the principles of devolution, which we believe is in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Bill passed Further Consideration Stage and referred to the Speaker under Standing Order 35(3).

PART-TIME WORKERS REGULATIONS

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): I beg to move

That the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 be approved.

I shall refer to these Regulations as the Part-time Regulations. They were brought before the Assembly on 27 June 2000 and came into operation on 1 July 2000. They are subject to confirmation by the Assembly within six months of the date that they came into operation.

The Regulations implemented European Directive 97/81/EC, as extended to the UK by Directive 98/23/EC, in Northern Ireland, and correspond closely to those made by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in Britain, which also came into force on 1 July 2000. Their aim is straightforward: they make it unlawful for unscrupulous employers to treat part-time workers less favourably than comparable full-timers.

Part-time workers, therefore, must receive the same hourly rate of pay as full-timers, the same access to occupational pension schemes, the same access to training and the same entitlement to annual, parental and maternity leave on a pro rata basis. In that way we can ensure that part-time workers are not treated less favourably in their contractual terms and conditions than comparable full-timers, unless different treatment is justified on objective grounds.

I commend the Regulations to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee (Dr Birnie): I am grateful for the opportunity to make some comments on my own behalf and on behalf of the Committee. I appreciate the Minister's remarks. It is of note that equivalent Regulations now apply in the other parts of the United Kingdom and that these Regulations have been in operation in Northern Ireland since July. As the Minister said, it is somewhat imperative that we confirm these Regulations today so that in meeting required timescales we comply with European law.

The underlying reason is the possibility of so-called Frankovich cases. The European Court has now made provision for individuals to sue the Government in their jurisdiction if that Government fail to implement current European Directives and Regulations. The Committee regrets that suspension between February and June cut short any contribution from the Committee at drafting stage of the Regulations in Northern Ireland. Notwithstanding that, on 9 November, the Committee took evidence on the Regulations and, on 10 November, we wrote to the Minister, listing some of our main concerns. It was not felt that those concerns merited a special report to the Assembly.

The burden of our concern is with respect to the limitation on the comparators against which part-time workers under this Directive are to be compared. It implies that only some, not all, part-timers will be able to avail of protection under the Regulations. Particularly of note is the fact that in these Regulations, unlike the Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976, there is no provision for a so-called hypothetical comparator.

The Committee supports the motion because it approves of the broad principles of equity contained in the Regulations. At the same time, it is concerned about some of the details. In this matter, we are constrained to a great extent to comply with the rest of the European Union. Nevertheless, the Committee stresses the value and appropriateness of an early review on the part of the Minister and the Department of the implementation of the Regulations to ensure that they are achieving their objective, which is the equitable treatment of part-timers relative to full-time workers.

I urge support for the motion.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee (Mr Carrick): I agree with Dr Birnie. I welcome the extension of statutory rights of equal treatment to part-time workers. Although the Committee raised several issues with the Minister, it is aware that the legislation needs to be brought into force. Apart from the absence of the hypothetical comparator referred to by Dr Birnie, the Committee was concerned at the absence of a code of practice, which many of the bodies responding to the Department's consultation process had asked for. Although that is not a flaw in the legislation itself, we believe that a statutory code of practice would give extra weight to the legislation and give clear guidance to part-time workers on their rights.

Many part-time workers are employed by small organisations that do not have the resources to make the advice available. A code of practice conveys good practice guidelines. I note that a similar document supporting legislation on recruitment and selection helped to change the culture in that area, as well as providing useful guidance for employers and employees alike.

The Committee also examined guidance on the Regulations that has been made available in all jobcentres. Although easily readable, the guide, we found, was confusing in some areas, and at times it gave misleading or perhaps unlawful guidance. Our views on that have been submitted to the Minister. In particular, the lack of statutory guidance on what comprises objective grounds for an appeal under the legislation leaves the whole issue to be sorted out at a tribunal. The onus is on the individual to identify his or her rights as a part-timer. We consider that employers should periodically review how individuals are provided with information on their rights as part-time workers.

I note that House of Commons staff are specifically mentioned in the corresponding legislation. Individuals in the Assembly have not been included in the Northern Ireland Regulations that we examined. I am especially concerned that staff working in the Northern Ireland Assembly should be covered by the legislation.

I too wonder how the effect of these Regulations will be evaluated. There should be some form of future inspection to ensure that the Regulations have been implemented properly and are being adhered to by employers. Despite my reservations, I agree with the Chairman about the importance of the Regulations.

I support the motion and commend it to the House.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the extension of the statutory right of equal treatment to part-time workers. The Committee raised several issues with the Minister. One of those issues was a code of practice that would give clear guidelines to part-time workers on their rights. The Committee believes that a statutory code of practice would not only add weight to the legislation but also guarantee protection for the most vulnerable workers, especially those working in smaller firms.

As the moment, part-time workers on fixed-term contracts cannot pursue a claim to win equal rights, even if they can find a full-time worker with a similar contract to act as a comparator. The absence of comparators is a serious weakness in the legislation and means that a large number of workers in low-paid jobs such as cleaning and catering, mainly women, will have limited protection. Similar limitations mean that the rights and terms of employment of term-time workers — a subject much discussed in the Assembly — cannot be properly addressed.

The rights of casual and temporary workers, home workers, agency workers, and other non-timed piece workers cannot be addressed either.

11.30 am

However, the legislation is welcome as a step in the right direction, although it is also a missed opportunity to really put in place legislation that would impact on the huge number of part-time workers in the North — approximately 200,000. The estimate that this legislation will impact on only 7,000 of those part-time workers indicates some of the legislation's weaknesses. It is obvious that the legislation promised businesses and employers a light touch, and certainly a minimum of red tape. However, I welcome the introduction of the legislation. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Ms Morrice: We also welcome the introduction of legislation that puts part-time workers on the same footing as full-time workers. That is important. However, we have several important concerns on which we would be grateful for further clarification from the Minister.

Obviously, the Regulations are of particular interest to the Women's Coalition, because 83·1% of part-timers are women. Some 36% of women work part-time, compared to 6% of men.

We are aware that these Regulations are the implementation of the European Commission Directive on part-time workers, brought into Great Britain legislation, and now extended to Northern Ireland. We are concerned that, in the rest of the UK, the Directive has been given the narrowest possible interpretation. However, on listening to the Minister, I have been given some assurance that several areas of concern could be alleviated — for example, the issue of the rates of pay. There is a marked incidence of low pay among part-time workers in Northern Ireland. The figures show that, in 1999, 22% of part-time employees earned less than £4 an hour, and, of those, 80% were women.

The earlier notes to the Regulations gave an example of a justified difference in hourly rates where employees are shown to have a different level of performance, measured by a fair and consistent appraisal system. I am assuming that the Minister, in his opening statement, said that there would be no difference in hourly pay between full-time and part-time workers. We welcome movement on that issue.

Our second point is on training. We are all aware that training has been much less available to part-time workers. In the Minister's opening statement, we heard that this also is to be clarified and that part-time workers will have access to training. That is vitally important, given that the majority of part-time workers are women. It is vital that they have access to training.

Dr Birnie raised the issue of comparators. Mr Carrick raised the point of the code of practice, which is important. We have a further question about situations when differential treatment is justified on objective grounds. It is important to understand what "objective grounds" means, so that we do not leave too many loopholes that could be used by unscrupulous employers to discriminate against people.

Those are the main points on which we wish to seek assurance. We support the calls from Dr Birnie and Mr Carrick for an early review of the implementation of the Regulations to ensure that they are being properly applied and that there is absolutely no discrimination against part-time workers.

Dr Farren: I thank all the Members who have spoken on this issue. I share their objective of ensuring that part-time workers enjoy the same level of protection as full-time workers — the same guarantees in their terms and conditions of employment and, insofar as it is necessary, the enhancement of those terms and conditions to the highest possible standard.

We should not assume that all, or many, employers of part-time workers are unscrupulous in their approach or that they are intent on denying workers their rights. It has been pointed out that only a small number of part-time workers will be affected by the Regulations to be implemented under the legislation. However, many part-time workers already enjoy the same standards as their full-time counterparts, and that is the case throughout the public sector. If, as Mr Carrick suggested, there are deficiencies in the conditions of employment of part-time staff in this institution, I would be very anxious to hear about them and to be assured that all part-time workers were receiving the level of protection required by the legislation. I would be very concerned if that were not so.

Points were made on the comparators used to determine terms and conditions for workers. The Regulations require a comparator to be in a job broadly similar to that of a full-time worker,

"having regard ... to qualifications, skills and experience".

Part-time employees are allowed to compare themselves to their predecessors in their posts, and that should be particularly helpful to women returning to work. I am very aware that a significant majority of part-time workers are women. All the evidence shows that many women receive a lower level of remuneration than their male counterparts. I trust that the Regulations that are to come into force under this legislation will go a long way towards enhancing the situation of women.

On the subject of review, I am anxious to ensure that we monitor the implementation of the Regulations, and I am sure that that will happen. We shall be assisted in that by the statutory agencies involved and by the trade union movement, and I shall welcome all their comments, observations, reports and evaluations. We are at the first stage of this legislative process in Northern Ireland. It was introduced shortly after suspension. Before that, there was very limited opportunity for making detailed comment on such legislation, as Dr Birnie pointed out, but that should not prevent the Committee and others from making additional evaluations, which might be helpful to us as we move forward. I trust that I have covered most of the main issues.

The legislation is a significant advance and I commend it to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 be approved.

DRINK-DRIVE OFFENDERS

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

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the Courses for Drink-Drive Offenders (Experimental Period) (Extension) Order (Northern Ireland) 2000.

The Road Traffic Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 provides for an experiment in the use of courses as a sentencing option for convicted drink-drive offenders. On satisfactory completion of the course, the offender may receive a minimum of three months reduction and a maximum reduction of one quarter of the period of disqualification from driving.

The aim of the scheme is to prevent reoffending. The purpose of the experiment is to test the viability of the courses and to facilitate the evaluation of their effectiveness in preventing reoffending.

An Order to reduce a period of disqualification can be made where the following conditions are met: where an offender of 17 years of age or over has been convicted of a relevant drink-driving offence resulting in a driving disqualification of 12 months or more, and the court has explained in ordinary language the provisions of the Order to reduce the period of disqualification to the offender, also informing him or her of the amount of the fees for the course and of the requirement that he or she must pay them before the beginning of the course, the court must be satisfied that a place on the course specified in the order will be available for the offender. Then, with the agreement of the offender, the order may be made.

An experiment has been running in the petty sessions district of Belfast and Newtownabbey since 1 April 1998. That experiment will end on 31 December 2000 unless the Department makes an Order before that date to extend the period. The Probation Board for Northern Ireland was appointed as the sole course organiser, and the fee payable to the organiser is £100. Courses include information about alcohol and its effect on the body, on driving ability and on behaviour; an analysis of personal drinking patterns and how they relate to the driving offence; the impact that drinking and driving can have on victims and their families; alternatives to drinking and driving; and personal strategies and sources of advice to prevent repeat offending.

Each course is made up of nine weekly two-hour sessions. To complete a course successfully a participant must attend all nine sessions in full. To date, 12 courses have been completed; 113 people attended and, of those, 109 — 96% — completed all nine sessions. The remaining four participants withdrew for personal reasons.

The main criterion for judging how successful the courses have been is whether offenders who have attended

a course are less likely to re-offend within three years than those who have not. From 1993 to 1999, courses for drink-drivers were run experimentally in 18 designated areas in England and Wales. The scheme will become permanent there with effect from 1 January 2001. In England and Wales it was found that offenders who had completed a course were almost three times less likely to be reconvicted of a serious drink-driving offence than those who had not.

Initial indications are that courses in Northern Ireland are effective. Participants have shown a marked increase in knowledge about alcohol and its effect on the body, as well as a better attitude to not drinking and driving. However, more time is required for fuller evaluation of the impact of courses on reoffending. The Order before the Assembly will extend the current experimental scheme for a further period of five years, to the end of 2005. The Lord Chancellor will make a separate Order designating all petty sessions districts in Northern Ireland. That will allow all relevant drink-drive offenders in Northern Ireland the opportunity to attend a course. It will also allow the collection of data on a sufficiently large sample of offenders to permit the carrying out of reconviction rate analyses.

I commend the Order to the Assembly.

11.45 am

The Chairperson of the Environment Committee (Rev Dr William McCrea): Drink-driving is a very serious issue. Nothing that has been discussed today, or the Courses for Drink-Drive Offenders (Experimental Period) (Extension) Order (Northern Ireland) 2000, should be understood as taking the issue of drink-driving with anything less than the seriousness and gravitas it deserves. Many innocent people have lost their lives through drink-driving. The Minister brings the motion to the House to try to help people who have been disqualified from driving to see the seriousness of their conviction and to stop them from reoffending. I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House on behalf of the Committee.

The Statutory Rule was brought before the Assembly's Environment Committee on 7 December 2000, and it was unanimously recommended that the Order be affirmed by the Assembly. I fully support that recommendation. However, the Committee had several questions, and officials from the Department of the Environment appeared before us. We still have some concerns that I ask the Minister to consider.

If someone is keen to drive again, surely it must look like a very attractive offer to have his or her suspension reduced if he or she satisfactorily completes a course approved by the Department. We are concerned that the actual take-up rate is very low — some 6% of all offenders. The fee to join the course is £100. To many in the House, £100 may not seem a lot of money. However, for some people who would like to take up this course, and

would greatly benefit from it, the fee could be regarded as a substantial amount. Is it not possible to provide the course at a lower cost? Has the Department considered some form of support from the car insurance industry? After all, it is in its interest as much as anyone else's for the courses to be successful.

The Committee was told that the experiment is to be extended throughout Northern Ireland. However, we were also informed that there will only be four centres — in Belfast, Ballymena, Armagh and Londonderry. Surely this will disadvantage people from outside those areas. For example, how can people from Enniskillen, Larne or Newry be expected to travel to a two-hour session at night? Remember that they do not have a driving licence. Those are questions that have exercised the Committee, and I hope that the Minister will take them on board.

I assure Members that the Committee and I support the Order and urge the House to do likewise.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I would like to reiterate the points made so expertly and comprehensively by our Committee Chairperson to reflect the views of the Committee.

This motion represents an enlightened approach to a significant and growing social problem. I commend the point about the vested interest, almost, of the driver who has been convicted and disqualified, and who wishes to drive again and be reinsured.

In those circumstances, the insurance companies impose a significant increase in the cost of insurance cover. It is important to encourage a greater uptake of this important form of counselling and awareness training. A 6% uptake is really a record of failure, but the concept of the course itself is worthy of strong support. We should try to redress the difficulties faced in obtaining a more appropriate level of uptake. If the Minister could address the insurance brokers directly they may be prepared to make an allowance upon successful completion of the counselling course. I understand that one broker already provides that incentive.

The statistics demonstrate that those who complete the course are three times less likely to reoffend than others with similar convictions who did not opt for the course. All the evidence points to the value and efficacy of that approach, but we must find ways and means of encouraging more and more people to avail themselves of it.

I strongly support the measure. Does the Minister agree that it would benefit us all if we could encourage more convicted drivers to take up the course? One effective means of doing that would be to provide the incentive of an insurance premium deferral or reduction upon successful completion of the course. We would all gain from that.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: I support the Minister's proposals. As Dr McCrea mentioned, we also want to keep in perspective the reasons why drink-driving remains one of society's ills. The television advert launched by the Minister only a few weeks ago highlights the gravity of drink-driving and the need to curtail it.

There has been a decline in drink-driving cases, which we welcome, but much more must be done. The graphic nature of the advert hits home to everyone, but those of us who are parents can relate especially to what happens to the wee boy playing football in the security of his back garden.

At the same time, we must look at the proposal to extend the experimental period, because, in its own way, it addresses some of the important issues. The road accident figures for the past year make horrific reading. They are just up on this year, with 577 alcohol-related and drug-related accidents, 34 fatalities and 1,072 total casualties, ranging from the slightly injured to the seriously injured.

Many of us believe that we should consider zero tolerance of drink-driving. Many people would like to see that. The experimental method in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the United Kingdom has not been very successful. However, it has had a marked level of success. The fact that a solicitor or a barrister, pleading on behalf of an offender, can ask for his client to attend the nine-stage course as a means of rehabilitation through treatment and education is a positive way of addressing the issue. However, I wish to see more of those who have been convicted taking up the course. Perhaps that tells one a lot about the people as well; perhaps they need their jobs more and perhaps they are prepared to redress the wrongs that they have done.

It is fair and just that a successfully rehabilitated offender should be allowed back on the road after a series of courses that will treat and educate him. Many have made mistakes; many are genuinely sorry and wish it had never happened. None the less, it did happen, and they make amends for it.

Can the Minister provide figures broken down into separate categories for driving offences involving drugs and those involving alcohol? Is the Minister considering adding to the existing categories, perhaps creating one specifically for accidents caused by excessive speed? Excessive speed is the biggest killer on the roads and also causes the greatest number of casualties. Dr McCrea mentioned assistance for those travelling to take part in courses. Will such assistance be made available? The four locations are not accessible to everyone in the Province, and the Minister should consider that.

The extension of the experimental scheme for another five years keeps Northern Ireland in line with the position on the United Kingdom mainland. It builds on the limited success of the scheme and gives offenders

the chance to address their mistakes and learn from them. I hope that that will allow offenders to contribute to society more fully than previously.

Mr Foster: Article 36(2) of the Road Traffic Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 states that a court can reduce the period of disqualification imposed on a drink-drive offender, provided that the offender satisfactorily completes a rehabilitation course. By providing for the continuation of that power until the end of 2005, the Order will facilitate a comprehensive evaluation of the experimental scheme. Such an evaluation is necessary if we are to assess the scheme's ability to deter those who participate from reoffending within three years of the relevant conviction. The scheme is a significant road safety measure and will contribute to a reduction in road casualty figures. I hope that, in due course, it will become permanent, but in the meantime I look forward to its continuation and to the evaluation of its effectiveness.

I shall answer the questions asked by Members. I take on board the points that Members have made about the course. These days, when there is terrible carnage on the roads, it is important that we do all that we can to ensure that the number of accidents is reduced. Indeed, it has been suggested that we should have a policy of zero tolerance.

I was asked why the courses could not be provided free or at a reduced fee. It is reasonable that the participants finance the courses, although the cost of the course must not be a disincentive for potential participants. The Probation Board has set the fee with that in mind. The cost of running one course has been estimated at £1,000, which means that 10 participants are necessary for a course to break even. Thus far, the average number of course participants has been just under 10. I assure Members that fee levels will be considered when we make a decision on the scheme's permanency. I am sure that Members appreciate the difficulties.

Dr McCrea referred to the locations in which the courses will be available. Under the extended experiment, courses will be available in Belfast, Ballymena, Londonderry and Armagh, and the offender will choose the location. The provision of courses in other places will be considered, if experience suggests that that is necessary. One of the first points that I made was about the situation for people from isolated areas, such as Enniskillen, my home town, Newry and other areas. My staff will examine that point.

Insurance companies in Northern Ireland do not normally offer reduced premiums to those who have completed a course, although one broker claims to offer such a reduction. Offenders are advised that there is a possibility of obtaining reduced premiums from an insurance broker, but it is up to them to trawl the market. My officials will pursue the matter with insurance brokers and companies in Northern Ireland. However, we cannot make promises, as it is a matter for the individual and the insurance company.

How will the Department increase uptake from the current level of 6%? For the extended experiment, the name of the course will be changed from 'Rehabilitation Courses for Drink Drive Offenders' to 'Courses for Drink Drive Offenders'. That should, to some degree, address the perception that courses are for people with an alcohol problem.

12.00

From August 2000, all offenders referred have received a letter and information leaflet from the course organiser, explaining the purpose of the course and outlining its content. Leaflets are to be redesigned to present information in a simpler and more attractive way. The Department will issue a press release early in 2001 to highlight the extended scheme and what it offers. Solicitors will receive direct mailing, and magistrates will be informed of the extended experiment.

Mr Shannon asked whether courses were available for persons convicted of drug-related road traffic offences and whether they could be extended. He asked for the present breakdown of drink-related and drug-related offences. Alcohol-related offences are the main offences taken into consideration at present. Although drug-related offences are rarer, we shall consider them too.

This presentation on behalf of the community in general is most important as far as road safety is concerned. I trust that I have addressed Members' questions to their satisfaction. My officials will identify any questions or points made that I have overlooked, and I shall write to those concerned. I thank Members for their interest in the debate and for their commendation. I am glad that everyone is in favour of the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the Courses for Drink-Drive Offenders (Experimental Period) (Extension) Order (Northern Ireland) 2000.

**DRAFT FINANCIAL
INVESTIGATIONS ORDER:
ASSEMBLY AD HOC COMMITTEE**

Resolved:

That this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the draft Financial Investigations (Northern Ireland) Order laid by the Secretary of State in accordance with section 85(4)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and to submit a report to the Assembly by 5 February 2001.

Composition: UUP 2
 SDLP 2
 DUP 2
 SF 2
 Other parties 3

Quorum: The quorum shall be five.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be
 such as the Committee shall determine. —
 [*Mr B Hutchinson.*]

The sitting was suspended at 12.03 pm.

*On resuming (Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice]
in the Chair) —*

Oral Answers to Questions

**ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND
INVESTMENT**

**Tourism Advertising:
North/South Co-Operation**

2.30 pm

1. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on co-operation in advertising between the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Bord Fáilte. (AQO 472/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Bord Fáilte have co-operated on joint advertising since 1987. Following the creation of the overseas tourism marketing initiative in 1995 and Brand Ireland in 1996, annual joint expenditure of approximately £10 million has generated approximately 400,000 annual enquiries. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board's initial contribution of £500,000 was followed by annual contributions of £300,000.

Mr Armstrong: Whatever the merits of joint advertising and marketing between Northern Ireland and the Republic, it is important that Northern Ireland's product be clearly identified for potential visitors. Will the Minister assure the Assembly that Northern Ireland will be represented properly in the joint promotion logo?

Sir Reg Empey: The answer is "Yes." We have to understand that the objective is to increase the number of visitors to Northern Ireland. People coming from abroad see Europe as a unit and these islands as a unit; they do not see particular regions within those units.

It is clear, under the terms of the arrangements that have been entered into, that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, in conjunction with Bord Fáilte, will be establishing this company. It is the creature of the two tourist boards. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board will retain the responsibility and requirements to continue with regional marketing. It was specifically written into the arrangements setting up the company that it treat, be aware of and take into account in its campaigns the particular circumstances that pertained here over the past 30 years. I am confident that that will be achieved.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comments on the figures. With regard to the amount of money allocated and spent from Northern and Southern Ireland,

can he indicate, for each region, the number of people who have made Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland their tourist destination? Is the joint advertising campaign providing value for money to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board? Also, when will the new chief executive be appointed?

Sir Reg Empey: With regard to value for money issues, advertising of any kind, as the Member will know, is extremely difficult to measure. At the same time, if it is not undertaken people will complain. We can only point to the fact that in the last few years there have been steady increases in the number of tourists and in the amount of their spend. Also, 400,000 enquiries per year have been generated as a result of the advertising. There is evidence on the web sites, and surveys are carried out to ask people where and how they heard about Northern Ireland. That gives some indication.

The Member will know that in any walk of life or in any commercial activity it is difficult to measure precisely how much activity comes through any particular type of advertising promotion — there is a variety of types. I am satisfied that the position with regard to advertising and promoting tourism is essential. Here in Northern Ireland, we are operating at one third of the capacity that I believe our industry has, if you compare us with our nearest neighbours in Scotland and the Republic.

With regard to the last point, proposals are under way for such an appointment. As the Member will understand, the current appointment is temporary, and I hope the situation will be clarified within the next few months.

Department Agencies

2. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when he intends to report on the reorganisation of agencies responsible to his Department.
(AQO 471/00)

12. **Mr Close** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made on creating a single development agency for Northern Ireland.
(AQO 457/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I will answer questions 2 and 12 together.

On 26 October 2000 I issued a consultation paper to ministerial colleagues, the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, the business representative bodies and other social partners of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and to the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance.

The consultation has ended, and I have received many helpful comments and representations. I plan to make a statement to this House before the Christmas recess.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's response. He is undoubtedly aware that local authorities in Northern Ireland play an important role in economic regeneration. In his review, will he undertake to give positive consideration to increasing that role?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member knows my views on the role that local government can play in economic development, since I have experience of it, and was involved with it at the start of the 1990s. The answer to his question is "Yes". However, I have to add the caveat — which we have announced in the Programme for Government — that we will be carrying out a review of public administration generally, and that will include local government.

That reform proposal, when carried out — which I hope will be sooner rather than later — will result in the capacity of local government being increased in order to deal with many of the social and economic issues that local authorities face.

However, there already is, and will continue to be under any new proposal that I will be bringing forward to this House, a meaningful role for local authorities in such things as the Business Start Programme and in other partnership models, where I believe local authorities can bring not only resources and expertise, but local knowledge, which is absolutely critical to ensure that agencies of the Department are fully informed and aware of local needs and local sensitivities.

Mr McMenamin: Does the Minister agree that the proliferation of quangos in Northern Ireland was the result of the many defects of direct rule, that it led to unaccountable government and that it was wasteful of public money? Can the Minister assure the Assembly that he will move speedily to dismantle these quangos and introduce accountable government to the people of Northern Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: I entirely agree with the remarks of the hon Member. I believe that quangos were a substitute for, and a visible expression of, the absence of genuine accountable democracy. As the Member knows, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has a limited number of agencies. We are currently examining those. I hope that, in time, he will see my determination to ensure that the number of such organisations is fewer rather than greater. However, we have to understand that there are a considerable number of quangos. There are scores of organisations; some are very large and some deliver significant services. I believe that in the review of public administration that the Executive has indicated it will be undertaking, these are exactly the issues that will be considered. I hope that all Assembly Members will have input into that review. I entirely endorse the Member's sentiments.

Mr McCarthy: In view of the many difficulties experienced by local entrepreneurs in trying to progress

their business at a much quicker pace, does the Minister agree that effort should be made to cut out all unnecessary red tape? Perhaps a single agency, properly resourced, would contribute to that.

Sir Reg Empey: I take the point. I have answered previous questions about regulation and red tape. I have carried out a review of my Department, and, indeed, later this week I shall meet my officials again to examine whether particular regulations are absolutely necessary. Section by section, my Department will examine every piece of paper that has been generated to see whether it is essential.

The need for quicker responses is growing all the time, because of the changing nature of the businesses that we are being asked to support. The Assembly is committed to assisting the knowledge-based economy, and companies require quick responses — the old way is no longer the right way. I fully understand the Member's sentiments.

Brussels Office for Northern Ireland (Department Representation)

3. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he plans to have a presence in the Office to be established in Brussels by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

(AQO 456/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I certainly expect to make use of the facilities provided by the Executive's office in Brussels. The IDB is examining the feasibility of a permanent presence in the office.

Mr Ford: I am disappointed to hear that the Minister is only considering an IDB presence. He has already referred to Northern Ireland's untapped tourism potential — a matter that is within his Department's remit. There are moves to promote inward investment, which is a necessary part of local economic development, so the Minister should say definitely that there will be a Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment presence in the Brussels office — not that he is just considering it.

Sir Reg Empey: Responsibility for establishing the office lies with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I have made representations on this subject, but it is for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to decide the shape and nature of the Brussels office.

When I was a director of the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe I encouraged moves to establish the office. I was also involved in designating the site that has now been obtained; it is an excellent location directly beside the European Parliament building. The former Northern Ireland Centre in Europe had some IDB support to enable it to hold functions and bring people in, and the centre was used for that purpose on a number of occasions. I hope

and expect that the same will apply in this case, but it requires the agreement of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. We have some representation in Germany, and we have organised a campaign to raise our profile in mainland Europe for early next year.

I hope to give a positive response to the Member's question in due course. I hope that that will be the outcome.

Mrs Carson: The Minister told us that he was thinking about an IDB presence in Brussels. Does he agree that co-ordination would be enhanced greatly if the IDB office were to be located in the Executive Committee's office?

Sir Reg Empey: I agree. It would make sense for IDB to be in that office, rather than in a separate one, and I have made representations on that basis. I also hope that it will be possible to reach whatever accommodation is required with the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe. Any Executive business on the European mainland should be carried out there, thus creating economies of scale. Anyone working in the office would have a status within the European system that would give them certain advantages. I am sure that you will appreciate that point, Madam Deputy Speaker. Anyone operating separately from and independently of that office would not have the same status, and that would diminish their role. I therefore fully support the Member's views.

Electricity Prices

2.45 pm

4. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any discussions he has had with Northern Ireland Electricity plc regarding electricity price rises.

(AQO 474/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Following privatisation, responsibility for ensuring that electricity prices are cost-effective rests with the independent regulator. Northern Ireland Electricity plc (NIE) and the regulator issued a joint statement on 7 December on the introduction of a comprehensive package of measures aimed at mitigating the effects of the 9% increase in tariffs from January 2001.

Mr McClarty: While accepting that the regulator, rather than the Minister, has direct responsibility in this area, I am sure that the Minister will accept that all of us in the Assembly have a duty to address the problem of fuel poverty, which leads to hundreds of deaths every year. Will he and his Colleagues in the Executive Committee undertake to persuade NIE to take account of those in fuel poverty before it hikes its prices again?

Sir Reg Empey: I am very conscious of the anger that was expressed in this House on the day that the increase was announced. You will recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we were having a debate on that very day and the views of Members were expressed from all sides of this House with equal vehemence.

The Member for East Londonderry (Mr McClarty) will be aware that the question of fuel poverty rests with my Colleague, the Minister for Social Development. However, my Department and I are conscious of the overall position with regard to electricity prices in Northern Ireland, which is and remains totally unsatisfactory.

As Members know, part of the problem rests with the contracts that were entered into in 1992, and part rests with the costs of distribution and transmission — which remains an NIE matter. Another part, which is outside our control, relates to rising world fuel prices throughout the year 2000. A cocktail of issues is involved.

We are trying to address those issues through more open competition — 35% of the market will be open for competition by April 2001. That primarily affects the commercial sector. However, the reality is that we are continuing to seek a long-term viable solution to this energy problem which has haunted us for the last nine years. It is only when we try to look at the global picture that we can get a response. Every time that there is an increase we are increasing upon a very high base. That is the fundamental problem, and we are trying to address its core rather than take a piecemeal approach to it.

Mr McGrady: The Minister's reply illustrated the problem and the extent to which he appears to be powerless. He pointed out very strongly that the Assembly had debated this matter and that there had been accord right round the Chamber. Surely it is important, after nine or 10 years of these impossible contracts, that we should in some way be able to buy ourselves out of the horrible situation where domestic electricity prices are 53% greater than in the Republic and industrial electricity prices are 75% greater. How can we compete in the industrial sector?

Can the Minister engage with the chief executive of NIE on two issues — first, on the prices which have been referred to; secondly, on shareholders taking less and passing more profits back to the consumer, given the total cartel situation? Will he look at legislation to give the independent regulator more power to address the gross distortions that have been mentioned in relation to transmission and distribution?

Does the Minister agree that we must take action rather than wait for something to happen?

Sir Reg Empey: I assure the hon Member that I am taking action. I am involved with the issue continually. However, he knows that contracts were entered into some years ago. They are legally binding contracts.

He talks about buying out, but we are talking about huge sums of money here — and I emphasise that. This is not small change; we are talking about hundreds of millions of pounds. I am trying to find a mechanism to deal with this that does not break the bank of the Department of Finance and Personnel. Consultants have been appointed, and a team is looking at this every few days with a view

to finding a solution. I can assure the hon Member, however, that it will not be easy.

At present, the regulator is engaged in a review of transmission costs. That is something over which he and Northern Ireland Electricity have some control. The differential between distribution costs here and those on the mainland is growing, and that is a worrying factor. I said in a previous debate, and I repeat now, that we are planning to introduce a new utilities Bill in the next session. That will look at the regulator's powers. It is my intention to increase the regulator's powers.

Mr McHugh: With regard to electricity charges, many people, particularly farmers, find it unsatisfactory that, in addition to paying for the metered units, they are being charged ground rents. Does the Minister not think that that is double-charging? In any other industry those charges would be incorporated in the per unit price. Perhaps that should also be considered with a view to reducing prices.

Sir Reg Empey: I did not catch the early part of the Member's question, as the sound system failed.

With regard to fuel costs, the Member will know that the contracts that have been entered into with the generators have two parts. There is a standby cost, which is an availability payment that the generator gets for having the facility available to Northern Ireland Electricity. There is also the direct cost of the fuel that is necessary to generate the electricity. The contract therefore has a variable part in the sense that the fuel cost element of it is directly linked to market prices.

The problem with this is that they are starting from a high base. When the contracts were entered into, the extent to which generators could make efficiencies in the power stations was underestimated. The efficiencies that were made have resulted in there being large gaps between the cost of generation and the contracts themselves, and so the generators have very lucrative contracts under those circumstances. The only solution to that is contained in my reply to the hon Member for South Down (Mr McGrady).

The other matters that the Member referred to — if I picked them up correctly — are primarily ones for the regulator to deal with. When we introduce a utilities Bill, which we will have the opportunity to discuss in great detail, it is my intention to get down to the actual cost detail. That is the position, for instance, in Great Britain. Then there is the whole question of who and how. The consumer's interest, of course, has to be represented in these matters, but that is a question for another day.

North/South Trade and Business Development Body

5. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the budgetary allocation to the North-South Trade and Business Development Body. (AQO 475/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The latest estimate of expenditure for the body shows a budget spend of £3.1 million for the year ending 31 March 2001. That is made up of contributions of £1.06 million from Northern Ireland and £2.132 million from the Republic of Ireland. The budget for 2001-02 is £8.63 million sterling. That is made up of £2.8 million from Northern Ireland and £5.75 million from the Republic of Ireland.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Minister for his reply. We should all take special note of the relative proportions of contributions coming from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Can the Minister assure the House that Northern Ireland will make a fair proportional contribution to the total, rather than one which is excessive?

Sir Reg Empey: Yes. As the Member knows, the financing of these bodies varies. In one case, the Republic of Ireland's contribution is eight times that of Northern Ireland. In this instance, a two-to-one basis was deemed appropriate. There are variations across the board, according to the work that is undertaken and the nature of the body.

Throughout, of course, the expenditures are subject to agreement and scrutiny by this House, and all Members have the opportunity at any point to examine the plans for the bodies. The details are available in the Assembly Library. After every meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, the relevant Minister will be present to answer questions in the House. I am satisfied that Members will ensure that there is genuine accountability for the funds that are expended.

Mr S Wilson: Given that Northern Ireland's contribution to the budget will be about 33%, on what basis does the Minister judge that this kind of North/Southerly creates good value for the people of Northern Ireland? Is he valuing it in terms of jobs promoted, and if so, can he tell us how many? Is he valuing it in terms of contacts made for new investments, and if so, can he tell us how many? Is it on a per head basis or per county basis? How exactly does he judge that a third of the cost is good value for the people of Northern Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: The first objective is to increase trade. Clearly, the Republic has been one of our fastest-growing markets for a number of years. Looking at other examples in the EU where two countries have a land border, the relevant trade here is on a much smaller scale than is the case in France, Germany, Holland or Denmark. We are building supply chains. For instance, if there are companies on this island that could be trading with each other, there are opportunities for reducing supply chains, thereby reducing stockholdings. Goods could be sold on a just-in-time basis.

We will be looking at measurement. Output can be measured, in part, by the growth or otherwise of the amount of trade undertaken between companies here and companies in the Republic of Ireland. There will be networking opportunities, and we have already tried to promote some trade shows — we have had four so far — to try and get

people to realise the potential of trading with those who are close to them. For example, Belfast City Council had “meet the buyer” days, which were intended to bring in people whom the council traded with, and people whom they did not trade with. New people came in and we generated new suppliers that we did not have before. The principle is exactly the same. One of the best methods of measurement is to see how trade actually increases, and we intend to do that.

Natural Gas (North-West)

6. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made on extending the natural gas pipeline to the north-west. (AQO 458/00)

Sir Reg Empey: It is primarily for the private sector to initiate commercially viable projects to take gas to the north-west. The Director General for Gas Supply is currently considering a number of applications for licences to take natural gas to that part of the region.

Mr Neeson: Does the Minister agree that there could be some linkage between the proposed development of a North/South natural gas pipeline and that to the north-west?

Does he also agree that proposals to impose a public service levy in the Republic of Ireland could be detrimental to both projects?

3.00 pm

Sir Reg Empey: The public service levy could have a detrimental effect on the viability of the North/South pipeline, but I want to take this opportunity to make it clear that the Department's policy is to see pipelines North/South and to the north-west as an integrated system. We do not want any part missing; that is our objective.

I must stress to the Member, however, that in the private sector, there has to be economic viability, and there must be people who are prepared to carry out the work and undertake the commercial risk that is involved. We are putting an enormous amount of effort into this project. I have been in regular contact with my opposite number in the Republic, Mrs O'Rourke, and it is my earnest hope that these matters will crystallise within the next few weeks with an outcome that Members of this House will be able to support.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Students: Republic of Ireland

1. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the decrease in the number of students from the Republic of Ireland

studying at universities and further education colleges in Northern Ireland over the past two years and if he will address this in the forthcoming review of student finance. (AQO 449/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): The number of students from the Republic studying at Northern Irish higher education institutions fell slightly from 3,846 in 1998-99 to 3,354 in 1999-2000. However, the number of Southern students studying in Northern Irish further education colleges increased from 1,617 to 1,845 in the same period. The Member and, indeed, others should view these figures in the context of demographic trends in the South, where the 17-to-18-year-old cohort is now in decline in overall numbers at an estimated rate of 14% over the period from 1997 to 2004 and at increasingly greater rates thereafter. The terms of reference for the review of student finance focused on Northern Irish domiciled students.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I thank the Minister for his response and his assurance that this is more to do with demographic trends than with the poor level of support from the funding system in the North. I tabled this question on behalf of students in the Republic who are receiving maximum maintenance grants of IR£1,775 but lose £440 when this is converted to sterling. Also, students from the Republic are not entitled —

Madam Deputy Speaker: May we have your question, Mrs Nelis?

Mrs Nelis: Yes. Thank you.

Dr Farren: I did not hear a question.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mrs Nelis, will you please put your question.

Mrs Nelis: I asked the Minister to give me some information on the decline in the number of students from the South of Ireland. He assures me that this has to do with demographic trends. My point is that I welcome that.

Mr Fee: I note the reference in the question to the forthcoming review of student finance. In the light of the detailed work and consultations that the Minister is undertaking, can he give us any indication of when he will be in a position to publish the work done so far on the review?

Dr Farren: As I have frequently told Members, I have been working fairly strenuously on this issue for a number of weeks, and we are now in the penultimate stage. With respect to my proposals, I think that the forthcoming budget statement will give some indication as to the overall context. I also like to think that I will be in a position to announce the broad framework of my proposals later this week.

Mr McFarland: While accepting that students from other countries may enhance any academic institution,

may I ask whether the Minister agrees that his first responsibility should be to ensure that students from Northern Ireland who wish to remain here for university-level education should have the right to do so? Furthermore, will the Minister undertake to increase the number of university places during his term of office?

Dr Farren: The Member's question relates to an issue that I have frequently referred to in this House. Significant increases have been planned throughout the period 1999-2004 in terms of higher and further education places in Northern Ireland. My first responsibility as Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment is to those students who are domiciled in Northern Ireland, just as my counterparts in neighbouring jurisdictions have a primary responsibility to the students domiciled in their jurisdictions.

EQUAL Community Initiative (Unemployed People)

2. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline the key features of the EQUAL Community Initiative and to indicate how the programme will benefit the unemployed. (AQO 466/00)

Dr Farren: The EQUAL Programme is a European Union initiative designed to test and promote new means of combating all forms of discrimination and inequalities in the workforce for the unemployed and those in work.

Projects must entail transnational co-operation with similar projects in other member states. In the light of local consultation, we propose that the Northern Ireland EQUAL Programme funding of £7 million throughout the period 2000-06 be directed at action under the two pillars of the European Employment Strategy; namely employability and equal opportunities. The benefit to the unemployed will be in the outcome of projects and that best practice in identifying inequality will be identified.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister agree that the greatest challenge will be to design a training programme that the long-term unemployed can really benefit from, particularly in those areas that have suffered long-term unemployment?

Dr Farren: EQUAL Programme funding is not intended — as I think the Member's question is suggesting — to go directly towards training programmes. The amount of funding, namely £7 million, designated over a six-year period, is rather small. However, the programme will identify best practice through a number of highly focused projects, which will deal with all issues of equality in the workplace, for those already in work and for the unemployed. There are a range of other programmes attracting greater levels of investment from my Department, which go directly to the training programmes that the Member has expressed concern about.

Mrs Nelis: Is the Minister satisfied with the consultation process involved in the programme, especially in terms of the community and voluntary sectors?

Dr Farren: I am not aware of any concern regarding this matter. Written consultation with almost 150 interested bodies was undertaken in June and July of this year. In addition, a number of workshops were held for special interest groups to outline their views on the EQUAL Programme.

The findings indicated that the greatest support was for facilitating access and return to the labour market, which is in the employability pillar. Under the equal opportunities pillar, reducing gender gaps and supporting job desegregation was also well supported. These two areas are included in the draft proposal. Promoting lifelong learning and opening up the business creation process for all were also popular areas in which initiatives can be taken. However, these areas are already being dealt with by significant Government and other EU programmes.

Educational Guidance Service for Adults

3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment what action he is taking to ensure equality of funding through the Educational Guidance Service for Adults to all constituencies.

(AQO 477/00)

Dr Farren: I trust that the Member is referring to the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) and its role in allocating and administering funds under the European Peace Programme. EGSA is contracted by the Department to undertake this role. In allocating funding it is required to contribute to the peace objective of benefiting communities in an equitable and balanced way, focusing particularly on those areas and sections of the population most affected by conflict and suffering most deprivation. Its specific contribution is to direct support towards those with the greatest need for educational guidance, counselling services and learner support.

Mr Beggs: It is interesting that my question follows a question on equality. Does the Minister agree that there is a continuing need for education in all constituencies? Is he aware of the £4.3 million spent during Peace I? Only £26,000 was spent in my constituency of East Antrim. If there is a continuing role for EGSA during Peace II, can the Minister ensure that the funding will be spread more widely to areas of need throughout Northern Ireland in the future? I am sure he will agree that all constituencies have such areas.

Dr Farren: I agree that there are areas of need. EGSA responds to need. However, EGSA allocates its resources not on a constituency basis but on the basis of need that has been identified. That is in accordance with a fundamental principle of the current Programme for Government — namely, Targeting Social Need and

simultaneously ensuring equality of opportunity for all. If, however, the Member has specific concerns I will be only too pleased to receive the details and to discuss the situation with him.

Mr McGrady: The Minister will be aware that adult learning centres are located in large towns, in urban environments. This has the unfortunate effect of discriminating against those in rural areas, where such centres are not available. Twenty-four per cent of the working population make up what we call the low skills base, and this is largely centred in rural communities. In view of that, I propose the creation of a mobile literacy centre, which would enable the more widely distributed rural communities to take advantage of adult learning programmes. Will the Minister consider funding such a scheme?

Dr Farren: The Minister is always ready to consider schemes which address particular needs bearing on the responsibilities of his Department. Certainly, if Mr McGrady has particular suggestions in mind, I am open to receiving them and giving them detailed consideration.

Part of the question may anticipate issues relating to initiatives that may be taken with regard to a University for Industry, and the learndirect centres that will be established under its auspices. These are beginning to take root right across the North. Using modern means of electronic communication in particular, and ensuring that people from all backgrounds — and particularly those with special needs — have access to these centres, we will be able to go a long way towards meeting some of the concerns lying behind the Member's question.

These issues will recur with a later question.

University Places

4. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline how Northern Ireland compares to other parts of the United Kingdom in relation to university places per head of population.

(AQO 463/00)

3.15 pm

Dr Farren: First, it is necessary to explain that the ratio of places to population is calculated using full-time undergraduate enrolments at higher education institutions in 1999-2000 against the 18-to-54-year-old population, and these figures are expressed per thousand of the population. The ratio of full-time undergraduate enrolments at Northern Irish higher education institutions per thousand of the population was just under 30 at 29.8. That compares to ratios of 32.4 in England, 40.3 in Wales and 42.3 in Scotland.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for that information, which clearly shows that we are not just in deficit against England but in major deficit compared to Scotland and

Wales in terms of the number of places in higher education. Has the Minister raised the issue with other UK Ministers, and what plans has he to expand undergraduate enrolments, perhaps through using the institutes of further and higher education to ensure that more graduate places can be supplied?

Dr Farren: It is amazing how frequently the same issues come up under different questions. I addressed the issue in a previous question pertinent to the Member's supplementary. I repeat myself for the Member's benefit. As a result of the 1998 comprehensive spending review and my announcement earlier this year of Government support for the Springvale educational project, some 2,240 additional university places will be phased in between 1999 and 2004. Any further expansion will be subject to consideration of budget proposals. With respect to our further and higher education institutions — the FE colleges, as they are more commonly called — the Member may be aware of initiatives I am taking to expand enrolment in those institutions. In particular, as the experimental phase of the foundation degrees, which will be introduced next September, rolls out, we will see over the coming years an increased number of places made available.

Many students wish to pursue courses that are not currently available and unlikely ever to be made available in our existing institutions. Many Members will agree that we should afford students the opportunity to pursue studies across the water and not inhibit them by denying them access to the same levels of funding as those who attend institutions here enjoy.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom eolas a fháil i dtaca leis na tosca sna sé chondae is fiche.

Will the Minister outline how the Six Counties compare to the rest of Ireland in relation to university places per head of population? Has he explored or will he explore the feasibility of establishing a university in the north-west, across a number of cross-border sites, to meet future requirements and which may have the potential to generate EU funding?

Dr Farren: There are many issues in that question. The Member is inviting me to stand up and unveil a new higher education policy in order to answer it.

Ach ar aon gcéad dul síos ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil suas le naoi gcéad ochtó is a hocht mac léinn ó Thuaisceart Éireann ag gabháil do chúrsaí sa Phoblacht agus go bhfuil, mar a thuigfidh an tUasal McElduff, a lán mac léinn ag teacht ón Deisceart go dtí an Tuaisceart mar a léirigh mé i mo fhreagra ar an gceist a chuir a chomrádaí, bean Uí Niallais. Tá comhoibriú ar siúl idir tuaisceart agus deisceart na tíre maidir le cúrsaí ardoideachais agus cuidim leis sin; agus tá sé sna pleananna s'agamsa maidir le cúrsaí trasteorann treisiú leis an méid comhoibrithe sin atá ar siúl. *[Interruption]*

A translation of the above paragraph, supplied by the Minister, is provided at the Annex to this Report (see page 36).

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I was waiting for the translation.

Dr Farren: As it was a supplementary question, I answered spontaneously, as I am quite capable of doing, in the Irish language, which, under Standing Orders, I am entitled to use.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. As a courtesy to those Members who do not understand Irish, the Minister is invited to translate his words.

Dr Farren: I expressed myself spontaneously. My concentration at this point is on the next question. If somebody has kept a record of what I said in Irish I will certainly give a translation. Those who are anxious to receive a response will — *[Interruption]*

Mr P Robinson: How can we ask supplementary questions if we do not understand the answer?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr Farren: After Question Time I will provide a written translation to all those who seek it.

Mr Beggs: Is it appropriate for Ministers to answer in this way?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Training and Employment Agency

5. **Mrs Carson** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to make a statement on the Training and Employment Agency's Next Steps agency status. (AQO 478/00)

Dr Farren: I will endeavour to answer in the best — dare I say it? — Queen's English.

I refer the Member to my answer to Assembly question 293/00 on 13 November, when I announced that I had recently reviewed the agency's status and concluded that its formal status as a Next Steps agency should be discontinued with immediate effect.

Mrs Carson: Why has the Minister decided to do that now, ahead of a general review of the whole administration?

Dr Farren: The agencies were created with the aim of allowing Ministers to set policy and gives officials responsibility for day-to-day operations, with greater freedom to manage, while being held publicly accountable for the quality of service. As a local Minister answerable to the public for all the Department's activities, I judged it to be no longer appropriate to have 90% of my Department in a separate agency. I took that step in order to enhance the administrative arrangements within the

Department. It prejudices neither the terms and conditions of the people working in the agency nor any accountability to the House.

Access to Employment: 'Work-Life Balance' Campaign

6. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment how the 'Work-Life Balance' campaign will promote access to employment among parents and part-time workers. (AQO 467/00)

Dr Farren: The 'Work-Life Balance' campaign will encourage employers to look closely at the business benefits of flexible working. The campaign will help parents to return to work or remain in employment in a way which will enable them to balance their work with their other responsibilities. Members may have noted that I inaugurated this campaign last week, and detailed information about it can be obtained, on request, from my Department.

Mr Fee: Will the Minister expand on what prompted this campaign and which factors influenced the Department's thinking on this initiative?

Dr Farren: The campaign itself has grown out of a number of previous initiatives within my Department, focusing on childcare needs and the development of what might be described as family-friendly policies in the workplace. It is designed to be much more inclusive, prompting employers to take account of many of the needs and interests of their workers, as opposed to focusing exclusively on the family needs of workers.

In many respects, it is likely to focus on the management of time, flexitime and part-time work. In this age, as the use of electronic means of communication in the workplace increases, we will have to consider whether it is necessary for all work to take place on the actual premises of an enterprise. It will consider a wide range of related issues, as well as workers' outside interests, such as service to the community. It will ask how employers might make adjustments to take account of those factors and create more positive conditions for employees, particularly in enterprises. Obviously, over the next three years of the campaign, time will tell how effectively those broad objectives are being met.

Learndirect

7. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment what progress he has made on the delivery of learndirect in Northern Ireland and what plans he has to expand the service over the next year. (AQO 469/00)

Mr Dallat: Ceist uimhir seacht.

Dr Farren: Tá mé sásta ceist uimhir a seacht a fhreagairt. I am pleased to answer question 7. I was able to remember that much Irish.

My Department has been working closely with the University for Industry to introduce learndirect to Northern Ireland. The Belfast call centre of the learndirect helpline has taken over 5,000 calls about learning opportunities since it was established early in the summer. The University for Industry has so far endorsed 16 learning centres, four of which have already been operating as test centres, which will be operational by April of next year. Further additions are likely after April.

Mr Dallat: I welcome what the Minister has said. Can he go further and assure us that the learndirect service will be available in all parts of Northern Ireland and, in particular, in the rural areas?

Dr Farren: Yes, I will give that general assurance. Members who closely follow adult education issues, in particular, will know that consortia are frequently being established in different areas across Northern Ireland, with the lead being taken by local further education colleges. These colleges are identifying, in their turn, various community organisations that might work in association with them to provide the services of learndirect centres, the establishment of which is an unfolding process. I trust that they will become available, as is necessary, across Northern Ireland.

Department Staff: New Deal Participants

8. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment what is the percentage of New Deal participants on the staff of his Department compared with that for the United Kingdom Department for Education and Employment; and if he will make a statement. (AQO 476/00)

Dr Farren: The Department currently employs 0.5% of its total staff through New Deal. In the Department for Education and Employment, 2.2% of staff are employed through New Deal. The latter employs New Deal staff in two grades while my Department recruits to the administrative assistant grade only.

Dr Birnie: The Northern Ireland figure is considerably lower than that in London. Does the Minister not agree that we should attempt to get closer to that standard of 2.2%, which does not seem to be a very demanding target?

Dr Farren: Comparisons are not always easy to make. The Member is comparing my Department with the Department of Education and Employment in London, which is very different in terms of scale and scope. The Training and Employment Agency has held recruitment competitions in Belfast, Derry and North Down, specifically for New Deal participants. The vacancies were circulated

to New Deal personal advisers throughout Northern Ireland, who preselected and encouraged their clients to apply for the posts.

3.30 pm

No upper limit was placed on the number of posts available for New Deal participants, who also retained the right to apply for posts in the Civil Service through open competition. We have certainly been making progress in trying to encourage a greater level of application with at least two posts filled by New Deal participants.

Further and Higher Education: Disability Rights

9. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment what progress he has made in implementing the recommendations of the Disability Rights Task Force report on further and higher education. (AQO 464/00)

Dr Farren: I am indeed committed to passing legislation to give effect to those Disability Rights Task Force recommendations on education which fall within the remit of my Department. The nature and timing of such legislation is under consideration.

Mr McMenamin: What would the main impact of any new legislation be?

Dr Farren: The recommendations of the Disability Rights Task Force report cover areas such as consultation, statutory code of practice, rights of redress in cases of complaint, continuance of non-legislative measures, and the extension of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Overall, the main impact would be to extend comprehensive and enforceable rights to education for disabled people in Northern Ireland on the same basis as in the rest of the UK.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Time is up. We must move on.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister responded to the original question posed by Mr Ford, the Member for South Antrim, leading to a series of additional points including one raised by Mr McElduff in Irish, to which the Minister responded in Irish without any translation. Will you investigate whether that is in accordance with the procedures of the House? It is particularly important in the light of the fact that it meant that Members lacking the questionable benefit of an ability to speak Irish were unable to ask a further supplementary question.

Madam Deputy Speaker: As you know, Standing Order 73 permits Members to speak in the language of their choice. That is clear. However, I have sympathy for those Members who are restricted in their contributions, especially during Question Time. Nonetheless, Standing

Order 19(7) shows that there has been no breach of order, for the question was put in Irish and was answered in Irish. The answer to the supplementary question was therefore understood by the Member who asked it.

Mr Beggs: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Do you consider that the Minister fulfilled his responsibility to the Assembly by answering in Irish when Members were not able to understand the response?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has ruled that according to Standing Orders the Member is entitled to speak in the language of his choice. As you are aware, the Minister has offered to provide Members with a written translation, and that is acceptable.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is one thing for the Minister to offer a translation after the event, but how were Members supposed to ask supplementary questions on the basis of an answer they could not understand?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I refer the Member to Standing Order 19(7). The answer to the original question was given in English. The supplementary question was responded to in Irish. Standing Order 19(7) says that questions should be answered as clearly and as fully as possible and that they are not debatable. A supplementary question may be asked to elucidate an answer. Such supplementary questions shall be answered individually as they arise, and further supplementary questions may be asked only at the discretion of the Speaker.

Mr McFarland: I want clarification. For some years now, a Member who speaks in a language other than English has followed with an English translation so that Members who do not speak the language of delivery may understand. Are you, Madam Deputy Speaker, saying that we are moving away from that understanding or tradition? I want to establish that this is a departure from the way in which the Assembly has been run for some years.

Madam Deputy Speaker: There is no requirement in Standing Orders for a Member to provide a translation. The issue can be raised with the Business Committee, whose members, I am sure, have listened to today's debate and will examine the matter.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Purchase of Housing Executive Dwellings

1. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister for Social Development to explain current legislation which denies persons aged 60 or over the opportunity to purchase their own homes from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and if he will make a statement. (AQO 481/00)

4. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any plans he has to review the criteria for purchasing Housing Executive dwellings.

(AQO 451/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): I propose to take questions 1 and 4 together.

The design of the Housing Executive house sales scheme, rather than legislation, defines house sales policy. Under the scheme the over-60s can purchase general housing. Dwellings that are suitable for elderly people, such as single-storey or ground-floor accommodation, are not for sale if a tenant is over 60 years of age when the tenancy is first awarded. The purpose of this exclusion is to ensure that enough properties are available to meet the increasing demand for accommodation to meet the needs of elderly people. The Housing Executive has confirmed that a review of the scheme is planned and that it hopes to hold consultations with groups representing elderly people in the new year.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his reply and welcome the review.

Can the Minister confirm that he has had representations from many local authorities on this issue? Does he not agree that persons of the age stated in the question have probably been in public housing for a considerable time, have probably paid the purchase value, and more, of their dwellings and, because of longer life expectancy, are likely to live in their homes for much longer than was originally anticipated? Should these people not have the right to own their houses?

Mr Morrow: I have some sympathy with the Member on this matter and assure him that the Housing Executive is currently in the process of conducting a lengthy review. In my opinion, there is some ambiguity, and we will look into the matter very closely.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the news that a review is under way into this aspect of Housing Executive policy. Most Members will agree that the current practice is fairly arbitrary and discriminatory. Has this policy been tested against equality legislation requirements and human rights provisions? If not, will that happen during the review that he proposes to undertake?

Mr Morrow: I can confirm that it has been equality-tested. I am not prepared to accept that the practice is discriminatory, but I am prepared to state that it needs to be reviewed and that it will be reviewed.

Mr O'Neill: I was glad to hear the Minister's reply. He has already answered part of my supplementary question. In the past, supply and demand were often used as an excuse for abuse in this sector. Can the Minister assure the House that during this review good, clear policies will be proposed to counter arguments of abuse and that there are people in the Department and in the Executive

who are well able to devise such policies to enable house sales to be made available to the over-60s?

Mr Morrow: The Member has stated that there is a degree of potential abuse. I agree, and for that reason we have a degree of ambiguity. However, there is enough expertise and knowledge to ensure that we can get the problem sorted out reasonably well and to most people's satisfaction.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Minister agree that there appears to be an inconsistency in the current policy? If someone under the age of 60 moves into a house that is deemed to be specifically for elderly people, he can purchase it. However, someone over the age of 60 who moves into the same house cannot. Can the Minister assure us that that aspect will be dealt with in the review? And when will the review be published?

Mr Morrow: The Member confirms the points we are trying to make. He shares my concern regarding the ambiguity. The review will take place early in the new year.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for that indication. Will the review look at the anomalies in inherited tenancies and in the ability to purchase houses? If legislation is required, will the Minister make a bid for legislative time in the House?

Mr Morrow: May I remind the Member that we have a new Housing Bill in the legislative timetable? It is a considerable Bill, with 200-plus clauses, but I can assure the Member that the matter will be addressed. We hope that by the time the review has taken place and the new Housing Bill has been debated, we will have come up with most of the answers.

Mixed Housing

2. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Social Development why there is no mention of mixed housing in the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 461/00)

Mr Morrow: People are entitled to choose where they wish to live. While there are many examples of areas in the private sector where people from different communities live side by side in harmony, the circumstances are such that the majority of applicants for social housing still choose to live where people from their particular community predominate. While the Programme for Government makes no mention of mixed housing, I hope that over time the "growing as a community" aspect of it will create an environment in which community background is not a factor in housing choice.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his response. The Programme for Government contains plenty of rhetoric about promoting community relations but little that is specific. Given that housing in urban areas — which include middle-class as well as working-class areas — is now more segregated than at any time for 30 years, and

given that many people who may wish to live in mixed areas find themselves forced into particular areas because of the present lack of mixed areas, is it not incumbent on the Minister to do something to promote mixed housing?

Mr Morrow: That is being looked at. I reassure the Member that the Housing Executive is currently considering a report from Queen's University that deals with the potential for mixed housing in new social housing developments.

Town Centre Management

3. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made towards a White Paper on town centre management. (AQO 462/00)

Mr Morrow: The former Department of the Environment commissioned consultants to report on town centres to ensure that those outside Belfast and Londonderry were thriving and healthy. The consultants have now reported, and my Department has taken the lead on the report in consultation with other relevant Departments. Following widespread consultation earlier this year, a conference was held in Armagh on 26 October 2000 at which a wide range of interests focusing on key issues in the report was discussed. The report's 27 recommendations, if accepted, would affect the policies of several Departments. An interdepartmental steering group is overseeing the work of co-ordinating a response to the recommendations. It is anticipated that relevant Ministers will receive the recommendations by March 2001, when I will decide whether the Assembly or other interests need to be consulted and, if so, when and in what way.

3.45 pm

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the fact that he recognises interdepartmental responsibilities in this matter. What plans does he have to work with his colleague the Minister of the Environment to impose a moratorium on out-of-town retail developments in order to protect the fabric of town centres in Northern Ireland?

Mr Morrow: It was recognised from the outset that recommendations in the town centre reinvigoration report might need to be reflected in the regional strategic framework and other government policies. For that reason, an interdepartmental steering group, comprising officials responsible for planning and transport, was established to take these matters forward in an integrated manner.

Mr Beggs: What provision has been made in the draft budget to promote the reinvigoration of town centres?

Mr Morrow: That is a difficult question, as we have not yet had the final submission. Once we have been made aware of that, we will examine budgetary figures. I will write to the Member with a more detailed answer.

Availability of Good-Quality, Affordable Housing

5. **Sir John Gorman** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to ensure that good-quality, affordable housing is available to all in Northern Ireland. (AQO 479/00)

Mr Morrow: I am taking a number of steps in that regard in this financial year. My Department has allocated approximately £60 million in grants to housing associations. Along with the private finance that they lever in, that money will enable them to provide approximately 1,400 good-quality houses for rent. In addition, over £5 million has been allocated to the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association. That will enable around 560 participants on low incomes to become homeowners.

Sir John Gorman: Has the Minister taken into account the large amount of affordable social housing that is going to be required, along with the 8,500 private homes which are calculated as being required in the regional plan? Will he consider taking steps in the forthcoming Housing Bill to emulate the situation in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland? In those places, when planning permission for a sizeable development of land for housing purposes is asked for, part of the land is allocated for social or affordable housing. That is the rule enforced in the Republic of Ireland. It might assist people in the Province — particularly young people who cannot afford a mortgage — to be able to have such housing. If the Minister would like further information on the Republic's actions, I would be happy to give it to him.

Mr Morrow: I do not want to sound unconcerned, but I cannot answer for the Republic of Ireland. There are times, perhaps, when they have difficulty answering for themselves. I am lost as to what the Member's real question is. Is he asking me to consider a mixture of social and private housing, or is he asking me to consider prices in relation to social and private housing? I would like clarification.

Sir John Gorman: I am happy to clarify. In planning matters, there is discordance between the Department for Social Development and the Department of the Environment. That should be attended to, because otherwise developers will build large estates for private purposes on some of the best sites in Northern Ireland. If this were a requirement before planning permission was given, affordable housing might be made available.

Madam Deputy Speaker: As I understand it, the question is: should a developer be required to set aside a parcel of land for social housing?

Mr Morrow: I am unable to answer that question on the hoof. I will look at it and come back to the Member and anyone else who is interested in the answer. That is the best I can offer at this stage.

Mr Dallat: Is the Minister telling the House that he is unaware of the issue of social housing, which has been under discussion for at least two years? Many elected representatives believed that Government plans to deal with social housing would be developed. *[Interruption]*

I am speaking to the Minister, not to Mr Peter Robinson.

Mr Morrow: I might digress a little to inform Mr Dallat that I have been interested in housing for 30 years — long before I entered the Assembly. As a district councillor, I have represented Housing Executive tenants for 27 years, and I have worked as an estate agent for 29 years. I am quite aware of the housing situation in Northern Ireland. I do not claim to know it all, by any means, and perhaps not even half as much as the Member knows. However, I certainly claim to have some knowledge of housing in Northern Ireland. I have great concern for social housing and even greater concern for house prices.

As the Minister responsible for housing, I am most anxious to ensure that everyone in every Northern Ireland family has a good roof over his head. I am already on record as having stated my belief that a good home is not a privilege but a fundamental right. I am working hard towards achieving low-priced housing — if that is how one chooses to term it — which is within everyone's grasp. I hope that that reassures the Member.

Local Advice Services

6. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to enhance the provision of advice services at local level. (AQO 446/00)

Mr Morrow: Arrangements for the support of local advice services were introduced in April 1995, when lead responsibility for advice services provision in Northern Ireland was allocated to district councils as part of their wider responsibilities under the community services programme. I shall shortly be considering proposals for the future of the community services programme, including local advice services, as a result of the recently completed major review of the programme.

Mr McGrady: I should like to direct the Minister's attention to the serious underfunding of citizens advice bureaux in almost all district council areas, with his Department now contributing an average of only £15,000 per year to each. Is he aware that for the last 10 years there has been a moratorium on increases by the former Department of Education — something that presents enormous difficulties to advice centres and district councils? In view of the fact that the Social Security Agency has received a budget increase of 7%, will he consider unfreezing this moratorium on the rate support grant directly distributed by district councils to advice centres? After all, the advice centres and the councils are now supporting citizens advice bureaux to a greater extent than the Department itself.

Mr Morrow: I could answer this question in four parts. The Social Security Agency has implemented an information, advice and assistance policy aimed at providing a more comprehensive advice service to its customers. This was communicated to customers through the new customer charter, which I launched on 11 October. The charter was widely publicised in the media and gives a clear commitment to customers that staff will provide information and advice about all benefits, as well as assisting with form completion.

Mr McGrady: The advice centres?

Mr Morrow: I shall come to them in a second.

This service is available in all front offices. As a result, I sincerely hope and believe that the CAB's workload will be reduced. If information and advice are to be given through SSA offices, it must follow that fewer people will be going to the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB). Having said that, I also wish to express my appreciation of the CAB's work. It does an excellent job across the Province. I recognise that, along with other groups, the CAB has had a moratorium on funds, but that is the position. We hope that after the announcement of 11 October its workload will be reduced.

Town Centre Management

7. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to provide central funding for town centre management partnerships. (AQO 460/00)

Mr Morrow: The consultants' report on town centre reinvigation recommends that town centre management, as an approach, should be promoted as an essential pre-requisite to funding being provided for town centre schemes.

My Department believes that town centre management can play an important part in improving town centres throughout Northern Ireland and is supportive of this recommendation. My Department is therefore exploring the possibility of bidding for funding for town centre management in the next tranche of European Union funding. I will let the Member know the outcome.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister agree that it would be unfair if his Department, on one hand, were to encourage town centre management partnerships and, on the other, were to refuse to fund these, leaving them, as his Colleagues have done, to be funded entirely by local councils?

Mr Morrow: I take the point that the Member is trying to make. There would not be much point in our initiating town centre management strategies and then walking away after bringing them to a certain stage. Once we have the report we will be looking at all aspects, and I will report to the Assembly on the particular matter. It is a valid point — there would not be much point if there were nothing available to the towns to get on with the schemes.

Mr Hussey: Like others, I welcome the concept of town centre management and all that it can do, such as co-operation with local business, local authorities, and so on. Can the Minister state briefly when a town is a town or a large village or a small town? What is the definition of “town”?

Mr Morrow: I do not know whether the Member is asking me whether Castlederg is a town, village or city, and I will not attempt to answer that question at this stage. If the Member can be patient, we will bring forward this report, which he will find enlightening. It will be clearly defined in that report exactly what is a town and what size of population will deem it to be such. I will ensure that Mr Hussey gets a copy of the report, and he will clearly see whether Castlederg and similar towns are included in that definition.

Community and Voluntary Sector: Compact with Government

8. **Mr B Hutchinson** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the progress made on the compact between Government and the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement.
(AQO 455/00)

Mr Morrow: The compact was published in December 1998, and the Assembly endorsed it in February 2000. It gave a number of commitments to actions that would support and lend substance to the values and principles outlined in it, including the preparation of a supporting document, namely the strategy. This sets out how the Government will put the principles and commitments in the compact into practice and keep it under review. The strategy will be the yardstick against which performance on the implementation impact of the compact will be measured. The strategy is now well advanced, and a draft should be ready for public consultation by the summer.

Mr B Hutchinson: Will the Minister detail what he means by the term “the public”? I am concerned, for I am aware that a number of area partnerships and others are asking questions, saying that they have not had many details. I ask the Minister to ensure that any consultation is wide.

Mr Morrow: The compact applies to the relationship between the voluntary and community sector and government, both central and local. That includes Departments, departmental public bodies, statutory agencies and district councils. I hope that the Member will agree that the net has been thrown fairly wide.

Housing Executive Tenants: Debt

9. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the debt of Housing Executive tenants for each of the last three years.
(AQO 453/00)

4.00 pm

Mr Morrow: Existing tenant debt in the last three years is as follows: for 1997-98, £10.8 million; for 1998-99, £11.5 million; for 1999-2000, £12.3 million.

Mr Poots: I thank the Minister for his response. I am not surprised that it indicates an upward trend. Will the Minister take that into account when determining the new rent and rates rise that will be levied on those who rent Housing Executive properties? It is evident that as more and more people are now in low-paid employment, they have more difficulties in paying their Housing Executive debt.

Mr Morrow: I have listened carefully to the advice given to me. I can assure the Member that it will be so. I also want to reassure the Assembly in relation to rent arrears. This is not something that the Housing Executive takes lightly. It has a very robust policy for gathering in rent arrears. It is something that I do not take lightly either. There should be a determined effort to ensure that all tenants pay their rents; it is a tragedy when only some are actually doing so. One half pays, and the other half lets it. I do not think it is as bad as that, but I am concerned about the level of rent arrears. It is a matter that we will be considering seriously. I can assure the Member that it will not be lightly treated by any means.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. Will he provide the Assembly with a detailed analysis of the debt that is outstanding on a regional basis and, indeed, on a local district office basis so that Members of this House and the general public can see where the debt is?

Mr Morrow: I do not have a problem with doing that if it is possible to do so. If it is possible, the Department will provide that information, for it is not trying to hide away from this issue. It is a good question, and I will certainly address it. I will write to the Member with all the details that he has asked for.

Housing Executive: North Belfast Strategy

10. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what priority he has given in the Department's draft budget 2001-02 for a start to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Strategy for North Belfast.
(AQO 470/00)

Mr Morrow: I have already publicly stated my support for the housing strategy for north Belfast, which is a programme designed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to meet a particular need in that part of the city. The Housing Executive has a duty to tackle north Belfast's chronic housing need aggressively, to stamp out bad housing and cut down on urgent housing need. I am determined that that will be done with energy and creativity. This is an operational matter, however, and,

that being the case, the timing and allocation of funding will be the responsibility of the Housing Executive.

Mr A Maginness: I want to express disappointment with the Minister's reply. He has indicated that he supports the Housing Executive's north Belfast strategy. However, he fails to produce the means whereby this strategy can be fully implemented. As he knows well, north Belfast has the worst housing in all of Belfast — indeed, throughout Northern Ireland. The Minister's reply is therefore somewhat laissez-faire in its thrust and lacking in the commitment that one would expect from a Minister.

Mr Morrow: I share the Member's concern and his disappointment, but I want to re-emphasise that a bid of £4.1 million was submitted. Unfortunately, the Executive does not share the concerns of Mr Maginness and myself. Its members do not give this the same priority as we do. I regret that, and I have no doubt that he regrets it.

It would be better, however, if he were to ride in behind my efforts rather than trying to throw roadblocks in the way. I do not want to misrepresent him — normally he is a very genuine individual — but Mr Maginness should accept that the best effort was made. Unfortunately, the Executive did not interpret it as such.

I will value the Member's support in the future in making any representations that he can. If he wants to come and speak to me on this issue, I am quite ready and willing to listen.

Mr B Hutchinson: Does the Minister think it would be useful for the six North Belfast MLAs to meet with him and then approach the Executive on that basis?

Mr Morrow: Mr Hutchinson is a member of the Committee for Social Development. He knows the number of times I have attended Committee meetings, and he is aware that I have discussed this matter with him and his Colleagues. He can gauge whether I am sincere. I cannot force him to make up his mind on that. However, I remind him that there are a number of Members on that Committee and that they have ample opportunity to make representations to me through the Committee. I can assure him, his Colleagues and the House that I want to see the north Belfast strategy go forth, irrespective of what Members may think of my political views.

Mr S Wilson: Can the Minister remind us how many SDLP Ministers are on the Executive, which refused the bid for money for north Belfast?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Campbell: The answer is three.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Perhaps the Minister will provide a written response to that question.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

Private Notice Question

COATS BARBOUR: JOB LOSSES

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what has been done to avoid the impending job losses at Coats Barbour, Lisburn.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The recent announcement of proposed redundancies at Barbour Campbell Threads is regrettable. However, this was a commercial decision taken by the company because of global market conditions.

Mr Davis: This company is a mainstay in the Lisburn area, and the consequences of 60 job losses at this time of the year, or indeed at any time of the year, cannot be overstated. These job losses will take about £1 million out of the local economy — spending power that will be lost to local business, which will have to grapple with the knock-on effects. It is conceivable that some businesses may be forced to re-examine staffing levels to take account of the loss of these manufacturing jobs. In essence, we are not just talking about 60 jobs, because more may depend on this long-established company's subcontracts and the money it injects into the Lisburn economy.

Like many other companies in this sector, Barbour Campbell Threads is not immune to the volatility of world markets and the pressure on margins caused by cheap imports. I understand that little can be done on the home front to create a level playing field for this sector. However, I ask the Minister to explore the potential of raising this matter in a European context. In addition, can the Department's agencies, particularly the IDB and LEDU, undertake a comprehensive review of textiles to determine what can be done to protect remaining jobs and safeguard some of the Province's older companies?

Sir Reg Empey: I deeply regret the fact that a consultation process has begun with the trade unions. It may be that some redundancies will take place in the first quarter of 2001, with the remainder towards the end of 2001. However, I want to make a couple of points. First, while the company advised the IDB of the impending job losses, it did not seek financial assistance. I understand that the decision reflects on the inability of the Hilden operation to match the cost of synthetic thread products, which can be sourced more cost-effectively from Asia.

I also understand that they have a strategy of focusing on speciality products and that the company is receiving Industrial Research and Technology Unit assistance on a

number of technical matters. These include a method of bonding and sewing threads using an innovative curing system rather than the current solvent-based system.

My Department initiated a review last June. We appointed Kurt Salmon Associates as consultants. The report has been completed, although I have not yet received it. However, I hope to make a statement about it after the recess because a number of Members have asked me questions on those matters and have great concerns. However, what can be done is being done.

Ironically, in the next few days when certain figures will be released, Members will find that there is still a degree of buoyancy in certain sectors of the textile market. However, in this particular case the company has taken a strategic decision to protect its position, bearing in mind that it is a substantial company currently employing some 300 people.

I understand and sympathise with the Member's concerns that such a large concentration of job losses in the Lagan Valley area has a knock-on effect. However, I believe that the company has made the strategic decision to specialise in areas where it will not be facing the wall of Asian competition with its low-wage economies, as it is very hard to compete under those circumstances.

Mr Close: I thank the Minister for his reply to my Colleague from Lagan Valley, Mr Davis. I wish to place on record my and my constituents' concern at such a potential loss of jobs at such a historic company — one which has its roots deeply imbedded in the Lagan Valley constituency.

Is the Minister aware that rumours have been circulating for a protracted period about the firm? Will he ensure that there is no asset-stripping in the concern? Will he also ensure that all the grants that have been provided — for example, through IDB — are secured and that there will be no attempt to remove machinery, et cetera, from the country?

Sir Reg Empey: First, I will say to the Member for Lagan Valley that the company has made no request for financial assistance. The company took a strategic decision, and this announcement was made. To be precise, Hilden is to become a centre of excellence for speciality threads to be used in the manufacture of car airbags, seatbelts, sportswear and upholstery products.

With regard to what the Member describes as asset-stripping, IDB, of course, has rules about how assets are treated if those assets are currently in receipt of IDB resources. That may not be the case in this matter, but we are acutely aware of the sensitivities of these matters. Any company that has an agreement with us has to honour its terms and conditions. It is a legally enforceable document — and I draw that to your attention, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I stress that the company will remain a significant employer in the Lagan Valley area. It has a clear strategy

as to what it wants to do. It was its decision and the company has made no recourse to us for assistance.

Ms Lewsley: I add my dismay to that of my two Lagan Valley Colleagues concerning the number of job losses at Barbour Campbell Threads. One of the issues raised by many of its workers was the lack of consultation. I am glad to hear that consultation started in June, yet well over a year ago I spoke to some people from IDB about concerns that had been raised. One of the biggest issues was the lack of consultation between the workforce and the management.

4.15 pm

Also, machinery was removed from Barbour Campbell Threads and sent to Hungary, and Coats Viyella has another venture in Asia. Is the streamlining a bit more sinister than we thought? In the past, it was suggested that Lisburn would be a centre of excellence, but how many people will be employed in it? Very few, compared to the current numbers.

The work force at Barbour Campbell Threads is a tightly knit community, and two or three people in the same family could lose their jobs. The impact on the quality of life for many in that community will be horrendous. Many of those people have been kept waiting to hear when they will lose their jobs; they could not find other employment, because they were not told when they would be made redundant. If they wished to take redundancy, the company would not let them. People have been badly put upon, and the Minister should take that into consideration.

Sir Reg Empey: I sympathise with the people who find themselves in those circumstances. It is not a unique situation; people elsewhere, particularly in the textiles industry, have experienced exactly those problems. However, the Member must be aware that consultation with trade unions is a matter for the company and the unions.

I appreciate the local circumstances and that individual families can be disproportionately affected, but I must point out two things. First, there is the whole question of outsourcing, which is the process by which companies based in the United Kingdom carry out part of their functions overseas. That will be a growing problem. Some indigenous Northern Irish companies are now, as a matter of policy, outsourcing in regions such as Sri Lanka, north Africa and South Africa. That will not change, and we will be confronted with that in a range of situations. We will have to return to the issue because, sooner or later, someone will seek assistance for outsourcing. That will be a big issue for the House.

We must also consider the general position in the Lagan Valley. There are 41 IDB client companies in the Lagan Valley area, employing almost 5,000 people. I shall put that in context: selective financial assistance of £80 million has been made available in support of projects

worth some £240 million in the past five years. There has been substantial IDB activity in the constituency. Even in the worst case scenario, Barbour Campbell Threads will still have 230-240 employees and will still be a substantial force. They have the technical ability to turn the plant into a centre of excellence, as has been discussed for some time. Funding has been made available, and the Industrial Research and Technology Unit has assisted them with the technical aspects. We are trying to take the necessary steps to protect the long-term future of the company.

Mr Poots: The size of the company makes this a serious blow to the local economy. What investment has IDB made in Barbour Campbell Threads? Does the Minister know how many jobs will be available when the new centre of excellence is created?

Sir Reg Empey: I shall write to the Member with details of the assistance that has been available for the long term. I repeat that we were not asked for anything additional.

It will remain a significant player in the constituency. Also, Coats Viyella has decided to sell certain parts of its businesses, and a number of Northern Ireland companies in its clothing and household furnishing sector are for sale at the present time. The thread business is going to remain the core business for Coats Viyella. I cannot say how much long-term funding was put into it, but I do know that in 1997 a letter of offer was issued to Barbour Campbell Threads in the sum of £1.4 million. To date, £733,000 has been drawn on the basis of that letter of offer, so there is an ongoing arrangement, which I assume is linked to either sales or employment targets. It might be better if I were to write to the Member with the precise details, but that is the statistical situation at this stage.

Question proposed:

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

TOOME BYPASS

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I brought the issue of the Toome bypass to the attention of the House by way of an Adjournment debate because of the anger and frustration felt by people west of the Bann at the Minister's shock announcement that this project was once more going to be put in suspension, delayed or cancelled.

It may be that the Minister is playing hardball with the Executive or with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, or it may be that he is playing politics with a very critical, strategic issue around the Toome bypass. If he is playing hardball with the Executive or with the Minister of Finance, knowing that this is a vexatious issue that has caused hardship for a great number of years, he may feel that by creating a lot of controversy around his remarks he can force the hand of the Minister to give him the extra moneys that he is looking for.

I suggest that the Minister would have had a more responsible and responsive position had he carried on this debate in the Executive, and not outside the Executive, and that the place to decide these issues of urgency, of hardship and of crisis is in the Executive and not outside it.

It is barely a year since the Minister's predecessor, Peter Robinson, arrived in Toome, to a fanfare of TV, newspaper and Department of the Environment personnel coverage, to launch, in a blaze of publicity, the Toome bypass project. We, along with the assembled gathering, were told that the money had been secured. We were told that construction would commence by the end of 2001. It may be that it will commence towards the end of next year, but we do not know. We are waiting for the present Minister to indicate, perhaps in a more realistic way, what his intentions are regarding an issue that is critical, that has caused hardship, and that we know from the reduction of the acute services in the Mid-Ulster Hospital could cause death itself.

Some 21,000 vehicles — a conservative estimate — travel this road daily, and some 5,000 people in construction, education and the health services travel from areas west of the Bann to Belfast and back.

Each day we have two-mile-long queues, and average speeds are seven to 14 miles per hour. This occurs for one or two hours in the morning and for one or two hours in the afternoon.

These are critical issues for people who live west of the Bann. The road infrastructure west of the Bann is bad enough as it is. A bypass around Magherafelt has been

awaited for many years. We are disadvantaged, yet we are being further disadvantaged by this Minister. He lives west of the Bann, and one would think that he would have a vested interest in ensuring that the Toome bypass be put in place quickly. Perhaps, politically, the Minister would be chopping off his nose to spite his face — I do not know.

I want Members to consider the critical issue of health and the Health Service west of the Bann, where people currently have to travel from Magherafelt to Antrim in emergencies. Travelling times have increased. From Swatragh to Magherafelt took 19 minutes. The time taken from Swatragh to Antrim rises to 36 minutes. Travelling time from Draperstown or Ballynascreen has risen from 13 minutes to 36 minutes. The small towns of Tobermore, Bellaghy, Money more, Castledawson and Magherafelt have all had extra travelling time imposed upon them, just on the one simple issue of health. They are also bedevilled by the traffic congestion that ensues on the way.

Increased travelling times to Antrim will increase mortality rates. That is borne out by the Ambulance Service. It tells us that in cases of acute pain — such as when people are in a traffic accident or are having a heart attack — people's lives are in danger unless they are dealt with inside of eight minutes. We now have a situation where it takes 16-36 minutes for people to get from west of the Bann to a hospital in Antrim — principally because of the difficult situation caused by the absence of a Toome bypass.

We can play politics with this issue, and it would be the simplest thing in the world to do so. However, I contend that this is too important an issue, too critical an issue, and an issue that has been outstanding for too many years, to play politics with. It is an issue that is economically damaging. We talk about the price of fuel, but if people are sitting in a traffic queue for an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening, just imagine how much fuel is being used up. That is apart from the damage that is being done to the environment. It all mounts up over time.

I notice Mr Peter Robinson talking through his hand as usual. Perhaps he will take his hand away from his jaw and let us know what he is trying to say — he being the Minister who promised this bypass less than a year ago. However, the DUP is playing its usual funny little games.

We could play politics with this issue, and we could develop it into a political debate. Unfortunately, it is all the people west of the Bann who are suffering as a result of this delay at Toome. It is all the people — DUP, UUP, PUP, Sinn Féin and SDLP — who are affected, damaged and hurt by this delay. It is a daily delay at Toome. It occurs seven days a week, not just on the five working days.

4.30 pm

The Minister allocated £460 million in the recent Budget. In detail, where is this money going? Can he tell us of an area in the North of Ireland — in the Six Counties —

that is in greater need of this money than the area affected by the Toome bypass? Can he detail exactly where and into what areas that £460 million is going? Can he tell us that he is not playing politics with the Toome bypass but is committed to alleviating the hardship that is being inflicted on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis on the people west of the Bann?

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the opportunity to debate this matter. However, it is unfortunate that we must be here today. I must express my exasperation at Sinn Féin/IRA, who have the nerve to complain about the starting of road improvements on the Toome bypass. It is somewhat two-faced for a member of Sinn Féin to raise this issue. Terrorists have brought great expense to the Province over the past 30 years. Cash has been pumped into Northern Ireland to fix and to renovate after the work of the terrorist army linked to Sinn Féin.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Are we discussing the Toome bypass, or do we want to get into a debate about paramilitary organisations?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am listening carefully to what the Member is saying. I am sure that he will return to the subject in question.

Mr Armstrong: This has further led to the lack of real investment in any future development in Northern Ireland. These people complain that they are treated as second-class citizens. Surely we are being treated as second-class citizens at the hands of these terrorists, who have prevented any real development in Northern Ireland. How can Sinn Féin have the face to ask for more money in Northern Ireland when, in the past, they have easily allowed Government money to go up in smoke?

I am surprised to hear the DUP Minister for Regional Development announce that his Department has difficulty in funding major work. In January 2000 Gregory Campbell's predecessor, Peter Robinson, announced at a press conference in the O'Neill Arms Hotel in Toomebridge that the Toome bypass would go ahead. Mr Robinson gave a commitment to the people of Northern Ireland, claiming that he would listen to the people and explain why decisions are taken. Mr Robinson said that construction would start in late 2001 and would take approximately 18 months to complete. The finance was to be provided by the 1998 Chancellor's Initiative package.

Mr Robinson described the Toome bypass as a major development that would help the people of Northern Ireland and relieve traffic congestion. Did Mr Robinson not plan ahead at the time? Why was there so much hype, if there was not enough money to pay for the bypass? Could Mr Robinson not have told us the state of his Department's finances at the time, rather than indulging his party in a blaze of publicity?

It is now apparent that a major challenge to the policy has taken place, both at departmental level and with the

DUP Minister. Both Mr Robinson and Mr Campbell are prepared to engage in political stunts rather than address the real needs of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Toome bypass is absolutely necessary to link industry with the east and the west, whether it is stock in transit, people travelling to and from work, or sightseers on a tour of our beautiful Province. Direct rule has prevented the direction of finance to the most needy areas of Northern Ireland. Now, with the devolved Administration, we have the opportunity to prioritise as we, the people of Northern Ireland, see fit. Toome is a significant bottleneck, a narrow bridge over a river flowing north from Lough Neagh. In modern life, people do not want to be delayed. Aeroplanes or boats do not wait for customers if they are stuck in traffic congestion.

Excess pressure is put on commuters and frustration arises. Over the years, Mid Ulster has been socially and economically neglected, and it seems to have been considered unimportant in many regards, including road infrastructure. Being centrally situated, the area is ideal for businesses targeting the whole of Northern Ireland. Fifty-four of the top 1,000 Northern Irish businesses are situated in the Sperrin area. If Mid Ulster were more accessible, industry would be more attracted to set up in the region, thus producing more jobs and encouraging people to live there instead of in the city.

Unemployment rates in the area are significantly higher than the Northern Irish average. There is a higher proportion of self-employed men and women in Mid Ulster than in Northern Ireland as a whole. There are a huge number of farmers in Mid Ulster, and we all know the problems they face at this time. Unfortunately, with the present depression in agriculture, it is becoming more commonplace that farming alone cannot bring in sufficient income for a satisfactory standard of living. The result is increased commuter traffic.

A bypass at Toome is essential for the future of the region west of the Bann. We must make Mid Ulster more accessible, for otherwise our efforts to promote the area for tourism and other industries will be wasted. The people of Mid Ulster want to share the benefits and attractions of our area with everyone across Northern Ireland and beyond. The bridge at Toome will carry traffic in both directions and will therefore benefit everyone.

Mr McClelland: Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take your advice and be very brief. I understand that there are several Members waiting to speak, and that the Minister will want to respond. All those who have spoken said that they did not want to play politics with this issue. What did they do then? They played politics with it.

I have a special interest — if not a vested interest — in this subject. I am very proud to have been born in the village of Toome. I attended primary school there — they have not yet put up a blue plaque on the wall, but perhaps they will. I represent Toome on Antrim Borough Council.

This debate is not new. Since first elected to Antrim Borough Council, I have met with every direct rule Minister to present this case. No one needs to be told that this road joins the two major cities of Northern Ireland and several surveys have been carried out on traffic density. Approximately 20,000 vehicles pass through the village every day and it is estimated that the number will increase to approximately 30,000 by 2017. Where was the planning during the decades of direct rule that did not envisage this level of traffic density on this main road bridging our two major cities? With the ending of direct rule, and the start of our own Assembly, the people of the area — and of the whole of the north-west — had very high expectations that this programme would receive a high priority in government.

I want to pay tribute to my colleagues on Antrim Borough Council who, for decades, have been pressing successive Ministers for this bypass. One of my colleagues on the council can affirm that even during the latter part of the 1980s — when it was not politic for local government Ministers to be meeting with Ministers of State to discuss issues such as the Toome bypass — Antrim councillors were regularly meeting with Ministers to press for this development. The council has also worked very closely with the local community group in Toome, Tidal, in providing finance for a variety of surveys on the density of traffic going through Toome and the environmental impact on the village.

Any delay in this programme will be disastrous for the people of the village and will have wider implications for the economy of the north-west as a whole. For years, the people of Toome have had to suffer the impact of traffic congestion, pollution, noise and delays. In addition, there is now what is called “rat running” — cars taking short-cuts through the small rural areas surrounding Toome village, with the attendant destruction of the rural and farming communities in the area.

All these issues impact on the people of Toome and mean a poorer quality of life for them. They also have a dramatic impact on economic and tourist development. Environmental plans and the commencement of a new industrial development strategy for the area are badly needed if unemployment levels are to be reduced.

We need the road for many reasons. We need it for the people of Toome, for economic growth in the whole of the north-west and to improve road safety. We need it, as Mr J Kelly said, because of the importance of acute services and the fact that the Ambulance Service has to move between the Mid-Ulster Hospital and the new Antrim Area Hospital. We need speedy access to our ports and airport, and to provide tourism, not only locally, but throughout Northern Ireland.

I do not subscribe to the view of one of Mr Kelly's colleagues, who wrote to my local paper recently to say that the Minister's decision not to proceed with the bypass

was sectarian. I do not believe that there is some sad little civil servant sitting in a car in Toome counting the number of Catholic cars and Protestant cars going through the village. I would, however, impress on the Minister the need to proceed with this project for the benefit of the people of Toome and the whole of the north-west.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I am delighted at the interest — albeit belated — that some Members have shown today in Toome and the Toome bypass. To the best of my knowledge some of them have never made a statement about Toome in their lives. It is always good to find that there are some takers and comers along the road, but I will return to that shortly.

Some Members told us that they are endeavouring to assist in getting the project off the ground, but they are giving misleading information. The Minister never said that he was going to put the Toome scheme into suspension, as one Member from Mid Ulster said — a Sinn Féin/IRA Member. To the best of my knowledge, the context was that if necessary funding were not forthcoming, all the schemes that were being processed at that time might not be carried out in the timescale that was mentioned. That was the tenor of the Minister's speech.

There was talk about the fanfare of publicity in Toome a year ago. I remember that morning well. My hon Friend Mr P Robinson attended as Minister, and everywhere the cameras went, Mr J Kelly followed or tried to get in front of them. One could see his neck stretching out every time a photograph was being taken of my Colleague and me. He wanted to be sure he was in it. When it comes to fanfares and cameras, the said person is far from shy; he wants to be there in the forefront, if humanly possible. There is so much hypocrisy about this issue that it is sickening for those who have been campaigning for Toome for over 20 years. However, let us push aside some of the minutiae that are being brought up.

This is and has been an important issue. It is so important for the area west of the Bann and for Mid Ulster that the Member of Parliament for Mid Ulster and an Assembly Member for Mid Ulster — the same person, representing Sinn Féin/IRA — is missing. He is not here for this important discussion. This issue is so important that it has frustrated Members and engendered anger in their bellies. However, it seems that the matter is not so important to the Member of Parliament. Of course, MP does mean "Missing Person" so far as the constituency is concerned.

4.45 pm

There has been so much hypocrisy about the Toome bypass. It is interesting that they say that they are worried about people's lives. There is a fly in the ointment; they were not interested in people's lives during the past 30 years of terrorist violence, when people were murdered and maimed and the ambulances needed to get through Toome to get not to Antrim Area Hospital but to the excellent services at the Royal Victoria Hospital. We

have heard an awful lot of hypocrisy; they want to grab the headlines, rather than deal with the situation.

I am glad that the hon Member for Mid Ulster (Mr Armstrong) has found out where Toome is. I must be honest — over the 28 years that I have been in public life, I had never, until now, heard him making a statement about a Toome bypass. However, it is better late than never, I suppose. It is good that he has found out that Toome and the rest of the constituency actually exist. However, it ill becomes people to chide those who are endeavouring to do their best for the area, when those people have done nothing for the area themselves.

Mr Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Rev Dr William McCrea: I certainly will not give way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCrea, you have been asked to give way.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I said that I would not give way. Mr Deputy Speaker, you know that it is the Member who decides whether he will give way — not the Chair.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I asked the question — that is all.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I was delighted that one of the first ministerial acts by my hon Friend the Member for East Belfast (Mr P Robinson) was to come to Toome and announce the proposals for the design of the bridge. Now, that was not regarded as sectarian, but it is regarded as sectarian to consider the wider financial aspects. Toome was not an isolated scheme; all schemes of similar magnitude were considered as part of the overall package. The people west of the Bann appreciated the fact that a DUP Minister was taking their interests into consideration and putting something in motion by unveiling the design proposals for the bridge and the bypass.

When the Chancellor announced his initiative and talked about his proposals, few elected representatives actually heard him — it is amazing how they listen to what they want to listen to, and then shut off. They welcomed the Chancellor's statement, not realising, of course, that the Chancellor said that the scheme would happen as one of a series of proposals that would benefit from the money accrued by the sale of Belfast port. It was simply and directly connected to that sale.

At that time Minister Robinson prioritised the roads programme, and Toome was a beneficiary of that. Mr Campbell followed Mr Robinson's policy, but — and he would be right to tell people all about this — the moneys allocated to his Department were changed. It would have been possible to make a start on all the schemes that were included in the proposal in year one. That is what the Ministers — past and present — wanted to do, but, of course, they did not have the money. Not even the Jews down in Egypt, who were receiving special help from the Almighty himself, were able to make bricks without straw.

The debate may be helpful. Although the money for year one was safe, the capital roads budget for years two and three seemed to be under question. To the best of my knowledge, we are politicians and this is a debating chamber for politicians, though that is not always evident, given that some contributions are always read, and sometimes badly read. If those speaking in this debate today are politicians of conviction — though it seems that we are not politicians if we are bringing politics into this — and if this debate means something to the parties and is not just “huff and puff”, today could mark progress in this Chamber.

If the Members from Sinn Féin/IRA, the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP who have spoken are making commitments on behalf of their parties to do everything in their power to ensure that the finances for the road budget are restored, progress will have been made today. But I have a feeling that, as usual, when their arms are twisted up their backs, they will cave in and prove themselves to be jellyfish, rather than men.

However, I would be happy to be proved wrong. If that is the case, we can be assured that the Members I referred to are not seeking headlines but are trying to ensure that the Minister has the finances to do the job. My conversations with the Minister have convinced me that no one would be happier to make sure that this scheme and others in the programme were processed properly.

I ask the Minister to ensure that there is no delay and that everything necessary is being done. Have the necessary procedures been put into place and into operation to ensure that there will be no delay in the programme for the Toome bypass, if the funds become available? We have seen that the goodwill in the Chamber has grown, and I have no doubt that the issue will be easily overcome. Are the planning process, the environmental studies, the vesting programme — if that is the way forward — being processed now to ensure that there will be no undue delay in the creation of this bypass?

Unlike some who have spoken, I have campaigned with genuine conviction for the creation of a Toome bypass for over 20 years. Mr McClelland of the SDLP said that he is familiar with the congestion because he comes from the area. I appreciate that, and I understand his conviction, because he has experienced the problem himself. I too speak with conviction, for I believe that the bypass would benefit not just the west of the Province but the entire region. It would be beneficial because it would remove the west-east divide. There should be one Province with the people of Northern Ireland enjoying all its benefits.

There are two industrial sites in the area, one of which is at Creagh, on the verge of Toome. The other is on the Ballymena side of the town. This road is vital to attracting industry. It is important to ensure that people and industries do not avoid this area because of congestion, delays and

pollution. Many issues hinge on this decision. That is why I know that my hon Friend will listen carefully to those whose belief in this issue is genuine and not based on political gain or belated interest. The Toome bypass is necessary to the well-being of the people of that vast area in the west and in the adjoining constituencies and council areas.

That is why I ask my hon Friend to ensure that nothing impedes progress. I hope and believe that all Members of the Assembly will unite in pressing for additional finances for the second and third years. If they do so, there will be no problem in ensuring that the Toome bypass becomes a reality, and that is what really counts.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr David Ford, and ask him to remember that time is moving on.

Mr Ford: An advantage of speaking at this stage in a debate is that one does not have to repeat everything everyone else has said. A disadvantage is that one directly follows the Member for Mid Ulster, who has dictated the Minister's winding-up speech to him.

I certainly acknowledge the Minister's quite clear problems in the realm of finance, but I do not think that they are entirely inflicted on him by others. Sometimes I wonder if they are not inflicted by the “hokey-cokey” policy of the DUP. Perhaps if one pulls Peter out to put Gregory in, one pulls out Peter's proposals and aspirations at the same time. I trust the Minister will show this afternoon that he has not forgotten all the commitments that we thought were given earlier this year.

One project in the Department for Regional Development's proposals that is worrying to me when compared to the Toome scheme is that to upgrade — I believe that is the euphemism — the Westlink in Belfast. I certainly acknowledge that there are problems with freight going through the city and that the Westlink can get thoroughly jammed. However, examining the possibilities, there are alternatives — particularly with public transport, but also with roads — which could reduce the demand for over £40 million worth of improvements on that stretch. There is a real fear on the part of many experts that all it will achieve is to speed the traffic jams up to three quarters of a mile through the city with a deterioration in air quality for those living in the area.

By contrast, the Toome proposals would cost under a third of the amount required for the Westlink. There is no alternative, and there would be significant environmental benefits, not only for those who travel through the village, but more particularly for those who live in and around it. Mr John Kelly referred to the problems of ambulances and to the fact that hospital services are now centralised. However, this is not just a problem for ambulances; it is a problem for freight vehicles, private cars and buses as well.

There is a bizarre situation in which the Maiden City Flyer, the most efficient way of getting between Northern Ireland's main two cities, cannot get through Toome in the morning in time for people to catch the Enterprise to Dublin. It is hard to imagine anything more bizarre than businessmen from Derry driving to Belfast to catch a train to Dublin because of the inadequacies of public transport resulting from the congestion that is solely in Toome.

Of course, the railway might make a slight difference at some stage, but even if it removes the north-west traffic we cannot expect it to take out traffic from the mid Ulster and mid Tyrone areas, and possibly parts of west Tyrone as well. There is a major need for the bypass, for in its absence we shall see the entire area grinding to a halt. There is no incentive for people to use public transport to improve their travelling times for, because of the jams, it is even slower than private transport.

Representing South Antrim — and therefore two thirds of the length of the proposed bypass, rather than the third which others represent — it is my great fortune that I rarely travel through Toome in the rush hour. When I do, it tends to be in the opposite direction to the main traffic flow. However, what I see is quite enough to convince me of the need for a bypass soon.

Reference has been made to the previous Minister's visit to the O'Neill Arms Hotel to launch the exhibition on the bypass proposals. I have a confession to make. I did not manage to squeeze into any of the pictures; I was not seen beside Mr J Kelly, Mr McCrea or Mr P Robinson. I was in this Building on Assembly duties while the exhibition was being launched. However, I travelled there that evening, which gave me a much better opportunity to see the exhibition, though a slimmer chance of getting on television. I had the opportunity to speak to local people, and it was quite clear that there is deep feeling in the village and its surroundings on both sides that the bypass is needed now. It is very rare that one finds people whose land is to be affected by a vesting scheme for a main road saying "Yes, this area needs it." However, I heard that said in the O'Neill Arms Hotel that night. Clearly, the feeling in the district is that priority must be given to the bypass, and we must take note of that.

5.00 pm

Currently, we have a temporary throughpass in the village, which seems to have made a marginal improvement in travelling times. This was clearly accepted by people in Toome, and certainly by Antrim Council, as a temporary expedient until the bypass was built — and it will only be accepted as such.

Why is there such reluctance from the Ministers responsible to do something about the Toome bypass? The Minister for Regional Development travels here most days from Londonderry, and the Minister of Finance and Personnel travels here most days from Derry. Perhaps they are being so careful about their own interests that

they do not want to be seen to be promoting the Toome bypass, lest anyone have any suspicions of their personal motives. We could accept and understand that if they felt that they wanted to make progress on the scheme. People would not criticise them of being solely interested in their own circumstances.

To give one hint to the Minister, perhaps he and his Colleague the Minister of Finance could set an example. Instead of coming in two cars, some day they could meet up at Lisnagelvin and travel to Stormont in one car. That would at least cut down the traffic jam through Toome slightly. I am not going to suggest that they bring the Minister of Education as well — I am not trying to be unrealistic. The Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of Finance could co-operate that far, and the people of Toome would appreciate it. I have no doubt that what they would appreciate much more is giving this scheme its proper priority within the region — doing something to put the bridge and bypass in place immediately.

Mr McFarland: I sit on the Regional Development Committee, and, with family roots in Tyrone, I have used this road through Toome for most of my adult life.

This is an important development as it is a key access route to the west of the Province. However, we are now hearing that there is no money available for this, and it may have to be put back. That was not always so, and listening to Mr McCrea we hear revisionism at its best. We had a press release on 25 January, wherein Minister Robinson announced, quite clearly — and there was no question about it then — that the Toome bypass would be built. He went to the O'Neill Arms to produce an exhibition and unveil plans. He even had a very public row with Mr J Kelly to make sure it made the headlines on the news that night. He went into enormous detail about the length of the bridge and how this would be and that would be. However, the new Minister, Mr Campbell, claims that there is no money for funding. At that stage there was no doubt at all, and this was the Department for Regional Development's press statement:

"Funding for the bypass is being provided from the 1998 Chancellor's Initiative, which announced investment for the physical infrastructure in Northern Ireland."

There was no doubt at that stage — no doubt at all — that this was to happen.

The question is "What is the game?" You could argue that Minister Campbell has been hung out to dry and has been left to carry the rap for a complete volte-face in the Department. With friends like these, who needs enemies? Mr McCrea told how he has been after this for 20 years. I wonder who was the MP for Mid Ulster for many of those 20 years. The only reason we are able to have Minister Campbell bringing this development forward is that the Ulster Unionist Party produced the agreement. Otherwise we would still be looking for funding for all this.

Is there now an opportunity for Mr Campbell to do some lateral thinking? Perhaps there is a chance to look at the Toome bypass as a public-private partnership (PPP) — to develop it as a toll road. You could argue that it is clearly defined, it is outside the village and people will have a choice of coming through the village or taking the faster route. It would save £13 million of Mr Campbell's budget. Has he thought about that? He tells us regularly that there is no money for roads — they are underfunded — and he is absolutely correct. There is a serious crisis in Roads Service. Does his vision of the future include looking at alternatives, now that he has this opportunity of a complete turnaround — no money when Mr Robinson said there was? Perhaps he will comment on that when he gets the opportunity.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion from my Colleague Mr John Kelly, Assembly Member for Mid Ulster. I reaffirm our position that the Toome bypass should be put in place as quickly as possible. It is a long-awaited scheme, and we have heard how long people have been lobbying about it.

Unfortunately, the then MP for the area did not deliver that particular scheme, even when at the time he was propping up the Conservative Government. Even when he was maintaining his own position and theirs, and allowing them to continue to run down the services and the infrastructures, he could not extract a concession from them to make funds available for this simple bypass.

The scheme itself cannot be delayed any longer. It has been planned for a long time. People living west of the Bann have suffered decades of discrimination by the Stormont regime and the British Government. We are talking about discrimination not against Catholics, but against the people of the west — Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters. They have all lived in that area.

From early on in the Unionist regime there was an awareness that repartition might be considered at some future stage. Therefore nothing at all was developed in the west. All the infrastructures, all the industries and all the hospitals were put east of the Bann. The attitude was that the rest of the population could come to the east if it wanted to avail of those services. However, the people were not provided with the necessary infrastructure to come and get the good of those services.

If one looks at the river Bann on the map one will see that the M2 stops just beyond Antrim, the M1 at Dungannon, and the railway at Portadown. There is no infrastructure right across from east to west.

Mr Leslie: The Member's point is very interesting. Does he agree that the same east-west divide is highly apparent in the Republic of Ireland — so much so that it has repartitioned the country itself for purposes of positioning the west of the country better for EU grants?

Mr Molloy: I agree completely. I could not have put it any better myself. We have often said that the west of Ireland has been discriminated against by the Dublin regime, by Stormont and by the British Government. In the South we now see a rebalancing. They are actually talking about repopulating the west of Ireland. We need to ensure that the same happens in the North and we will get repopulation of the Six Counties, so that we will get a fair distribution of resources, infrastructure and wealth.

Mr McElduff: I want to draw the attention of the Member, and that of the Minister, to the Omagh throughpass. Just like the Toome bypass, it is deemed to be at risk and may be deferred as a result of the 15 November announcement. I find it very unusual that the Member for South Antrim — sorry, the Member for Mid Ulster — Mr McCrea, was putting the onus on all the other parties to secure funding for the Toome bypass and these other road schemes. The Minister's self-exclusion from the Executive table has cost many communities the money for these schemes.

Mr Molloy: I agree. Not only has the Minister not come to the Executive and argued for the money to be made available, but the previous Minister took advantage of the situation by making the announcement, laying down the plans and leaving it to the Executive to provide the money. He knew that he was not going to be there for the second round. He simply left Mr Campbell to clean up afterwards.

We are now in a situation where we do not have the Minister who announced it, and we do not have the funds to deliver it, because there was no plan in place to ensure that the Executive would support it. It was simply a public relations announcement by Mr Peter Robinson at that time.

The village of Toome has suffered severely. It has been destroyed by pollution, traffic congestion and noise. The quality of life has been affected. Even the plaque that Mr McClelland was looking for would be splashed all over if it were put up at the moment, given the amount of traffic that is going through the village.

We have to take all that into account if we are going to improve the situation and improve the quality of life for the villagers. One of the things that we have found down through the years is that villagers often feel that their village will be destroyed by putting a bypass around it. In this situation the village has been destroyed by the failure to put a bypass around it, and the failure to put the bridge in place. We need to address this problem. This is one of the main east-west arterial routes.

It is important that this bridge is put in place and that the infrastructure is developed. Not only is this the main east-west arterial route, but it is also the main arterial route for the DUP/LVF spokesperson from Mid Ulster, South Antrim, or wherever he is currently representing. He now travels between one constituency and the other,

so it is vital that this bridge be built, for that would allow him to move between his constituencies quickly.

If we are going to develop the west — and this is one of the main issues we need to address — we have to have the necessary infrastructure. Industrialists say that they cannot get their goods out or their materials in. If TSN is to mean anything in this Assembly, and if the Executive is sincere in trying to implement it, we need to target social need by providing adequate finances and resources. I ask Members to support this. It is unfortunate that the people who caused the whole east/west problem in the past are badly represented in the Chamber. There are only three Members — *[Interruption]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have to stop you, Mr Molloy.

Minister, are you prepared to give up a short amount of your time to your predecessor, Mr Peter Robinson? In other words, you will have nine minutes between you.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is normal — *[Interruption]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member — *[Interruption]*

Mr P Robinson: I am on a point of order.

It is normal that when spurious or ill-founded comments have been made about a Member, that Member has a right to respond. Instead of coming to me, you went to the Sinn Féin/IRA representative. That is the issue. I do not wish to take up the Minister's time, but I think that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, should have given me time to answer the points that had been made against me personally.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have taken up very well the time that I was prepared to give you.

Mr J Kelly: A LeasCheann Comhairle, on a point of order. Was the Member's name on the list to speak?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Mr P Robinson: That was not the answer you wanted, was it?

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): The notes that I prepared before the debate have been borne out by most of the Members' speeches, in that virtually everyone is agreed that Toome needs a bypass. It would improve journey times and reliability on the vitally important trans-European route between Belfast and the north-west, and it would also deliver environmental, community and safety benefits by substantially reducing the amount of traffic travelling through the village of Toome. I want to assure the House that my Department and I are keen to deliver a well-designed solution as soon as possible.

The proposed scheme is for a 3.5-kilometre — that is just over two miles — dual carriageway bypass to the north of Toome. The estimated cost is £13 million, and the likely contract period is 18 months. To ensure that local people were fully consulted about this scheme, my

predecessor, Mr Peter Robinson, opened an exhibition in the village in January of this year. Good progress has been made since then, and the following steps have been and are being taken.

During the statutory planning process, the direction order attracted one objection, but this was resolved by negotiation. The Committee for Regional Development and I have approved the direction order, and it will become operative in February 2001. That will complete the planning procedures.

The statutory environmental procedures have been completed without objection, and a notice to that effect will appear in the press later this week. That will allow my Department to proceed to the next stage of the statutory process, which is the vesting order stage. Roads Service has made an initial visit to all the relevant land-owners, and I understand that they have proved co-operative so far. It is planned to publish the notice of intention to make a vesting order next month.

My Department has further demonstrated its commitment to the scheme by advertising for project management consultants to oversee the design and construct contract. It is intended to appoint the consultants in the next 10 days, and the value of that scheme is about £400,000. I also plan a 16-week site investigation contract, to start next month, to obtain detailed ground survey information along the route of the bypass. That contract is valued at £100,000. An advertising — *[Interruption]*

Rev Dr William McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for people to instigate a debate like this and then not listen to the answers that are being provided?

5.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Rev Dr William McCrea: It is a point of order.

Mr Campbell: Also, there was advertising last week for horticultural contractors to undertake a contract to harvest and propagate local seeds to provide native planting to be used in the subsequent landscaping of the new road. That is a Northern Ireland pilot of a new UK-wide initiative.

I want to pay tribute to Roads Service staff, and their consultants, for all of their work to date. If all goes well with the land acquisition, the design and construct contract could be advertised in the summer of 2001, with the successful contractor undertaking the detailed design in the autumn and starting work on the ground early in 2002.

However, despite all the progress that has been made, it is vital that my Department receives sufficient funds so that this and the other schemes in the major works preparation pool can proceed on schedule. Clearly, insufficient funds could delay the start date of some of these key schemes.

This matter seems to have escaped the notice of some Members, despite the fact that my predecessor sent them a letter on 20 July which not once, not twice, not three times, not four times, but five times indicated that these schemes would proceed subject to finance being available. It was stated five times in the one letter.

The recent Budget statement by the Minister of Finance and Personnel announced draft allocations for the year 2001-02. That was done since my hon Friend, the previous Minister for Regional Development, made the announcement about the exhibition in Toome. However, using the normal financial planning assumptions, it seems that the funding available to my Department for the years 2002-03 and 2003-04 may not be sufficient to enable construction to start on all the schemes in the preparation pool which it is anticipated will be ready to start in that period.

I felt it important to make members of the Regional Development Committee aware of the possible funding shortfall when I met them on 15 November, and I welcome the opportunity today to discuss the matter further in this Adjournment debate.

With regard to the Toome bypass, I want to make it clear that when my predecessor, Peter Robinson, opened the consultation exhibition in Toome last January the scheme was subject to the statutory procedures and the availability of funding. I want to make that crystal clear, and I hope to have to say it only once — not five times. That is the case for every major works scheme. There is no scheme that I know of that proceeds irrespective of

funding — none. If people do not understand that, then I do not know what they would understand.

Similarly, when I advised the Regional Development Committee several weeks ago of a possible funding shortfall, that was not a cancellation or a postponement of any scheme. It was merely a statement of the obvious: to build roads, I need resources. I am convinced that, through our consultations with local people and with our extensive environmental studies, we have come up with a bypass scheme that is an excellent solution to a very serious problem as well as being a scheme which enjoys widespread support throughout Northern Ireland.

I have no wish to delay or defer this important project. I am aware of the benefits that it will bring. I am sure that with the goodwill and support of this House the necessary finance can be made available to my Department in the years 2002 and 2003 in order to allow it and the other vital schemes in my major works preparation pool to proceed as soon as is practically possible. I hope to receive the support of this House to get the necessary resources so that these roads can be constructed.

One or two political comments have been made about where I would, or would not, go in order to get the necessary resources. I will do all in my power to ensure that these roads are built. The one constraint that I am faced with in ensuring that I get the resources is the manifesto election pledge upon which I was elected. I will not be departing from that.

Adjourned at 5.20 pm.

ANNEX

Following is a translation of the Irish spoken by Dr Farren in reply to a supplementary question put by Mr McElduff (See page 19):

But first of all I would like to say that up to 988 students from Northern Ireland are studying at courses in the Republic, and there are, as Mr McElduff will know, many students coming from the South to the North, as I explained in my answer to the question from his Colleague Mrs Nelis. There is ongoing co-operation between the North and the South of the country in respect of higher education matters. I assist that, and my plans for cross-border issues are to strengthen the co-operation.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

REVISED BUDGET (2001-02) AND PUBLIC EXPENDITURE (2002-03 AND 2003-04)

Tuesday 12 December 2000

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS: VISITING CLERK

Mr Speaker: Members will note that we have a new Clerk at Table today. Dr Heather Lank is a Clerk of the Canadian Parliament and is here to assist in the training of our Clerks. It is traditional when a senior Clerk visits another Parliament on duty, that he or she is invited to assist at Table. I am delighted to have the help of such a distinguished Commonwealth parliamentary colleague. *[Applause]*

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on behalf of the Executive on the Budget for 2001-02 and the Executive's public spending plans for 2002-03 and 2003-04.

When I introduced the draft Budget on 17 October I set out the Executive spending plans for 2001-02 as a basis for debate and comment in the Assembly and more widely. Many have taken this opportunity, and I am especially grateful to the Finance and Personnel Committee for the attention that it has given to this issue. The Assembly had a very fruitful and important debate on this subject last month, and Members will also have seen the report of the Finance and Personnel Committee on the Budget. There has also been extensive comment from other Assembly Committees.

We have received several important comments from social partner organisations and other interested parties. We held two seminars on the impact of the Budget proposals on equality of opportunity, which was also the subject of comments from the Equality Commission. I am very grateful to the Commission, and to all who attended the two conferences, for their thoughtful input.

As well as the comments from the Assembly and others, the revision of the Budget has been affected by several developments in the public spending figures. Decisions by the Chancellor of the Exchequer gave rise to some changes in the total available, especially his confirmation that we will receive a Barnett-based share of the latest round of allocations from the Treasury's capital modernisation fund.

Within our own management of spending, it has been possible to correct an anomaly in the treatment of rate rebates which up to now has had the effect of denying us some of the subsidy to which we were entitled from the social security system. The correction of this anomaly increases our spending power in the departmental expenditure limit as fixed by the Treasury while having no effect on those who need rate rebates. The rules on entitlements remain based on parity of social security legislation with England, Scotland and Wales.

Details of the additional amounts available for allocation as a result of these changes, together with some savings that have emerged in departmental budgets since October, are set out in the Budget document.

In finalising the Budget proposals, the Executive have had regard to the views expressed by the Assembly on a range of issues. The Executive propose that the additional resources available should be used as explained in the Budget document and in the table attached to my statement.

To outline the revised Budget proposals, I will comment on the position for the Executive programme funds and for each Department in turn. I will set out briefly the changes to the allocations now proposed for each Department as compared to those announced in October, as well as a few key points about the indicative figures for 2002-03 and 2003-04.

The Executive have agreed the indicative allocations for 2002-03 and 2003-04. We do not have as much in the forward plans as we would wish, because of the effects of the Barnett formula. We want to achieve a new steer on our spending to deliver our Programme for Government in the best possible way. It is important, therefore to remember that the figures for departmental allocations for the later years are indicative. They understate what will, in the end, be allocated to many functions, because they will be augmented by allocations from the Executive programme funds. They will also be subject to review next year. To emphasise this they are, in line with convention, rounded to the nearest £10 million.

The Executive programme funds are a key element of the Executive's determined strategy to ensure that spending plans are adjusted from previous patterns and brought into line with the Executive's strategic priorities as set out in the Programme for Government. They are also designed to promote cross-cutting working, whereby proposals and initiatives can be brought forward for consideration by an appropriate group of Ministers working together. That will help the new structures of Government to promote a better way of working and managing programmes and projects.

The attribution of resources to the funds has now been confirmed and is set out in the Budget document. That includes the increase of £9 million for 2001-02, made possible through planned carry forward from 2000-01 as announced last month. There are also increases for the new directions fund, which I will say more about later. Early in the new year, proposals from Departments for the allocation of those funds will be considered and put to the Assembly in due course. We believe that the special allocations from these funds, managed and approved at Executive level, will make a real difference in applying our Programme for Government in contrast with previous patterns of expenditure. That will be an important demonstration of new political direction, based on direct accountability to the people, through the Assembly.

Because some spending power is being placed in these new funds, it follows that the amounts allocated to Departments, especially for 2002-03 and 2003-04, understate the final spending power that will be available to functions in due course. Thus the spending plans in the revised Budget document will be augmented by successful bids on the five Executive programme funds from Departments. We want to proceed with this as quickly as possible and to consider the allocations from the funds

for the next three years so that the spending plans for all Departments are set out as clearly as possible.

With regard to EU programmes the draft Budget showed how the Peace II programme would be added to the mainstream allocations for Departments. These are also shown in today's revised Budget, though they are indicative allocations which we will need to revisit once the programme has been agreed. The Executive are committed to ensuring that the new programme is truly additional and distinctive, as intended. A factor in settling the detail of the revised Budget is the Executive's provisions in their spending plans for the actions proposed for the other aspects of the new round of EU structural fund programmes, namely the transitional Objective 1 programme and the community initiatives. Unlike Peace II, these do not provide additional spending power to the region over and above our Barnett-based public spending allocation.

In finalising the Budget for 2001-02, and in setting indicative plans for 2002-03 and 2003-04, the Executive have ensured that there is appropriate provision for the content of these EU programmes. This has meant making special provision of £15 million in 2001-02 and £20 million in each of the two later years. That includes an allowance of some £11 million a year for aspects of the transitional Objective 1 programme which are outside the normal budgets of Departments. There is also £4.5 million in 2001-02, and £9 million a year thereafter for the four community initiatives — INTERREG III, URBAN II, EQUAL and LEADER+. Details of the allocation of these amounts to Departments are shown in the Budget document. These roll forward similar and successful actions from the previous round of EU funding and show that the Executive are determined to ensure that we work fully and effectively with the EU in applying the structural funds as a key contributor to the region's development. We are very grateful for the special assistance that the EU continues to provide, especially for the Peace II programme, which is such a unique and significant commitment by Europe to our situation.

The proposed allocation for 2001-02 for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is increased by £2 million from that announced in October. The further allocation is to provide for the likely cost of essential functions in relation to animal health together with allowance for EU programmes, in particular the LEADER+ community initiative. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development receives a substantial increase in spending power in 2001-02, and this is then rolled forward into 2002-03 and 2003-04 in the Executive's indicative figures.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure received a significant boost in expenditure in the draft Budget, especially for the arts. Some further provision has been added to permit further work on the libraries capital programme in both 2001-02 and 2002-03. The Budget

also provides for the agreed increase in the provision for the North/South Languages Body, which was announced in November following final recommendations from the North/South Ministerial Council. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is to get a substantial increase in 2001-02 with smaller increases in the later years, though, as for all Departments, these may be revised when the allocations from the Executive programme funds have been completed.

The proposals for the Department of Education include an additional £1.3 million in 2001-02 compared to the draft Budget.

10.45 am

The uplift from 2000-01 to 2001-02 will be 7.2%. This demonstrates the Executive's determination to make appropriate provisions for schools which is a fundamental investment in our future. The Minister of Education will provide further detailed information in due course.

In the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment there is a new provision for the development of the information age initiative, which is a significant aspect of the investment that we must make in the economy. The investment from our own public spending resources will be complemented by the proposals currently under discussion with the European Commission for inclusion in the Peace II programme. Again, there will be scope for funding proposals for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment functions to be considered in the Executive programme funds.

The budget for the Department of Finance and Personnel has been increased from the position proposed in October. This is to include an allowance to cover technical assistance, with the new round of EU structural funds programmes. The indicative figures include a roll forward of these proposals, which also take into account the needs of accommodation services for all Departments in future years.

The largest single programme in our departmental expenditure limit is for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The proposals now presented, which involve the allocation of £7 million more than proposed in October, make provision well above the rate of inflation, with a 7.6% increase over 2000-01. That should help the Health Service to develop and address the needs of our population.

I recognise the significant demands on the Health Service at this time, and it is right that it should receive substantial resources in the spending review. The indicative figures for years two and three of the period provide for further substantial increases. Furthermore, many aspects of health programmes will be eligible to bid on the Executive programme funds; thus there is scope for these allocations to be increased.

In the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment the main development arises from the Executive's decisions last week regarding the approach to the student support review, which I will turn to shortly. The departmental figures now include details on the welfare-to-work programmes, which have been transferred to our responsibility following the conclusion of the Spending Review 2000 by the Treasury. The plans also include the continued provision of support for training, which is to be provided by non-governmental organisations and is likely to receive support under the European structural funds transitional Objective 1 programme.

The plans for the Department of the Environment remain largely unchanged from those announced in October 2000. There are some additional provisions for the environmental aspects of the European transitional Objective 1 programme, as well as a small increase for administration costs in planning and environmental heritage.

The Programme for Government included a commitment to introduce free travel for the elderly. The spending plans for the Department for Regional Development make provision for this commencing from April 2002. The Executive decided to cover three quarters of the estimated cost, rather than one half, which was the figure in the models discussed up to now with district councils. Such details must be explored further with councils. However, this is an area to which the Executive are committed to making an important change which will benefit many. Also for the Department for Regional Development there is an addition of £2 million for roads maintenance in 2001-02.

The Department for Social Development will receive an additional £2 million for housing aimed at targeting the particular difficulties affecting north Belfast at present. This area is a high priority for the Department for Social Development and the Housing Executive. The plans also provide for continual support for the voluntary sector under the transitional Objective 1 programme, subject to the ongoing negotiations with the European Commission.

Finally, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has a budget largely unchanged from October. The additional £0.4 million in 2001-02 will be used to fund key research on equality and policy effectiveness and to expand a number of existing programmes.

In particular, the Executive have agreed to provide for some aspects of the student support review presented by the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, and to ensure that, after further consultation and discussion, there will be scope to make more specific decisions when the time is right.

In considering that, the Executive are focusing their attention on action to help the groups and sectors in greatest need of assistance, and that will address the factors

that cause under-representation. The proposals, which Seán Farren will explain in detail later in the week, include action to help those students in higher and further education who are most affected by the restrictions on support for living costs, and for additional higher education places.

The full proposals need further consideration by the Executive and the Assembly, but the Budget provides an additional £5 million in 2001-02, £7 million in 2002-03 and £8 million in 2003-04 for some key aspects of the review, mainly for further education. The Executive concluded that this aspect of tertiary level education is where there had been the greatest neglect of students' needs in recent years, and that the additional funding presents a major opportunity to make a difference. The Executive agreed to act immediately to provide help for that sector. These increases come on top of the additional £3.4 million for parity-based increases in the student support regime provided in the draft Budget.

The Executive have increased the allocation for the new directions fund by £15 million in 2002-03 and £20 million in 2003-04. Those funds will be earmarked to make it clear that there are resources available to allow a response to some of Seán Farren's proposals, after they have been considered further by the Executive early in the new year. That will allow further time for evaluation and discussion of the proposals and for a proper response when the processes have been completed.

I stress again that the figures for 2002-03 and 2003-04, as set out in the tables attached to my statement and in the Budget document, are indicative at this stage. Departments can and will use them as a basis for planning. In particular, they will allow capital programmes to move forward, though the Executive will monitor the evolution of the public service agreements and information on actions and targets to ensure that there is a major change in the quality and detail of our analysis of what we are getting for the money used in expenditure programmes.

The Executive considered carefully the points made about the uplift in the regional rate, but concluded that the increases were needed to ensure that we have sufficient resources for our services.

In introducing the draft Budget on 17 October, I said that agreement on the Programme for Government and the Budget represents a very important step in the evolution of our new institutions. Again, we have demonstrated that we can, and do, work together as an Executive, having regard for the full range of responsibilities of all Departments and the services which are provided for all the people in the community. The next step will be a full debate in the Assembly next week, when I will introduce a motion seeking the Assembly's approval of this revised Budget.

Because of this year's constrained timetable, it has been necessary to eat into the original Christmas recess to take time to fulfil this central and important function.

As I explained earlier in the autumn when this timetable was being settled, it is essential that we reach agreement on the position, so that those responsible for public services will have a clear basis for planning. The Finance and Personnel Committee, in its report on the Budget, urged that in future cycles the presentation of the draft Budget should take place as soon as possible after the summer recess.

I agree that that is the best way to ensure that the Assembly and its Committees have as much time as possible to undertake scrutiny. However, the process can and should begin before the summer recess, when Departments are preparing their input to each Budget cycle.

My other major concern is the overall position for determining public spending levels for the region, given the consequences of the Barnett formula. It is clear, especially as we look at the indicative figures for 2002-03 and 2003-04, that we do not have sufficient resources to take forward all the policy initiatives that the region needs in the context of the unique opportunities provided by devolution and the Good Friday Agreement.

We have inherited a backlog of under-investment in infrastructure, and difficulties in funding for health, education, transport and a range of other services that are now being addressed with large amounts of money in England. The Barnett formula means that we cannot match all of the increases available, and that will have an increasingly serious effect as the years go on. As I have said previously, the Executive remain determined to engage with the Treasury on the examination of these issues and to make as much progress as possible.

We also have a clear responsibility to ensure that whatever resources we have are used as effectively as possible. Already the Assembly's Public Accounts Committee has examined a range of value-for-money issues, and my Department will continue to work with and on behalf of all Departments, and in line with the requirements of the Public Accounts Committee, to promote the best possible use of resources.

We are also working in conjunction with the Economic Policy Unit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to develop better public service agreements, incorporating actions and targets and work on the evaluation of policies and programmes. That will improve how spending is managed and controlled.

I commend these Budget proposals to the Assembly. This has been a time-constrained cycle. However, I believe that we have an outcome that will begin to make a real difference which, especially through the Executive programme funds, will mean that everyone will begin to see the impact of the Executive and the Assembly in the management of our services.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement from the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the revised Budget. It is good that we have another look at the Budget in the ongoing review process. I can only speak on my own behalf, as the Committee has not discussed the revised Budget. The Committee will meet the Minister this evening and will be giving full consideration to the revised Budget.

I have a couple of questions. The first relates to the new money. Is that part of the extra £40 million in the 2000 spending review period? If that is the case, would it not be possible to use that money to keep the increase in the rates in line with inflation?

I welcome the commitment that the money that the Government will put into the European funding will be additional. I would appreciate a clear statement on when these funds will be available for Peace II, as that is an ongoing saga. The community is finding that the gap in funding is increasing and that Peace II is not on the ground.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member and the Committee for their work on the draft Budget.

First, the extra resources that we have available to allocate come from several sources, as I explained in my statement.

Some of them are a consequence of the Barnett formula, arising from the allocations announced in the pre-Budget report by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and some arise from the difference in the treatment of rate rebate for owner-occupiers, which gives us some more resources to manage.

11.00 am

The Executive considered the option of using those moneys to achieve a lower increase in the regional rate. However, the Executive were also very conscious of the fact that various departmental Committees were saying that they wanted to see increases in departmental budgets. Departments, and their respective Committees, were indicating that they needed even more resources next year. If we were to make more resources available, then we needed to use the extra moneys that were becoming available between the draft Budget and now. In particular, we have the significant issue of student financial support, on which proposals have come forward in the interim as a result of a review. It was important that the Executive should make provision in respect of all of those issues.

We are continuing to work very hard with the European Commission on the Peace II programme to ensure that we can have the operational programme agreed as soon as possible. All discussions on the community support framework have been completed, although not as early as we would have liked. We are now dealing with the

operational programmes, and when they are agreed we must then bring forward the programme complements.

We have already appointed the monitoring committees; some are in shadow format as that is all we are allowed to do at this stage. This is evidence that the Executive are determined to make progress as soon as possible. We are very conscious of the need, the expectation, and the frustration on the ground in relation to the delays in Peace II funding, and the uncertainty as to timing.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Leslie): I commend the Minister for bringing this statement to the House a week before the substantive Budget debate. Members will be very thankful for the opportunity to study the figures over the next six days.

In relation to the Department for Social Development, the Minister's statement allocates an extra £2 million to target housing difficulties in north Belfast. This is very welcome. The House is aware of the considerable difficulties in that area. However, I am very disappointed to see that that amount seems to be all that there will be. The House is aware that the Minister for Social Development continues to insist on increasing rates by 2% above the level of inflation, which will cause great hardship for those who actually pay their rent.

What plans does the Minister have for allocating some money to the other pressing problems in housing, namely fuel poverty, and the need to upgrade basic kitchen and bathroom facilities in Housing Executive homes?

Mr Durkan: In response to representations made by many people, not least the Social Development Committee and its Chairperson, the Executive have responded, in the revised Budget, with an allocation of £2 million. This is specifically aimed at supporting the Housing Executive's work in north Belfast.

In relation to future monitoring rounds, the Executive will, as they have done in previous monitoring rounds, pay due regard to the needs and programmes of all Departments. We will be making allocations in the December monitoring round, and we want to make the provision that would be appropriate for a monitoring round at that stage of the year.

The question regarding rent increase cannot be dealt with in the context of a monitoring round. The spending plans for the Department for Social Development presume a rent increase of GDP plus 2%. If we worked on another basis, then there would be £7.8 million less for the Housing Executive programme.

These issues raised by the Member, and similar points made by other Members, will be considered alongside all the other pressures and proposals to be taken into account in the December monitoring round.

Mr O'Neill: I also welcome the Minister's Budget statement, which contains many elements that we can all

support. However, on behalf of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, I ask the Minister if he understands our disappointment at the absence of any undertaking to buy out the salmon fishery nets licences on our coastline. Does he recognise that for slightly over £1 million, these licences could be bought out and that this would be a major step towards the recovery of our wild salmon stocks? This problem has been well identified by experts, but will it be given a sympathetic hearing when further adjustments are made to the Budget? The situation is so bad that, within perhaps 12 months, some of our premier wild-stock salmon rivers could be making a nil return.

Mr Speaker: Will Members, and indeed the Minister, be as concise as possible with their questions and answers so that every Member who wishes to ask a question can do so. This is not an opportunity to make statement; it is an opportunity to press questions. Speeches can be made during next week's debate.

Mr Durkan: Mr O'Neill has indicated what is not in the Budget, but we also need to remember what is in the Budget. Resources of £0.7 million have been provided for inland waterways and fisheries in 2001, with indicative allocations of the same amount for the following year, and £0.8 million thereafter.

I accept his point, and I understand that his case is supported by many experts. I do not pretend to be an expert. He asked if this issue can be considered when further adjustments are made to the Budget, but this is the revised Budget, as approved and agreed by the Executive. Therefore, neither the Executive nor I can make any further revisions. As I indicated in a previous answer, other specific proposals and pressures may be addressed in the December monitoring.

Mr P Robinson: I am sure that the House will agree with the Minister that there has been a legacy of underfunding, particularly for infrastructure. The House will want to support the Minister in anything that he can do to bring about a revision of the Barnett formula so that the situation in Northern Ireland is dealt with more equitably. However, I regret that in his revised Budget statement he still holds on to the intention to increase the regional rate by 8%. I thought that there had been fairly widespread criticism of this decision in the House and that the Minister had been advised to review the matter.

If Mr Durkan is looking for some suggestions about how he might save an equivalent amount of money and cover that shortfall, I would direct his attention towards the Civic Forum and the unnecessary "North/Southerly". The public will find it difficult to understand this rise in the regional rate, which is considerably higher than the rate of inflation.

I raise my second issue so that he will know how to deploy his troops next week —

Mr Speaker: May I press the Member to put his questions. I urge all Members to ask questions rather than make statements.

Mr P Robinson: And in doing that I have taken significantly less time than have other Members before me.

I want particularly to draw the Minister's attention to the Executive programme funds. I want him to try to convince the House of their benefit, for money is being held back that could be put into projects immediately. These funds must have the same criteria applied to them which apply to departmental projects.

Finally, the Minister's figures do not indicate very clearly what the roads expenditure will be for the following two years. Figures were shown to the Regional Development Committee which indicated that in years two and three the amount available for capital funding in year one would be cut. Will the Minister indicate whether he intends to cut the roads funding in years two and three?

Mr Durkan: There are quite a number of questions there, and I am not sure that I will manage to answer all of them.

First of all, Members cannot have it both ways with regard to the regional rate increase. They cannot come in here and vote for motions that call for more expenditure — for instance, motions asking for the speedy implementation of recommendations from the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee — and then insist that we cannot have the resources as an Executive to try to respond to the review on student support.

The Member has mentioned the amount of money allocated for the Civic Forum this year: that sum is £300,000.

I must repeat a point I have already made in the House in relation to North/South spending. The money that is being earmarked for North/South implementation bodies does not all represent new spending. Much of that money represents work that has already been done — but not by North/South implementation bodies. Many of the people employed on North/South work were already doing similar work. They are similar now doing that work as part of an implementation body, rather than on any other basis. That is fact. It is not all new work. It is not all new spending.

I pointed those figures out previously when outlining the allocation of £11 million for North/South implementation bodies. This issue has been dealt with before.

Secondly, in relation to the Executive programme funds, the Executive have made a clear decision that they want to use those funds to make sure that the Executive's priorities as laid down in the Programme for Government are properly discharged by Departments and through interdepartmental co-operation. In my statement, I indicated

that we hope to take decisions on the programme funds early in the new year. We hope that those decisions will carry through for three years, lending them more certainty and shape through reliable planning than would some of the more conventional departmental allocation methods favoured by the Member.

Mr Close: In his deliberations on the revised Budget, was the Minister aware of the recent family expenditure survey which showed that gross weekly income in Northern Ireland was £102 per week less than in the UK as a whole? If so, why does he insist on pulling more people into the poverty trap by imposing an 8% increase in the regional rate? Why has he ignored the pleas of councils, Members of the House, other organisations and Committees in insisting on mimicking that which was previously carried out by former Tory overlords? Why does he penalise those who are less well off by insisting on inflation-plus hikes in rent and rates?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for the now familiar points which he has just made. I must now make the familiar reply.

11.15 am

Yes, I was aware of the family expenditure survey. Yes, the Executive have also been aware of it. That is why the Programme for Government is trying to ensure that all Departments set about targeting social need more effectively than before. Therefore, it is wholly inappropriate to talk about people mimicking Tory overlords. In the Programme for Government we have measures that are aimed at targeting social need and the needs of the less well off. I would contrast that approach with that of the Member's party. Not so long ago it was voting for the Executive to commit themselves to even more expenditure. The party voted for us to engage in substantively significant expenditure over and above what was in the draft Budget. However, a couple of weeks later it was saying that we should not have the resources to meet the draft Budget plus the additional items, not least for student support.

We need this regional rate increase if we are to fund all the services to the levels we have indicated. The less well off are protected by the housing benefit scheme and rate rebates. I accept that some people will still be caught just above benefit levels, and I have already indicated that we want to address that in the overall rating policy review. We must make serious plans, not send out sound bites. As the Minister of Finance and Personnel, I, on behalf of the Executive, must present a comprehensive Budget that adds up and works out. Fortunately, the Member does not have to do so.

Ms McWilliams: The Minister may recall that I asked during his previous Budget statement if he could tell us what he meant by a reclassification of the welfare-to-work expenditure. In other words, how much of this money is new and how much of it is due to the reclassification of that expenditure, which we all know

to be substantial? In light of that, the Minister may be aware of some concerns. He will have received a communication — during his last statement he said he had not, but between then and now he undoubtedly has — from people working in the community who say that they will have to make substantial redundancies or else go to the wall if funding is not set aside between Peace I and Peace II.

Mr Durkan: On the latter point, I am aware of the needs in relation to Peace II and the needs of groups on the ground. I indicated in my response to Mr Molloy that we are aware of their expectations, needs and frustrations. In monitoring rounds this year, both last month and in the summer, we moved to provide gap funding out of departmental budgets to try to meet those needs. We are keeping that matter under review because we understand and appreciate that the particular funding difficulties faced by bodies vary according to the programme or sector involved. For some it is not so much a funding gap between Peace I and Peace II, as a funding warp in relation to Peace II.

I indicated during my previous statement that the welfare-to-work figures now appear in departmental budget lines. As I have explained in the House twice before, welfare-to-work money is treated differently because it now forms part of the departmental expenditure limit. Previously, it was annually-managed expenditure and thus ring-fenced. We had no discretion on its use. The amount we get for welfare-to-work is now included in the departmental expenditure limit and is under our overall control. The amount allocated to Northern Ireland has been reduced because of the reduction in unemployment.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I would like to make a couple of points. First, I would like to thank the Minister for his statement this morning. We welcome the way in which he has underlined the inadequate level of funding that we had for many years under previous Administrations and the need for a revision of the Barnett formula.

I acknowledge the difficulties faced by the Executive and the Minister in dealing with the competing demands. It is also interesting to listen to people with no responsibilities for meeting any of those demands, including the Ministers who do not even go to Executive meetings to argue for their own Departments. They will be able to make some kind of popular statement —

Mr Speaker: The Member should ask his question.

Mr Maskey: I would like to ask the Minister two questions, although I appreciate that he may not have the answer to hand for one of them. I would like each Department to provide evidence that there is a Budget allocation for targeting social need —

Mr P Robinson: What is your question?

Mr Maskey: That is my question — the Member should listen. Is there a Budget allocation for targeting social need and the equality provisions required by the agreement? Secondly, what impact will the increase in the regional rate have, particularly on the retail sector? As other Members have said, that issue raises some concerns. The Minister may not be able to answer today, but I would appreciate an answer before next week.

Mr Durkan: To be honest, Mr Speaker, I thought the Member was making good progress without asking questions.

Departments were asked to consider the implications of the new targeting social need programme and the requirements of section 75 for their budgets. That occurred at the bidding stage. I am sure that the Member is aware that all bids that the Department of Finance and Personnel received were copied to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Equality Unit and the Economic Policy Unit.

As part of its draft targeting social need action plan and proposed equality scheme, the Department of Finance and Personnel is determined to assist all Departments in measuring and focusing their equality and targeting social need actions. The Executive are committed to those actions, and all Departments have responsibility for them. I hope that the departmental Committees will take an active interest in those matters.

As I said, there have been two consultation conferences since the announcement of the draft Budget, and community and voluntary sector groups were invited to participate in the consideration of the equality and targeting social needs aspects of the Budget. Our considerations benefited from the queries from that sector, and we want to build on that in the future.

The Executive's commitment to equality and targeting social need cannot be measured simply by a particular budget line. It is not a matter of each Department's having a mere budget line for equality; it is a matter of ensuring that we have an overall Budget for equality.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Birnie): I would like to ask the Minister about paragraphs 26, 27 and 28 of his statement, which relate to student support. I welcome his statement, as, I am sure, does the Committee — as far as it can, ahead of further clarification from the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment.

In fiscal terms, these paragraphs are the opposite of the dance of the seven veils — layers are to be progressively added, rather than the reverse. The Minister states in paragraph 26 that

“there will be scope to go further, when the time is ripe for more specific decisions.”

What is the timescale, given that we are moving closer to the start of the next academic year in autumn 2001? Will the further provisions for student support be in place by autumn 2001?

Mr Durkan: My statement made clear that the Executive have already made an initial commitment in response to proposals brought forward by the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment. That initial response is in the departmental budget figures and amounts to £5 million next year, £7 million in the second year and £8 million in the third.

As I said in the statement, we have also earmarked £15 million and £20 million respectively from the Executive programme funds for the second and third years. Those resources are there so that the proposals that finally come forward on student financial support will have first call on that money. The Minister, like all Ministers, is obviously free to bring forward other bids and proposals in the course of future Budgets and monitoring rounds. The Executive are making these provisions now on the basis of the three-year planning that we are trying to bring forward for the Assembly's consideration.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): There are many good aspects to the statement today but, with particular reference to regional development, I welcome the Executive's commitment to introduce free travel for the elderly and their important initiative to cover three quarters of the estimated costs, as opposed to the half previously suggested. I congratulate the Minister and the Executive on that.

Did the decision to provide three quarters of the funding come from the Executive? Will the Minister and the Executive encourage the Department for Regional Development to get on with the vital task of tidying up details and discussing with local councils — which are important — the need to introduce this important change as soon as possible, to meet the deadline of April 2002?

Mr Durkan: That is a significant commitment on the part of the Executive Committee. The Executive offered the commitment to introduce a free travel scheme for the elderly in the Programme for Government. There were already proposals under way, and papers had previously come to the Executive in this regard.

A scheme such as this would not be funded from a single source, since, as a result of the squeeze on resources, we do not have the money available at this time to fund it fully at regional government level. Since it involves several councils, as well as the transport providers, it will take time to work through. I have recently spoken to the Minister for Regional Development about this, and I am aware that he has been working with a number of councils to bring forward the scheme as previously planned.

The allocation that we have been able to make in the draft Budget should assist the Minister in doing that and should help in those areas where people are reluctant to become, or resist becoming, involved in supporting and contributing to a comprehensive scheme across the region. I hope that the additional resources now made available in the Budget will encourage that. There were already commitments in the draft Budget to an assisted fares scheme, but this takes them further. I hope it will assist the Minister and the Department in bringing forward the scheme that the Executive Committee want to see.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Mr Carrick): Further to Dr Birnie's question, I want to press the Minister on student support.

11.30 am

I note in the Minister's statement that provision is made for some aspects of the student support review and, in the case of further education, for some key aspects. Will the Minister tell us when funding will be made available to both higher and further education sectors to address in full the student neglect acknowledged in the Minister's statement?

Mr Durkan: I indicated in the statement that the Executive Committee have now made provision — some directly into the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment departmental budget line, particularly for some items for further education students, and some in the new directions of the Executive programme funds.

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment brought proposals to the Executive, which they agreed last week. He will make the details of those proposals public and available to the Assembly Committee later this week. Of course, as well as the Committee and others wanting to consider those proposals for their purposes, the Executive have to subject proposals to further evaluation and appraisal. There will also be the all-important equality consultation. That is why the Executive have made the provision through earmarked allocation into the Executive programme funds.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that four paragraphs have been devoted to the question of student finance, which might be, and probably is, gratifying to the students. However, one might ask, where is the meat?

The extra £5 million will not go anywhere near to meeting the current question of student hardship and debt. What did the Executive receive from Dr Farren in relation to student finance? Also, can the Minister confirm that the increased allocation in the revised budget for higher and further education is the result of representations from Dr Farren?

Finally, in last night's 'Belfast Telegraph' we read about the £300 million shortfall in the health budget. Is that just speculation, or can we do something about it?

Mr Durkan: First, I have already indicated, both in the statement and in an earlier answer, that proposals brought forward by Dr Farren to the Executive last week were agreed by the Executive Committee. It was on that basis that, subsequently, the Executive Committee agreed the Budget and the Budget allocations. That is how the Executive work, in case people do not understand.

The proposals that came forward as a result of the review were the subject of work and contact between officials in the Departments of Finance and Personnel and Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment. There were also bilateral discussions between Dr Farren and myself, just as there are between other Ministers and myself when significant new items come forward. This was a significant new item that was not in the draft Budget, simply because the review of student finance had not concluded and been brought to the stage of proposals. That is why those provisions are there.

I cannot go into detail about the exact number of meetings we had or about the amounts bid for. As most Ministers do, and will recognise, the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment came in with proposals at a higher spending level than the Executive have been able to meet.

If we get into the details of bids then I might have to say which Ministers were objecting to those concerning further and higher education. I am not sure that would be fair to one Minister or another, because of the possible implications it might have for their Departments. If we are to open up the debate on the basis of what each Minister said, there might be red faces in several corners of the Chamber.

Mr Hussey: I appreciate the initial set of costs of restructuring government in Northern Ireland. However, what happened to the commitments to savings promised by making administration more effective and efficient? Indeed, in Annexe C we see increases of 10% in total departmental running costs. Future increases in running costs are also listed in the main statement.

Furthermore, I, like other Members, would voice my extreme concern at proposals for the ongoing rise in the regional rate. We are finishing off the third part of the devolved Government's commitment to the 8% rise, running to — over the three year-period — 26% or so. Can the Minister explain how, in the public expenditure plans table, the increase in "Regional Rate and other items" is 23% from 2001-02 and in the following year it will be 29%? How do these figures relate to the 8%? I realise that the Minister has addressed the correction of previous anomalies, but what other items bring up these percentages? We are really concerned that the Executive

are robbing Peter to pay Paul, and that small and medium-size enterprises in Northern Ireland will suffer.

Finally, I want to welcome the commitment to press for further funding. Major infrastructural improvement —

Mr Speaker: Order. I plead with Members to be more concise and to limit themselves to one question. We have already had two questions, expanded upon by the Member, who is now making a statement.

Mr Hussey: I will ask a final question. The Minister has said that there is a certain amount of additional European funding — the transitional Objective 1 programme and the community initiatives. He stressed that they were additional. However, paragraph 13 of his statement says

“Unlike Peace II, these do not provide additional spending power to the region over and above our Barnett based public spending allocation”.

Will the Minister explain that?

Mr Durkan: The two points made by the Member form the explanation. The only additional money will be from the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. When we are referring to additional money, we are talking about the Peace II programme.

The transitional Objective 1 programme and the various EU initiatives are not additional. The Member might have been thinking of the point I made in the statement with regard to the further match funding that will come forward in relation to some of those measures.

As regards the review of public administration, we must look carefully at the needs that arise. That includes the additional work that has been generated by devolution — the Assembly, the work of the Committees, the questions that are asked by Members, and the higher rate of public contact and interaction with the Departments. Additional costs come in at those levels.

In terms of the overall provision for departmental running costs, the rise from £628.4 million to £691.4 million is not totally accounted for by the type of running cost pressures I have described. A large part of that increase relates back to the change in the treatment of the welfare-to-work programme, which has been transferred into the main departmental expenditure limit. The running costs associated with that are now counted as part of the departmental running costs in the overall departmental expenditure limit. That partly explains the bump in the figures. We must also make realistic provision for departmental running costs at this stage. It is not good enough for us to limp along, and continually make provision for departmental running costs in monitoring rounds, if the best way to deal with the issue is to take account of the fact that departmental running costs were originally underestimated. That is what we have tried to do.

In relation to the regional rate, I do not like a regional rate increase of that level, or to project it over a number

of years. It has clearly not made me any friends in this Chamber, but the Executive have to do this if additional money is needed. The Member's point about the Barnett formula seems to suggest that he recognises that additional money is needed. We will not be in a strong position to tell the Treasury that we need an improvement on the Barnett formula if the Treasury can in turn say “Yes, you are looking for more money from English taxpayers, but you are not prepared to ask for more money from the people of Northern Ireland.” Members should remember that although the rate increase of 8% is significant, it does not compare adversely with projections across the water. Northern Ireland's average rate levels are considerably lower. They are a fraction of what households across the water pay.

Mr Dallat: I will be both precise and concise. Can the Minister indicate what measures and consultations were undertaken on the Budget in respect of equality issues?

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

Mr Durkan: As I indicated in an earlier reply, Departments provided equality assessments of their bids when they were submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel. These were then copied to the Equality Unit. The assessments were taken into account during consideration of the Budget proposals. The draft Budget was also, of course, the subject of equality consultation under my Department's draft equality scheme. The draft Budget was circulated to all of the 120 groups that my Department's equality scheme recognises, and copies were also made available in alternative formats. In addition to the opportunity to respond in writing with their views, all the groups were invited to attend two consultation conferences, which I addressed, in Derry and Belfast on 22 and 23 November. I also received a report on the views expressed by delegates, which helped to guide our final recommendations and future thinking.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Minister of Finance and Personnel came to the House today in an attempt to create the perception that his pockets are stuffed full of cash for Christmas. He is a bit like Bruce Forsythe, saying to the Executive Ministers “Come on down. The price is right”. Can he explain to the House whether this is an economic miracle or a mirage? In examining the figures, does he agree that today's statement — which follows fast on the heels of his statement of 20 November on the reallocation of funds to Departments — will cause the community to note that Nationalist-controlled Departments are receiving considerably more money than Unionist-controlled Departments in an allocation being made by a Nationalist Finance Minister? How will he address that issue and the perceptions created by it?

In particular, I note that today he is allocating an additional £400,000 to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. That results in a budget that is some £8 million less than it takes to run the entire

Assembly. How does he justify that amount of money going to that Department, given that we never see its two invisible men — the junior Ministers, Mr Haughey and the other one?

Will the Minister tell the House whether the additional £2 million for agriculture will make a difference? Can he explain why he has not made any further allocation to the £10 million deficit in funding for the vision group? He knows that it is seeking £10 million, and it is not getting it.

11.45 am

It appears that the Minister's allocation today is giving money to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, but, yet again, the farmers' pockets remain empty. Does the Minister agree that, if you were to do a quick tally of the sums, the Unionist Ministers outside of the Executive appear, once again, to have done considerably better than their Unionist Colleagues who wish to attend the Executive? Does he also agree that those Unionists should leave the Executive and that they are, perhaps, failing to fight their corner in the Executive?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for a question that, once again, reveals his obsessive sectarianism. The fact is that Departments here are served and headed by Ministers from several parties. I do not treat Departments according to the party label of their Ministers. I think that Ministers would bear me out on the fact that I have equal and proper dealings with all of them and their Departments. If Mr Paisley were insinuating that there is any discrimination on my part, I would ask him to take the appropriate course of a proper legal challenge on that basis. There is no discrimination on my part or on the part of the Executive Committee.

His final bit of point-scoring to try to get at the Ulster Unionist Ministers actually undermined his initial point. He tried to say that I was discriminating against people on party political grounds, but then he ended up talking about how well — as he would put it — the DUP Ministers appeared to be doing. Either we are treating people fairly and properly, or we are not.

As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I am treating people fairly, and so are the Executive. We do not look at Departments according to the party political attachments of their Ministers. We look at them on the basis of the services they run and according to their customers' needs. Their customers are the Northern Ireland public — Unionist and Nationalist alike.

As a Minister, I have taken a Pledge of Office, as have all other Ministers, to serve equally all the people of Northern Ireland. I am alarmed at the suggestion by a Member of this House that Ministers might be, should be or could be working on the basis of motives depending on the person who is coming along with the request. It does not matter to me what Department or what area

applications come from, for I, my Department and the Executive Committee at large are treating people according to our public service needs and priorities. We treat all members of the Northern Ireland public equally.

Mr B Bell: I am glad that the Minister has highlighted the under-investment in infrastructure that has been inherited from the direct rule regime. I am sure, however, that he is aware that in England, Scotland and Wales this is being addressed by private finance initiatives of various kinds, as well as public sector ones. Why is there is no commitment in the Budget to ratchet up the investment levels in infrastructure here by partnership with the private sector?

Mr Durkan: The Executive recognise, as did I in my statement, that there has been historical underfunding in relation to infrastructure. We are trying to address that in a couple of ways — by the allocations that are going to the Departments which have key responsibility for infrastructure and by the further creation of Executive programme funds.

The details, management and criteria of those funds have yet to be fully agreed by the Executive, but using them to generate a higher and more productive participation in private finance initiatives and public and private partnerships is one important consideration that we have in mind. Obviously, our interest in private finance initiatives and public and private partnerships is not confined to infrastructure, but this is a very obvious area in which we can try to improve our rate of investment.

We will be working with the relevant Departments to see that they are able to do that with the funds available to them. We will also be working with them in relation to what funds might be made available from the Executive programme funds in relation to whatever bids might come in.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the revised Budget and the increases for all Departments. Will the Minister comment on the importance of public service agreements (PSA) in the pursuit of good government? What relation do the PSAs have to the allocations in the Budget statement?

Mr Durkan: Public service agreements link the resources allocated in the Budget to the objectives of the Northern Ireland Departments, regardless of who heads those Departments. They aim to deliver modern and accountable public services. Quantifiable targets are set for specific improvements in services or for the results that those services will achieve. PSAs show what the public can expect from the resources allocated in the Budget.

Public service agreements should be a key instrument for the Executive and the Assembly. When the Assembly votes money for a Budget, Members will want to know what the money is for. The Assembly will want to ensure that it can monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of

that spend. PSAs will help the Assembly to discharge that requirement satisfactorily.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): I would like the Minister to clarify an item in the table entitled "Increases to Allocations to Departments and EPFs from Draft Budget" on page 9. It shows that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will receive an additional allocation of £2 million and an extra £4.5 million for EU programmes. The total shown is £1 million. I note that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is missing, although I am not suggesting that he has made off with the other £5.5 million. Can the Minister explain the anomaly?

Will the Minister also tell us what bid he received from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for e-government? The initial request was for £14.9 million, but that was not met in the initial round. E-government must be taken seriously if we want to have a modern, serviceable Government.

An initial request for £500,000 for victims' groups was not met in the first round. Subsequently, an offer of £200,000 was made. Can the Minister not allocate more money to victims, rather than allocating £400,000 to departmental spending?

Mr Durkan: As the Member said, an allocation was made to victims' groups in the October monitoring round. The Department of Finance and Personnel is unable to meet every bid, even if it comes from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Earlier, Mr Poots's Colleague appeared to suggest that the Department of Finance and Personnel was being unduly soft and generous to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, because of the allocation of an additional £400,000. Members should be consistent in their approach to such issues.

We all attach huge importance to e-government. The bid from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister was not a bid for its own work, but for work throughout Government. All Departments must continue to develop that work from their baseline. In the future, Departments may make a bid to the service modernisation fund for work relating to e-government.

The additional allocation to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that is shown in the table on page 9 is over and above what was in the draft Budget, namely £2 million. The correct figure is £6.5 million; what appears in the table is a simple typo.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Savage): I welcome the Minister's comments, but with a degree of caution. The Minister said that there was a backlog of under- investment in many Departments, but he left out the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. How much money will be available for LEADER+ and

the rural development programme? Rural development committees in councils are quite concerned and do not know where they stand.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question. There was a significant increase in the draft Budget, and that increase is sustained here. The increase in the draft Budget recognises that many Department of Agriculture and Rural Development programmes have been underfunded. It also tried to take account of some of the new work coming forward, such as the vision group. We gave an advance for the beef quality scheme, and that is a clear indication that other proposals from the vision group can also draw on Executive programme funds.

With regard to community initiatives, LEADER+ focuses on rural development, and that will be additional to the figures that are provided in the budget table for rural development. The INTERREG programme will have a rural development aspect as well. Proposals relating to INTERREG and LEADER+ have now been given to the Commission and will be the subject of negotiation over some five months. The amounts that we are reckoning on for LEADER+ are included in the tables in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's budget line.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister explain the significant increase of about £6.2 million in the 2000-01 capital allocation for roads in this year's Budget? Next year, compared to the October budget expenditure and to today's announcement, there is a further £9.6 million.

Furthermore, will the Minister confirm that the increase for transport in this year's allocation of £72 million, next year's £93 million, and the subsequent year's £130 million, is largely as a result of increased expenditure on railways?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question. He mentioned several points from the Budget. The Executive are trying to respond to the needs in key areas of infrastructure such as roads. People need to take account of the Chancellor's initiative money in the Department for Regional Development's budget line, which is essentially for roads. That is where the total figure for spend on roads comes from, and we have been trying to make a commitment in that area.

The fact that there will be a fall-off in the Chancellor's initiative represents a problem that happens when one-off, time-limited benefits come to an end. We have made a commitment to rail transport, as we did in the draft Budget, that we believe will assist the Department and other relevant interests in taking forward the consolidation option. Clearly, railways and roads are key areas of infrastructure that are eligible to bid for the Executive programme funds.

CHILDREN: RESIDENTIAL AND SECURE ACCOMMODATION

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

That this Assembly approves the first report of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee on residential and secure accommodation for children in Northern Ireland and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement the Committee's recommendations at the earliest opportunity.

As Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee, I am very pleased to bring the Committee's first report before the Assembly. The report examines children's residential and secure accommodation in Northern Ireland. I am particularly grateful that the report enjoys the unanimous support of the Committee, and I wish to thank each and every Committee member for their very hard work and positive support. I also wish to thank the Clerk to the Committee and the Committee's support staff for their outstanding help and co-operation at all times.

12.00

The Committee wishes to place on record its gratitude to over 60 individuals and organisations for their excellent written submissions and oral evidence. The introduction of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 was welcomed as an enlightened piece of legislation. It placed the best interests of the child at the heart of the services for children by imposing a raft of new duties on statutory authorities.

However, its implementation has been severely emasculated by a lack of accompanying resources. Indeed, some witnesses to the inquiry attested to instances where resources had been diverted out of children's services into other "priority" areas.

Given the moral, as well as legal, obligation on statutory authorities to provide proper support and guidance to children in a safe environment, this is clearly an unacceptable state of affairs, and must cease immediately. There has been mounting concern in recent years about the quality of provision of children's residential services in Northern Ireland.

The former Department of Health and Social Services recognised the problem in 1997. It commissioned a review of residential care, and that resulted in the report 'Children Matter', which was published in 1998. That report recognised the deepening crisis in the children's residential care sector, but also emphasised that it formed only part of a complex set of interrelationships in children's services. Consequently, the report emphasised the importance of taking into account the level and nature of unmet specialist need, staffing, training and complements,

fostering, educational needs, preventive measures, leaving-care needs and commissioning arrangements.

It is therefore deeply regrettable that the crisis in children's residential care has, if anything, deepened since the publication of 'Children Matter'. While the setting up of a ministerial task force to drive forward the model of expanded, differentiated provision envisaged in 'Children Matter' is clearly a welcome development, it is nonetheless a sad reflection of the lack of progress on the report's recommendations since its publication over two years ago.

Secondly, there was a historical over-reliance on the voluntary sector, which unsurprisingly led to a succumbing to intolerable pressures, and a dramatic reduction in its provisions. Regrettably, this year saw the closure of St. Joseph's in Middletown, which had provided 24 residential places in the voluntary sector and which had been renowned for its excellent educational input.

Thirdly, the Criminal Justice (Children) (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 has had the effect of diverting even more children into the care system. Fourthly, and critically, there has been an unwillingness, or an inability, by the Department to commit sufficient resources to the residential sector and preventive family-support measures.

The Committee does, however, acknowledge recent efforts by the Department to inject much needed resources into this area, but much more needs to be done. The continued retraction of children's residential places has meant higher thresholds for admission, resulting in the inappropriate placement of children with conflicting and complex needs and behavioural difficulties, as well as increased demands for secure accommodation. The Committee was appalled to learn, from various witnesses, of a myriad of problems resulting from the lack of adequate provision. It heard of widespread instances of overcrowding, placement instability, violence, absconding, alcohol and drug abuse, and inappropriate sexual behaviour, including prostitution.

We are faced with the stark reality that the system, the very *raison d'être* of which is to provide the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in society with a safe and secure home environment, is exposing children to further risk and to inappropriate placements.

The central theme running through the evidence provided to the Committee was deep concern about the historical underfunding of the residential sector for children and young people in Northern Ireland and the leaching away, on occasion, of the limited resources to other so-called priority commitments. No public service can operate or plan effectively under such circumstances. The tag of "Cinderella service" must go. The Committee fully agrees with those witnesses who argue passionately for sufficient ring-fenced resources to be made available for facilities and staff for the additional children's homes needed.

It also believes that the use of these resources should be closely scrutinised through audit trails to ensure that they are used efficiently to achieve the desired outcomes. The word “earmarked” is often used in presentations by Government Departments. While I appreciate the massive financial constraints on all Departments, I welcome what the Minister said earlier about the £7 million addition to the health budget over and above what was allocated in October.

I am also aware of what Mr John Kelly said about the statement regarding the four boards, the representatives and the fact that hundreds of millions of pounds are being spent in Scotland above what is being spent here. The commitment of such funds will facilitate the specialised and greatly expanded model of residential care provision described in ‘Children Matter’, which will properly serve the differentiated and complex needs of children and young people in appropriate care settings.

The ‘Children Matter’ model is pyramid based, with a range of general and locally based children’s homes at the bottom, a middle tier of more intensive support units for those with more complex needs, and, at the top, a small number of secure care places for those who pose a risk to themselves or to others. This model of provision represents a realistic way forward. However, it must be emphasised that to facilitate choice, surplus places must be available.

It is recommended that homes should not operate at more than 80% occupancy. At present, not only is the sector operating at almost full capacity, but some homes are also exceeding full capacity. The impact of the Criminal Justice (Children) (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 is an additional consideration which needs to be addressed alongside the ‘Children Matter’ proposals. This has heaped further pressure on the children’s residential care sector by diverting young offenders there who would previously have been kept in a custodial setting.

Witnesses recorded that these young people pose serious management difficulties and disrupt the routine of other children. The Committee notes that the voluntary sector has already drawn up development plans to meet the distinctive residential needs of this very specific group of children. It recommends that the Department’s strategic regional plans provide for suitable facilities for looking after offenders. It also urges the Department to award the voluntary sector longer term contracts of at least five years to facilitate the strategic development of its services in the residential sector.

The guidance in the 1998 Order states that a home should treat each child as an individual and promote and safeguard his or her welfare. However, a culture of “get them in anywhere you can” has developed owing to the sheer lack of places. This inevitably leads to children with conflicting needs being accommodated in the same home, jeopardising their safety and well-being. Some

children are being exposed to problems that could exacerbate their own problems.

The registration and inspection report of the Northern Health and Social Services Board 1999-2000 confirms

“The lack of placement options continues to be the most pressing concern arising from inspections. Many of the problems and stresses for children, and for staff, arise from the inappropriate mix of residents in four of the general purpose homes.”

Situations such as that in Harberton House in the Foyle Health and Social Services Trust area — where, at times, up to 33 children have been accommodated in a 27-bed unit that is funded for only 20 children — are unacceptable and must become a thing of the past.

Given the grave concerns for the safety of children in residential care, it is vital that a placement risk analysis be completed for each child prior to admission, or as soon as possible thereafter. In addition, the care plan for each child should include a protection strategy approved by the registration and inspection unit.

Critical to the success of an expanded children’s residential sector will be the ability to attract and train the estimated 150 to 200 extra social workers needed. The difficulties here have as much to do with the retention of staff as with recruitment. The recent closure of St Joseph’s in Middletown resulted in the devastating loss of 30 highly qualified staff from the sector. Only four remain within the children’s residential sector. Staff are working under extreme pressures in overcrowded homes where there tends to be a high concentration of children with challenging behaviour, who can be difficult and disruptive. The low ratio of staff to children makes it difficult to do any real constructive work with children, or even to supervise them properly.

The Committee learned of the high proportion of casual staff who supplement staff rotas due to chronic absenteeism rates — up to 30% in some trusts. Staff have to work unsocial hours, including frequent weekends, with little time to share with their families. Radical steps, therefore, are needed to entice new social workers into this sector as well as maintaining the current staff. These should include a review of pay and conditions, the establishment of a sophisticated staff complementing unit, and a training and support facility for social workers specialising in children’s care.

The fact that there are only eight secure places for children in Northern Ireland has meant that a queuing system has developed, with young people being inappropriately placed or remaining at risk in the community. There can be as many as 15 young people waiting for a placement at any one time. The Committee was shocked to learn that young girls are being held in the women’s section of Maghaberry Prison because there is no appropriate secure care accommodation. The Northern Ireland Court Service said

“We remain astonished that one of these children has not killed, or been killed, in the past four years.”

It is a most appalling indictment and serves as the starkest warning of the need to rectify the situation immediately. The Committee understands that the Department has commissioned six extra places at the Lakewood facility, and urges that this provision be expedited. It also recommends that consideration be given to changing the subordinate legislation to allow the voluntary sector to provide additional places that are clearly needed in the short term. St Patrick’s in west Belfast, which is closing, is one place that could be considered in that regard.

While the Committee is loath for any child to be deprived of his or her liberty, it also recognises that secure care accommodation is required for a small number of children and young people who pose a risk to themselves or others. However, based on the positive outcomes from an experiment in Scotland, it believes that the Department should invest some resources in pilot studies to test the effectiveness of alternatives to secure accommodation. That is a very important point.

Lack of specialist provision for children with disabilities and mental health problems has been highlighted as giving particular cause for concern. The Committee was deeply concerned about the treatment of children in adult psychiatric wards — a practice that should cease immediately. The current provision of six inpatient adolescent beds in the Young People’s Centre is clearly insufficient and should be urgently complemented by an additional eight-bed mental health unit.

Dr Ewan McEwan of the Young People’s Centre gave evidence to the Committee, and we were most impressed by what he told us. Members will be aware that the adolescent psychiatry services have only half a dozen places. That also needs to be remedied.

12.15 pm

The Committee also wants the forthcoming departmental report, which outlines the future provision of adolescent psychiatric support, to focus on preventative measures. The development of mental health support services should include an input from the adolescent psychiatric service. A study of the residential needs of disabled children should be urgently commissioned.

The present level of educational achievement by children in residential care is depressingly low. Up to 50% of young people in Northern Ireland leave care with no educational or vocational qualification, thus further disadvantaging this most vulnerable group. Maintaining children and young people in mainstream education continues to pose considerable problems for staff in children’s homes, for they are having to cope with a growing number of children who have been either excluded or suspended from school.

The Department of Education highlighted the pressing need for improved communication between social services

and educational professionals in relation to children in care. I witnessed this at Muckamore Abbey Hospital, which I visited several months ago. The staff work so hard with the young people there who have learning difficulties. The young teachers do their best, but, again, there are not enough resources; there are not enough people involved. The Department of Education must, therefore, liaise with social services to discuss the education of young people in that situation.

The Committee believes that, with proper support measures, a significant improvement can be made. It welcomes the joint funding by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education and Save the Children for research into the education of young people in care. It strongly advocates the establishment of a joint working group, involving the Department, the NIO, the trusts, education and library boards as well as the voluntary sector, to formulate an agreed protocol regarding the education of young people in care. Particular attention should be given to young people who are excluded from school.

I want to move on to the question of independent visitors. Although the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 provides for independent visitors to advise and befriend children in care, the Committee was concerned to learn that, due to the narrow drafting of the legislation, only a minority of children in care have been able to avail of the scheme. Research shows that children strongly value these provisions. These children are severely disadvantaged in relation to others, and therefore each has access to an independent visitor.

The Order also imposed a new duty on the trusts in respect of leaving and aftercare responsibilities. Programmes were to be designed to help young people in care to prepare for the difficult transition to adulthood and independent living. This already vulnerable group is expected to cope with a wide range of issues in a very short time at a much younger age than the remainder of the population. The Committee was greatly alarmed to learn that, according to the 1999 report, despite the terms of the Order, nearly half of the trusts did not have a framework for developing their leaving and aftercare programmes.

The Northern Ireland Leaving Care Bill, which is due to be introduced next year, is warmly welcomed as a legislative measure specifically aimed at producing better outcomes for this most vulnerable group. It should ensure that trusts discourage young people from leaving care too early, and before substantial preparatory support is given. Furthermore, they must provide better services for young people in the areas of education, employment and housing.

The Committee endorses the recommendation from the Northern Ireland Leaving Care research project that all young people in care should have a “through-care” plan to address their preparation and aftercare needs and

so enhance their practical living skills. It is conscious of the positive impact of the Quality Protects programme in England and Wales with regard to children leaving care. It also welcomes the Minister's proposal for a regional review that will replicate its objectives as appropriate.

Witnesses repeatedly emphasised the important role that family support services can play in helping to prevent children from entering the residential care system and possibly ending up with mental health problems. Conversely, failure to invest properly in prevention is a false economy and only stores up a multitude of problems further down the line, resulting in more costly interventions, both in human and financial terms.

The Committee strongly welcomes the Executive's plans for an extension of the Sure Start scheme for disadvantaged families and the creation of a new children's fund to provide support for children in need and young people at risk. These types of commitments must be sustained over the long term to facilitate proper planning of family services.

A year or two ago there was a programme run by the previous Administration to do with youth at risk. Lack of funds stopped that, but it was an outstanding exercise to help young people from the most vulnerable parts of our society, and I hope that it will be reinstated.

The shortage of children's residential places has placed ever greater pressures on foster carers, who have to care for children with more complex and challenging needs than before. As failure to find suitable foster placements can lead to children having to go into care, it is crucial that the recruitment of foster carers keeps pace with demand. The Committee was therefore very concerned to learn from a recent social services inspectorate report on fostering that almost 70% of carers are aged between 40 and 60, and that the overall numbers are falling. It warmly welcomes the Minister's commitment to develop a regional strategy to address recruitment and retention difficulties. This must address the support needs, the respite provision and the training requirements of foster carers and raise the boarding-out rates to reflect the skills and demands of foster caring.

Research shows that adopted children fare better than those who remain in care throughout their childhood. It is therefore disappointing to note that Northern Ireland's adoption rates compare poorly with those of Great Britain. The Committee therefore welcomes the social services inspectorate's current review of adoption services with a view to promoting it as an option for children in care. It is clear that the successful implementation of an expanded model of the children's residential sector will require a co-ordinated overarching strategy, involving clear policy objectives and outputs, and encompassing the statutory, voluntary and private sectors' working in close collaboration. The Committee very much welcomes the Minister's commitment to involve the voluntary and private sectors in the regional plan for children's services.

However, it was very concerned about the absence of the voluntary sector from the ministerial task force which was created to drive forward the strategic plan for the children's residential sector. That omission should be remedied at once. The task force must be afforded full responsibility and dedicated resources to enable it to implement the strategic plan over a five-year period, reporting on progress regularly and directly to the Minister. It should also consult with young people with experience of residential care on the future provision of services.

Planning has become a major obstacle to the provision of new children's homes in recent years because of the strength of opposition from local communities. The Committee fully endorses the Minister's view that public representatives should work with local communities to promote awareness and understanding of the special needs of vulnerable children in care. The Committee was convinced by the very persuasive arguments of many witnesses in favour of a commissioner for children, especially in view of our very serious concerns about funding for children's services, the increasing numbers affected by mental health problems, and children's rights and safeguards under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

The Committee joins me in saying that a commissioner for children, such as exists in other countries, would be a major step forward in co-ordinating services for children, and especially for those most in need and in care. We therefore strongly recommend the appointment of a commissioner for children to heighten the profile of children's issues, to assist in the development of services for children and to act as a watchdog over their welfare.

Finally, the Committee looks forward to the implementation of the measures in the Programme for Government which are aimed at helping children and young people at risk. It recognises fully the need for cross-departmental collaboration and for close liaison involving the statutory, private and voluntary sectors on the strategic planning which is vital for building the specialised model of provision of children's residential care. The Committee trusts that the recommendations of this report will form part of a co-ordinated, inclusive approach to bringing about significant improvements in the quality of life and outcomes for children in residential care.

I look forward to the debate, which will give an overdue platform to the children's residential care sector. It behoves us to add our voices to the cause of the most vulnerable children and young people. At the very least these severely disadvantaged children are entitled to the type of stable and secure home environment that the majority of our people take for granted. I sincerely hope that the report will receive the widespread support of the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling the next Member, I remind Members that a substantial number of Members have put down their names to speak and that we need to

leave appropriate time for the winding-up speeches by the Minister and Dr Hendron. For that reason I will limit the time available for each Member to five minutes, but that does not mean that Members have to take the full five minutes.

Rev Robert Coulter: I congratulate Dr Hendron, the Chairperson of our Committee, on his excellent speech that covered every aspect of the report. The only problem is that there is very little left for the rest of us to say.

It is encouraging to realise that children's services have now become a priority. When we realise that young people are growing up in the jungle of modern society it is not surprising that many need help. The number of individuals and organisations who were prepared to give evidence to the Committee was an eye-opener to its members and is testimony to the level of concern that is felt.

That there are serious shortcomings in the children's residential sector is proved by the fact that the Committee had to include 36 recommendations in its report. That is not something new — there has long been recognition of these problems. These problems were recognised in the early and mid-1990s. The tragedy has been, however, that they were not properly addressed.

The shortage of places has been mentioned, and I do not want to point the finger at anyone. Rather, we need to take the problems and look at them seriously and see what can be done to help these young people.

The fact that we are told that we are 30% short of places and suitable accommodation — which is leading to overcrowding — is an indictment that not enough has been done in the past. These young people who come from very difficult backgrounds are sometimes left to lie on mattresses on the ground, and that is neither adequate nor acceptable. We have a moral responsibility not only to highlight their needs but to go further and do something about them.

The lack of adequate provision in specialist residential places to meet the needs of children with mental health problems and disabilities must be addressed immediately. In connection with that, the respite provision for disabled children is inadequate. It is not only the children but the other members of their family who must have respite provision in place.

The shortage of staff is one of the greatest problems. Recommendation 7 goes to the heart of the problem — the modernisation of pay and conditions of service for children's residential social workers. That includes careers structures to take account of the specialist demands of the job, the high levels of stress and the unsocial hours involved. If we are to get the 150 to 200 extra staff, recommendation 7 must be addressed immediately.

There are only eight places in the whole of Northern Ireland for secure care provision. Young people are housed

with adults during those formative years, and that will leave a mark upon them for the rest of their lives.

It struck me, when Dr Hendron was making his report and telling us that young people were being housed in a prison, that we are back to the age of the Victorians, who put children in jail. Let us face the problem. Let us be honest enough to say that in a modern society we are not prepared to allow this to happen.

12.30 pm

It is of serious concern that the 1999 report on the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 revealed that nearly half of the health and social services trusts did not have a framework for developing their leaving-care and aftercare programmes. I hope that the Northern Ireland Leaving Care Bill, to be introduced next year, will address these problems and take education, employment and housing into account.

Funds must be made available and there must be accountability in the Department. There should be no redirection of funds which have been set aside for this area of concern.

The sitting was suspended at 12.31 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they each have five minutes in which to speak.

Mr Berry: The report from the Health Committee, of which I am a member, does not make for pleasant reading. As one of the witnesses made it clear, the changing shape of the family, with more parents working and more one-parent families, has produced many of the problems faced by society today.

The report highlights the fact that the state makes a bad parent. Not only that, but here, as in every other sector, bureaucracy is paramount rather than the task it is supposed to be dealing with. This problem has mushroomed beyond what the services can cope with at present. Young children in state care are not being enhanced educationally, except in a negative sense, and this helps to explain why half of the children who are in care get no qualifications at all.

To make matters worse, given the fact that many children in the system are becoming criminals, the quality of the service they are getting must be seriously questioned. At the same time, a number of staff members are on long-term sick leave, and this is having a detrimental impact on the provision of services. This, combined with the lack of applications for posts, makes for a very serious situation in children's care services.

We were also reminded very forcibly that a lack of proper assistance for family support services results in a

multitude of problems later on. There is overwhelming evidence of the fact that children are best raised in families with stable environments. It is therefore rather sad to see a decline in the number of foster parents and adoptions. Much more can and needs to be done on this. It is quite ironic that those who are supposed to be being helped by a myriad of statutory bodies and a host of legislative measures are today no better off than they were a decade ago.

Surely that tells us that something, not least simple effectiveness, is almost entirely absent from children's services. Adding more layers of bureaucracy and passing new laws is not the answer. What we need, first and foremost, is a determination that what is in place will be done well. We also need a resolve to fund what exists properly and to remove the restriction on the voluntary sector's providing secure care and accommodation. It must be recognised that foster parents are invaluable in this. The fact that they have been treated so poorly is an indication of the current state of affairs. It is vital therefore that the rates paid to foster parents be reviewed and updated.

Given the cost of residential care and the amount paid to foster parents, there is a strong case for retaining the fostering system. But the diminishing number of foster parents is an indication that urgent action must be taken.

In conclusion, the evidence presented to us of prevalent drug use in residential homes, of inappropriate sexual behaviour and of children being taken advantage of by sinister individuals ought to send a shudder down the spine of every Member. We must ensure that the service is overhauled and improved forthwith.

As the Health Committee listened to one consultation after another over a period of months, a number of clear indications emerged, one of which was that a commissioner for children must be appointed immediately to deal with the problems. Children across Northern Ireland, whether in care homes or not, are suffering.

More money must be ring-fenced to deal with this problem and a commissioner for children must be appointed as soon as possible. I trust that the House will not only support this motion but strive to work very hard so that children in Northern Ireland are well treated in homes across the country. Money must be provided and a commissioner for children appointed immediately.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I rise to support the motion. We hope this report will mark the first step on an overdue journey to address and redress the plight of so many of our young people who find themselves in vulnerable circumstances when they are coming to terms with the difficult transition from childhood to womanhood or manhood. It is also a time when they are starting to cope with their emerging sexuality and the difficulties that that entails. In many

cases these young people find themselves in circumstances over which they have no control.

I reiterate all that the Chairman said this morning; he covered the majority of the points that we made in the Committee. I would like to pay a special tribute to all the Committee staff, the Clerk and others, who put in hours of work organising and compiling this report, and also to all those who appeared before the Committee and made their submissions.

It is unfortunate, a LeasCheann Comhairle — and I know it is not your fault — that only five minutes could be set aside for such an important debate about a critical set of circumstances. I am not going to labour the point, but I support the report and endorse all that it contains. I hope that in the future we will be able to make life better for these young people who find themselves in such unfortunate circumstances.

Mr McCarthy: The situation is diabolical, shameful and unacceptable. I come to this debate today with mixed emotions. I am not a member of the Committee, but I have to say that I am totally and absolutely horrified at what is contained in this report. When I read it I was horrified, angered, shocked, and even ashamed. As a society we have completely failed to look after our most vulnerable members. The provision of care for children and adolescents is desperately inadequate. As the Committee said, this lack of provision does more than breach the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It also breaches the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Human Rights Act 1998.

I thank the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee for bringing this report — horrible as it is — to the Assembly, and I thank everyone who contributed to it.

This inadequate provision is not only illegal, it is also immoral. We are putting the physical, mental and emotional health of our children at risk. It is only through luck and the dedication of our overstretched and under-resourced staff that death or serious injury to some of our youngsters in care has been avoided so far. As the Northern Ireland Court Service has so rightly pointed out

“We remain astonished that one of these children has not killed or been killed in the past four years.”

Truly, that is a totally appalling statement. I repeat myself: I am horrified and ashamed that we have treated our needy and vulnerable children so badly. We have waiting lists of more than twice as many children as there are funded places. We have waiting lists of over two years for counselling services. Our lack of provision means that children are housed in adult psychiatric wards and young girls are housed in Maghaberry Prison. Even in cases of sexual assault the victim is housed in the same building as the perpetrator of the attack.

It is coincidental that in today's post I received a copy of this booklet from Kids for Peace, entitled 'Endangered: Your Child in a Hostile World'. That could be applied equally to children in care in Northern Ireland, and we should be totally ashamed. We have failed — at least those politicians who were in power over recent years have failed. This is not a situation that we can allow to continue. It is, I repeat, illegal and immoral, and surely someone somewhere should be made accountable.

The present Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety cannot be held responsible. However, if improvements are not made immediately the Minister and her Department will have to face the Assembly in the days ahead, and they will then be held responsible. I do not want to spend any more time highlighting the reported instances of failure and poor provision. The question now is: where do we go from here?

As with so many other things, funding is needed. I am pleased to note that the Minister is putting more money towards preventative measures, and I hope that the Executive's fund for children will help to rectify these problems. However, a decision to increase funding is simply not enough. The Committee could not find evidence that past increases in funding had been spent on these services. I am totally alarmed, as are others here, by the evidence that moneys meant for children have been spent by trusts on other activities, such as clearing overdrafts. This is totally unacceptable.

I cannot emphasise this strongly enough: I serve notice to the trusts, to the Assembly and to the people of Northern Ireland that this behaviour simply cannot continue. I will do all that I can to see that the situation is rectified. Money allocated for the provision of children's services should be spent on those services. When the Assembly, the Executive, the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee or the Minister decide to direct funding to children, it must be spent on those children.

My Colleagues David Ford and Eileen Bell have tabled a notice of motion asking the Assembly to appoint a commissioner for children, and I hope that that will come before the Assembly very soon.

Ms McWilliams: This is our first debate on looked-after children, and it has taken us the best part of two years to get round to this. This category is not small. It comprises 2,414 children. The report could equally have been titled 'An Inquiry into the Lack of Care and Insecure Accommodation'. That is not to reflect on the dedicated staff but on the lack of resources.

The Minister has inherited a legacy, and we urgently need to do something about it. This is a sad and pathetic story. We are 115 places short in residential care at the minute, and as a consequence we have excessive numbers of disturbed and disturbing young people concentrated in fewer centres. As Ewan McEwan from the Young

People's Centre told us "It is a story of containment rather than constructive intervention."

He came to a conference two weeks ago on the issue of contact between children and parents and the danger of domestic violence. He talked about what can happen to children when family care breaks down. He made one very poignant observation: "You have not lived in that country." If we think for one minute what it must be like for a child in need and at risk to be taken from home and placed in care, we can imagine the loneliness, isolation, and vulnerability he feels. It is a horror story when he enters the residential homes.

2.15 pm

We do not have therapeutic communities in this country, particularly for adolescents and young people who are suffering from mental health problems. I have sometimes found that they are locked up to protect them from others in the home or because there is an insufficient number of staff to deal with them. I went to Maghaberry prison after Ewan McEwan had given evidence to the Committee. He told us that he was visiting a 15-year-old girl there the following Saturday. I spoke to the Governor and he told me that we would not find 15- and 16-year-old girls in prisons in England, Scotland or Wales.

I am aware that the Minister is not responsible for criminal justice, but one of the report's pleas is that we urgently need to set up a working party to address both the criminal justice system and the health and social services needs of young people. The young girls are in Maghaberry; the young boys are in juvenile detention centres. This is the year 2000, not 1800 or 1900. That young woman was in court on that day, but I was told that she felt alone and had no one else to talk to other than the staff. Under the human rights legislation she is not able to receive visitors at the same time as the adults. If we were to put ourselves in her shoes, we could begin to understand how badly the system is letting down girls like her.

There is a story to be told about juvenile justice, but, given that we only have five minutes, that will have to be left to another day. Our residential care centres understand that they have overstressed workers. We were presented with evidence that 52 young people in the Western Board area alone had absconded for less than 24 hours; 18 went in the front door and out the back and were gone for more than 24 hours; one was gone for 69 days.

Young girls in my constituency are now being pimped for prostitution, and I live in south Belfast, not south-east Asia. There is an ongoing police investigation into young girls of 13, who have been taken out of care homes, being used for prostitution. I am sorry that an excellent home in Middletown in south Armagh, which I also visited, has closed, because there I saw a linked-up service with some attempt being made to educate the young women. That is gone, and many of the voluntary residential

homes have closed, particularly those run by religious orders. That is why we are facing such a crisis.

We were told “it is a make-do response”; “the staff are on strike”; “we can no longer cope”; “there are no places on a Friday night”; “there are camp beds on corridors”; and “we do not know how many children are at risk”.

I received a written answer to a question I asked a Minister. We do not know how many children are in poverty in this country. The prevention strategies are laid out in front of us dealing with education, respite care, adoption and the needs of foster carers. In particular we are making a plea for adolescent and mental health services.

It is not good enough currently to have over 240 children being discharged from adult psychiatric wards. Protection facilities are also needed. We need a protection strategy and we need placement risk analysis. The good practice at the Young People’s Centre provided us with an excellent example. But most of all we need an action plan. The Children (1995 Order) (Amendment) (Children’s Services Planning) Order (Northern Ireland) 1998 is not working; we desperately need a children’s commissioner. We need the resources, and we need to make children matter now.

Mr McFarland: It is fair to say to all those reading this report that children’s services are in a bit of a shambles. Our children are not being properly looked after. The dedicated staff is hard-pressed. It is not just a matter of finance, although Members can see from the report that money is being frittered away and needs to be ring-fenced. A serious question arises over leadership, strategy and planning. An even bigger question is how the current situation has been allowed to arise.

It is a travesty that around 50% of the children coming out of care are low achievers with no proper qualifications. They are falling through the net. It is important that there be a joint working group to look at this to try to produce some form of through-care path so that this does not happen.

Secondly, I wish to address fostering. There is a clear need to protect children. However, I know a couple who foster children. They see it as their duty to care for children, and they tell me that many hoops are put in their way. Fostering is not an easy business, and we need to examine ways of making it easier. With regard to the age profile of those who foster, a system needs to be devised to encourage younger people to participate in this important activity.

The procedures for adoption are similarly problematic. Adoption is the best option for a child likely to spend a lot of time in care. Examples from England and Scotland have indicated that nonsense and political correctness have made it extremely difficult for children to be adopted. As a result, couples have gone to Mexico, Romania and elsewhere to get children they can call their own.

As Prof McWilliams has said, the criminal justice system is in confusion about the different regulations and Acts. We must ensure that the Department and the Northern Ireland Office clarify the demarcation lines on this issue. We must continue to bring pressure to bear so we do not fail in our duty of providing loving care for children who, usually through no fault of their own, find themselves in lonely and stressful circumstances. Action must be taken now, and I call on the Minister to take the lead. I commend the Committee for its hard work, and I commend this comprehensive report to the House.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Gallagher): I support the motion. I agree with the Chairperson’s comments about the effort and energy of our Committee colleagues, and the work and commitment of all staff associated with that Committee.

Members do not have to read the report to gather from the list of recommendations that the system delivering services and support to young people in care is under-performing. Significant improvements can be made in this sector if there is a fair allocation of resources. This is particularly true of children’s residential accommodation. The four health boards have jointly published an integrated plan addressing the needs of children in care, entitled ‘Implementing Children Matter’. This plan suggests that over £26 million is necessary for capital costs and that £11 million per year for recurrent costs will be required over five years. The Minister has already made a strong commitment to provide substantial funding for improving the circumstances of these children.

In the past, money initially allocated for children’s services was sometimes diverted to other areas considered a higher priority. To avoid a repeat of this, I ask the Minister to ring-fence the funds that will be allocated towards the ‘Implementing Children Matter’ report. We are talking about the most vulnerable children in the community, and there is a most compelling case for ring-fencing the money. If the Minister cannot give an open-ended commitment, I urge her, at the very least, to pledge to ring-fence the money for the immediate five years.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety shares responsibility with the Department of Education as regards the education of children in care. This requires the co-operation of the Departments, and the co-ordination of the education boards, the health boards, and the hospital trusts. Our schools and teachers are best placed to provide the security, continuity and reassurance needed by children in care. The Committee has concerns about the shortcomings in the present procedures for the identification and support of children at risk.

The report draws attention to instances where teachers have not been informed about children who have been taken into care. It is hard to comprehend and very disappointing to find out that schools do not always have

this information. While responsibility for the children rests with the trusts, the two Departments must put mechanisms in place as soon as possible to ensure that the school is also informed in every case where a child is placed in care. To this end, we need a central system to distribute information on children in care to both Departments as well as to education boards, trusts and health boards.

As we know, these children are educated in a variety of settings. Some of them are in mainstream education; a high proportion have special needs, and some, because of suspensions or expulsions, receive all their education outside school. It is widely accepted — as has been referred to by Assembly Member Alan McFarland — that the educational attainment of young people and children in care is poorer than average. If they are to reach their full potential, they will require the assistance and support of teachers, psychologists, educational welfare officers and others.

It is essential to have a co-ordinated approach between the Departments and the agencies. If the educational needs of the vulnerable and the marginalised — the group to which we are referring — are to be addressed, a co-ordinated, multidisciplinary and multi-agency approach is required. There can be no excuse for failure to communicate important information among any of the agencies relevant to children in these circumstances.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Deputy Speaker. I too rise in support of the motion. At the outset, I wish to state my disappointment that there is a five-minute time limit on Members who wish to speak, for a great deal of hard work and effort has gone into this report. I feel that this five-minute rule makes a mockery of many months of work.

I wish to thank the Committee Clerk and support staff for their excellent work in facilitating the Committee's coming to this report. I also want to mention the various children's groups and individuals who put time and effort into providing written and oral submissions. I should like to mention the fact that the Minister is here with us and has attended the debate. I welcome her commitment to ensuring that the rights of children are centre stage.

We are all aware of the serious underfunding in the Health Service, as mentioned previously. However, children's services have, in my view, come a poor second. The Committee Chairman, Dr Hendron, mentioned that they are regarded as the Cinderella service.

In a more positive vein, I welcome and support the Executive's decision to set up, under the proposed Programme for Government, a children's fund to tackle the problems of children in need and young people at risk. However, to me this points out the clear need for a cross-departmental policy on children's services, which cut across all Departments. We need assurances that the

programme will not consist merely of empty promises of the sort we have heard over the last few years.

I also welcome the establishment of the Children Matter task force. It was due to report last month, and I am somewhat concerned that it has not. I would appreciate the Minister's telling us why.

People have mentioned that the report is very comprehensive. It contains most alarming statistics and shocking quotations from various people involved in working with children.

We concluded with 36 recommendations, and, in my view, many of them can be acted on now. Some will cost money, but others will not, and I believe that small amounts of money can make a great difference, with a knock-on effect on services for children and young people. It will greatly change the quality of life we propose for them.

2.30 pm

It is right that we point out that some of the recommendations have been about for a number of years. The Department has only to agree joint protocols on these recommendations and implement them.

I am conscious of the fact that the Chairperson covered a lot of the report earlier, but there is an issue concerning secure accommodation in the juvenile justice section. The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which is the under the remit of the Department of Health, defines children as "under 18 years of age". However, in the juvenile justice section they are defined as "under 17". I know that this is not within our remit, but we were finding that it is creating problems in the other parts of the system.

The Department informed us that the reason the definition was "under 17" was that in England there were a large number of cases, which were overburdening the juvenile courts. I do not accept that as a good reason for the definition. If we are treating them as adults for this reason, will there be a knock-on effect? Are we going to continue allowing people to vote at 18, or are we just treating them as adults at age 17 to accommodate ourselves?

I have a problem with secure accommodation in that the Departments of Health and Education have no say in the health or education of these children — they are within the remit of the Northern Ireland Office. One recommendation is for a joint working group to be set up to facilitate that. I am happy that the Department of Health has just announced, in the Health and Personal Social Services Bill, that staff in the probation and juvenile justice centres will come under the remit of the proposed social care council. This is a positive step, and it will be another safety valve for children in this sector, because we are all aware of the stories and reports concerning the care of children.

I am disappointed that there was no recommendation for a junior Minister. In saying that, I welcome the proposed recommendation for a commissioner, which is the first step to ensuring that the rights of children are placed centre stage. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: As Chairperson of the Education Committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important issue. My Committee recognises the importance of this, and we responded to the Health Committee's request for comments by providing a memorandum. I am pleased to see that the concerns we highlighted, from an educational perspective, have been included in the Health Committee's first report.

Members will be aware that the great majority of children in care attend mainstream or special schools. As stated in the Education Committee's response, the present level of educational achievement of children in residential care is very low indeed. This must be addressed, and I fully support the Health Committee's view that with necessary support measures a substantial improvement can be made. The level of low achievement is also compounded by the fact that children in care have a higher rate of non-attendance at school than their peers. I am pleased that the Health Committee highlighted my Committee's concerns about this and the issue of multiple suspension.

My Committee also recognised the lack of information about these children's education. This must be addressed if we are to ensure the quality planning needed to enable decisions about their education to be taken in an informed way. We support the full integration of young people's educational needs into care planning arrangements. Again, I note that Colleagues on the Health Committee have also recognised this as a priority. We also endorse the formation of a joint working group to consider the education of young people in care and strategies for keeping them within the school structure.

I will be seeking my Committee's agreement that the Health Committee's recommendations in respect of the education of these children be given our full support. We will include the educational issues raised in this report in our work programme for consideration in the new year.

Ms Lewsley: The report of the inquiry into residential and secure accommodation for children only served to underpin the existing knowledge that children's services in Northern Ireland are chaotic and totally inadequate to meet the needs of young people at risk and in need.

There are many aspects to these care services. Inadequate resources and inappropriate placements over the years have meant that children's needs have not been assessed or catered for properly in residential care. Increasing pressures on staff are also a problem. One such pressure stems from insecurity of tenure, which has already been mentioned today; others result from the use of short-term and casual contracts, which has resulted in low morale

and huge inconsistency in the care provided to children and the support given to staff.

It is important that we act now to redress years of underfunding and neglect and, as other Members have already said, to provide ring-fenced funding on an ongoing basis. Priority must also be given to family support measures to try to reduce the number of children who are being placed in care.

I want to refer to young people suffering from mental illness. It is absolutely appalling. The system of service provision for young people is patchy, disjointed, poorly co-ordinated and overloaded. The few services we have are under severe pressure and struggling to cope. The pattern of children's and adolescents' mental health services is varied, with differences in expenditure by local trusts and boards. Where specialist services exist, waiting lists continue to increase and we find children inappropriately placed on adult wards. This is surely more than inappropriate. It is harmful, dangerous and an infringement of the basic human rights of any child.

Allow me to put this in context. Young people whose illnesses may often be tied in with abuse have found themselves in wards with perpetrators of abuse, and they have also been witness to the behaviour of some very disturbed adults. This is nothing short of a disgrace, and the Minister must assure us that under no circumstances will such a situation ever occur again.

While I welcome the additional beds for which money has been allocated in the Budget, I wonder where these beds are to be placed, how they are to be staffed and whether additional funds have been secured to train and retain staff to cope with the new places. Allocating extra acute beds on its own is not enough. They must form part of a co-ordinated approach throughout the Health Service to deal with the problems of young people who suffer from mental illness.

We must ensure that appropriate residential places are available, especially for young people who have problems with drug and alcohol abuse and have mental health problems. Services for children with conduct disorders and challenging behaviour should fall within the child and adolescent mental health remit. The evidence suggests that there is a growing and unmet need in this area. Such units should be open seven days a week and must cover the geographical spread of our services. Currently, there is only one specialist service for young people — the Young People's Centre in the South and East Belfast Trust area. This centre has a six-month waiting list.

Eating disorders are also on the increase, particularly in female adolescents. Again, only one specialist service for these conditions exists to cover the whole of the North of Ireland. Once more, this unit is in the South and East Belfast Trust area, and the waiting list for it is four months long.

We have heard many issues raised here today. I do not need to tell every Member that mental health services are in a crisis. The services for young people and adolescents are stretched to breaking point. It is time to develop a proper regional strategy. First, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must carry out a proper assessment of need. How, for instance, was the figure of 10 beds arrived at when we do not know how many young people suffer from psychosis, eating disorders or challenging behaviour? How many of the young people in residential accommodation suffer from mental illness? We have let our young people down, and it is time to own up.

Civil servants must stop hiding behind procedure and bureaucracy, assess what is needed and develop a regional strategy to deal with the broken minds of the young.

The humanitarian and financial reasons for investing in youth mental health services are irrefutable. It would be shameful for us to ignore the situation, implement piecemeal measures first to treat the symptoms and not take preventative measures to tackle what is a growing problem. Children are our investment in the future. I believe that it is the responsibility of every Member in the Chamber to act now to improve dramatically the situation that has been outlined today in this report.

Ms Armitage: Much has been said today, so I will say little, as I am sure that it has all been said better than I could say it anyway. There is a chronic problem with the provisions for children in relation to services, care, protection and secure accommodation. This has been well documented since 1997, and yet the problem remains as we approach 2001. The number of residential places currently available is about 30% short of the estimated need. Due to a lack of suitable accommodation, children of varying ages and conflicting needs are being placed together in general provision homes. The result of mixing and misplacing these very vulnerable children is intolerable.

Pressure on staff and the consequent effects of low morale and a high incidence of sick leave are leading to a drift of qualified social carers into less demanding occupations. The pressures on staff include the need to deal with a level of violence in the homes, and regular incidents of absconding, drug abuse and even prostitution. There is an undeniable lack of adequate provision to meet the needs of children with mental health problems and a lack of secure accommodation for children and young people who pose a risk to themselves and others. Basically, the choice of proper care and placement does not exist for these children and their individual needs.

If children's homes were immediately available there would still be a problem in attracting suitably trained staff to care for the children. Bricks and mortar can produce a building, but that in itself is not a home. These children need and deserve a loving, comfortable and caring

environment of the same standard that we would provide for our own children.

Recruitment of staff for children's homes should be stepped up. Last year, approximately 15% of residential social workers left the profession due to unsocial hours, violent incidents and, in general, the long working day. Social workers do not shut the homes on bank holidays; they do not leave early to avoid the rush-hour traffic; and they do not just put the job off until tomorrow. That is not how a social worker operates.

There should be greater incentives to attract the right type of people to this work — people who will accept the unsocial hours and the degree of commitment that is required. A body should be established to determine proper staffing ratios for existing and proposed units specialising in child residential care, and adequate training and support facilities. It should also review the pay and conditions of service to reflect the demands and stresses of the job. I am not aware of a mechanism whereby social workers can award themselves a massive payment for work performance. I doubt if they would want to.

The situation has become worse in recent years due to a lack of willingness in the community to consider fostering. This might reflect our social lives and the changing pattern of childminding. A registered childminder earns approximately £100 per week. That week lasts five days, usually from 8.30am to 5.30pm. There are no wake-up calls in the middle of the night and no weekend commitments. Although childminding and fostering are two very separate issues, I believe that if we do not encourage, support and train prospective foster carers, their talents may well be channelled into childminding.

2.45 pm

That may already be happening: almost 70% of foster carers are aged between 40 and 60, and, in the past year, insufficient numbers of foster carers were recruited to compensate for those who had retired. There should be a review of boarding-out rates to reflect the skill and commitment needed for such a valuable community service.

Educational performance among children in residential care in Northern Ireland is poor; 50% leave with no qualifications at all.

My time is up, Mr Deputy Speaker; I assume that you want me to sit down.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not want you to, but the system requires it. Thank you.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the report. Having listened to the Members who have spoken and read some of the reports, I concur with the conclusion that the overall picture is one of long-term neglect by direct rule Ministers — minimal strategic planning, little policy development, a narrow focus on children's needs, poor co-ordination

and, worst of all, the historic underfunding of services. In effect, public expenditure on family and childcare services fell from 17.6% in 1995-96 to 16.7% in 1997-98. Is it any wonder that vulnerable children in the North of Ireland have been way down the political agenda and way behind those in England, Scotland, Wales and the South of Ireland?

The Minister has inherited a situation in which children in need are excluded. Those children and young people are among the most vulnerable groups in society. They live on the margins of our health, education and training systems, and they often fall into the gaps between departmental responsibilities. The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which we welcomed at the time, gave core legal responsibility for care and safety to the Department of Health and Social Services, and responsibility has passed to this Minister. However, the needs of children and young people are often too complex to be met by a single agency. That complexity is even recognised by the current Government, and their policy places increasing emphasis on multi-agency collaboration in both the delivery and planning of services. Such collaboration might be facilitated by a children's commission.

The underfunding of the measures contained in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 has already been recognised as a major problem. The old Department of Health and Social Services did not release sufficient moneys for that important legislation to be effective. That resulted in untold suffering and the death of a child who walked out of a so-called secure unit in Belfast, stole a car, crashed it and died. He was 12 years old. In fact, the introduction of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 coincided with a major downsizing of the voluntary residential childcare sector. Those of us who voiced strong objections at the time can now see the inevitable outcome of such downsizing. The report bears out all our concerns.

The 'Children Matter' report, compiled two years ago by the social services inspectorate, emphasised the extent of the difficulties and made several recommendations. Its main finding was that there was an urgent need to create smaller specialist units of accommodation, with adequate staffing and resources, which would require considerable capital and revenue expenditure. As Members have said, we cannot accommodate children with severe emotional needs or disabilities.

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has done what the Department under direct rule failed to do: it has asked questions about children and been informed fully of their needs. I believe that the Minister will endeavour to address those needs.

I share Ms Ramsey's disappointment that there was no recommendation for the appointment of a Minister for Children. If it is suggested that a children's commissioner be appointed, it is important that he or she be given as much seniority and authority as possible. Only then will

the low priority given to children in need be properly addressed. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mrs Carson: I welcome the report on the serious issue of residential and secure accommodation for children in Northern Ireland. I congratulate the Committee and its support staff on producing the report. It is hoped that all Members will fully support the recommendations in it.

At this festive time, there are heart-rending stories in newspapers and other media, and appeals for finance. Northern Ireland people are known throughout the world to be the most generous when faced with pictures of children in need. Who would have thought that Northern Ireland would be faced with such problems in the twenty-first century? There is an urgent need for secure accommodation for children.

Children's services are important, and any funding designated for residential homes and services should be used for that purpose and not channelled into other Departments to be lost, perhaps, through poor financial management. Can the cost of implementing the report's recommendations be met fully by the Department? This excellent report must not be left to gather dust.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Chuir mé suim mhór, agus mé ag éisteacht, sna pointí a luaigh Teachtaí le linn dhíospóireacht an lae inniu ar thuairisc an Choiste Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí ar chóiríocht chónaithe agus dhaingean do pháistí.

Ba mhaith liom an Dr Hendron agus baill uilig an Choiste a mholadh as tuairisc chomh cuimsitheach inléite sin a chur le chéile. Bhí faill agam i mí Dheireadh Fómhair fianaise a thabhairt don Choiste agus is feasach domh an tsuim agus an tiomantas atá ag baill an Choiste maidir le leas na bpáistí. Ag an phointe seo, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas pearsanta a ghabháil le gach cagraíocht agus le gach duine aonair a thug fianaise don Choiste as a gcion tairbhe luachmhar.

Tá an tuairisc féin fadréimseach cuimsitheach agus cuimsíonn sí 36 mholadh shainiúla. Ar ndóigh, beidh am de dhíth orm leis na moltaí seo agus na himpleachtaí a bhreathnú chomh maith le hiomlán na bpointí a luadh sa díospóireacht inniu a chur san áireamh. Beidh orm na himpleachtaí praiticiúla, reachtaíochta agus airgeadais a mheasúnú.

Níl rún agam trácht ar gach moladh, nó, mar a dúirt mé cheana, beidh am de dhíth orm lena mbreathnú. Ach is mian liom trácht ar chuid de na príomhábhair chúraim sa tuairisc agus sna moltaí a bhaineas léi. Cé gur ar chúram cónaithe agus cóiríocht dhaingean do pháistí atá an fócas, baineann sí le saincheisteanna níos leithne, mar an t-altramas, an t-uchtú agus an tacaíocht theaghlaigh. Aontaím leis nach féidir an cúram cónaithe a bhreathnú ar leithligh ó sheirbhísí eile.

Tagraíonn an chéad mholadh don riachtanas dóthain maoinithe a chur ar fáil do sholáthar áiteanna breise cúraim chónaithe do pháistí. Agus caithfidh mé a rá maidir leis an ábhar seo go bhfuil mé buartha go gcaithfidh mé — go gcaithfidh mé uilig — feabhas a chur ar sheirbhísí páistí. Beidh mise ag déanamh mo sheacht ndícheall le cinntiú go mbeidh an maoiniú cuí ar fáil le déanamh deimhin go dtig linn an feabhas sin a chur i bhfeidhm.

Is ábhar buartha domh nach raibh an maoiniú agus an t-airgeadas a bhí de dhíth ar fáil le roinnt blianta. Déanfaidh mé mo dhícheall a chinntiú go mbeidh tuilleadh airgid ar fáil uaidh seo amach. Cuireadh maoiniú breise ar fáil i mbliana do sheirbhísí do pháistí agus cuirfear maoiniú breise ar fáil sa bhliain seo chugainn. Dá n-ardófaí an líon áiteanna cúraim chónaithe go dtí an leibhéal a mholann an tuairisc, ghlacfaidh sin roinnt blianta le baint amach. Ar ndóigh, beidh mé ag iarraidh maoiniú breise bliain i ndiaidh bliana, ach caithfidh uilig a aithint go bhfuil tosaíochtaí éagsúla san iomaíocht d'acmhainní agus tá seans nach n-éireoidh liom i mo thairiscintí. Caithfidh mar sin bheith réalaióch faoi cad is féidir a bhaint amach.

Tá an Tascfhórsa Tábhacht le Páistí a bhunaigh mé ag tabhairt aghaidhe ar shaincheisteanna maidir le hairgeadas, foireann, pleanáil agus saincheisteanna lóistíochta eile. Beidh mé ar mo dhícheall na hacmhainní a bhaint amach a ligfidh do mhéadú teacht ar an líon áiteanna cúraim chónaithe sna blianta seo chugainn. Beidh mé ag brath ar an tascfhórsa le cinntiú go gcuirfear le feabhsuithe sa tseirbhís cibé acmhainní a chuirfear in áirithe do chúram cónaithe do pháistí.

Ní maith le duine ar bith, ar ndóigh, árais páistí a bheith ag feidhmiú thar a dtuilleadh, agus is ábhar buartha domhsa sin chomh maith. Caithfidh, mar a dúirt mé, cinntiú go mbeidh airgead ar fáil don réimse leathan seirbhísí atáimid ag iarraidh a chur ar fáil do pháistí sa tsochaí seo.

I have listened with considerable interest to the points raised by Members during today's debate on the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee's report into residential and secure accommodation for children. I would like to congratulate Dr Hendron and all the members of the Committee for producing such a comprehensive and readable report. In October I had the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee, and I am aware of the considerable interest and dedication of its members to children's welfare. I would also like to add my personal thanks for the valuable contributions made by the organisations and individuals who gave evidence to the Committee.

The report is wide-ranging and comprehensive and contains some 36 specific recommendations. Obviously, I will need some time to consider them and their implications, as well as time to take account of all the points that have been raised in today's debate. I will need to assess the practical, legislative and financial implications.

I do not propose to comment on each recommendation, because, as I have said, I will need time to study them. However, I do want to comment on some of the main areas of concern raised in the report and in the related main recommendations, as well as on the points raised by Members today. Although the focus is on children's residential care and secure accommodation, the report also touches on broader issues such as fostering, adoption and family support, and I agree that residential care cannot be viewed in isolation from other services.

The first recommendation refers to the need for sufficient funding to be made available for the provision of additional children's residential care places. This was raised by many Members today including Prof McWilliams, John Kelly, the Committee Chairperson, Dr Hendron, Rev Robert Coulter, Paul Berry, Mary Nelis and others. I am very concerned to see measurable improvements in children's services and will wish to ensure that the resources allocated are applied to ensure such improvements.

I am also concerned, and am aware of the concerns expressed by others, about the underfunding of children's services and the leeching off of resources. I will be making strenuous efforts to secure appropriate funding for these services in the future. Additional funding has been provided this year for children's services, and further funding will be provided next year. An expansion in the number of residential care places to the levels suggested in the report would take several years to achieve. I shall, of course, be seeking additional funds year on year, but we all recognise that there are competing priorities for resources, and I may not be successful in the bids that I make.

3.00 pm

We must be realistic about what can be achieved, and the Children Matter task force that I have established is already addressing the practical matters to do with finance, staffing, planning and other logistical issues.

Again, the question of ring-fencing was raised by several Members, including Mr Gallagher, Mr John Kelly and Ms McWilliams. I will be doing all that I can to secure the resources that will allow for an increase in the number of residential care places over the next few years.

People will know, as I have already stated, that there are some difficulties regarding the specific ring-fencing of money. I will look to the task force to ensure that resources earmarked for children's residential care are applied to ensure improvements to the services. It is undesirable and unacceptable, as people have said in the debate, for children's homes to operate beyond full capacity. I am aware that some trusts have taken innovative steps in using temporary accommodation to relieve short-term pressures. I reiterate that I will do everything in my power to ensure that we are given the resources to achieve the significant increase in the number of places that we are planning to have.

Recommendation 5 states that a regional group should be established and charged with producing precise staffing requirements for the existing homes and more specialised provision as the service develops, and a subgroup of the Children Matter task force has been set up to address this very issue.

I join several Members in praising the efforts of existing staff, and I would like to associate myself with those who have praised the professionalism, dedication, and enthusiasm of staff who work, often in very difficult circumstances, in children's homes. We owe them a great debt of gratitude.

I fully agree that there is a need for training and support for residential care staff in the areas highlighted in recommendation 6 and highlighted by Members here today. The social care council is due to be set up in October 2001, subject to the legislative will of the Assembly. We need to consider whether this would be the appropriate mechanism and, in fact, whether it would be practical for the council to undertake this training and support work. However, the task force subgroup on staffing issues will consider this matter carefully.

It is clear that if we are to expand children's residential care, the work must be made more attractive to those involved. We share the concerns of those who have highlighted the difficulties that staff face. I agree that career structures, high levels of stress and the unsocial hours involved in this work are all issues to which further consideration will have to be given.

As regards the recommendation to lift the current restriction on the voluntary sector's providing secure accommodation — a matter raised by Dr Hendron, Rev Robert Coulter, Ms Armitage and Mr Berry — I should say that the current pressures on secure accommodation will be eased by the seven new secure places to come on stream at Lakewood within the next few weeks.

I will have to consider very, very carefully whether further expansion of secure accommodation would be advisable at this time. I will consider the points raised by Members. However, putting children into secure accommodation must be the last resort, and we wish to ensure that secure accommodation is used only when necessary, and then only as an interim measure. The aim must always be to facilitate the return of the child to the community.

I am also aware of the human rights concerns that people have in this area. The legal criteria for the use of secure accommodation are extremely tight, and its use for any significant period requires the authority of the courts.

Members have raised other queries regarding recommendation 13 about the liaison with the courts, and we need to look at that question. We will also look at the whole question of liaison with the NIO regarding the juvenile justice system, which I will come to later.

On the provision of an additional mental health unit, the Programme for Government gives priority to this issue and to a bid for additional resources to provide 10 adolescent mental health inpatient beds. Therefore, the question of the provision of those beds has been addressed in the Programme for Government, and my Department will also address the issue of providing residential facilities for disabled children.

Regarding Ms Lewsley's question about the inadequacy of general mental health services, each of the boards has undertaken a comprehensive needs assessment of children's and adolescents' mental health services. These clearly indicate that services are to be developed as resources become available. The draft strategy 'Minding our Health' sets out the key priorities for the development of action to promote mental and emotional health, and I hope that Members will join with me in pointing out the need for us to secure resources for the whole wide range of children's services so that these can be brought forward.

The residential and community support needs of children with psychological and psychiatric difficulties are ones which, I believe, the task force and the 'Minding our Health' strategy will address by trying to seek more responsive and accessible services for children.

Clearly the lack of residential and respite facilities, a matter raised by Rev Robert Coulter, is a matter of concern to me and is presently being looked at by the Children Matter task force. I note and accept the Committee's call for research in this area.

The education of young people in care, a matter raised by Mr Gallagher and Dr Hendron, straddles not only my responsibility but also that of those in the juvenile justice system. This is an issue which is very important, and Members will know that some preliminary work has already started in liaison with the Department of Education. We will certainly consider the involvement of the NIO. Specific facilities suitable for looking after offenders are a matter we will need to consider further.

Mr McFarland and Ms McWilliams raised a point about the need for an interdepartmental group to consider the position of young offenders and young people who are inappropriately placed in custody. I will certainly consider the issue of children in the justice system and will take this up with the NIO.

Ms McWilliams also asked about the absence of therapeutic services for children and the placement of children in services not designed for them. This is of significant concern to me. The issue of the use of adult prisons for girls is one I wish to consider more fully in collaboration with the NIO to ensure the appropriate protection and well-being of young women. I hope I have addressed the Member's point regarding the provision of money for 10 additional adolescent beds next year.

We also need to look at the fact that many children admitted into care have a range of very complex needs, and I certainly want to consider what further steps can be taken to improve the life chances and opportunities of these children and ensure that their rights are being taken care of and protected.

There are already statutory provisions encompassing risk analysis, and this duty rests with the trusts, which have parental responsibility for looked-after children. Registration and inspection units are concerned with quality standards, and to involve them in emergency placements for individual children might compromise their work. The planning for individual children is clearly the responsibility of the trust.

As I indicated to the Committee when I met with it on 4 October, I intend to produce a regional overview of the way forward for children's services. I will be bringing forward a range of proposals relating to children's services to address the same broad issues covered by the Quality Protects programme which was issued in England. We will also be looking at the National Children's Strategy in the South.

I intend to issue a consultation document in the new year relating to care leavers. It will set out detailed proposals for improving the life chances of young people moving from care to independent living. These proposals will, however, require legislation, and I intend to bring forward a Children Leaving Care Bill next year. I will also bring forward proposals to address the support needs, respite provision and training requirements of foster carers as soon as possible. I absolutely take on board the points raised by Members about the crucial place of foster carers in the whole continuum of care for our children. I accept what has been said about our need to express a particular debt of gratitude to those taking on this task and our need to look after them.

The Children Matter task force will shortly produce a regional plan which will set out a programme of specific developments over the next two and a half years to increase the number of places by about 90. The capacity to implement this programme will depend on the availability of financial resources and the ability to recruit and train the necessary additional staff. It is intended to involve the voluntary and private sectors in the implementation of the task force's work. However, in relation to the task force itself, there are several issues which I need to consider regarding any potential conflicts of interest.

To secure the expansion of children's residential care services — which we all want to see — it will be important to work with local communities. No doubt there will be a need for innovative approaches. I will be pleased to see how we, as public representatives, can work together to improve the perceptions of children's residential care and — I was happy to see this pointed out — to improve our chances of being able to open children's residential

care places to ensure that those valued young members of our society receive proper care and that their needs are met in the most appropriate manner.

I would like to pay particular attention to the question of a children's commissioner, which was raised by Paul Berry, Dr Hendron, Prof McWilliams, Kieran McCarthy, Sue Ramsey and Mary Nelis. The Deputy First Minister said on 6 November

"The Executive Committee is determined to ensure that our arrangements for protecting children and upholding children's rights are based on best practice. We will carefully examine key developments through Europe, including the Waterhouse Report on child abuse in Wales, the appointments of a Children's Commissioner in Wales, a Children's Rights Director in England and an ombudsman for children in the Republic of Ireland. We will also look at the roles of commissioners for children in the Scandinavian countries."

A question was raised about the pilot scheme. I know that the Sycamore Project in Fife — run by a voluntary organisation, the Aberlour Child Care Trust — is providing a regional service for all of Scotland in this regard. It is sited in three units — in converted terraced houses, in a housing estate with close links to the local community and in six local schools. One unit cares for under-14s, another for over-16s, while the main unit copes with the core population of 14- to 16-year-olds. The children are those at risk of being admitted to secure accommodation or who have been discharged from secure provision. An intensive programme of work is undertaken with the children. The director of the project is acting as a consultant to Extern, which is to open a similar model of service in the Ballyduff area of the Northern Board during the spring of 2001.

Ba mhaith liom deireadh a chur le mo chuid cainte ag rá go gcuirim fáilte roimh thuairisc an Choiste Sláinte ar chóiríocht chónaithe agus dhaingean do pháistí. Cion tairbhe luachmhar í dár smaointeoireacht ar roinnt saincheistanna deacra. D'fhéach mé le freagra a thabhairt ar chuid mhaith de na saincheistanna a luadh agus scríobhfaidh mé chuig Teachtaí ar bith nár fhéad mé a gceistanna a fhreagairt inniu. Luaigh mé na réimsí sin ina mbeidh tuilleadh machnaimh riachtanach má táimid le fuascailtí praiticiúla a fhorbairt ar na fadhbanna atá ag an chóras cúraim chónaithe do pháistí. Ba mhaith linn uilig na bearta atá riachtanach le cúram agus cosaint páistí inár gcomhphobal a fheiceáil á gcur i bhfeidhm chomh gasta agus is féidir. Caithfear saincheistanna acmhainní agus ama agus an gá le reachtaíocht a d'fhéadfadh a bheith ann, caithfear iad sin a chur san áireamh. Ach, na coinníollacha sin san áireamh, glacaim leis an rún atá os comhair an Tí.

3.15 pm

In conclusion, I welcome the report of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety into residential and secure accommodation. It is a valuable contribution to our thinking in relation to a number of difficult areas and issues. I have endeavoured to respond to many of the

issues raised in the report and the contributions made by Members today. I will write to any Members whose concerns I have been unable to address in this debate. Furthermore, I have indicated those areas where further consideration will be necessary if we are to develop practical solutions to the problems facing the residential care system for children. We all want those measures that are needed for the care and protection of children to be implemented as soon as possible. The issues of resources, of timing and of the possible need for legislation will need to be taken into account, but, subject to this, I accept the motion before the House.

Dr Hendron: I would like to thank the Minister and all my Colleagues, both on the Health Committee and in this Chamber, for their participation in this most important debate. I thank the Minister for her presence here during the debate, for her contribution and for her answers to the questions. I also thank her for setting up the special task force. There are 36 recommendations to consider in this report, and as the Minister said, she cannot go over all of them. I agree with her that residential care cannot be viewed in isolation from other services. Despite the additional £9.5 million provided this year and the £3 million that is expected for next year, we do need additional funding. In relation to the Children Matter task force resources that have been earmarked for children's residential care, steps must be taken to ensure that this money is ring-fenced for that most vulnerable section of our community. Audit trails are important; accountants and financial experts should be able to follow audit trails from the Minister, the boards and the trusts the whole way through to the coalface. This will identify how funding for children's services is spent, and that will apply to other matters as well.

We welcome the subgroup set up by the task force that is involved in the staffing of social care and which will work in association with a social care council. The Minister referred to career structures for staff and to the fact that she agrees with the idea of secure accommodation — such as at Lakewood — only when it is necessary and only as an interim measure. We accept that. However, it is necessary to have sufficient places. I welcome her remarks on adolescent mental health. Many of my Colleagues spoke about that, as it is a major problem.

In respect of the education of young people, recommendation 20 of the report refers especially to those in the juvenile justice system, and the involvement of the Department of Education and the NIO is very important.

The Minister mentioned a regional overview of children's services, the very important Quality Protects programme, the whole question of care leavers, children going into care, and the 'Children Matter' task force. I hope that the regional plan will be announced by the Minister very soon.

Many of my Colleagues in the Assembly spoke in the debate. Bob Coulter mentioned historical underfunding, accountability, no redirection of funds and the staffing problems. I agree with him. It is so important that funding meant for children's services reaches its target. Mr Paul Berry mentioned family support, adoption, funding — everyone mentioned that — foster carers and their rates of pay. He supported, as did all my Colleagues, the idea of a commissioner for children.

John Kelly mentioned righting past wrongs in relation to children. He also mentioned resources, funding and foster carers. Kieran McCarthy used the words "diabolical" and "shameful". We all agree. The Minister inherited this problem, and there is no blame on her, but it is diabolical and shameful that society has failed. We in this Assembly must not fail in this regard.

Monica McWilliams talked about two years' work for the looked-after children, but we are talking about a population of over 2,000 people. She is quite right about containment rather than constructive intervention. She mentioned Maghaberry, so I will not repeat those points, and talked about adolescent mental health. That is a major problem for all of us, but especially for those concerned and their families.

Alan McFarland talked about the dedication of staff, ring-fencing, leadership, strategy, fostering and adoption. He and many Colleagues talked about education, which is very important. Tommy Gallagher also talked about the staff and resources, planning, ring-fencing the funding and about a multidisciplinary approach to education.

Sue Ramsey mentioned the five-minute limit. That is not something I want to go into now, but it should be looked at in the future. This was, and is, an extremely important debate, and five minutes was not enough. I agree with Ms Ramsey and with the others who said that. Sue Ramsey also thanked the staff, as did many others. I am very pleased to thank all my Colleagues, together with the Committee Clerk and his staff. Sue Ramsey went on to mention secure accommodation in the juvenile justice system and the cross-departmental policy. We all agree with that.

I very much welcome the fact that the Chairperson of the Education Committee, Danny Kennedy, said that his Committee wanted to include consideration of recommendation 20 of our report in its forthcoming work programme. That recommendation deals with the establishment of an agreed protocol involving the Department, the Northern Ireland Office, the trusts and the education and library boards regarding the education of children in residential care.

Patricia Lewsley talked about the chaos in children's services, and about inappropriate placement, as did many others. She also mentioned assessment of needs, and looking after staff, social workers and, again, the mental health of adolescents and their psychiatric problems.

That is a massive problem. Pauline Armitage talked about the 30% shortage of places and inappropriate placing, staff, drug abuse, prostitution, mental health and how we can get more social workers. Like others, she talked about the whole education of these young people.

Mary Nelis talked about vulnerable children and how we must look after them. They are on the margins of our system. She also mentioned comparing funding with that in England and, especially, in Scotland, where much more funding goes towards this problem. Finally, Joan Carson talked about the cost of implementation. The Minister made reference to that.

I thank the Minister and all my Colleagues on the Health Committee and Members of this Assembly. I am honoured, as the Committee Chairperson, to have presented this most important report today and to have moved this motion. I know that the Assembly will give it its full support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the first report of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee on residential and secure accommodation for children in Northern Ireland and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement the Committee's recommendations at the earliest opportunity.

AGGREGATES TAX

Mr Byrne: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the serious economic and environmental implications the aggregates tax will have for the quarry and construction industry in Northern Ireland and calls upon the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make representations to the UK Treasury on behalf of the Quarry Products Association to prevent the introduction of this tax in this region.

Taxation, as Members are well aware, is a reserved matter. In recent weeks, representatives of Northern Ireland's quarry industry have brought a taxation issue to my attention and to the attention other Assembly Members, including Mr Hussey, whose name also appears on the motion.

This tax is known as the quarry or aggregates tax, and its imposition in Northern Ireland in April 2002 will have serious economic consequences on the quarry industry throughout the North, particularly along the border area.

Furthermore, the imposition of the tax will not produce any discernible or environmental benefits and will have a detrimental impact upon the spending power of the devolved Departments of this Administration, inhibiting the ability of the new political dispensation to deliver on the commitments given in the draft Programme for Government.

The introduction of the aggregates tax was announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget speech in March 2000. Detailed provisions will be included in the 2001 Finance Bill, and the tax will come into effect in 2002. It will apply to all virgin sand, crushed rock and gravel and their products such as tarmac, bricks, blocks, concrete et cetera, which are subject to commercial exploitation in the UK. The tax will be collected by Customs and Excise, but unlike VAT, which is charged as a percentage of value, it will be charged on a weight basis at £1.60 per tonne. The tax will apply to exported products, but exported aggregates will not be taxed. Although imported aggregates will be taxed, imported products made from aggregates, such as concrete blocks, et cetera, will not be taxed.

This amounts to a tax which will make imported products cheaper and will put the industry in Northern Ireland at an unfair disadvantage. The Government's primary stated reason for introducing the tax is environmental. They want to encourage a shift away from virgin aggregate as part of their sustainable development strategy and to encourage the use of recycled aggregates.

The aim is to integrate fiscal strategy with environmental concerns and reduce environmental damage by shifting the taxation burden away from what the Government consider as "goods" to "bads". The Government intend to use the revenue raised from the tax to contribute towards a cut in employers' national insurance contributions and to

set up a sustainability fund to produce “benefits to local communities affected by quarrying”.

However, the Government’s rationale for this tax on construction simply does not fulfil their own objectives. First, the research upon which the taxation is based is highly questionable. Secondly, we should consider the inevitable job losses, the costs to the construction industry and the fact that the aggregates tax might not even raise the necessary revenue to fund the intended reduction in national insurance contributions. When these factors are taken into account, it seems ill-advised for the Treasury to impose such a broad tax, especially on this region.

The reasoning for the aggregates tax was first raised in Labour’s 1997 Budget and was based upon a paper produced by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), which promoted the idea of green taxation. The Government have since then justified the tax using research commissioned by external consultants — London Economics (LE) — which showed that quarrying had an external environmental cost of around £300 million.

3.30 pm

This cost was based on a controversial form of analysis called contingent valuation in which interviewees were prompted to place a monetary value on the negative impacts of quarrying. The results were multiplied to produce a national value. However, according to the Quarry Products Association (QPA), in the promotion of these research results, and the decision to introduce a tax, the Government neglected some important points. For example, the research assumed there would be no benefits from quarrying, only cost — which the QPA accused the Government of inflating by 30% — and, therefore, that there would be no benefits from quarry restoration nor in the use of quarry products. Additionally, at least 90% of those surveyed did not identify any cost from quarrying.

Doubts about this research were expressed by a peer review, commissioned from Profs David Pearce and Susanna Murato of University College, London. In response, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions commissioned a second report from London Economics, and again the same professors found it lacking, particularly in any benefit analysis of quarrying. Therefore, the London Economics’ report has an inbuilt bias against the quarry industry. To introduce a tax on the basis of such questionable and unscientific research, which alone has cost the taxpayer £500,000, does not stand to reason.

The basis of charging this tax amounts to no less than a tax on construction, as it will only apply to crushed rock and sand gravel used as construction aggregates. As demand for these products is price-inelastic, construction clients will meet any tax introduced through increased costs.

The introduction of the aggregates tax is particularly bad news for the industry in Northern Ireland, which has an annual turnover of £300 million, with an estimated output of approximately 20 million tonnes. It employs between 5,000 and 6,000 people in hard rock, sand and gravel quarries and in concrete, asphalt and block plants.

The QPA estimates that in Northern Ireland, where the average price of stone is £3 per tonne, the imposition of this tax on Northern producers will represent an increase in price of about 53%. In any town North and South where producers are equidistant from the border, the Southern producer will be able to deliver products to the consumer £1.60 per tonne cheaper than his counterpart in the North.

Given that we have a land border from Derry to Newry, and given the fact that we have so many quarries in the border zone, we can see the industry being devastated if the tax is introduced. When one considers that five out of the Six Counties have a border with the Irish Republic and that Southern producers already have a competitive advantage in terms of the punt/pound differential, lower corporation taxes and lower fuel costs, the impact on Northern producers will be devastating.

For many decades, the quarry industry has been an important source of employment in rural areas of Northern Ireland, which have already been hard hit by job losses in the agriculture sector, the textile industry and the petrol retailing trade. For example, in west Tyrone there are over 30 quarries, and over 1,000 jobs in the county are dependent upon quarrying. In Fermanagh, 750 jobs are at stake. Overall, the percentage of the workforce employed in quarrying in Northern Ireland is much greater than in Britain. It is the only region where this tax will apply — a region which has to compete with cheaper imports coming across a land border.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

The existence of the border will also make the tax difficult for Customs and Excise to implement and collect. It will encourage the emergence of a black economy in aggregates which will irrevocably damage reputable producers. It is estimated that 70% of the 5,000 to 6,000 jobs the industry provides could be at risk, resulting in over 4,000 job losses. This, by itself, should be enough to prevent the imposition of this tax, which could cost the Government up to £60 million in lost tax revenues and unemployment benefit.

The environmental reasons for introducing this tax do not add up either. Due to the nature of the local economy, and the greater dependence on the rural economy in the North, we do not have the same opportunity to avail of recycled aggregates in the same quantities as they do in Britain because we do not have the same level of urban regeneration.

Our society is a largely rural one, whereas Britain has a highly industrialised urban society. In addition, there is a more even distribution of rock in Northern Ireland, and quarries are located closer to the customer with the result that lorry mileage and haulage costs are lower. An increase in imports and a relocation of businesses across the border will result in an increase in the number of lorries on our roads. This will have adverse effects on the environment and damage our roads.

With regard to our current spending constraints, this taxation on construction will have a detrimental impact on the spending power of a number of Government Departments. For example, an increase in construction costs would result in a 10% to 15% reduction in the spending power of the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service. This would have a major impact on the roads budget and would further extend the existing backlog in roads maintenance requirements, particularly in border areas.

In the North, the public sector represents 60% of all expenditure on construction, and the introduction of this tax will force construction costs up by between £18 million and £20 million across the capital spending budgets of all Government Departments, creating a net cut. This tax is expected to raise an estimated £32 million in the North, but only about £14 million will be left to administer the tax and fund the reduction in national insurance contributions. Given the cost to the regional economy of 4,200 extra unemployed people, the aggregates tax will cost the Treasury more in Northern Ireland than it will yield.

Of course, I accept that we must take on board environmental concerns. However, it makes more sense to adopt a balanced and fair approach which is sensitive to the environment and which does not, at the same time, wipe out the quarry industry and impose enormous costs on the construction industry.

In July 1999, the QPA submitted its alternative to the Treasury, which was rejected. The QPA's new deal for the whole of the UK was a 30-point plan of voluntary and regulatory initiatives. These included a commitment to establishing an index-linked sustainability foundation, which would be financed by the industry, amounting to £125 million; the introduction of an industry-wide quality mark for environmental performance; environmental purchasing policies; major investment in recycling plants and equipment; the introduction of a restoration scheme for all aggregates; and guaranteed environmental impact assessments.

The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee's Sixth Report 'Budget 2000 and the Environment' found the Government's rejection of these proposals difficult to comprehend. In spite of the QPA's submission, Mr Stephen Timms, the Financial Secretary, argued to the puzzlement of the Committee, that there was no scope for differentiating between suppliers on

their "green credentials". The Committee remarked, in its report, that it was "bizarre" that it did not seem possible for the Treasury to differentiate between the aggregate produced by a quarry which had shown due concern for environmental considerations and one which was environmentally reckless.

The Environmental Audit Committee said that even the Government have accepted that the aggregates tax is "a very blunt instrument" for dealing with the environmental impact of quarrying given that the demand for aggregate is "very inelastic". Furthermore, the Committee's report highlighted the difference between the Government's conciliatory approach to the agriculture and agrochemical industries on the pesticides tax and their uncompromising and unsympathetic attitude to the quarrying industry.

Finally, and probably most incredible of all, the Committee's report highlighted the QPA's concern about whether the revenue raised throughout the UK from this tax could actually fund the intended cut in national insurance contributions. The QPA estimates that the £330 million raised by this tax in 2002-03 would not be enough to fund a 0.1% cut in national insurance contributions, costing £350 million, even before one can consider contributing an additional £25 million to an environmental sustainability fund to help local communities.

In short, in relation to Northern Ireland the aggregates tax is, at best, an ill-conceived policy that will do more harm than good. It will not encourage the use of recycled aggregates. It will not finance a sustainability fund or cover the cost of the proposed cut in national insurance contributions. The Government's proposals as they stand would treat bona fide quarry operators with high environmental standards — and these operators are in the majority — in the same way as those with low standards, and that would ultimately result in the loss of many jobs.

In conclusion, when we elected representatives consider the commitments given in the draft Programme for Government to promote a competitive economy, a balanced regional development strategy and greater environmental sustainability, it seems totally illogical to introduce such a tax to Northern Ireland. This tax will increase the cost of building new hospitals, schools, social housing and roads infrastructure and, according to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), it will not alter behaviour in favour of the environment.

Representatives of the QPA's steering committee have already met with my Colleague the Minister of Finance, Mr Mark Durkan, and with UK Treasury officials to express their concerns about this tax. They will also seek to put their case to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey.

On many occasions in the House the need for the Executive to take a joined-up approach to Government has been expressed. The aggregates tax will affect all Departments and will increase the cost of all capital

spending projects. The Environmental Audit Committee called for a partnership-based approach to the subject of environmental taxation, and the Ministers of Finance and Personnel and Enterprise, Trade and Investment could set up a review group which would listen to the views of the stakeholders. That review group could report back to the Executive who would forward those views to the Treasury. However, time is limited.

The Government's proposals in their current form should not be introduced into Northern Ireland, and the House should send a clear message to the Treasury that alternative arrangements are needed which will address the particular issues facing this region.

Mr Wells: I speak as someone who through his interest in wildlife, waste disposal and nature conservation issues can claim to have visited every quarry in Northern Ireland over the last 10 years. I have come to know quite a few of their owners. I also speak as someone who considers quarrying to be a very important industry in south Down. However, I would like to dwell on the environmental issues, because this tax is being levied to bring about environmental benefits.

It must be said that there is a world of a difference between quarrying as practised in Northern Ireland and that practised in the rest of the United Kingdom. If you go to England you find the Wimpeys and the Tarmac's of this world — huge multinational companies with quarries which can be of 400-500 hectares in size and employ several hundred people. As these are absolutely enormous holes in the ground, this type of quarrying has a huge environmental impact.

The situation in Northern Ireland could not be more different. Almost every quarry in Northern Ireland is a family-owned concern, and they are relatively small. There is a larger number of quarries in Northern Ireland, which means that the overall impact on the environment is much less, and the distances travelled to carry the products to the farmers and the construction industry are much smaller. While there may be one or two bad examples, such as the one in west Belfast, which is quite large, these are not the norm. Therefore, to impose a tax in Northern Ireland which is designed to bring about an amelioration of environmental damage in the rest of the United Kingdom is absolute nonsense.

The second reason for my opposition to this tax is that there are 6,000 jobs at stake. Those jobs are in areas which have suffered the worst economic deprivation over the last decade. I am talking about areas such as Londonderry, west Tyrone, Fermanagh, Armagh and, of course, south Down. Just when the quarrying industry was getting itself back on its feet after many difficult years of lay-offs and reduced production due to underinvestment in infrastructure, it gets a kick in the teeth in the form of this tax. To those who thought up this hare-brained tax, I contend that it could not be more ill-timed.

3.45 pm

In many depressed agricultural communities quarrying is an alternative source of income and employment. Many people farm in the evenings and work in the local quarry, or deliver materials from the quarry, during the day; it is a second income. This tax therefore runs the risk of removing one of the very few alternative sources of income for these people. I have direct experience of areas such as Kilkeel, where quarrying is a crucial part of the rural economy. Yet when other elements of the rural economy, in particular farming, are going down the plughole and incomes are falling fast, an unnecessary burden is imposed on one of our most important rural industries.

As has already been said so eloquently by Mr Byrne, if I were a potential investor and had the opportunity to expand my quarry business in the Irish Republic, just across the border in Cavan, Leitrim, Monaghan or wherever, or the option to expand a quarry in Fermanagh, south Down or Armagh, and I thought that this quarry tax was on its way, where would I choose to invest? I would invest where I could produce the goods more cheaply, and this tax will not apply to indigenous material produced in the Irish Republic.

If this were an EU decision that applied to all member states, we would be on an equal footing, but we are not. Surely we as an Assembly have seen enough of what has happened to fuel over the past four years to realise the obvious opportunity there is for fraud. Recently I had a phone call from a gentleman in my constituency — I will not say where he was from because it might be too revealing. He said "Jim, can you explain something to me? At 3 o'clock every morning a tanker of fuel free-wheels down the main street into the rear of a certain garage, rapidly unloads its fuel, then freewheels down to the roundabout, starts its engine and sails away." You can draw one of two conclusions from this: either that individual is being very sympathetic to residents' needs and does not wish to disturb them, or perhaps there is something in that tanker that he does not want Customs and Excise to know about. I will leave it to hon Members to decide which is the more likely.

Because this tax will not be imposed on both sides of the border, it is going to make life very difficult for our quarry owners. We are effectively placing a 50% increase on the materials produced — £1.60 a tonne does not sound very much, but this material is sold in bulk as sand or as aggregates for roads. It is often sold at £2.90 or £3.00 a tonne, so some 50% is to be added to the cost of the finished product.

The quarry industry simply cannot bear that type of burden. Running costs are already much lower for quarry owners in the Irish Republic who use legitimate fuel, and they also have the advantage of the pound/punt difference. Wages are lower and products are cheaper there, yet we are now going to impose another burden. We really are

asking for trouble. There is absolutely no need for this tax. As Mr Byrne has said, it is quite clear that it will not even raise enough money to make it cost-effective. Circumstances in Northern Ireland are so different that we constitute a special case.

If it is decided not to go ahead with this aggregates tax in Northern Ireland, it will have no overall impact on the sum produced by this tax throughout the United Kingdom. But what it will do is save a lot of jobs, many of which are at the outer rim of Northern Ireland and close to the border. Indeed, one of our major quarries straddles the border and is the most important employer in Fermanagh.

We simply cannot allow this decision to go through. An argument will be made that this decision has been taken at Westminster and that we as an Assembly have no control over these matters. Unfortunately, as yet we do not have control over fiscal matters. I appeal to the Minister of Finance to go back to his Colleagues at Westminster and the Chancellor of Exchequer and explain the implications of this tax. It is scheduled for 2002, so we have time to argue our point and argue it forcibly. If we are going to show our teeth and really represent the people of Northern Ireland, particularly those in hard-pressed rural areas such as west Tyrone, we need to ensure that their voices are heard before irreparable damage is done to our rural economy.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This aggregates tax that has been introduced in a cowardly way by the British Government is not a proper piece of legislation for the Six Counties. I would like to see the Regional Development Committee open an inquiry into it.

First, I will address the unfair tax that will increase the financial constraints already experienced by our roads programme. As we have seen from our proposed Budget, the roads fund lacks proper investment. What will happen if the tax is given a green light? A clear distinction has not been made as to where this tax will be spent. The British Government's rationale for introducing this levy is national insurance and the impact that it will have on the environment. They do not give a reason for refusing to consider the QPA's green purchasing proposals as part of an alternative approach to taxation.

The quarry industry provides raw materials for the construction and maintenance of homes, hospitals, schools, railways, other buildings and infrastructure. We have inherited a backlog of underinvestment in those areas, and the aggregates tax will serve to increase underdevelopment. The underinvestment in the raw materials that we have seen today in the proposed Budget is the reason that Sinn Féin is requesting an inquiry by the Regional Development Committee.

We must also consider the high value of the pound and its effect on business in Fermanagh, Tyrone and the border counties. Fermanagh and Tyrone depend on the

quarry industry for jobs. I am asking the Committee to hold an inquiry to see the effect that the proposed Budget will have on the environment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion. It calls for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make representations to the Treasury. However, the motion goes further than that in that it requires positive action from the entire Executive, and not just from the two Ministers specified. I note that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is present for the debate, and I acknowledge this. If we are to lobby the Chancellor effectively, there are issues for the Department of the Environment and its Minister to consider. We should have received a report from that Department in which comparisons between environmental issues in Northern Ireland and those in England, Scotland and Wales were made. One of the Members who spoke earlier pointed that out. That would be a useful way of preparing ourselves for pleading our case to the Chancellor.

There are also serious issues here for the Department for Regional Development. In England, an estimated £70 million out of the extra £250 million for roads will be eaten up by the tax. In Wales, the aggregates tax will cost the construction trade £40 million a year and possibly 3,000 job losses. Similar figures have been estimated for Scotland. It is time that the Department for Regional Development estimated the impact that the tax will have on our roads budget. The best estimate that I have been able to get is £13 million. However, before we go to the Chancellor, we need to prepare the figures.

I am concerned about the quarry owners and their employees whose livelihoods depend on this industry throughout the North. They will be immediately affected, and there will be knock-on effects for people involved in the construction industry — those involved in the construction of houses and roads and in renovations, as I mentioned earlier. The greatest impact will be felt in the border areas, as has been the case so often. My constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone will be particularly hard hit because there are, in this area, at least 1,000 jobs in quarrying. The border constituencies are already enduring a crippling of the economy because of currency differences.

The Executive face the challenge of preparing an adequate case, and this will involve every Minister. I have no doubt that there is a case to argue. When the two Governments submitted their application for European assistance they wrote a common chapter in which they discussed plans to develop and harmonise the economy, particularly in the border areas. The current proposals of the Chancellor of the Exchequer for fuel tax are contrary to the commitments made in this chapter.

Mr Gibson: We are having an interesting day. This morning, the Chancellor of the Exchequer here was criticised for his idea of taxing buildings — a tax commonly known as rates. He also referred to the mobile phones

carried into this place. We know that Chancellors tax airspace. Governments have, over the past few years, tried to move from direct taxation to other means of taxation. At an international conference on environmentally friendly attitudes, it was unsurprising that a move towards tax benefits was seen as a way of encouraging Governments to consider the environment. When they returned from the conference, representatives from the South of Ireland sobered up and responsibly — or irresponsibly — said they would withdraw from that agreement on the grounds that it was not sensible. Either Westminster has remained in a state of inebriation, or it is incapable of thinking the dilemma through.

However, the Minister and the Executive have more difficulties over and above those highlighted in the arguments this afternoon. This issue is really about taxation. The same clamour was not made when we willingly, or unwillingly, paid £2 per tonne — not in value added tax — to deposit waste in the earth. There were howls from councillors, and a little murmuring was heard at this level. It was perceived as another form of taxation, and the scheme was sold on the grounds that it was environmentally beneficial. If a product is taxed, people will seek an alternative — we have already seen that. Let us look at alternatives open to the construction industry. If you want wood, you cut down more trees — this is not environmentally productive.

4.00 pm

I suggest that the Minister and the Executive give the Chancellor of the Exchequer a few ideas more like those originally sold to the Government about the possibility of making money from airspace. I should never wish to be the one to suggest a method of taxation, for I hate the very idea. However, I am sure that the wit and brilliance of the Executive and their Ministers should be able to defend the countryside environmentally.

There are good reasons for that. Omagh gold, a natural product of the ground, is being launched in my constituency this week. It is being marketed all over the world. To get it, one must extract rock, but this dream from international conferences will add another £1.60 per tonne to the cost of that. That is just one point. Rock is a natural, God-given product.

We talked about the farming industry this morning. We know that our Government have a policy of rural proofing. How, in West Tyrone or any other border region, could one rural proof the idea of a tax on extracted items, the natural products of the ground, which have been the baseline of survival for many local family enterprises? I could easily add another hundred names to the list appended to the article that came in from the quarry interests. There are well-known families associated with quarrying and extracting, not only in my constituency but also in neighbouring ones.

Does this mean that Coalisland clay and brick will be taken off the world scene? What about limestone, the farmer's basic fertiliser? What is our thinking on products such as cement that come from lime chalk? What do we think of the other natural products that make brick? We are talking about taxing something that is a natural product and is environmentally friendly.

This imposition will mean that — even if the South of Ireland got responsible, or irresponsible, and went into the conference saying that it would charge £1.60 — all that one will have is a cross-border quota system whereby a quarry in West Tyrone would ring up its counterpart in west Donegal and say “I have 0.25 million tonnes of rock to sell to a man in your constituency.” The other would reply “I have 0.25 million tonnes to sell to a man in yours. I will send your man mine, and we shall just cross the paper.” One could have all sorts of ridiculous situations.

Mr Wells: That is dishonest.

Mr Gibson: Of course it is dishonest, for one is changing the paper. However, that is what Governments want.

A move must be made, through the North/South procedures, to see what is happening and what the real effects are. Someone talked about research. What about inequality? This situation becomes more unequal if one examines the extraction of other products from the ground, for example, coal, oil, gas, iron and aluminium. Are they being taxed in the same way? Are we talking about open or underground extraction? The matter gets more ridiculous when we enter that area.

The proposer of the motion hinted at some of the studies and surveys that have already been carried out. At the end of the day, however, this is not really about environmental protection, for it was originally conceived as a tax. The Government sold it on the basis that employers stood to benefit. Then, as is natural in all things this century, they gave it an environmental spin. However, it has been exposed as environmentally unfriendly and, worse still, as a destroyer of jobs. Worst of all, it could never be rural proofed, never mind equality proofed. By its very nature, it is taxation on the open extraction of natural products.

I support the motion, but I ask the Minister, along with the Executive, to inform the Chancellor that there are other more equitable and rural-proofed methods of raising taxation. Above all, consider a little common sense. Anyone walking the lanes of County Tyrone, and hearing that he is going to tax the natural products of the ground, would look at him and say “Go home, son, and sober up”. The Minister should go to the Chancellor and tell him to have a sober thought about the next conference he is going to.

Mr Close: Members may recall that I first raised this issue in the Chamber on 24 January 2000 by way of an Oral Question to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I referred to the potentially adverse effects of national fiscal policies on the Northern Ireland economy. In my supplementary I referred specifically to the aggregates tax and urged them to make a strong case to the Treasury for at least some form of abatement to Northern Ireland industry in this respect. The record shows that on that day I received assurances that these issues would be raised with the Treasury. I hope I am not here today recognising and acknowledging that we have failed in that. I hope today's debate will be used to further emphasise the need for and importance of making a very strong case to the Treasury. This is a classic example of the nonsense and damage that can be done to a region by the importation of national fiscal policies.

As has already been stated, it has been introduced on the terms that it was an "environmentally-friendly" tax. Quite honestly, that is rubbish. The basis of that is that recycling could take place. Where is the recycling for the volume and quantities of aggregate in Northern Ireland? It does not exist. The Government have stated that they intend to use the taxes raised to fund a decrease in national insurance contributions for all employees in the UK. Does anybody believe that? Taking it a step further, if this tax is imposed upon the quarry industry in Northern Ireland, it will lead, as it says in this booklet, to the death of that industry. What will that mean? It will mean thousands of people out of a job, and people who are not employed do not pay national insurance contributions. So who is going to benefit? It is not going to be Northern Ireland. Our economy can ill afford to lose other industries.

We are in close proximity to the South of Ireland — 25 to 30 miles from the border. Lorries will trundle across and sell their product, and the people of Northern Ireland will effectively be denied the ability to compete. We all know, from previous debates, that excise duty and fuel are more expensive here. At the moment people are competing with one hand tied behind their backs. If this type of tax were passed — I understand it will be £1.60 per tonne — they will be expected to compete with both hands tied behind their backs. In fact, they will be crippled.

With regard to this whole question of the environment, the location of quarries in Northern Ireland means that there is not the damage to the environment that there is, relatively speaking, in other parts of the United Kingdom. We have the machinery and production capacity to make the bricks and so on that have already been referred to.

My final point should come as joy to the ears of the Finance Minister following what happened this morning. He told us — exerted us and exhorted us — to seek ways to reduce the amount of public expenditure required to finance the various programmes in Northern Ireland. Here is one: if the tax is imposed, the spending capacity

of the Department of the Environment will be reduced by some 10% to 15%. What we are saying is therefore in the Minister's interest as well as in that of the quarry owners and everyone who lives in Northern Ireland. We can rest assured that the tax will be passed on; it will be passed on in every facet of life. We cannot allow that to happen, so I exhort the Minister and his Executive Colleagues to get over to the Treasury — sooner rather than later — and make the case for Northern Ireland. They must not come back saying that they have failed.

Mr Dallat: If only stones could speak. Experience shows that if taxes are not harmonised, the part of the island where taxes are higher faces economic disaster. Recently, that has been Northern Ireland. I will not labour the point.

There must be a level playing field to give our industries a fair chance of surviving. Local businesses have built up lucrative niche business in the Republic in road and other construction. The European Union should nurture those industries rather than kill them off with unfair taxes. I recently visited east Germany, where I noted that the Government were spending massive sums on a new road infrastructure. Our entire road and rail infrastructure faces the aftermath of thirty years of the troubles and abject neglect by an absentee Government. It is downright crazy to be contemplating a quarry tax that could kill off an industry that must play a vital role in creating a new infrastructure.

Members have referred to quarries in the border region. No quarry in Northern Ireland will be safe if the tax is introduced. In east Derry, there is substantial employment in all parts of the quarry industry, and none of those jobs would be safe if the tax were imposed. As those industries introduce new technologies, costing million of pounds, it is most likely that they will relocate where taxation is more favourable. The hills of Donegal will become more popular than ever — not for their beauty, but for their stone. That serves the interest neither of Northern Ireland nor of the Republic.

The experience of the fuel industry is well documented. Not only is fuel flowing freely over the border — legally and illegally — but the haulage business has largely relocated. Could the stone and concrete businesses relocate in the same way? I should think not. I represent a large, rural constituency where jobs are hard to come by. Many people depend on the construction industry. Are such people now to be sacrificed, as others have been, because of tax differentials? The case must be made to Brussels before the legislation is passed.

I am happy to leave the hills of Donegal in Donegal, where I go frequently to admire their beauty. I prefer to see stones being quarried locally, on a scale — approved and controlled by Government — that will never damage the environment. Today all parties in the Assembly have been united on this issue. Let us go forward together and,

with the support of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, deliver the message that a tax on stone will bleed our industry dry.

4.15 pm

Mr A Maginness: I speak as Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee.

The matter of the aggregates tax was recently brought to the attention of the Regional Development Committee. It greatly concerns us. Regional development is essentially about developing our physical infrastructure as a region. As we know, one of the aims of the Executive, as outlined in the Programme for Government, is to create a competitive economy. That objective will not be attained without proper infrastructure. Therefore the Department for Regional Development aims to create and renew our infrastructure, which has almost reached a crisis point because it has been starved of proper investment for so long. It is important that the Committee and the Department look at the overall effect that this tax will have on the development of our infrastructure.

Many Members talked about the effect that it would have on local producers. However, that will be passed on, not just to private sector customers but to the Government and the Department for Regional Development in the public sector. The public sector will have to bear the additional costs that this tax will create. The additional cost could be quite damaging to the process of renewing our infrastructure, particularly road building.

It is estimated that the public sector uses 40% of the materials used per annum in Northern Ireland. If 20 million tonnes are expended, the additional burden on the public sector will be £12.8 million. That is an enormous amount of money, which would be sufficient in many ways to put back Northern Ireland's road development programme. The Executive, and in particular the Department for Regional Development, are strapped for cash. They do not have the necessary money to engage in a proper road-building programme.

This additional burden could wipe out some of the Minister of Finance's generosity — and the extra funding he has provided for the Department has been generous. It will be very damaging, because we will have to run hard simply to stay still. That is the reality of the situation. The Regional Development Committee is very concerned about the effect that this tax will have on the private sector and, especially, on the public sector, which is our particular responsibility.

It behoves all of us to support this motion, to lobby the Government centrally and to outline to them the effect that this tax will have on our public sector. Successive Westminster Governments failed to invest properly in infrastructure here. Now that we have a devolved regional Assembly and Executive, the Government are imposing an excessive burden upon us. There are good reasons for

implementing this tax, but unfortunately the outworking of it will harm us and harm our development.

We are faced with a historic legacy of underinvestment by the Government at Westminster, and now that Government are imposing a burden that, frankly, will be hard to bear. Therefore, it is right and proper that the Minister of Finance and Personnel should go to London and explain carefully to the Chancellor of the Exchequer the harmful effects that this tax will have on us. The Minister should plead with the Chancellor for an exemption for Northern Ireland — one that we truly deserve.

We must at least be given some time and space in order to get on our feet, otherwise it will be unfair of the Government to insist on this. This will be a recurrent theme in the Assembly over many other issues as yet undetermined. As a devolved Assembly and Executive, we are in conflict with central Government whose interests, aims and objectives do not necessarily suit us. I have no doubt that we will come back to this theme in the future. This issue highlights the classic conflict between central Government and this devolved Assembly and Executive.

I reiterate and endorse what other Members have said. The circumstances of Northern Ireland in relation to this tax are unique. We have a good case, and the Minister should go to London with our fullest backing and support.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):

I welcome the opportunity to respond to this motion and to hear the views of the Assembly on the aggregates tax. I have received several representations on this matter, and recently had a very useful meeting with the QPA to hear its concerns at first hand. I will say more about that meeting shortly.

First, I will provide some information about the tax and its stated purpose. Secondly, I wish to inform the Assembly about representations made to me and the actions I am taking in response. Thirdly, I would like to set out for the Assembly the wide range of issues that the new tax raises for us in the context of our Programme for Government. Lastly, I will explain how I propose to take this matter forward in conjunction with my Executive Colleagues.

I lay particular emphasis on that last point, as some other Members have done in their remarks. The one thing that has been made abundantly clear to me today is that this is a cross-cutting issue that will impact on a range of departmental interests. Obviously, it would be inappropriate for me to speak on behalf of others, but I know that Sir Reg Empey, who is unfortunately unable to be here this afternoon, has a keen interest in the economic impact of the tax. He is concerned that it will damage the competitive position of Northern Ireland quarry companies.

I know from interdepartmental discussions that others will be affected. The Roads Service in the Department

for Regional Development is, as some Members have mentioned, the largest user of aggregate in Northern Ireland. It anticipates a major increase in its costs as a consequence of this tax.

From a different perspective, the Department of the Environment is seeking to promote a range of environmental improvement policies, including the greater use of recycled aggregates. There are various factors that need to be considered, and I will explain some of the background to the tax.

In this year's Budget the Chancellor announced his intention to introduce an aggregates levy which will come into effect from April 2002. According to the Chancellor the purpose of that levy is to ensure that the environmental impacts of aggregates production are more fully reflected in prices, encouraging a shift in demand away from virgin aggregate towards alternative materials such as recycled aggregate.

The levy will apply to virgin sand, gravel and crushed rock which is subject to commercial exploitation in the UK — including that dredged from the seabed in UK territorial waters. It will be charged at £1.60 per tonne. The levy will not apply to recycled aggregates or to certain secondary aggregates such as those derived from reworking old spoil heaps.

To protect competitiveness, exports will be relieved and imported aggregates will be subject to the levy when they are first sold or used in the UK, though this will not apply to imported processed products.

There will be a range of exemptions or relief for certain rocks and industrial minerals, for the production of lime or cement from limestone and for silica sand or limestone used in certain agricultural and industrial processes.

The Chancellor claims that the levy furthers the Government's aim of shifting the burden of taxation from — as Mr Byrne mentioned — what the Chancellor describes as “goods” to “bads”. The revenues from the levy are to be fully recycled to the business community through a 0.1% reduction in employers' national insurance contributions and the newly created sustainability fund. It is contended that the reductions in national insurance contributions will provide a significant benefit to Northern Ireland employers. We will need to quantify that accurately.

Details of the sustainability fund have recently been announced. Around £35 million per annum will be set aside from April 2002 to establish that fund. Of that, almost £1 million per year will read across to Northern Ireland under the Barnett formula. The figure is £0.97 million in 2002-03 and 2003-04.

In October, the Treasury suggested that the devolved countries should pool their shares of the fund with the English resources. That would create a UK-wide pool from which groups or organisations could bid on a competitive or challenge basis to fund projects which

would achieve a number of environmental objectives. These will include reducing the environmental costs of quarrying, promoting environmentally friendly quarrying practices, supporting conservation and increased biodiversity, retaining the natural landscape and encouraging the construction industry to use recycled aggregates. I considered this with Sam Foster and, after consultation between our Departments, we resiled from the proposal to take part in the pooled fund.

Mr Wells: Does the hon Member accept that due to the way that quarrying was carried out in Northern Ireland it is not unusual for a closed-down quarry to be declared an area of special scientific interest? Does he accept that many quarries eventually become havens for wildlife in what is often a green desert?

Has the Minister done any research to find out if the impacts of quarrying in Northern Ireland are in any way similar in scale to those in the rest of the United Kingdom? Many of us contend that they are not and therefore believe that we do not need to take ameliorating action.

Mr Durkan: I am setting out the background to the tax and explaining about the sustainability fund. I have said what the Chancellor is advocating. I will subsequently address the points arising from the various representations we have received including those raised in this debate. I do not disagree with the Member. Perhaps he has a misapprehension concerning my point about the proposal that the Northern Ireland interest in the sustainability fund should be reflected through the pooling of the fund with the other devolved regions and with England. It is a straightforward matter of information. We have resiled from that suggestion.

4.30 pm

On 29 November I had a very useful meeting with some representatives of the QPA. They presented a very cogent case for seeking exemption from the aggregates levy. In view of the cross-cutting nature of the issue, officials representing the departments of Sir Reg Empey, Gregory Campbell and Sam Foster also attended the meeting. The association argued that the tax would have a negative impact on the local quarrying business and would damage the wider Northern Ireland economy. It said that the tax would have a detrimental effect in border regions, which are already suffering from the impact of the exchange rate and from a depressed agriculture sector. The QPA argued strongly that the levy would make quarry operations here less competitive and would probably have the effect of displacing quarrying businesses from North to South. Crucially, it claimed that the tax will not lead to a switch by the local construction industry to other materials such as substitute or recycled aggregates.

Northern Ireland has a much higher dependence on newly extracted aggregates and therefore is unlikely to be able to make the desired change easily. As a result of this, the association made a strong case for suggesting

that the displacement effect of the tax will not have a positive environmental impact. In fact, the association maintains that it will achieve the opposite because there will be no reduction in the extraction of raw materials and there will be a significant increase in the transportation of raw materials and aggregates.

The tax rate of £1·60 per tonne will add over 60% to the cost of Northern Ireland aggregates, which currently average around £2·50 per tonne. This compares with an average price of aggregates in Great Britain of around £7·00 per tonne and would provide the Exchequer with up to £40 million in revenue, based on the QPA's estimate of current aggregate production here. Hence, the tax rate in Northern Ireland would be 60% compared with 22% in Great Britain. As a consequence of this, the association claims that the jobs of up to 80% of the 5,000 people who work in the quarrying industry are under threat.

I have asked the association to provide further information to support its claims. However, on the basis of the evidence provided there appear to be grounds for concluding that the aggregates levy will have a more profound and damaging impact on the quarrying industry in Northern Ireland than was originally imagined.

Members' contributions today echo the QPA's strong arguments that this levy could have a perverse environmental impact here, which would match its adverse economic impact on this region. However, as I made clear to the association at the meeting, there are a number of competing issues to be considered. Apart from the very real risks which the quarrying industry now faces I must, in conjunction with my ministerial Colleagues, also have regard to the objectives on sustainable development which the Executive have signed up to in the draft Programme for Government.

Mining and quarrying impact on the environment, and the levy is the Westminster Government's response to public concern about the construction industry's involvement.

Mr Poots: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: I think I am about to make the point that you are going to make.

Mr Poots: I do not think so.

We live in the European Union, which is an area of free trade. In this case, if the UK Government were to introduce a tax on aggregates coming into the United Kingdom, other countries could take the United Kingdom up for creating unfair trade within the European Union. Is there a case for the quarry people who manufacture the aggregates to take a case against their Government for destroying trade and creating an unfair market for them?

Mr Durkan: I am not sure that the Member wants to continue down that road, given some of the recent discussions at the Nice Summit which went to the heart of the very sensitive issue of the sovereignty of member states on taxation. I would have thought that on that issue

he would be on the side of those who say that taxation should remain squarely in the domain of the national Government.

Clearly, any challenge based on distortions of trade can be pursued if people want to pursue them. Given the difficulties of effecting change in these areas, any point is clearly worth pursuing. However, mounting that course of action would not be the most productive challenge that the parties most affected could make.

The Westminster Government claim that the tax is a means of encouraging the construction industry to use recycled aggregates, which are exempt from tax, because that would be in line with their sustainable development strategy. We must also bear in mind that, to protect competition, the Treasury decided that imported aggregates will be subject to the levy when they are first sold or used in the UK. I do recognise the validity of the points that have been made here and that the scale and nature of the quarrying industry in Great Britain is quite different from the scale, nature and operating context of the industry here. The reality is, however, that we are dealing with a tax that has been proposed, set and established at Westminster.

It is clear that the Executive have to weigh the environmental and economic costs and benefits carefully when dealing with this issue. If this is not the best means for Northern Ireland, we are duty bound to identify alternative ways of achieving these important environmental objectives. I am pleased to say that the QPA recognises this, and we have asked its members to propose workable, alternative ways of reducing the harmful effects of their industry.

I hope this provides a flavour of the range of issues which my Executive Colleagues must now consider. Please note that, without pre-empting our deliberations, I do not wish to downplay the difficulty of securing any form of derogation from this tax from the Treasury. The devolved Administrations have been conceded very few exemptions from UK-wide fiscal policies. We can predict that the Treasury will resist any special pleading on this issue. Merit, validity and compelling reality from a regional perspective do not have a strong record of sway with the Treasury. Therefore, before making representations to the Treasury on this aspect of fiscal policy, we must give the most careful consideration to the impact that this may have on the broad range of financial issues which we are pursuing with the Treasury.

This has been a most useful and informative debate. It has been vehemently argued that the aggregates tax could profoundly damage the Northern Ireland quarrying industry while simultaneously failing to deliver the environmental benefits which it seeks to secure. I would therefore like to assure the Assembly that we will take full account of the outcome of the debate in determining our response.

As I indicated earlier, the QPA has been asked to provide further material in support of its case, and I expect that we will be able to conclude our discussions after we have had an opportunity to consider that. Those discussions will involve the Departments already mentioned — my Department, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development. It will also involve the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers.

Members should understand that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister play a key role representing Northern Ireland's broad interests. That includes making fairly fundamental and significant representations to the Treasury. Just as I did in the meeting with the QPA, along with the officials representing other Ministers, I will give further consideration to, and put more work into, the issue, in conjunction with the other interested Departments and Ministers. I hope that we will arrive at ways that will allow us to deal actively with the key concerns voiced in support of the case.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his presence and the Members who contributed to the debate. It has been a wide-ranging and cross-party debate. From the sober elements of Mr Gibson to the stoned elements of Mr Dallat, I welcome all the contributions from five major political parties in the Assembly — I hope the fifth party welcomes its inclusion in the top league.

I welcome the recognition that this is very much a cross-departmental issue, and that has been widely echoed around the House. Capital programmes of all the Departments may be affected, but the Departments particularly affected have been well addressed by all Members, so I do not intend to delay a positive vote on the issue by going into too much detail.

The figure of between 10% and 15% on the cost of the capital structure programme for regional development is something that the House must take seriously. Remember where the job losses could and probably will occur if the tax is brought into being. They will be in already deprived areas, areas in which the textile industry and farming are suffering. It has been suggested that those areas are along the border. How far in does the border stretch?

The tax of £1.60 will allow producers from the Republic to go a further 20 to 25 miles into Northern Ireland. That means that five of our six counties will be directly affected. If you were to draw that line on the map, you would be talking about two thirds of the Northern Ireland land mass. That is the significance of what we are taking about — up to 4,000 jobs and to gather what

in taxes? A figure of £30 million has been suggested. How much will it cost to pay for 4,000 unemployed? A fair figure to suggest might be £60 million in Northern Ireland alone, yet they expect to put between £30 million and £35 million into the sustainability fund.

There is the immediate impact of Northern Ireland on the Treasury figures. What the Treasury will lose on those two figures alone wipes out what it could possibly put into the sustainability fund. I do not intend to dwell long at this point in the debate. The issues have been well put by the Members, and I congratulate Mr Byrne — if I had been making his opening speech, we would have been using the same notes. I also congratulate all the contributors to today's debate.

4.45 pm

I welcome the Minister's investigations and his collaboration with the aggregate producers. I urge him to continue these investigations for the good of the many people in that deprived community which lives in the two thirds of Northern Ireland that will be affected — those who live outside County Antrim — which is essentially what we are talking about.

I note Mr Close's reference to a question posed earlier in the year. I also note that the Minister said that the issue referred to in that question would have to be strongly pursued by the First and Deputy First Ministers. This should have been started already, as promised, as a result of that earlier question — but that will happen now.

The Minister referred to the potential difficulties of trying to change United Kingdom fiscal policy. This is evident from the fuel tax debates and representations from this part of the United Kingdom. Remember, however, that success was achieved with the climate levy change. I urge the Minister to make sure that, once again, the Assembly proves that it can work for the good of the people of Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the serious economic and environmental implications the aggregates tax will have for the quarry and construction industry in Northern Ireland and calls upon the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make representations to the UK Treasury on behalf of the Quarry Products Association to prevent the introduction of this tax in this region.

Adjourned at 4.47 pm

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 18 December 2000

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY: UNPARLIAMENTARY LANGUAGE AND PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Mr Speaker: At an earlier sitting of the Assembly the First Minister asked me to clarify those situations when I rule on parliamentary language and personal statements. Decisions on parliamentary language and personal statements are made under the guidance outlined in 'Erskine May'. It may be helpful if I outline these principles in two particular areas.

If an unsubstantiated allegation of criminal behaviour is made in the course of other comments and about another Member, I shall regard it as unparliamentary language and treat it as such. If an unsubstantiated implication of criminal or similarly disreputable behaviour is made of another Member in the course of other comments, I shall — if requested — give the Member accused a brief opportunity to reply. However, on other matters that relate to unparliamentary language and to the circumstances of personal statements we shall continue to follow the guidance outlined in 'Erskine May'.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it not be a good thing for the House to consult Standing Orders and make provision, as in 'Erskine May', for a personal statement from a Member who feels aggrieved?

Mr Speaker: Several Members have pointed out that Standing Orders are not as complete as they could be. Members holding such views should draw them to my attention or to the attention of the Committee on Procedures. If they are drawn to my attention I shall notify the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures, Mr Conor Murphy. If they are drawn to the attention of the Committee on Procedures directly, I trust that it will deal with them appropriately and will bring them to the House for an appropriate decision.

USE OF ASSEMBLY TELEPHONE NUMBERS

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. I drew your attention to the fact that a member of the Ulster Unionist party had used the telephone number of the House in a newspaper article. When will you be able to make a ruling on that?

Mr Speaker: I hope to make a ruling at the start of business tomorrow at 10.30 am.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):
I beg to move

That this Assembly suspends Standing Order 10(2) and Standing Order 10(6) for Monday 18 December 2000.

Members will be aware that today is the culmination of many months' work on the spending allocations for 2001-02 and on the indicative allocations for the following two years. I regret the timetable that we have had to adopt and I appreciate the difficulties that it has caused many people — not least the Committees, particularly the Finance and Personnel Committee. I am determined that better timetables and procedures will apply in future.

However, on this occasion and in these circumstances it has been necessary to eat into the Christmas recess to enable this debate to take place. This may be unsatisfactory, but it seems to me that the family-friendlier option is to conclude the debate today, as the alternative is a long debate tomorrow, which would be even less welcome.

For that reason I propose that we suspend Standing Orders to allow this important debate to continue after 6.00 pm if necessary.

Mr Speaker: I have received no requests to speak.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly suspends Standing Order 10(2) and Standing Order 10(6) for Monday 18 December 2000.

BUDGET (2001-02)

Mr Speaker: I wish to make some brief remarks on the conduct of the motion. First, in line with the decision made by the Assembly, there will be no limit on the length of the debate, save what seems reasonable to the Speaker. I trust that the Speaker will get a sense of Members' feelings and of the stamina of the Minister who must respond at the end of it all.

That being the case, there will not be a specific time limit on Members' interventions. We shall debate until 1.30 pm, suspend from 1.30 pm to 2.30 pm for lunch and resume at 2.30 pm with Question Time until 4.00 pm. We shall then resume the Budget debate and continue until its completion.

I have, however, been asked by the business managers to pay particular attention to Standing Order 17(7), which states that

"The Speaker, after having called the attention of the Assembly to the conduct of a Member who persists in irrelevance or tedious repetition, may direct the Member to discontinue his/her speech".

Much will be said in the early part of the debate. I trust that Members who wish to intervene later will stay to listen to all those who speak at the earlier stage so that their interventions are not repetitious. I shall, in deference to the House and in particular to the business managers, pay particular attention as the debate continues to Standing Order 17(7).

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):
I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2001-02 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 12 December 2000.

Today the Assembly will vote for the first time on a budget as envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement. Guided by the Programme for Government, the Executive have agreed their programme of expenditure proposals for 2001-02 and have made some revisions as a result of scrutiny by the Assembly and its Committees. We had less time for the procedure than we wished, but now is the time to take the next important step. It is my privilege, on behalf of the Executive, to ask the Assembly to approve the proposals that I introduced last week.

Approving the Budget is one of the Assembly's most important responsibilities. It is essential that, after mature debate, we discharge that responsibility on behalf of all our people. This will be our biggest step in moving away from the patterns that we inherited a year ago. From today we shall be setting a new direction and providing resources for public services under the guidance and management of the new institutions; services that will be guided by our programmes and priorities and not by anyone else's.

The Executive have set out their objectives in the draft Programme for Government, and the Budget allocations have been framed with these objectives in mind. We intend to make a difference, and this Budget will make that difference to the lives of thousands of our people. We have made extensive provision for the key services upon which we all depend. We have available a total increase in spending that allows for likely inflation of 5%. That is a real opportunity to do more and to make real improvements.

I am determined to avoid hype today because I recognise that we must deal with spending issues realistically. We must, however, make the most of the significant additional money that we have to spend, comparing this year with next. I can cite a few examples of how we intend to make the most of that money. We have made significant new provision for student support and for the introduction of free travel for the elderly. We have made provision for safer railways and new trains — at last. As a result of the spending plans more money will be spent on the Health Service to tackle pressing needs and problems. We are investing more in our schools and further education colleges, in buildings and, more importantly, in staff, because it is our priority to raise standards in education. There are significant increases in the budgets for agriculture, the environment and social development. These will fulfil the needs of key services and will also provide significant employment; they will help too in delivering these services. The Executive's proposals are designed to make improvements in all spending programmes.

We have also struck out in new directions, most visibly through the creation of the five Executive programme funds. It has been argued that these funds have merely delayed the allocation of money to Departments. That is to miss the point. We are determined to break with the past practice of paying lip service to co-operation between Departments. The funds will play a key role in ensuring genuine co-operation.

Every budget must strike a balance between the desirable and the affordable, and the Executive have worked hard to achieve such a balance. A significant real increase in spending will enable us to provide many positive measures and to make some inroads into our inherited problems. However, our needs are so extensive that we cannot deal with all the problems and backlogs at once. The Executive formed a judgement on this balance. We believe that it achieves funding for some key actions that we regard as priorities and that it offers good provision for all the key services for which the Assembly is responsible.

10.45 am

Last year I said that setting a budget would entail change for us all. We would no longer be advocates for

one issue, or for one issue at a time, but would have to judge all the issues. That is clear from today's discussion.

I am pleased to tell the Assembly that Commissioner Barnier has today signed the European Union community support framework. That is another important step towards completing work on the new programmes. We are very grateful to the European Union for the special support that it has provided. The Peace II programme is a unique and tangible commitment by the European Union to underpin the Good Friday Agreement.

When I introduced the draft Budget in October I promised that the Executive would listen carefully to the points that emerged from the scrutiny of these proposals in the Assembly and in the wider community. The revised Budget is proof that this promise has been kept. We have strengthened spending in many important areas. Of course, we have not been able to do everything that was asked — there are simply insufficient resources for that. Nor must we imagine that new services come without cost. If we wish to do more we must will the means to do more. That is why the Executive have kept the proposed increase in the regional rate, unpopular though that may be. Many Members have said repeatedly that we face hard choices, and this is one from which the Executive have not shied. Raising extra money from the regional rate — from those who can afford to contribute to our services — is necessary to deliver the improvements in public services that we all need and want.

I look forward to a vigorous, but responsible, debate on the Budget. That is what the voters who sent us here want and what democracy demands. When the allocations have been set, key procedures of the Executive and the Assembly for controlling spending will be brought into operation. They are designed to ensure that the money is used as effectively as possible.

I want to stress again how strongly we are determined to achieve progress by working with the relevant Committees and by taking account of all the points raised by Members. Mr Speaker, I commend this Budget to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Two amendments have been chosen and are on the Marshallled List. We shall now take the first amendment.

Mr Dodds: I beg to move the following amendment:
At the end, add

“subject to a reduction of expenditure, as necessary, on the following spending areas —

North/South Body: Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights

North/South Body: Languages

North/South Body: Waterways Ireland

North/South Body: Trade and Business Development

North/South Body: Special EU Programmes

North/South Body: Food Safety Promotion

Tourism Company

North/South Ministerial Council Secretariat

Civic Forum —

in order to reduce the increase in the regional rate from 8% to the current level of inflation”.

Mr Peter Robinson and I move the amendment on behalf of our party.

I listened very carefully — as did, I am sure, all Members — to the Minister's latest statement; I have listened carefully in recent weeks to several of his statements in the House and in Committees. We are all agreed, as no doubt are all those who have seen the Finance and Personnel Committee's report on the Budget process, that we have not been given enough time.

This must be corrected. I welcome the Minister's assurance that in future (if the Assembly has a future) more time will be devoted to this important aspect of expenditure and government. It is unacceptable that Members should be presented with over £6 billion of expenditure in important areas in all Departments and be expected to deliberate, consult and decide on it in so short a time.

We complained in the past about direct rule Ministers' lack of consultation. In future, it will be unacceptable for the Minister to introduce budgets in the same way as this year's and for the reasons that he gave.

I urge the Minister to do what he can in conjunction with Her Majesty's Treasury to ensure that the calculation of the Barnett formula is changed. I know that he is considering this and that there is a problem with how the Barnett formula is calculated — it does not meet the needs of this part of the United Kingdom. An adjustment to it would help to provide extra expenditure to meet many of the needs identified by the various Assembly Committees.

Departmental running costs are highlighted in the Finance and Personnel Committee's report. The Minister will be aware that the Confederation of British Industry and Assembly Members have highlighted the large increases in departmental running costs between 2000-01 and 2001-02. This increase in bureaucracy and administration could be pruned to ensure that more money is spent on capital and on delivering services.

I hope that this issue will be dealt with in future and I am confident that, without even waiting until next year, some Ministers are already looking for ways to prune expenditure so that services can be improved. Of course, we must bear in mind that there has been an increase in administration under this system of government, and the Minister drew the Committee's attention to this. The need to increase the number of Departments from six to 10 has resulted in departmental running costs of £26.1 million for this financial year and the same again for next year. Over £52 million is being spent simply to accommodate 10 Departments rather than six. At the

time, many of us pointed out that some of the departmental divisions were not being made for practical, pragmatic reasons but rather to ensure that there were enough jobs for the boys and girls and to cover the various party political considerations.

This £52 million of taxpayers' money, which could have been spent on delivering services, is being spent on administration, bureaucracy and red tape. Over a year and a half ago, leading members of the Ulster Unionist Party promised us that reduced spending on quangos and on other public bodies would create enormous savings that would compensate for the increased expenditure on administration. We have yet to see those enormous savings.

A review of public administration and of Departments has been announced. However, that announcement was not made to the House. We have no details of what the review will comprise, because, despite repeated requests, the Minister has never told the House what implications it will have. We learned of it in newspaper reports and at press conferences, but Members have yet to hear details of the review so that it can be subject to questions and debate. The sooner that is done the better.

I shall now deal with the subject matter of our amendment. Throughout the questions after the Minister presented the Budget, after he presented the revised Budget, and again during the debate on the Budget itself, we heard heated argument. The Minister has clearly heard the widespread concern in the community — concern that has been echoed in the House — at the scale of the increase in the regional rate proposed by him and by the Executive.

I note that Sinn Féin is also to move an amendment to reduce the regional rate. I am very interested to know whether Sinn Féin agreed to the increase in the regional rate and to the allocation to the Executive programme funds when these were being debated in the Executive. We did not. We come to this House with clean hands, so we have every right to move such an amendment. However, I want to hear from the Minister exactly where Sinn Féin stands on the issue.

The rates issue proves that the notion of collective responsibility in this system of government is what we have always said it is — a notion. It does not exist. Every Minister does his or her own thing, and if anyone needs more evidence of that let him look at today's proceedings on a key issue of government. We heard from the Minister that the Budget is a milestone, a major step forward for the Assembly. Nevertheless, one of the parties in the Executive is to move an amendment to change fundamentally the Budget that it agreed with the other members of the Executive. Other parties certainly have some explaining to do when they attack us. After all, we do not go to the Executive; our hands are clean on this.

The Minister said that the fact that his promises had been kept was proof that he had listened very carefully to Members. He also said that these are our priorities and

no one else's. Clearly, he takes full responsibility for the 8% rise in the regional rate. The parties that support him on this also take full responsibility. Responsibility for that decision lies with no one else.

Last year the Minister said that he had decided to roll forward the uplift of 8% in the domestic regional rate that was assumed in the 1998 comprehensive spending review. At that time, it was generally accepted that there was very little time available and very little room for introducing radical change into any aspect of the Budget. For that reason, the Budget went through an accelerated procedure without any amendments being made to inherited policy. However, it was strongly suggested that in this financial year there would be an opportunity to make changes. In fact, on 17 October Mr Durkan reminded the House that his proposals were

“not a set of hand-me-down Budget proposals simply rolling forward the plans inherited from the period of direct rule”.

That may be largely true, but not with regard to the regional rate. The 8% increase is precisely the increase that direct rule Ministers had planned; and precisely the increase that was implemented by direct rule Ministers in the previous two years.

These increases were bitterly criticised by many elected representatives, especially those in local councils throughout the Province, who have struggled to keep the district rate increases as close as possible to the rate of inflation. They saw their hard work cast aside when direct rule Ministers imposed swingeing increases far above the rate of inflation. Nonetheless, the Minister and the parties that support him in the Executive are introducing another swingeing increase that will add enormously to ratepayers' household bills.

11.00 am

Rates apply to all whether they are on high, middle or low incomes; rates are not a progressive form of taxation. People who are struggling to make ends meet and people who are working to earn an income for their families will be hit year after year with massive increases in their rates bills. We have had these increases for the last two years. On page 3, paragraph 1.9 of the Budget statement one finds that this is not the end of the story. The Minister says that the spending proposals in the draft Budget require the domestic regional rate to be increased by 8% and the non-domestic regional rate by 6.6% in 2001-02. The Executive have confirmed these proposals for 2001-02, and I am interested to know whether all members of the Executive were in agreement, given Sinn Féin's amendment.

The spending plans should make people across Northern Ireland sit up and take notice. For years we are to have an increase of 8%. For 2001-02 it is proposed to have an increase at more than twice the rate of inflation; and the spending plans for 2002-03 and 2003-04 require the domestic regional rate to be increased by — guess what?

— 8% and the non-domestic regional rate by 5.5% in both years. If Mr Durkan and those parties that support him in the Executive have their way, ratepayers in Northern Ireland, whether they are on high, middle or low incomes, will face a rates increase of 8% every year for five years.

Is this acceptable? We recently had a debate in the House on increases in electricity prices, after Northern Ireland Electricity imposed an increase of 8%. Outrage, concern and alarm were expressed on all sides of the House at this increase, as it will result in consumers in Northern Ireland paying the highest electricity prices not just in the United Kingdom but in Europe. Nevertheless, the Minister comes here today on behalf of those parties that support him in the Executive to lay before the House a proposal that would increase the regional rate by an inflation-busting 8%. This is on top of what has already been done — and there are more plans in the pipeline.

This is simply unacceptable. Numerous studies have shown that people in Northern Ireland are generally less well off than people in other parts of the United Kingdom and that the gross weekly income in Northern Ireland is £100 less than the UK average. I did not hear that argument from the Minister. His only justification was that the proposed expenditure cannot be maintained if we do not set the rates increase at 8%.

That goes without saying. However, the question remains: why has he picked 8%? Is it a coincidence that that figure was proposed and implemented by direct rule Ministers? No doubt the Minister will argue that we are slightly better off than council taxpayers across the water. However, I have already pointed out that we in Northern Ireland pay disproportionately higher costs for many services and essential goods than people in the rest of the United Kingdom do.

Let us look at other issues. Northern Irish people pay more for fuel and transport than those in the rest of the UK and in the South, yet the Minister wants to add a massive increase in the regional rate to that burden. He is to some extent correct in saying that if we were to stick to the expenditure proposals in his Budget, he would have to increase the regional rate by 8%. Our amendment suggests a way in which he could obtain the necessary finance. In correspondence with the Finance and Personnel Committee, officials explained that if the increase in the regional rate were kept at 4%, revenue would be reduced by £8.9 million. If the increase were 6%, revenue would be reduced by £4.4 million. We have calculated that at a rate of inflation of 2.9% we would have to find approximately £12 million to reduce the increase in the regional rate from the proposed inflation-busting 8% to what I regard as a reasonable rate of increase — the rate of inflation.

Therefore we suggest that this money can be found by looking at the expenditure for the all-Ireland political dimension contained in Mr Durkan's Budget. The increases outlined in his Budget are quite significant. For instance,

the increase for the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission is from £400,000 to £600,000, an increase of almost 50%. The increase for the North/South language body is from £2.2 million to over £3.5 million, an increase of over 50%. Expenditure for Waterways Ireland rises from £1.3 million to £2.6 million, an increase of exactly 100%. Some £2.9 million is being spent on the trade and business development body, which was not originally included in the list of North/South implementation bodies. The money for the special EU programmes body rises from £300,000 to £600,000, an increase of 100%. Expenditure for the Food Safety Promotion Board rises by 50%, from £1 million to £1.5 million. In all, the total is £11.7 million.

Tourism, which was included by the Department and by the Minister in the list of North/South implementation bodies last year, has for some reason been omitted from this year's list. Perhaps because its expenditure has risen from £0.5 million to £5.8 million. Therefore total expenditure when the secretariat costs of the North/South Ministerial Council have been included — and they come to well over £600,000 — approaches £20 million.

If the costs of the Civic Forum and the various other items designed to promote the political agenda of the Belfast Agreement are added, one can see where savings could be made. We have heard eloquent speeches from Members who believe that the regional rate should be reduced. Despite their eloquence, passion and argument, however, they failed to move an amendment. No doubt they will be pleased to support this amendment. I do not look in any particular direction when I say that, although I do look forward to hearing Mr Close.

In an attempt to pre-empt this argument, Mr Durkan said last week that none of the expenditure on North/South bodies and on the all-Ireland political dimension is new spending; that some of it had already occurred. I see that the First Minister has suddenly sprung to life and is nodding vigorously. Our amendment states that the expenditure should be taken from these bodies and put back into the pockets of Northern Ireland's ratepayers. Essential work that is already under way should continue. That will be a matter for consideration for the Minister and for the Executive. However, if the Minister is trying to tell us that this will end work that is already going on, he is not speaking with any validity. Our amendment allows that necessary work to continue, while stripping away an all-Ireland dimension that was designed to promote a political agenda.

I am sure that the Minister — as the First Minister and others have tried to do — will say that in a budget of £6 billion the amount of money that we are discussing is very small; that it does not amount to much. They dismiss it as almost trivial. However, when we look for extra money to pay for essential services in various Departments we are told that hardly another penny can be squeezed out of the system. I remind the House that for every £1

million spent on advancing the all-Ireland political dimension of the Belfast Agreement, less money is returned to people through reductions in the regional rate. For every £1 million spent there are 200 fewer heart operations in Northern Ireland; 25 fewer homes built for the homeless; 300 fewer people with central heating in their homes; and 1,000 fewer adaptations are carried out in homes so that people with disabilities can live comfortably in the community. That is what we get for every £1 million. Think what the statistics would be if that were multiplied by the almost £20 million being spent to advance the political agenda of the all-Ireland “North/Southerly” of the Belfast Agreement.

Others will want, no doubt, to add to and comment on what I have said. However, I want to commend this amendment to the House. Other aspects of the Budget concern us, and we shall raise them later in the debate. Members who genuinely desire to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland are not penalised on top of the already high fuel and transport costs and the high and rising electricity and food costs can say to them today “We shall not penalise you further by raising your rates above the rate of inflation”. Join with us in the Democratic Unionist Party in voting to have those rates reduced and in putting a stop to the North/South all-Ireland aspect of this Budget.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg to move the following amendment: At the end, add

“subject to a reduction of expenditure, as necessary, in the Executive programme funds to reduce the increase in the regional rate from 8% to the current level of inflation”.

Nigel Dodds claimed that his party’s hands were clean; the truth is that its hands are wringing wet. Of course the DUP members of the Executive do not take their seats. However, after their Ministers have tried to get what they need for their Departments — and rightly so, for they represent everyone in the region not just their own party support — their Colleagues come here to attack everyone else. The Member for North Belfast, Mr Dodds, made a blatantly political speech that had nothing to do with the Budget, concentrating instead on the North/South Ministerial Council. That is a matter for the DUP, but I hope that this will expose the truth to everyone.

11.15 am

The DUP said nothing constructive. It says that we should remove everything from the North/South Ministerial Council, offering all the old chestnuts about cutting back on Government expenditure. However, it fails to suggest anything that might pass for a reasonable proposal. There is no acknowledgement that their Departments made considerable bids for funding for other projects; bids that they were unable to secure.

I move the amendment reluctantly, and it is with even greater reluctance that I suggest that the money be taken from the Executive programme funds. We regard it as a

one-off means — for this year only — of reducing the rates increase. We are conscious that every Department made considerable bids for funding for much needed programmes that would benefit the whole community. We see the Executive programme funds as a means of drawing off money that has not yet been committed. I acknowledge that we could overload the programme funds so I move the amendment with great reluctance and stress that the measure should be for this year only.

The Minister readily acknowledged that circumstances beyond our control have ensured once again that we have only a relatively short time in which to scrutinise the Budget. My party appreciates the efforts of all the Ministers who have grappled daily with their departmental responsibilities while seeking to work together for the benefit of all Departments and all citizens. That important achievement should be welcomed.

I shall answer the question put by Nigel Dodds. My Colleagues were prepared to support the Budget in its entirety, including the rates increase; Martin McGuinness and Bairbre de Brún were very supportive of the whole Budget. However, after wider consultation and consideration, our party finds itself unable to support an increase above the rate of inflation; that is reasonable. Despite the DUP’s jibes, the Executive will not collapse because the parties that worked on the Budget have differences of opinion. I must therefore disappoint the DUP: any party in the Executive can hold a position that is contrary to that of others without causing a collapse.

Last week I welcomed the statement from the Minister of Finance and Personnel. He identified the consistent underfunding and neglect on the part of previous Administrations. British Ministers, who had no mandate here, flew in and out, setting Budgets unaccountably and producing inadequate and often discriminatory funding packages. Last week the Minister acknowledged the problem caused by deficient spending over the years and the inadequacy of the Barnett formula. I welcomed his comments; they once again made it clear that the Executive must vigorously pursue the question of how we are funded under the Barnett formula.

Members who have worked on councils will understand why the regional rate increase was inserted into the Budget: it was an attempt to match all Departments’ funding demands. However, after consideration, it is our view that such an increase would be an unfair burden on some sectors in the community, particularly the retail sector. There is no doubt that the massive hike in the rates in recent years has been very damaging to small businesses. That is why we do not want to support a rates increase above the rate of inflation this year.

We take the view that such an increase conflicts with the commitments that many of us have, including all the members of the Executive, to support the arterial routes, small villages, rural communities and small businesses.

We must remind ourselves that the Minister has already committed himself to conducting a further rates review. This move would be precipitous at present and damaging to small businesses.

We move the amendment reluctantly. We want to acknowledge publicly the Trojan efforts of Executive Ministers — those of them who work together — in squaring the circle of meeting funding demands. We all appreciate that it has been a very difficult task. In that spirit, I want to move the amendment.

Mr Speaker: It may be of some assistance to the House if I remind Members that under section 64(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 votes on the draft Budget require cross-community support. I simply draw that to the attention of the House.

The Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister of Finance and Personnel's statement and praise the work that he has done in very difficult circumstances. We all know that it is the Minister that carries the can for the Budget when all is said and done. It is the Executive's Budget — not just the Minister's. There may be parts of it with which he disagrees.

The Minister has been very open with the Finance and Personnel Committee on all its requests for information. He is committed to ensuring that the Budget is representative of and committed to the various Departments; and to ensuring that it reflects as far as possible the views of the Finance and Personnel Committee. The Minister serves two Committees — the Executive Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee — and that must be difficult, particularly if he also has his own views.

The Finance and Personnel Committee sought views from all the departmental Committees on the provision for their respective Departments. All but two of them responded. It is important to say that there is collective responsibility on departmental Committees to work together in scrutinising the Budget in every possible way and in ensuring that the Finance and Personnel Committee produces a full report to advise the Minister.

The Finance and Personnel Committee arranged the substantive Budget debate, held on 14 November, during which Members had full opportunity to raise concerns about the allocations in the Budget proposals. After the debate, the Committee produced a report that summarised the written responses and the Budget debate. The report was passed to the Minister of Finance and Personnel on Friday 24 November, and a published version was available to Members a week later.

The report recommended that the Programme for Government and the Budget proposals should be among the first items of business brought to the Assembly by the Executive after the summer recess. This is important.

Everybody has complained about not having had enough time to deal with the Budget or to scrutinise it properly. To rectify that, the programme should be introduced immediately after the summer recess. The Minister has acknowledged that this will be the target to work towards in future, and it is important that we reach that target.

An assessment of needs should be undertaken as a first step in demonstrating that the current application of the Barnett formula is inappropriate and unsuited to the special circumstances here. The Minister acknowledged last week that the Barnett formula does not target the social need that we are trying to deal with. It is not appropriate here. However, as he warned, it is also dangerous to throw the baby out with the bath water. We must look at what may be possible in the future and, to that end, the Finance and Personnel Committee asks the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Executive and the Assembly to develop a strategy to review the Barnett formula. It is not "the Barnett formula or nothing". There must be a mechanism. We would like to join with the Executive and with the other Committees to develop a strategy whereby we can approach the British Exchequer to ensure that we get a proper appropriation.

The Department should commission an urgent review of the structure and staffing of all Departments and the bodies for which they are responsible in order to achieve maximum efficiency in delivering public services in 2001-02. Although he did not fully commit himself, the Minister did respond. However, the restrictions on Departments and on budgets are essential to ensure that every penny of public money is used to maximum advantage. We ask for reassurance that the question of efficiency across all public services will be dealt with urgently.

The Minister should assess the departmental financial allocations in order to take full account of the objectives contained in the Programme for Government. Ministers consider the objectives, the requirements of new TSN and public safety to be of the utmost importance.

There will be a warm welcome for the additional money that the Minister put forward last week. Whoever delivers a Budget always says that no more money is available. However, we saw last week that more moneys were available. An extra £40 million was found through a review of how the Government deal with VAT returns. That review increased our spending power by £20 million. That must be welcomed, because several Departments benefited. There was an extra £7 million for health, £2 million for agriculture, £2 million for housing, £2 million for roads, and £1.3 million for education.

We must ensure that European funding is additional to the Budget, although there was a response with regard to additionality.

Every Department needs more money, and I am sure that none of the Committees will say that it has achieved

all that it wanted. However, it is a major step forward, and we look forward to considering all of this again.

The Finance and Personnel Committee did not adopt a position with regard to the 8% regional rate rise. Had a vote been taken during the meetings and discussions, the Committee would have opposed the rise. It is important to note that.

All Departments should consult their Committees during the spring and early summer before finalising their budgetary requirements and submitting them for the consideration of the Minister of Finance and Personnel. It is important that all Ministers relate to their Committees to ensure inclusive discussions so that the Budget reflects as far as possible the requirements of Committees and Ministers. Ministers should regard Committees as a support, and Committees must be aware of what their Ministers demand from the Executive and must support them in those demands.

Those are the Committees' concerns; Members may raise others. In a personal and political role and speaking as a party member and as a constituency representative, I feel that it is important to recognise the work done by the Minister.

It is a pity that the Assembly's first Budget contains a proposal to raise the domestic regional rate by 8% and the non-domestic rate by 6.6%. The rates are an unfair system of taxation. A taxation system should be called a tax and not simply put on the rates. The rating system is a blunt instrument for collecting tax, because it hits households. It becomes a poll tax. We remember the poll tax campaign in England. Young people were forced off the electoral register because parents were losing housing benefit, and various structures had to be put in place to counteract that. The rates should be viewed as another poll tax that damages the whole community. We want young people to be involved in political structures: forcing them off the register will not encourage them.

11.30 am

The blunt nature of the rating system means that households are targeted rather than individuals. At least taxation across the board means that although taxpayers must pay a higher rate of tax, they can do so because they are earning. The Minister said that the rates rise would be directed at those who can afford to pay, but that is not the case. Many on the breadline will be pushed one way or another, and the rates rise will drive many small shops out of business. In some small towns and villages the rise in rates will lead to the closure of rural businesses. That is particularly important given the state of agriculture. The Executive and the Minister of Agriculture have told the House that a rural approach is needed. The situation will not be helped if small rural businesses close. In future, many households, particularly in rural areas, will be deprived. The rates rise will add to already high expenses.

The Minister will say that rates are lower here than in England, Scotland and Wales. However, the rates, especially the council rate, are different here because the situation is completely different. Councils in England, Scotland and Wales provide a full range of services; in some cases more services than the Assembly does. He is not comparing like with like.

I am sure that we shall be asked where the money will come from if the rates are not raised. As I said earlier, the VAT review has put an extra £40 million into the coffers. Even with last week's additions, there is a difference of over £20 million. The amendment moved in the name of Mr Alex Maskey identifies that very clearly. Last week, an additional £9 million was put into the Executive programme funds. That, and the moneys in the Executive fund that have not been allocated to a Department, could be used to alleviate the rise in rates. We do not want to wipe the rates out; we merely want keep them in line with inflation.

Some Members have already covered part of the 8% rise in the regional rate that will raise an additional £12 million. The Executive have made too much of this figure and of raising the rates in this manner. The rating system is a blunt instrument for collecting taxes, and it should be re-examined. We do not have a balance sheet that sets out the consequences of not doing it or that explains why the domestic rates are rising by 8% and the non-domestic rates by 6.6%. We are told that this will also apply next year. Another 8% rise in the rates in twelve months' time will cripple rural communities. We must look at that.

We are also asking those who were deprived of services and facilities in the past to pay again. The British exchequer underfunded infrastructure here for years. Those who were deprived, especially those west of the Bann who have no hospitals, services or infrastructure, are being asked to pay an 8% rise along with everyone else. We are punishing those who were punished in the past, and that is unfair.

We need a strategy for dealing with the Barnett formula. It is simply not good enough to say that the Barnett formula does not work and that we must deal with it. We need a strategy developed by the Executive, the Assembly and its Members to lobby the British Exchequer to ensure that more money is available.

First, we must lobby the British Exchequer for the peace money that we were promised would come from reductions in spending on security, the military and on policing. All that money should be available for other services. For years we were told that that was depriving people of services. The British Exchequer must turn the war chest into a "peace chest" to ensure that this money reaches the right places.

The Irish Government must pay towards their aspirations, because it is important — this is, after all, a

transition period — to ask the Irish Government to pay into the Exchequer so that the Assembly receives money from them.

Mr Weir: Given that the Member's party seems to have a direct line to the Irish Government, I wonder whether that suggestion has been made to them. How did they react when he suggested that they should "pay towards their aspirations"?

Mr Molloy: A Cheann Comhairle, my party has put the point several times, and the Irish Government have responded. They have funded projects here that the British Government failed to pay for — for instance, Irish-medium schools and various cultural events that the British Government and the Unionist Party failed to recognise.

We should certainly ask the Irish Government to spread the Celtic Tiger right across the 32 counties of Ireland. Let them follow aspirations with commitment and finance. We shall certainly push that.

I shall deal with some of the specific issues and, for a moment, be a bit more parochial. Although the increase in money to the various Departments is welcome, more is needed. There should be an allocation for the acute services review, for instance. The review may shock us all by trying to reverse the imbalance in the hospital service between east and west of the Bann. If the South Tyrone Hospital is to reopen as an acute hospital, money will be needed. But from where? We must ensure that that happens.

If the acute services review is simply a whitewash it will have been a waste of time and money. I would like to see money allocated in the Budget. The British Government should be asked to pay. For years the Conservative Government — propped up by the Unionist Party — made cuts, closed hospitals and reduced services. It is now time for payback, and the British Government should correct the imbalance of the past to ensure that they live up to their commitments.

The same holds for infrastructure, for rail and road services east and west of the Bann and for agriculture. We must ensure that there are services for rural communities. We must pay for those services, but we must also see a rebalancing of the finances that have been going east rather than west of the Bann in recent years.

We are candid in saying that the British Government must invest here to correct that imbalance. Their past neglect caused it, and through investment they must ensure that it never happens again. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee (Dr Birnie): It is worth reiterating that this is an historic occasion. It is the first Budget and the first Programme for Government for Northern Ireland and by Northern Ireland people in almost three decades. In forming any Budget there is a danger that departmental inertia and

political expediency will mean that we just roll forward existing allocations willy-nilly.

That said, this Budget contains valuable innovations and has resisted the danger of inertia and expediency. Three main innovations are to be welcomed. First, the Executive programme funds will ensure that our assent to the principle of joined-up Government is not nominal.

For the first time, public service agreements will be applied from London to public expenditure in Northern Ireland. Properly applied and scrutinised, they should ensure value for money. Today we are simply discussing cash inputs, but ultimately the public values what that money pays for and the good services that it delivers.

The third innovation in the Budget is solid investment in areas that could be foundations for future economic growth and social progress. Therefore I wish to return to the extra provision in last week's statement and in the statement of the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment last Friday regarding student support. This is the first time that Members have been able to consider those provisions in detail.

The Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee welcomes them as a good start to a continuing process of reform. Let us be clear about the central problem of student support. Lower-income social classes in Northern Ireland are approximately three fifths of the adult population; but they constitute barely a quarter of students in higher education. We must ensure that people of genuine ability do not miss out on a good education and on the chance of developing their potential because their families cannot afford to maintain them in further or higher education.

Nevertheless, there are many benefits in the extra support for students. Last week's package goes some way towards the proposals in the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee's report on the subject. It is hoped that there will be some grants, some removal of student tuition fees and some additional university and further education places in Northern Ireland. That may be seen as a clever piece of social inclusion.

There is still room in the Budget, as money becomes available through in-year monitoring, for necessary social inclusion spending from other Departments to help other socially disadvantaged groups apart from students. As ever, the devil will be in the detail of the students' support package. The Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee welcomes the ending of tuition fees for some further education courses — especially those dealing with perceived skills shortages — the Minister's proposals may be open to challenge down the line owing to the perceived inequity and selectivity of support.

I agree with Dr Farren that skills shortages are an important, cross-cutting matter that should be dealt with.

They will have implications for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, among others. Innovative policy should not be restrained by a straightjacket of excessive equality regulations. At the same time, since that Department has hitherto made so much of equality proofing, there is a danger of its being hoist by its own petard.

Last week the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment decided that the principle of tuition fees should be retained. I understand the logic of his argument. Nevertheless, there is solid evidence from England that the fees that students in higher and further education must pay may deter those from low-income backgrounds from studying. If the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment intends to keep fees for students from a higher income background, it should improve the information available so that it is clear that less than half of students will be paying part or full fees.

11.45 am

Unfortunately, the House may have to return to the question of tuition fees in further and higher education in two or three years' time. After the next general election the new Government may back the Russell Group proposal by the perceived elite of English and Scottish universities that we move towards the American system of very high top-up fees for university students.

We shall cross that bridge if we come to it. For the time being, however, the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment proposals are a good start. They would give Northern Ireland a system of student support superior to England's — particularly in further education — although probably less developed than the support available in Scotland. We do not yet know what will happen in Wales.

At least we can be satisfied that, in this area, devolution is making a valuable difference for all the people of Northern Ireland. I therefore support the motion and reject the two amendments.

Mr Maskey and Mr Molloy commented on the rates burden on business. We should be thankful that this could be evidence that Sinn Féin is at last throwing off Marx — Karl, not Groucho — and that there is evidence of a conversion towards the enterprise culture. That should be applauded.

With regard to the DUP's amendment, it is of note that the six North/South implementation bodies employ about 300 people in Northern Ireland: more than 20,000 are employed in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. That puts the implementation bodies into perspective. Most of those 300 people have been transferred from existing departmental activities. These activities would have happened anyway, and we would still have had to pay for them. Among these activities are the maintenance of

canals and river banks and the upkeep of lighthouses. Those instances of all-Ireland co-operation date back to the 1950s for canals and to the 1890s for lighthouses. That is hardly a formidable challenge to United Kingdom sovereignty. Of course, some Members regard Lord Brookeborough or the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, as infamous Lundys. I support the motion.

Ms Lewsley: There is much to be commended in the Budget proposals. The Minister has shown insight and fairness in dealing with the difficult task of allocating funds to areas of need and social deprivation. I hope, as the Minister said, that we are at the start of a journey to redress the underfunding that is the legacy of the direct rule years and to set realistic targets to redress the balance and to target social need.

It is very easy to advocate change when in opposition; it is not so easy, however, when one is in government. It is absurd for those who say that they want change and who are most vocal about the Executive programme now to oppose the mechanisms for change in the Budget. This is an Executive Budget, agreed collectively and implemented cross-departmentally. I appreciate that the Budget is not perfect, because needs will always outstrip the resources available. Nevertheless, the additional money available to schools, hospitals and agriculture is a testament to our intention to begin the process of change.

I am also sure that our senior citizens are grateful for the increased provision for free transport. Do those who object to the increase in the rates want to see a reduction at the expense of the most marginalised sections of our population?

The proposed overhaul of student finance cannot happen without additional funds. The proposals have already received support from Queen's University Students' Union, the University of Ulster and the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education. Queen's University Students' Union has stated its belief that Dr Farren has taken the first step towards striking the right balance. As a result of the changes almost three out of five students in higher education will pay no fees. The proposals must be seen for what they are — a positive move towards a more equitable distribution of funds that will promote wider access to education.

The promotion of interdepartmental co-ordination in dealing with various issues, particularly those affecting people with disabilities, is one of the most positive measures. It offers a more concerted way to alleviate difficulties and to promote the social inclusion of one of the most disadvantaged sections of our population. We should aim at providing better access to services and facilities for the disabled to bring it into line with the access enjoyed by the rest of society. The combined effort across Departments will improve access for people with disabilities to culture and leisure facilities and to social

and work activities. That is a positive move towards inclusion.

An additional £1.3 million — 7.2% — has been made available to education for 2001-02. The allocation for Northern Ireland, as for Scotland and Wales, is calculated using the Barnett formula, and the money goes into the block grant. The Barnett formula, which is based on population, awards only 3.3%. That is a shortfall of £7 million compared to the extra funds allocated in England. I hope that the Barnett formula will be revised to ensure that the allocation of funding comes into line with that in England.

The House is aware of the dreadful condition of schools. I welcome the extra moneys allocated to the improvement of schools, but it is only a drop in the ocean. It will take substantial investment to bring our schools — particularly our rural schools — up to modern standards. I hope that the Department will use some of the extra money for special needs provision and to improve literacy and numeracy, especially in schools in disadvantaged areas.

The targets defined in the Programme for Government must be regularly reviewed, and we must ensure that they are achievable. However, we cannot do anything without the adequate funding that will enable us to solve our problems. Funding for education is an investment in our future, and we must invest now, not merely to stop the system from deteriorating further but to develop a comprehensive and inclusive education system that will bring great benefits to our society now and in future.

The Budget is not perfect, but, as Dr Birnie said, we have, for the first time in three decades, the opportunity to make significant grass roots change in many disadvantaged areas. We should not remove additional funding that has already been allocated. If we did we would have to say to those who deserve help most “Sorry, but we cannot do any more for you”. Therefore I support the motion, not the amendments.

Mr P Robinson: It is difficult for the Minister to take account of the competing demands from Ministers and of the views of the Assembly Committees and still put forward a universally acceptable Budget. The Minister has allocated funds to Departments fairly and equitably based on the needs of the community rather than on the wants of Ministers.

The Barnett formula has already been referred to, as has the subvention to Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom Exchequer. The House recognises that there must be a revision. Can the Minister tell us what type of revision is being sought and how it would be fairer to this part of the United Kingdom? Is there a strategy to allow us all to pursue a common goal?

At this stage it is worth pointing out that as the Budget flows from the Programme for Government it is

necessary to express some disappointment in that Programme for Government. I know that Ministers will not have had much opportunity to acquaint themselves with all the minutiae of their Departments or to start thinking about how things could be done differently. There was not much new in the Programme for Government, and some innovation is required to put the Ulster thumbprint on the operation of devolution in Northern Ireland. An outside observer would not notice much difference between this Executive's Programme for Government and that of the direct rulers.

Several Members have expressed opinions on the amendments. I recognise that there is a responsibility — indeed a legal requirement — on an amendment to allow the Budget to be balanced at the end of the exercise. That places a responsibility on individuals and has restrained some who simply want to reduce the regional rate and forget about everything else rather than look at how easy it might be. That they have not moved an amendment may mean that they could not do it, and that balancing the Budget requires people to find out whether savings made here could be made elsewhere to balance it.

We had no difficulty in carrying out that exercise. We have known for several years that the whole process is politically driven and that a great deal of Budget money is squandered merely to bolster the Republican agenda. That is the core of our amendment. Dr Birnie does not think these issues very important. They are important enough for all the Executive parties to go to court, such is their significance. Their importance lies in where they intend to lead this Province. However, I am sure that the Deputy Speaker will not allow me to go much further down that road in a Budget debate.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

I found the Sinn Féin/IRA amendment amazing. They sat around the table shoulder to shoulder with the Minister of Finance and Personnel discussing how best to make the allocations. No doubt, those discussions took place over many months in the Executive.

12.00

I have no doubt that all those present argued persuasively for their Departments' allocations and that they studied the whole Budget; and that after long discussions the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health agreed with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and with their Colleagues on what should be presented to the Assembly. However, as soon as that was done their party moved an amendment to the Budget that they had agreed. I find that incomprehensible. You may attack us for not being at the Executive and for moving an amendment, but had we agreed a Budget with you I assure you that we would have stood by you in the Assembly.

We must reach some conclusions. Clearly there is a split in IRA/Sinn Féin. That can be dangerous enough,

as you are probably aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it is clear that the two Ministers are out of step with the rest of the party. The mover of their amendment said that the party had acted after further consideration. One might have thought that the “further consideration” would have taken place before they signed up to the Budget; but it appears that they do these things after the event. Having agreed to the proposals in the Budget, IRA/Sinn Féin decides that perhaps the electorate may not be so keen on a rates increase and so changes its mind. IRA/Sinn Féin is leading the Minister of Finance and Personnel to the end of the plank, and it will leave him there. Having stitched him up, it decides “This is not good politics for us; we shall go in a different direction”.

Either their two Ministers do not have the brains of the rest of the party — in which case one must wonder why they were proposed for office — or their party considers them dispensable in pursuit of its real objective: popularity with its electorate. Their approach to the agreements that they make does little credit to any principle they may claim.

The Budget money required to keep the regional rate at the level of inflation is not significant. Therefore I am surprised that the Minister of Finance and Personnel could not accept the clear will of the Assembly and of the electorate to keep the regional rate at the level of inflation. The amount required for maintaining the regional rate at the level of inflation is much less than the amount that the Minister will have at the end of the financial year for slippage. Slippage will be about £40 million, or the “reduced requirements of Departments” as the Department of Finance and Personnel describes it. However, it is significantly more in each financial year than the amount that we are attempting to save. That puts it in perspective.

I want to discuss several areas, and it will become clear why I have chosen them as I go on. The first is free fares. I am not sure what point Ms Lewsley was trying to make when she asked whether the people who moved these amendments wanted to deprive the needy of free fares. Obviously, she has not looked at the Order Paper. Neither amendment proposes taking money from free fares. Indeed, both of them look for funding from a different area.

It is worth pointing out that Sinn Féin/IRA said that it tabled its amendment because the Executive programme funds have not yet been allocated. Of course they have been allocated; they are on page five of the Executive Budget programme. They may not have been allocated down to the last detail, but neither are any of the other headings.

Will they take the money from community regeneration, service modernisation or infrastructure renewal to save the £12 million? Will it be taken from funding for children? Will it be taken out of the mouths of children? They

should have been upfront, as we have been, in telling people where they would take the money from. It is not enough to say “We shall take money from the Executive programme funds”; one must tell people exactly where one intends to take the money from and what work will not be done as a result.

I hope that the Assembly noted that the mover of the Sinn Féin/IRA amendment said that it was for this year only. He must want the regional rate to go up by 8% next year and by a further 8% the year after that, because that is what the indicative figures show. Our proposals will have life in them at the end of those 12 months and will be able to be carried forward into the following year, the year after and so on for ever. If that were the case, I would be happy.

The IRA/Sinn Féin amendment proposes taking money from areas of expenditure that are intended to put in place the very infrastructure that it demanded. IRA/Sinn Féin is attempting to bluff its constituents into believing that the money has been taken out of the pockets of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister — the Executive programme funds. It would be taken from schemes that would benefit the constituents of every Member in the Chamber.

The proposal for free fares is strongly supported by the community, as has been shown in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ opinion poll. I announced my intention to establish free fares for older people when I moved to the Department for Regional Development last year and I am delighted that we have taken a significant step towards them. The scheme has several advantages. Among them is the social interaction that will flow from it for people who are largely confined not because they are unable to go out or because they have no one to visit but because they must make the unpalatable choice between eating and outings. This scheme will give them greater freedom to be more involved in the community that they have done so much to support.

However, it will only be of value to the whole community if there are improvements in transport, particularly in rural areas. When the test schemes were carried out in Castlereagh and in Newry and Mourne, I was struck by the difference between the two schemes. People in Newry and Mourne, where there is little rural transport, will derive less benefit from the scheme.

Therefore rather than say to Translink “The scale of economy is such that you should be able to do something for us to reduce the amounts”, we should be saying “You must do something to improve rural services throughout Northern Ireland”. I remember hearing Fermanagh councillors’ request for a bus service — never mind a better bus service — in their area. The benefits to Translink of free fares and the additional funding it will get must be paid back to the community, particularly the rural community. Further testing and

phasing of the scheme may be necessary. That will be the joy of the Minister for Regional Development, but it will be necessary if we are to meet the time scales set out in the Minister's statement.

I have twice attempted to get some clarification on the matter of roads. On both occasions the Minister was short of time. On the first occasion his statement in the Assembly limited his ability to respond; on the second in the Committee a whip was cracking in his ear and he had to come to the Assembly to speak in a debate. Now that he is in a more relaxed mood I hope that the Minister will be able to give me some answers.

There has been speculation about roads programmes and the capital funding available to them. The reality is that the Minister has put enough money into roads for the capital resources required so that all the schemes that have been announced can proceed, provided that that level is maintained for the next two years. Forget about inflationary increases; if that level is maintained for the next two years all those schemes can proceed. However, as the Minister and House know, these schemes take a long time to go through the statutory processes. They must go through the necessary vesting orders and through the tendering and construction processes. That takes two or three years, and to start a job in year one the necessary resources must be available — albeit indicatively — in years two and three before the contract can be signed. A Minister cannot say “On the basis of this year, I can proceed”. A Minister must be sure that when he or she signs a contract the money will be available in years two and three.

This is a difficulty. The indicative figures show a reduction in the money that will be available for capital roads expenditure. That is shown, but it may not be the outcome because we have what are described as Executive programme funds. I listened to Dr Birnie extolling the Executive programme funds as I listened to the statement last week by the Minister of Finance and Personnel informing us of this great innovation.

I thought that all the funds in the Budget were for the Executive's programme. What distinguishes these from others? Why have they been distinguished at all? We all know the reason. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister want to have some good news to announce from time to time. They want to take some of the good news away from Ministers — and they have attempted to do that frequently, as the Minister of Finance and Personnel will know — to announce it themselves — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: Ministers should make announcements — it is their departmental responsibility. Ultimately, Ministers will have to fulfil commitments, and this will be done by the Departments. The Executive programme funds are simply a device to allow Ministers to announce some good news from time to time — although it could

be something more sinister. It is to allow them to impose their political agenda on Departments and on the people.

12.15 pm

Here is where I have real difficulty. I shall take the example of the Department for Regional Development as I know it best. When deciding to spend money on roads, I cannot say “I am the Member for East Belfast; East Belfast needs a new road around the harbour, so let us put our money in there”. That would be entirely wrong. People might have done that in the past. However, one must have objective criteria; one must determine how one sets priorities. All Members think that the roads in their constituency should take priority, and I do not doubt their arguments, but we must have criteria when decisions are being made.

In taking decisions on roads we should consider the number of accidents, the volume of traffic using the road, the benefits to major hospitals and to schools along the route and the age and state of repair of the road. These are all objective criteria in determining priorities. That is what we do. A Department will set the objective criteria and prioritise its programme on them.

I shall take another example: the Toome bypass proposal was announced before the proposal for a road to Newry. As I expected, the Deputy First Minister argued the case with me for the Newry road in his constituency. I would have done exactly the same had I been Deputy First Minister. Objectively, however, I determined that the Toome bypass was more important.

Let us look at the new circumstances. Infrastructure expenditure is now contained in the programme funds. Will the Deputy First Minister prevail on the Executive by telling them that “Newry is the priority; its road must go ahead. We shall allocate the money out of the Executive programme funds”? In that case, despite objective criteria, the less urgent road would be given precedence over the more urgent. That cannot be right. It may even be legally suspect. The basis on which the Executive programme funds are allocated should be questioned and clarified.

I am delighted that money is available for the improvements outlined by the railway task force in A D Little's report — vital work for the railway infrastructure. There is now a draft regional development plan. An important part of transport strategy is to encourage people to use public transport. When devolution was introduced I had no doubt that the railways were finished; railways in Northern Ireland would close — with the exception, perhaps, of the Belfast to Dublin line. That was the agenda. That has been reversed under devolution, but it can only continue to be reversed if the money is available. This Budget is a start.

I am delighted that there is an increase of £14.5 million in spending on water services. That will help to deal with all the problems, including raising health

standards, particularly in light of the cryptosporidium outbreak, which is much on our minds.

I commend the amendment moved by my Colleague, Mr Dodds. The amendment seeks to recognise that the regional rate is a significant burden on householders and on businesses. An increase of 8% — more than twice the rate of inflation — is unacceptable. I usually challenge people's actions rather than question their motives. However, the motive here is fairly clear. The regional rate is being increased because ultimately the Assembly will not be blamed. The poor councillors will be blamed, since the rates bill comes from the council, does it not?

The Minister can increase the regional rate substantially, and the boys and girls in the councils will get a kicking for it from the electorate. No matter how prudent they might have been in their local authority — even if they have reduced their district rate — the Minister's whopping 8% rise in the regional rate will remove any advantage, and councillors will get the blame.

The regional rate is merely an additional form of taxation. There was once a link with water services, and the public believed that it was paying for water and sewerage improvements. That is no longer the case as that link has been broken. This is the Durkan tax; it is direct taxation. We were not given tax-raising powers under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 but we have adopted them in the form of the regional rate. Business people in particular, who have great difficulties in making a living, must now deal with a significant increase in the regional rate.

There is no doubt about the community's view on this increase. The Minister could have addressed it with very little difficulty. As he did not, we have taken from his Budget the most useless items of expenditure — the squandering and wasteful "North/Southery", the so-called Civic Forum and other elements that amount to about £20 million. He would have to take £12 million from this — his figures are not very precise — to reduce the regional rate to the rate of inflation.

He has rightly said that some of the work of the bodies that we named would be done anyway. We have left £8 million for this to be done in the relevant Departments. This amendment should commend itself to the Assembly, as I know it will commend itself to the public.

Mr Close: I draw attention to the fact that I am the first Member of the Opposition to speak this morning. All previous speakers have been from parties that are in the Executive. I have never seen so much wriggling, squirming and so many would-be Pontius Pilates. "This is not our document. Oh no, don't blame us, don't tarnish us with this". They have not dipped their hands in the bowl for ablution — they have immersed their whole bodies in search of salvation. However, it must be remembered that the Budget has been agreed by the Executive. Let everyone remember that the Executive

consists of the Ulster Unionist Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, the SDLP and Sinn Féin.

Mr P Robinson: Can the Member please tell us when the Democratic Unionist Party agreed this Budget?

Mr Close: Those with ears, let them listen. I am stating — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members will address their remarks through the Speaker.

Mr Close: I have difficulty in getting my message across, but the members of the Northern Ireland Executive — and I shall repeat them in case there is any doubt — are the Ulster Unionist Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, the SDLP and Sinn Féin. The public recognises and accepts that. To pretend otherwise is to treat the people of Northern Ireland with contempt. The people know for whom they voted and whom they put in the Executive, and the members of the Executive must accept that.

I should not criticise that. I am trying to win a case, and the case is that the regional rate should not be increased by 8%. Two parties of the Executive are already scrambling to get in behind this justifiable premise. They are even prepared to turn their backs on the Executive of which they are members and come scrambling over to the Opposition. Imagine if the Chancellor of the Exchequer delivered his Budget only to find that his Colleagues had scrambled from the Government Benches to the other side of the House. Like Pontius Pilate, they do not want to touch his Budget. "That is not our Budget", they say, "Oh, no, no — save us from this terrible, terrible Budget".

When the Minister was speaking —

Mr P Robinson: You have stated your case.

Mr Close: And I have a big case to state.

In his statement the Minister referred to the revisions that had taken place and he used the words "as a result of scrutiny". With the greatest respect, I must correct the Minister. No scrutiny of this Budget has taken place at any stage. Yes, there has been consultation, and, yes, there has been talk of scrutiny. However, scrutiny, as laid down in the Northern Ireland Act, means "close examination of", and there has not been that necessary close examination of either the draft or the revised Budget. Do we need proof of this? The proof is that two of the Statutory Committees did not even have time to submit a written response on the draft Budget to the Finance and Personnel Committee.

The Finance and Personnel Committee did not have sufficient time to do its sole job of advising the Minister of Finance and Personnel and of assisting him to introduce the Budget. That has given us a Budget that is in many respects shallow and superficial. As Dr Birnie said, it does not allow us to get behind the figures, and

we are still being promised public service agreements in January.

We have not seen the public service agreements for setting targets and benchmarks for public expenditure and its results. That is a fundamental flaw. In many respects, our approach is a hand-me-down from previous regimes with some changes that I accept. Lack of time for proper scrutiny has resulted in the job's not being done properly.

Mr Maskey's contribution almost reduced me to tears. I visualise him, arm up his back in excruciating pain, moving his amendment to reject an 8% increase in the regional rate with great reluctance, in spite of his party's being part and parcel of the Executive. I was nearly crying; I was reaching for my handkerchief. The Democratic Unionist Party once again moved an unadulterated party political amendment that was clearly calculated to cause as much damage as possible to the Good Friday Agreement. The DUP is consistent, I will give it that. The amendment calls for the removal of North/South institutions and of the Civic Forum. "Let power lie totally in the hands of politicians", says the DUP. Nevertheless, it says that it had to do this — for honourable reasons, of course, — to find the £8 million to £11 million.

I find it very strange that when the DUP studied the figures — and it obviously did because it was able to cost what it called "North/Southery" — it missed one glaring figure for the Departments for Regional and Social Development. It seems to have ignored the fact that between the draft Budget and the present one the departmental running costs for the Department for Regional Development have gone up by £2.1 million while those for the Department for Social Development have gone up by £6.3 million. That is a massive £8.4 million between the two Departments. As every 1% increase in the regional rate equates to almost £2.2 million, lo and behold, 4% has been diverted to these Departments.

12.30 pm

Mr Dodds: I am interested in the Member's argument. If he feels so passionately about this matter why did he not move an amendment rather than lecture the rest of us? Could he not be bothered? Is rhetoric his only contribution?

Mr Close: The impatience of the Gentleman! This is only a preamble, yet his party is already jumping at me to hear why I did not move an amendment. Do not get excited; calm down. Some Members seem to forget that during the take-note debate of 14 November, I stated clearly that the Alliance Party would not support a Budget funded, even in part, by an 8% increase in the regional rate. We gave absolute responsibility to the Executive to do the decent thing and amend it. We hoped that the Executive would heed the views and concerns of Members, of the Finance and Personnel Committee, of local authorities and of the people.

To date, they have not done that. I would not usurp their authority. I am proud to be a Member of the Opposition, and it strikes me that many people and one or two parties in the Executive would like to join the Opposition. We shall consider their applications, but I question some Members' behaviour. We may have to stand alone.

Why did we say that we would not support a Budget that was based on an increase of 8% in the regional rate? We did that for sound economic reasons but also for reasons of principle and consistency. It strikes me — and this has been brought home to me even more this morning — that inconsistency is one of the greatest scourges of politicians. We have the privilege of representing people. What do the people say? They say that some politicians will say one thing one day and do the opposite the next.

They promise the sun, the moon and the stars, but what do they deliver? Absolutely nothing. Politicians produce manifestos to fight an election. However, as soon as the election is over the manifestos are consigned to oblivion. They no longer matter, because the politicians are now in power.

On 14 November I pointed out that consistency was very important, and that we, along with councils and councillors throughout Northern Ireland (and over 60 Members of the House are also members of local authorities), had consistently opposed a large increase in the regional rate. On the same date I asked how anyone could possibly oppose a large increase in the regional rate when a member of a local authority but when in power ape the Tory overlords who foisted this on us for years. How can anyone do that and then face the electorate? For saying that, I was criticised and accused of being adversarial — note: adversarial. When I appealed to Members' social consciences to recognise that increases in the regional rate and in Housing Executive rents that were above inflation would hit the poor (specifically pensioners) and would drag people into the poverty trap, I was accused of indulging in — wait for it — populist stunts. This quarter also accused me of being a poor mathematician and in the next breath accused me of being a magician — just like that.

What is the justification for these indefensible hikes in rent and rates? The justification is responsibility. Members of the Executive claim that they have such a responsibility. Some politicians will hide behind any fig leaf. Those of us not in the Northern Ireland Executive have no responsibility. We should sympathise with those in the Executive because they do. We poor people outside the Executive can indulge ourselves because we have no responsibility.

If being consistent, if having a social conscience, if protecting the poor, if democratically fighting for fairness is irresponsible, I stand guilty as charged. I shall submit to the people's verdict; but of what shall I be accused?

Shall I be accused of being populist? I remind those Members who say that I am a reject that this “reject” topped the poll in his constituency in the Assembly election. Members of the Gentleman’s own party stood in that election, so he should be very careful about the stones he is casting.

I appreciate that the Executive have a very difficult job to balance the books. I appreciate that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has limited resources. I repeat: money was available in the system to provide the services without an 8% increase in the regional rate. Eight million pounds or £9 million would reduce the increase to 4% and approximately £11 million would reduce it to 3%.

That is less than a fifth of 1% of the whole block. Therefore it comes down to priorities. I stress the importance of “bottom-up” economics. By removing people from the poverty trap we give them a sense of pride in society, and economic benefits will accrue. Large rent and rates increases are completely against that principle. They increase poverty; they drive more people into dependence on the state, and that results in an ever-increasing benefit culture.

Mr Cobain touched upon that on 14 November when he referred to the cynics who say that 80% of Housing Executive tenants would not have to pay the increase in rents because they receive housing benefit, which is not paid out of the Northern Ireland block.

Even a poor mathematician like myself recognises that all money comes from one cake — UK taxation — and the more that is spent on social benefits through the social security arm of UK taxation, the less will be available even for the Northern Ireland block grant. The same applies to the commercial sector. The more small retailers must pay in rent and rates, the less opportunity they have to grow. The regional rate, which is spread across Northern Ireland, constitutes approximately 66% of the entire rates bill.

The retail sector, particularly its service side, must grow. The Assembly should do its utmost to promote that growth rather than impede it. Large rates bills equal less employment. We must use any opportunity we have to increase employment in the service sector to catch up. I am thinking in particular of tourism. We must attract people to Northern Ireland; that will return the money by more than tenfold to the Exchequer or, I should say, to the Northern Ireland Executive.

I recently studied the family expenditure survey figures for Northern Ireland. They show that the average weekly income here is £102 a week less than in the rest of the United Kingdom. In fact, we have the lowest average weekly income of all regions in the United Kingdom. I may be a poor mathematician, but most people will agree with me that the lower one’s average income, the less one has to spend.

People in Northern Ireland must spend 25% more on electricity, 20% more on clothing and footwear and 8% more on food than the average person in the rest of the United Kingdom. The people of Northern Ireland therefore spend a disproportionate amount of their disposable income on the bare necessities.

In spite of that, the Northern Ireland Executive are proposing to add to that burden by increasing the regional rate by 8%. The Budget proposes that Housing Executive rents be raised by more than 2% above the rate of inflation, reducing our people’s disposable income. We spend about £12 a week less on leisure services than the rest of the United Kingdom.

12.45 pm

If we are to get Northern Ireland’s economy right we cannot ignore those lessons, and it saddens me that so far the Executive have ignored them. The Minister compared our proposed increases with England’s. That misses the big picture, and we cannot afford to do that if we are to make the necessary changes to the Barnett formula, for example. These arguments must be presented to the House and to the Treasury. Need and relative incomes are fundamentals that cannot be ignored in any society.

The reallocations in the October monitoring round could have been used to mitigate the proposed increases in the rents and rates. The Minister assured us then that the 8% rise was needed to provide the services outlined in the November Budget. He also assured us that any reductions would inevitably lead to a reduction in services. However, at that time approximately £75 million was available for reallocation. Some people called it “easement”. There was not one penny of easement for rent and ratepayers, despite pleas. It was a kick in the teeth for them.

The DUP pointed out that the 8% rise in the draft Budget was to be applicable for one year. This Budget tells us that it will roll on for another two years. That is a double kick in the teeth for rent and ratepayers. It is a clear demonstration that everyone’s pleas were ignored. They were not merely ignored, their noses were rubbed in it. I resent that. More could have been done.

Of the £75 million in the reallocation £20 million came from the sale of Housing Executive houses through receipts, and more could have been done for these people. Those receipts were not anticipated. They could have been used to reduce Housing Executive rents. Four million pounds in the reallocation came from the regional rate through the final allocation of end-year flexibility for 1999-2000. That should have been used to keep the regional rate at an acceptable level. However, that was not one of the Executive’s priorities. The Executive regarded the 8% as a sacred cow. They would not bleed that sacred cow; but they were prepared to bleed the poor. That is very wrong. It is unfair and it is a kick in

the teeth for all of us, including local authorities, who urged that the regional rate be kept at acceptable levels.

My party did not move an amendment, nor have I any intention of doing so. This is a matter of principle. I will not play party political games with a Budget. I said that my party would vote against the Budget, and we will do that if the necessary changes are not made. It is not too late to do it, even at this eleventh hour. I appeal to the Executive and to the other parties to row in behind us and insist that this Budget be changed to accommodate a less than 8% increase in the regional rate. It can be done. It is the Executive's duty to do this. We shall keep our promise and reject this Budget if those changes are not made.

Our reason for not moving an amendment is vitally important. This Budget is a key decision. With regard to key decisions, the Alliance Party is discriminated against because it does not describe itself tribally. In effect, our votes do not count, for we are described as neither Unionist nor Nationalist in the roll of honour. That is a travesty of justice, of the agreement and of the law. Even if we moved an amendment, it would not count. In that respect our votes are less than worthless. We will not be part of such a charade. I appeal to the better judgement of the Executive to change.

I want society to change. I want to cross bridges and divides rather than stick labels on people. However, if labels mean more, there is nothing I can do. You can vote against us and reject us and tell us that we do not count. You can put us, in many respects —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will address the Chair.

Mr Close: I am sorry.

We can be put in the same category as the rent and ratepayers, who can be trodden on.

Mr Roche: We discuss the Budget proposals against a backdrop of crises in nearly all Departments, particularly in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. At the same time, the Budget proposals allocate about £6 billion combined with an 8% increase in the regional rate.

The case against the 8% increase has been made very substantively by the mover of the first amendment. It will fall heavily on the poor and will damage business, which is already suffering from the differential in fuel and electricity costs. At the same time it is being used to finance a combination of bureaucratic waste and a politically driven all-Ireland agenda. I say "politically driven" because the detail of this agenda has never been subject to any substantive economic evaluation. We do not know what return we shall get but we can be pretty sure that any possible returns that may accrue to this all-Ireland agenda will not offset the harmful effects of

an entirely unwarranted — indeed, outrageous — increase in the regional rate this year and in future.

Several Departments face acute crises. This is combined with a very large distribution of money and an increase in the regional rate. However, one of the most striking features of this whole so-called Programme for Government is that there is no substantive immediate or medium-term policy justification upon which either the overall allocation of the money or its detailed use in the Departments could be argued. In other words, there is no innovative thinking in the Budget proposals.

There is nothing remotely resembling a grounding in policy. That would require detailed analysis of the crises facing each Department and an evaluation of the various options available to deal with them. Such considerations are entirely absent from this so-called Programme for Government. In other words, it is not a Programme for Government in any sense at all. Spending £6 billion and imposing an outrageous 8% increase in the regional rate with no substantive policy statement is merely throwing money at the problem.

There are two possible outcomes. Throwing money at a problem is unlikely to produce any result. It would be a waste of taxpayers' hard-earned money.

A good example is the recent proposals of the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment. I have read these proposals very carefully, and the only way to make sense of them is to say that the Minister was caught between two constraints. He was caught between the commitments in his party's manifesto and the Government's being unable ever to finance student fees comprehensively again. This ragbag of proposals makes no sense. That does not surprise me, for I heard the same Minister on a recent 'Seven Days' programme not only professing his ignorance of elementary English literature but trying to turn his ignorance into an intellectual virtue. What else can one expect when such a man is in charge of a Department?

Why have the Executive not produced coherent policies to enable Members to evaluate the proposals reasonably and sensibly? It is because the Executive lacks any mechanisms for collective decision making. There is no collective responsibility in the Executive, and it is not surprising that their statements lack policy coherence.

The second amendment reflects the absence of any real policy coherence in the Executive. The second amendment opposes a decision reached by the Executive; yet it is being moved by a party that has two Members in the Executive, who, presumably, agreed it. That shows that decision making in the Executive is in chaos.

It gives me no pleasure to say this, but, unfortunately, precisely the same is true of the first amendment, although I agree entirely with its substance. The first amendment opposes an 8% rate increase, but it was moved by a

former Minister who made two Pledges of Office — first, to participate with Colleagues in preparing a Programme for Government; secondly, to support all decisions of the Executive and the Assembly. A Member is moving an amendment — and I agree with all his arguments — who agreed to give a blank cheque of approval to all the Executive's decisions. He simply cannot mount any credible opposition to this process in general and to the decisions of the Executive in particular from such a position.

We are throwing £6 billion at our problems and imposing punitive economic measures, yet there is no collective responsibility and no coherent policies.

We are in this mess because people were appointed to the Executive regardless of their expertise.

1.00 pm

For example, the Minister of Agriculture inherited a crisis in agriculture, many of the causes of which are beyond the Assembly's control. That must be said. However, despite being presented with the opportunity to have the BSE ban lifted, she failed to seize it. Now, unfortunately, the BSE crisis in Europe is such that the ban is unlikely ever to be lifted.

The Minister has displayed marked incompetence in handling a portfolio. That also explains the incoherence of today's document.

Every time the Minister of Health defends her policy in the media, she substitutes the word "clearly" for coherent argument. The word "clearly" — even if screeched at the top of one's voice — is not a substitute for a coherent argument. That this individual repeatedly deploys this word, and various other rhetorical devices as substitutes for arguments, clearly demonstrates her inability to handle the portfolio that the d'Hondt system threw at her.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member return to the Budget shortly?

Mr Roche: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I shall return to the Budget, and I admit that I was, perhaps with some justification, digressing slightly. The main issue is that several areas in Northern Ireland are in acute crisis. We have £6 billion to spend and we are deploying it blindly. Money is being thrown at problems; yet there is no coherent policy. Therefore we can expect little from this Budget — despite all the rhetoric that has been heaped upon it — to alleviate our real problems.

The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee (Mr B Bell): I support the Budget as, I hope, will the House. I speak as one who has neither desire nor design to be a candidate in the next Westminster election. Therefore I shall make no political points today, as it seems to me that there has been some electioneering going on.

I broadly support the Budget although I am concerned about the time allowed for consultation. I made those

concerns known at the Finance and Personnel Committee. I am wearing a couple of hats today: I am the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, which oversees Government spending and which attempts to ensure that waste is eliminated. I am also a local councillor and a member of the Northern Ireland Housing Council. I was formerly on the board of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. I therefore have a particular interest in housing.

The Budget sets out to modernise our fiscal accountability. Linking spending allocations to clear targets for delivery will lead to greater efficiency and to better value for money.

I welcome the introduction of public service agreements; these will open up to detailed scrutiny each Department's objectives and the means by which they will be achieved. Furthermore, I welcome the use of the principles of resource accounting in assessing public spending and the services delivered or results attained thereby. I hope that the work of the Public Accounts Committee will be made easier by those innovations. I am confident that local democratic control and scrutiny will lead to greater accountability in the management of our resources.

Housing is a particular interest of mine, and, frankly, I am disappointed that it has been given such low status in the Budget. In his statement of 12 December the Minister promised an additional £2 million for housing to deal with the difficulties of north Belfast. As I represented that area on Belfast City Council I welcome that. However, that allocation deals with a one-off situation and does not affect the overall housing plan for Northern Ireland.

Housing needs are changing. There are more one-parent families, single occupancy is growing and there has been a fall in household sizes. There has also been substantial growth in the number of privately owned homes, which has been partly caused by the sale of Housing Executive properties. I have supported such sales — and I shall continue to support them — but there is still a need for social housing. Lack of funding for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive could lead to important schemes to replace windows or kitchens being put on the back burner. I was heartened by the Minister's assurance to Mr Leslie on 12 December that the Executive would pay due regard to the needs of all Departments in future monitoring rounds. I hope that housing will not be given a back seat in future rounds.

The demand for social housing is not being met. Government financial policies have led to annual cuts in funding for the Housing Executive. Although the housing associations do excellent work, it is necessary that the Housing Executive continues to provide housing as well as performing its strategic role. The Housing Executive should become a housing corporation, or a housing association with the powers of a housing corporation, so that it would have access to private and public funding. In his reply to my question the Minister said

“private finance initiatives and public and private partnerships is one important consideration that we have in mind.” —[Hansard, 12 December 2000, p49]

That should be borne in mind, and the Housing Executive should be given access to private funding.

The annual shortfall in housing starts will be about 400. That figure is taken from ‘Review and Perspectives 2001-2004’, which concluded that there was a need for an annual social build programme of 2,100 dwellings. That is still 400 homes short of what is needed. Providing decent accommodation for all should be one of the Executive’s priorities, so that the good work of the Housing Executive over the past 30 years can be continued.

The Department of the Environment’s Planning Service is to receive a further £800,000 to accelerate the production of development plans, including the Belfast metropolitan plan. I welcome that move. As a councillor in Lisburn, I have watched the progress of the Lisburn area plan; its slowness has caused great frustration to countless people, including me. I am not sure that it is only a funding issue; the whole system must be overhauled. Anything that can speed up the provision of housing in Northern Ireland should be welcomed.

This is the first Northern Ireland Budget for many years that will receive full scrutiny, although I hope that we shall have more time for scrutiny in future. I welcome the Executive’s plans and look forward to many more Budgets that will lead to greater prosperity and a better life for all our people.

Ms McWilliams: The Minister must wonder what people will be for in his Budget, having listened all morning to what they are against. It is much easier to dwell on problems than to find solutions. I welcome the Budget and its focus on solutions although I have concerns about it.

The Minister has consulted from the outset, and that is important. Unfortunately, we do not know how productive the consultations were or what revisions were made between October and December as a result. The process has shown the way forward by giving Members an opportunity to make a contribution. It is also useful that the public — those who knew about the consultations — made its contribution. That the Civic Forum may in future have a say on how we spend our money is also to be welcomed.

Like other Members, I am concerned about the time scale. I am a member of two Committees, both of which had great difficulty in scrutinising the Budget properly. We need more audit trails, although the Minister cannot solely be blamed for a lack of them. In their absence, this devolved Assembly will be no different from what preceded it under the Northern Ireland Office. We must know where the money is going, how much is being spent and what is being purchased.

We do not have an audit trail for each Department. That is certainly true of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. To date, it has been difficult to get answers about what happens to money when it goes to boards and trusts. We must know which boards and trusts are spending money efficiently and effectively; whether they are robbing Peter to pay Paul and whether they are taking from one part of the health budget to cover a deficit in another.

I welcome such scrutiny, even though it has created difficulties. Nonetheless, it is important that Committees be given sufficient time to respond to the Budget in future. The Assembly requires a strategy for an audit trail, and that, as well as a call for a review of the Barnett formula, should be spelt out in future Budgets.

1.15 pm

Expenditure can only be discussed in relation to income — how much money comes in and how much goes out. It has been difficult to follow the debates between October and December on the extra incoming funds and on how much will be spent in different quarters. The Executive programme funds have increased considerably. I would like to have seen a breakdown of where the increase came from. I have tried to follow that in the Budget to establish who got what money and from where. However, that has been a difficult road to follow.

Are the four parties in Government in favour of private finance initiatives (PFIs)? Is that how the Executive will seek finance in future? There is only one reference in the Budget to PFIs. On page 40, the paragraph entitled ‘Infrastructure Renewal’ states

“where appropriate related to the use of PFI/PP.”

That is one tiny sub-clause on what has become an income generation mechanism for the public sector. I have enormous concerns about that. If it is not clearly spelt out, either in the Programme for Government or in the Budget, we shall be left to the devices of private developers.

There is at present a major contradiction. This is not joined-up government. The Department of Education sold a substantial piece of land in south Belfast to a private developer. It is currently the subject of a planning appeal, and the Department of the Environment has said that the Department of Education did not fulfil its function of carrying out a community impact study before selling the land. One section of the Department of Education was not talking to the other and decided that that land was surplus to its needs.

When did public land and open space that was a community facility become surplus to needs without the community’s being consulted? It has put a great deal of money into the hands of private developers and not into the hands of the public sector. That means short-term gain for long-term pain. Major areas of infrastructure

are being mortgaged, and they will always have first call on the Budget because they will require money for maintenance or leasing before those parts of the education sector that have not adopted PFIs.

I want to hear a cohesive, co-ordinated response on the future decision on the finance of the public sector. Will a slice of it come from PFI, and what percentage will that be? If that is not the case — and there are still doubts — let us see what is. However, five words in the Budget on PFIs is not sufficient — especially when England and the devolved regions, Scotland and Wales, are raising concerns about them.

It is difficult to have an accountability mechanism addressed in the large funds of the Executive programme. The Budget states that the Assembly will be told in January who has had a call on them. However, as this is a Budget debate, I should like to know now where those funds are destined.

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment announced his own proposals. However, he told the Assembly that he will not know how many of those proposals will be implemented until the findings of the new direction fund have been agreed by his Executive Colleagues. The Minister has made public his proposals, yet we shall not know until January whether the Minister has been successful in bidding for some of them. We should debate whether the proposals would see the light of day.

I welcome the £6 million for the community regeneration fund this year — an increase of £3 million. The Minister knows of my concern about what is happening in the community sector. Peace I has run out, and it will be some time before Peace II is available. Can some of this “community regeneration” money be used to help the groups that must lay off workers?

I am glad that the children’s fund will be substantial. However, there is no commitment to the appointment of a children’s commissioner, which was part of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee’s recommendations on secure and residential accommodation. I welcome the thematic approach of the Programme for Government. The Committee felt that appointing a children’s commissioner, as other devolved regions have done, was an important part of joined-up government. It does not cost a great deal of money.

Unfortunately, a response from the Minister for Social Development informed us that we do not know how many children in Northern Ireland live in poverty. The Republic of Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England know, but not Northern Ireland. They will simply take a proportion of low-income groups and of those on benefits from the family expenditure survey. As that does not give us a figure, how can we have social integration or an anti-poverty strategy? It is not called that, but the thematic approach of the Programme for Government is

probably focusing on an anti-poverty strategy, and I look forward to its liaising with the Civic Forum.

It will be difficult to set aside the resources if we do not have the information in the first place — information is powerful. If we know how many people are living in poverty we shall know how much money is needed. It is not the Minister’s responsibility to produce such information, but he will find it hard to develop an anti-poverty strategy without the necessary information.

I note that the capital budget is decreasing rather than increasing in some Departments, particularly in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It is shocking that the budget for hospitals and the building of hospitals will decrease over the next three years. It is not possible to have the determination of the acute hospitals review now, but we should be sufficiently flexible to know that we need these hospitals and that we need some new build.

I am particularly concerned about the judicial review on the Royal Victoria Hospital and Belfast City Hospital last week. We were promised a purpose-built women’s hospital for maternity services in the City Hospital. I visited the Royal Victoria Hospital last week and was shocked to see 17 women in a very small ward. I gave birth in that ward 15 years ago. There are now beds up the middle of the ward, and there is one bathroom for 17 women. We would probably see something similar if we visited other hospitals for new mothers. Maternity hospitals are closing down. Mr McGrady said that Downpatrick Maternity Hospital is also facing a crisis. What will happen if it closes? Are we sending more mothers to the Belfast hinterland?

We know that hospitals are closing. Belfast City Hospital accommodated 3,000 patients and there are now 6,000 patients on one site. We urgently need a new purpose-built hospital. There are no plans for one, and I cannot see where the money will come from. We have done a disservice and told people an untruth. They were promised a new hospital, but it is not in the Budget. I shall judge deeds not words. If the money has not been set aside, the hospital will not be built. That is a poor message after the court’s decision that the manner of the hospitals’ closure led to many questions being asked.

Ministers may bid for large sums of money. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety bid for £21 million for mental health and learning disability. She got £3 million — £1.5 million for mental health and £1.5 million for learning disability.

Our new Government and our new Assembly are sending out the message that the mental health needs of the entire country are worth £1.5 million over the next year. That falls far short of £21 million. We are not getting the medium-secure units so we continue to violate human rights legislation by sending those with mental illness to Scotland. They should be diverted from the criminal

justice system. These are people with serious psychiatric needs, yet no medium-secure hospital will be built in Northern Ireland. Of course, we could sell the land at Knockbracken, which is owned by the Knockbracken Trust, and go down the private-finance road once again. We have already lost some of our public space and some beautiful land, which is now a rare commodity in Belfast. Again, the Budget does not provide for what is needed.

Mental health carers are enormously concerned that they must continue to pick up the pieces. CAUSE, a major carers' group, recently sent a petition, which had been signed by all its members, desperately pleading for the money to empower them and those for whom they care and to free them from the stigma attached to mental illness. They are weary of living in isolation and urge that they be allowed a share of the support that is so openly given to other groups. They plead from their heart, as they cannot walk away from the responsibilities with which they must live every day. If those suffering from mental illness are to be moved out of long-stay hospitals, carers will increasingly have to look after them.

There was a debate in the Assembly last week on the protection of children. I am putting down a marker: we are not meeting our statutory responsibility, and the Assembly — and its Members — will be taken to court, as the Department was last week. Judicial review after judicial review will be carried out as we send our children to places that are inappropriate for their needs. There is a shortage of 115 places in residential care, and that is creating a crisis. Children are absconding from residential care. They come in the front door and go out the back. Over 69 of them were missing for over 24 hours in one board area alone. One child was missing for 69 days.

This cannot go on. After all, The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 is supposed to be progressive legislation. I have no doubt that in future the Minister may spend more time in court than in her Department if we do not set the necessary Budget resources aside for these places. If we do not meet our statutory responsibility we leave it to the courts and not to our Ministers to decide their governmental responsibilities.

I find myself, for a change, agreeing with the former Minister for Regional Development. I too believe that road developments should be based on criteria. When shall we see the draft regional development strategy? I hope that it comes before the Assembly by summer. We are, after all, spending £40 million on the M2 Westlink and the Dunmurry slip roads. Is this money being spent well? Why did we have a hugely expensive planning inquiry when there was supposed to be a draft strategy?

I would have assumed that the Government made decisions by deciding on a strategy, by making plans and putting them into action and budgeting accordingly. Instead, they are setting aside a large slice of the Budget to build a questionable infrastructure. Otherwise why

hold a major planning inquiry before they have produced their development strategy?

1.30 pm

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has one line in its Budget statement to cover all its responsibilities. If I ask my students to analyse a question I must give them information. We cannot analyse this Budget line. The word “victims” is not mentioned in the responsibilities. That is a very poor message on a day when we should be commending the Minister for completing what was no doubt an arduous task and for producing the Budget so quickly. This should be the last Budget to contain one line from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

I support this Budget and I shall not be supporting either amendment. The regional rate concerns me. However, I believe that the Budget aims at promoting energy efficiency, improving housing conditions and helping small businesses. We must make a balanced judgement, and that judgement has come down in favour of the way forward with regard to all those matters.

Debate suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.31 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

Oral Answers To Questions

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Members will find that several questions to the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of the Environment have been transferred to other Departments. This may, of course, be expected to happen from time to time, but it happens so regularly that I have made enquiries at the Business Office.

I understand that there are at least two reasons for this. First, many Members table questions very close to the deadline when it is not possible for matters to be checked. What is perhaps even more troublesome is that some Members do not accept the Business Office's advice on who the question should be asked of. These Members insist that the Business Office table their question only to find that the Department shares the view of the Business Office and not that of the Member. I advise Members that it is in their own interests to accept the Business Office's advice, which is given in good faith. It may not be perfect advice, and it may not always be correct, but it is correct at least as often as Members are.

Mr Fee: On point of order, Mr Speaker. I had a question on the Order Paper today but I have just been advised that it has been transferred to another Department. If a question is the responsibility of several Departments, how does one find out what each Department does about its responsibilities?

Mr Speaker: The Departments determine which of them will take the lead. I cannot speak to this particular question — that is for another Minister — but I suggest that you take the advice of the Business Office, for it is more often correct than not. I shall not get involved in the specifics of this question, if you do not mind, Mr Fee.

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Review of Public Administration

1. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to ensure the independence of the proposed review of public administration referred to in the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 501/00)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Mallon): The Executive recently discussed how best to take this important review forward. The review will have to examine all elements of public administration since the establishment

of the Assembly and the Executive, and we must ensure that it is carried forward effectively. Officials have been asked to prepare for further discussions in the new year, after which we hope to decide how to proceed.

I can, however, report that the Executive do believe that an independent element would be appropriate, and officials have been asked to bring forward a range of options for the conduct of the review that reflects this. This is necessary to ensure public confidence. In addition, widespread consultation will be needed to enable everyone to contribute to the review. The Executive will consider these matters carefully to ensure that the review is inclusive, objective and has credibility.

Mr O'Neill: Does the Deputy First Minister agree that it is a good thing that the review's emphasis should be on public administration and that it should not be a review of local government only, as is sometimes mooted? Does he also agree that this is important, as local councils account for only 2.8% of expenditure, while bodies, boards and quangos are responsible for 56% of public expenditure? Is the Minister aware of the Irish Civil Service's strategy, prepared in 1996 and entitled 'Delivering Better Government', and will he consider this and reviews in other member states when preparing the terms of reference for a new review in public administration?

The Deputy First Minister: The Assemblyman is right to put this matter in perspective. Much of the thought and many of the utterances on this issue have centred inexplicably on the question of local government. It is clear from the expenditure that it is, although crucial, only a part of it. The general administration is crucially important.

We must learn the lessons gained elsewhere and we must incorporate international best practice where possible. We must recognise the value of engaging independent external experts where necessary who can bring a different dimension to the case. There is a widespread change in attitudes to the quality and efficiency of public administration across the European Union. The Republic of Ireland is delivering better government. Another example can be seen in the UK's modernising government initiative, which has been far-reaching. At present, the European Commission is undergoing a major programme of reform, which may yield valuable lessons as well.

Examining these initiatives, and others, in EU countries will be an important task for the review team. Such research can help us in many ways, although it may not all be pertinent to our situation.

Mr B Bell: I am glad that the Deputy First Minister agrees that local government is an important part of any review. Having established the need for a review of public administration, does he accept that unnecessary delay in completing it will lead to uncertainty and will undermine the goal of improved accountable democracy? Can he

assure the House that the review will be carried out as urgently and as efficiently as possible?

The Deputy First Minister: I have spent 16 years in local government and regard it as a very important part of our administration. Once the Executive have agreed the way forward, it will be in the best interests of everyone to undertake the review as quickly and as efficiently as possible. It will be a very complex task, perhaps one of the most complex tasks that the Assembly will undertake in this session. It is essential that we proceed quickly to end all political uncertainty and to end uncertainty in councils and among the staff of the sections of administration that are to be reviewed.

It is essential that the review be carried out efficiently, systematically and thoroughly. The key principles of how we want to administer government must be fully explored. Proposals for change must be considered carefully, and all relevant people must be consulted. We cannot afford to cut any corners and we shall not have any undue delay.

Mr P Robinson: May I ask the Deputy First Minister about the timetable. Once the remit has been prepared, the review could take up to 18 months to be completed. After that, there will be a period of consideration by the Executive, followed by legislation. The review is likely to change the number of district councils, so there may have to be a boundary revision. It may take up to two years after its public phase.

If that is the case, it may take three or four years for real change to take place in local government. Is there an advantage in postponing local government elections?

The Deputy First Minister: I awaited the ultimate sentence with great anticipation. I thank the Member for confirming my statement that we must be absolutely thorough in this matter. To put it colloquially, we shall get only one bite at this cherry. We cannot afford to get it wrong. Therefore the Assemblyman is quite right. It must be thorough, and its research and thinking must stand us in good stead — not just for the next five years but for the next 25, 30, and 40 years. I regard it as a matter of the utmost seriousness, as do the Executive, and I shall not fall for any red herrings at the end of a highly pregnant and relevant question.

Decommissioning

2. **Mr Dodds** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to give details of any further reports on the decommissioning of illegal terrorist weaponry received from the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. (AQO 492/00)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): The most recent report of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning to the British and Irish Governments was dated 26 October 2000. The commission reported

that the international inspectors had carried out a second inspection of some IRA arms dumps and confirmed that the dumps had not been tampered with and remained secure. The commission also gave a detailed report on its work from February to October 2000.

Mr Dodds: Once again the First Minister must report no progress on the handover of illegal terrorist weaponry. The House and the people of Northern Ireland were told that the deadline was the 22 May. The First Minister has told us that there would be no government unless such illegal weaponry was decommissioned. His phrase was “no guns, no government”. He told us that government would not continue unless guns were handed in.

Does the First Minister not accept that the recent murders on all sides, and particularly the atrocious murder today in north Belfast, emphasise the need to decommission all illegal terrorist weaponry? Is the First Minister not in the least embarrassed at lecturing people in Palermo on combating organised crime when he signed an agreement that let all the criminal organisers in Northern Ireland out of prison? Is he not embarrassed at signing an agreement that let them keep their weaponry, which is destroying the legal police force designed to combat them and which keeps their political representatives in Government?

The First Minister: We have heard another typical DUP rant. That is all it is. I sometimes wonder, listening to Members in that corner, what they would do if there were further progress. They do not recognise that, although not enough progress has been made, some progress has been made. Furthermore, they do not recognise that the only progress that has been made has been as a result of pressure that we have exerted. The truth is that the DUP does nothing at all on decommissioning, and further progress would only disappoint it.

Mr McFarland: Does the First Minister share my frustration that seven months after the restoration of devolution the Republican movement and Loyalist paramilitaries have yet to decommission? Does he agree that sustaining the Belfast Agreement depends entirely on terrorists carrying out their promises?

The First Minister: I agree entirely. The devolved institutions were restored following a promise by the Republican movement that it would initiate the process of putting its weapons beyond use; and that it would do so verifiably and credibly. That is the basis on which we have proceeded. We wait to see when that promise will be fulfilled.

Human Rights Abuses (Paramilitary Organisations)

3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline its awareness of the criticisms of the Government that have been made

by Professor Colin Knox of the University of Ulster in his report, and what actions are proposed to highlight and to tackle the abuse of individuals' human rights through paramilitary attacks. (AQO 525/00)

The Deputy First Minister: The detailed and extensively researched report produced by Professor Knox and his colleagues is being studied with great interest. It shows clearly that the scourge of so-called punishment attacks is all too prevalent, at a terrible cost to individuals, families and communities. It highlights the need for an accountable police service and an accountable criminal justice service that enjoy the support and confidence of everyone that they serve. Although criminal justice and policing are reserved matters, this Administration will do all that it can to tackle the underlying social problems that can contribute to crime and to ensure that the needs of victims of violence are met with high-quality, effective services. Many organisations are trying to deal with these issues, and the Executive's commitment to victims is outlined in the draft Programme for Government. Criticisms of devolved areas of responsibility in Professor Knox's report will be examined, and I shall ensure that the report is brought to the attention of the Minister whose Department is directly involved.

2.45 pm

Mr Beggs: The first sentence of paragraph four of the report states

"There is a reliance on Sinn Féin, the Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Democratic Party to do something about 'punishment' beatings and shootings."

Does the Deputy First Minister agree with that statement? Are you satisfied with the actions of those parties to date? Furthermore, the Department for Social Development and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety incur costs as a result of punishment beatings and shootings. Do you agree that if the Executive were to collate and publish the levels of such human rights abuses in conjunction with the RUC, increased community pressure would force paramilitary organisations to end such activity?

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member and other Members to address their questions through the Speaker.

The Deputy First Minister: Those who carry out such attacks should get no sympathy or understanding from me or from anyone else in this Chamber. I say that without equivocation. However, all must play their part in bringing pressure to bear on organisations that perpetrate these so-called punishment attacks. This is a political matter rather than an accountancy one. Lives are ruined and society is damaged by these attacks; more is involved than the financial implications for individual Government Departments. I wish it were as easy as tabulating the cost. This matter is not quantifiable. Neither should we believe that we can quantify human suffering in financial reports.

Mr Attwood: I concur with the Deputy First Minister when he says that there can be no sympathy or understanding for those who carry out the sort of attacks that happened to the people of north and west Belfast at the weekend.

When the Knox report has been reviewed, will the Executive bear in mind their recommendation for a co-ordinated strategy between Departments to tackle the causes of crime?

The Deputy First Minister: The question is pertinent, as the Executive and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have already established an interdepartmental working group on victims under the chairmanship of the junior Ministers, Mr Haughey and Mr Nesbitt. The group aims at developing a strategic approach to the issues that victims face, and it is one of the action points in the draft Programme for Government, which states that it is planned to have a cross-departmental strategy in place by April 2001.

In addition, a programme of capacity building for policy makers will begin with a major conference at the end of January 2001. That will be followed by a series of four one-day seminars with the aim of increasing the knowledge and awareness of senior policy makers on victims' issues.

Mr Boyd: In view of the recent paramilitary attacks, including today's murder, do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree with the findings of Professor Knox's report that the Government are turning a blind eye?

The Deputy First Minister: The Government are not turning a blind eye. It is not fair to heap blame on anyone, least of all on those who are not here to answer. I take it upon myself to state that I do not agree with that assessment. This is not a problem that can be solved by Governments; it is a problem that can be solved by people operating as a single community, collectively deciding that this barbarity has no place in their lives. It is then that it will finally be defeated.

Visit of President Clinton

4. **Mr Byrne** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the visit of President Clinton. (AQO 497/00)

The First Minister: The Executive were delighted to welcome the President of the United States on his recent visit to Northern Ireland. During his visit the President met Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly and held discussions with representatives of political parties. The Deputy First Minister and I welcomed the President's personal interest in and commitment to Northern Ireland. We fully recognise the role undertaken by the President and his Administration in contributing to the efforts to secure a durable peace settlement here.

Mr Byrne: Does the First Minister accept that a visit to Northern Ireland by the President of the United States is always welcome, particularly since we are always grateful for American investment? Does the First Minister also accept that the less than enthusiastic welcome for the President by Belfast City Council, through the pronouncements of the Lord Mayor, may benefit Omagh or Strabane, or indeed Lurgan, Newry or Armagh? In these places there would always be a warm welcome for any president, Republican or Democrat.

The First Minister: I am happy to tell the Member that I too am pleased not to be responsible for the statements made by the mayor of Belfast. I shall not say anything further. Economic matters cover trade and investment. Trade is as important to businesses as inward investment, welcome though that is. There is very substantial US investment in Northern Ireland; very substantial trade is being undertaken. We welcome that, as it is very much to Northern Ireland's advantage. I am sorry that there are those in the opposite corner who are curmudgeonly on this issue.

Mr S Wilson: Does the First Minister extend his welcome to the President of the United States in light of his hugging Gerry Adams and his bending immigration laws to allow RUC killers to stay in his country? Will the First Minister tell us how enthralled he was with the President's speech when he had to walk out halfway through?

The First Minister: On the last point the Member is quite wrong. As he knows, I had a plane to catch, which, unfortunately —

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The Prime Minister offered the First Minister a seat on his plane.

The First Minister: Mr Speaker, I know that it is not normal practice to pay attention to sedentary remarks, but the person who made that remark is misleading the House. The offer that he refers to would not have enabled me to make my connection.

I welcome the support that the President has given to the agreement and to the implementation of all of the agreement. I welcome his making it clear that the whole agreement, including its provisions on decommissioning, must be implemented.

Rev Robert Coulter: Does the First Minister agree that the most telling of all the President's comments were those delivered during his first visit here in 1995 when he told the terrorists that their day was over? Does the First Minister regret, as I do, that five years later the same President must call on terrorists to accept that reality?

The First Minister: It is of course a matter of considerable disappointment to us that the process has moved so slowly, particularly on those issues. This process is nothing if it is not designed to produce peace and democracy.

There is a responsibility on various people, some of whom are in the Chamber, to deliver the peace and democracy that we are striving to achieve. We shall continue to make every effort to reach those goals and we shall not, unlike others, merely pour scorn on a noble undertaking.

Ethnic Minority Voluntary Groups

5. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what proposals are in place for targeted support for ethnic minority voluntary groups.
(AQO 493/00)

The Deputy First Minister: As part of the commitment in the Programme for Government to develop a race equality strategy for the Administration, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is committed to ensuring targeted support for ethnic minority voluntary organisations. In view of its important work in supporting people from ethnic minority backgrounds, the draft Budget statement includes £300,000 for funding for ethnic minority voluntary organisations in 2001-02. This is to include £250,000 for the core funding for organisations operating throughout Northern Ireland, and it will provide salaries and associated costs. The remaining £50,000 will be used for innovative, time-limited projects in line with our stated priorities. As with core funding, it will be provided as part of the new cross-departmental policy on race equality, which was announced in the draft Programme for Government.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the Deputy First Minister's comments, including the commitment in the Programme for Government to protect ethnic minorities. Will he expand on funding and where it will be distributed?

The Deputy First Minister: The Programme for Government referred to the development of a race equality policy in a three-year strategic framework and to a linguistic diversity policy to include ethnic minority languages along with Irish, Ulster-Scots, and British and Irish sign languages.

We should ponder this point because, too often, we apply the term ethnicity to our problems when we should be examining the respect that we have for people across the entire community, regardless of their race, the colour of their skin, their language or their beliefs. We must attend to, as has been done in the Programme for Government, the needs of travellers, their children and the children of other ethnic minorities. The creation of a social inclusion community regeneration fund will cover initiatives to build community relations and cultural diversity. The Single Equality Bill, which is to be introduced in 2002, will bring together all the existing anti-discrimination laws and will take account of recent developments on racial discrimination in Europe.

Dr Birnie: I appreciate that it is primarily the duty of the Royal Ulster Constabulary to protect ethnic minorities,

such as the large Chinese and Indian communities in my constituency of South Belfast, from race crime. Will the Deputy First Minister outline the actions that the Executive Committee are taking in their sphere of competence to rid society of this odious form of sectarian hatred?

The Deputy First Minister: I shall not reiterate the elements included in the Programme for Government. Every attack on ethnic minorities here has revolted the entire community — there is no place in this society or in the society that we want to create for that type of racial hatred. Everybody in this community — police, laymen who are not involved in security, politicians and all leaders — should make it clear to those attackers that there is no place for them here. That is not the type of society that we want to create. It is therefore our duty in what we say and do to oppose intolerance. Intolerance leads to racism; we have all witnessed that, especially in the Assemblyman's constituency.

3.00 pm

Travellers

6. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the progress of the promoting social inclusion working group on Travellers. (AQO 499/00)

The First Minister: The promoting social inclusion (PSI) working group has provided a report containing detailed recommendations on Travellers' accommodation, health, education and training. The Executive have agreed that the report should be published. It is now being printed. It will be issued on 22 December and made available through libraries and on the Internet. There will be four months' consultation, ending on 30 April 2001. Ministers will consider all the recommendations of the working group carefully, together with the views expressed in the consultation process before making their proposals.

Mr McMenamin: Why has there been such a delay in publishing the PSI working group's report on Travellers?

The First Minister: The Department for Social Development sent the report to our office in September and asked us to publish it for consultation. The report's recommendations referred to various Departments, agencies and public bodies. After internal consideration on consultation, we sought Executive agreement. Through its report, the working group has voiced its suggestions for measures to improve the lives of travellers, and we have not changed the contents of the report in any way.

Fire Service

7. **Mr Hussey** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail what liaison has

taken place or has been planned with representatives of Northern Ireland's Fire Service since 27 November 2000.

(AQO 491/00)

The Deputy First Minister: As this is probably my last question for this year, for my part and on behalf of the First Minister I wish all Assembly personnel a very happy and peaceful Christmas.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's statement in the Assembly on 27 November informed us that the Executive Committee have decided that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister should investigate whether the state award for firefighters would be achievable or appropriate. Arrangements are being made for officials from our Departments to meet representatives of the Fire Service, the Fire Brigades Union and the Fire Services (Past Members) Northern Ireland Association to discuss this matter.

Mr Speaker: Following the Deputy First Minister's festive remarks there is no opportunity for a supplementary question to the Member's good question.

Mr Hussey: Much as I appreciate the Deputy First Minister's Christmas greetings, they have denied me my supplementary question.

Mr Speaker: Order. With regard to those somewhat unfestive remarks, there would still have been no time for an answer.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Why, Mr Speaker, is that the practice here? In Westminster — to which you often refer us — a full answer is given once a question has been asked, even if it is after the time.

Mr Speaker: Dr Paisley will be aware that a full answer was given. It was the supplementary question that was not permitted. I did not bring the Deputy First Minister, the question or his answer to an untimely end; I did not permit a supplementary question.

The Deputy First Minister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker — and I thank you for your indulgence. I apologise to the Assemblyman — indeed, to the entire Assembly — if wishing a happy and peaceful Christmas has caused offence.

Mr Speaker: Time for questions to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has truly passed.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Speaker: Before calling the first questioner, I should inform the Assembly that question 2 in the name of Mr Edwin Poots has been transferred to the Department of the Environment. Mr Poots will receive a written response from that Department. Similarly, question 12 in the name of Ms Lewsley has been transferred to the Department of the Environment, from which the Member will receive a written response.

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

Street Lighting Division: Location

1. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to ensure that Consultant and Design street lighting division will not be relocated from the Roads Service in Downpatrick to a section office at Benson Street, Lisburn; and if he will make a statement. (AQO 488/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): The Roads Service recently carried out a review of its street lighting function. The review's recommendations, which involve the relocation of a small number of posts, are being considered in consultation with the trades unions, and a decision is not expected before the new year.

I am constantly looking at ways of making the Department more efficient and of improving our service to the public, and in some cases this may involve moving staff between offices.

Mr McGrady: The Minister must be unaware of the decision communicated by his predecessor in a letter to me dated 29 March 1999. That letter said that Rathkeltair House in Downpatrick would become the headquarters of the Roads Service consultancy, which will have responsibility for engineering design and contract supervision throughout Northern Ireland.

This happened when disciplines in the Roads Service were restructured. Jobs had been taken out of Downpatrick Division at that time, and the panacea was the creation and maintenance of the consultancy and engineering works in Downpatrick. Are we now engaged — and I hope not — in the further centralising of Government services?

Mr Campbell: I take it that the Member was referring to a predecessor of mine who took the decision.

The Roads Service is committed to carrying out best-value reviews and to constantly improving its services so that it is effective and gives value for money. Such reviews and improvements may, from time to time, conclude that services could be organised to serve the public better. However, the thrust of the Member's response is in no way to be incorporated in the review that is under way, and the conclusions of which will be announced in the new year.

Former Newtownards-Belfast Railway Line

3. **Mr McFarland** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the state of repair of the trackbed of the former Newtownards to Belfast via Comber railway line and to confirm if there are plans to reinstate a rail link on it. (AQO 521/00)

Mr Campbell: Close to Belfast city centre, the former railway line now has other uses, and at Comber it forms part of the Comber bypass. However, a railway line could be reinstated on much of the remaining alignment without major acquisition of property. With the exception of the section from the Hollywood Arches to Dundonald, no details are available on the state of repair of the remaining trackbed.

Translink has plans to provide a guided busway, known as the E-way, along the section from the Hollywood Arches to Dundonald, but it has no plans to reinstate a railway on any part of the route. The costs of doing so would be significant. The cost of relaying existing track on the Belfast to Bangor line is approximately £1 million per mile; the cost of reinstating a line could be several million pounds per mile.

Mr McFarland: The regional development strategy states that Ards Borough Council has volunteered for an additional 7,000 houses to be built in its area in the next 10 to 15 years. Given the congestion in traffic coming from Newtownards and Comber and the additional 7,000 houses, surely serious thought should be given to a proper commuter system for that area.

Mr Campbell: I accept the Member's comments about the possibility of an additional 7,000 houses in the area. That reinforces the need for the E-way or something similar. I am aware of the considerable increase in the volume of traffic on that route and I hope that the regional transportation strategy, which will be published next year, will tackle its problems and the problems of all the other commuter lines in Northern Ireland.

Street Lighting (Rural Settlements)

4. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his proposals to make street lighting available to rural settlements. (AQO 515/00)

Mr Campbell: The Roads Service is carrying out a review of its policy for providing rural lighting. The review is scheduled for completion in April 2001. Street lighting in rural areas is provided where there is a minimum density of 10 properties on 200 metres of road or when night-time accident statistics have shown that lighting would help to reduce the number of accidents.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree — indeed I know he agrees — that rural settlements often fall marginally short of the criteria? Does he encourage his Department to be more flexible with the criteria so that those rural settlements can have street lighting?

Mr Campbell: The Member suggests that I agree, and I do. Looking through the briefing notes, I see that a Member for East Londonderry, Mr Gregory Campbell, asked a question on rural lighting of a former Minister. I do agree and I eagerly await the outcome of the review. A recent study of the Road Service's policy evaluation

programme accepted that the present policy for providing street lighting in rural areas helped to reduce adverse impact on the rural environment. However, the study did recommend a policy review to look at consistency of approach and customer dissatisfaction. Until that review is completed, I cannot comment further, but as soon as it is completed the House will be informed.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his answer and for his sympathy on the matter. He will be aware that the qualifying number of properties rose before the Assembly was established. Is the Minister considering lowering the number of properties required on 200 metres of road to what it was before?

Mr Campbell: My instinctive answer is an unequivocal "Yes". However, that could pre-empt the outcome of the review. I prefer to answer that when the review has been completed and is available to Members. Then I, like Mr Hussey, will have several points to raise, and the number of dwellings required on a road shall certainly be one of them.

Railway Task Force/Westlink

5. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost to his Department of (a) the railway task force and (b) the assessment of proposals to widen the Westlink. (AQO 505/00)

Mr Campbell: The cost of the secretariat for the railways task force was £88,657; a further £115,391 was incurred in consultants' fees to facilitate the consultation exercise. In assessing proposals for the M1 Westlink scheme, the Roads Service incurred consultants' costs of £294,000 for preparing environmental statements and preliminary design, et cetera, and consultants' costs of £344,000 for preparing for and holding public inquiries.

Mr Ford: I am sure that if the Minister consults his notes he will not mind being reminded of the efforts made when the northern rail corridor group met the former Minister for Regional Development. The group was ably represented by, among others, a Derry city councillor called Gregory Campbell. Why therefore has his Department spent so much money on a rail report that has examined in detail proposals for closure or massive cutbacks but which has failed to look in any detail at options for enhancement? These include increased freight use and retaining the Antrim to Lisburn line with its service to the international airport; they are particularly important given that at least one rail line is threatened with closure. Will he tell us what he can do to ensure that we build on that report and do not waste the money?

3.15 pm

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for his comments about previous representations. I have noted them. The railways task force was established under direct rule by Adam Ingram. The task force report presented me with

several options. There has been a generally supportive response to building on the consolidation option described in the report. I hope and expect that we build on that option in future.

We shall not stop at merely retaining existing railway lines in Northern Ireland. It is worth repeating that six months ago we were facing the potential closure of Northern Ireland Railways; now we are contemplating consolidation and enhancement. That is a vast improvement.

Ms Lewsley: The Minister said that he has spent £344,000 on a public inquiry into the widening of the Westlink and the slip roads at Blacks Road. I ask the Minister to assure us that his decision will not be cost-driven now that the public inquiry has been completed. I ask him to consider the damage to the health of young children at St Anne's Primary School if option one on the slip roads to Blacks Road is implemented.

Mr Campbell: I do not want to make any detailed comment until I receive the inspector's report from the public inquiry. I am committed to having a modern, sustainable and safe transport system that benefits society, the economy and the environment and that actively contributes to social inclusion and to the quality of life of everyone in Northern Ireland.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister assure the House that when he is assessing the cost of the railways task force and the proposal to widen the Westlink, he will seek to avoid a fiasco like that surrounding the attempt to open Mossley West station, which involves his Department, the roads and planning services and Northern Ireland Railways?

Mr Campbell: Although I was happy to answer the original question I should point out that a comparison between the cost of the railways task force and the assessment of proposals to widen the Westlink ought not to be made. They cannot be compared, as one can see from the costings. Nonetheless, the issue raised by Mr Ken Robinson is important and must be accepted. We are examining it and we hope to reach a speedy conclusion so that more people can use that commuter line.

Safeway Development (Bangor)

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will outline the Roads Service assessment of the proposed Safeway development in Bangor town centre. (AQO 506/00)

Mr Campbell: The assessment of this proposed development by my Department's Roads Service has included evaluations of the potential impact on the local road network, the adequacy of the proposed parking provision and servicing arrangements and the site's accessibility to public transport.

The Roads Service has not yet been able to recommend approval of this planning application to the Department

of the Environment's Planning Service, as several traffic-related issues have not been adequately dealt with by the applicant. Further information on these issues was received by the Roads Service on 11 December from consultants acting on behalf of the applicant, and this is being assessed.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Department jeopardise a major town centre regeneration project over a dispute about the number of parking spaces, especially as some out-of-town centres have fewer spaces than are being asked of Safeway in Bangor? Does he agree that, with so much controversy about out-of-town shopping centres, it is incumbent on the Roads Service to do all that it can to help town centre shopping developments?

Mr Campbell: The outstanding issues that the applicant must deal with are the effect that development traffic will have on the Castle Street/Castle Park Avenue signalised junction and the Abbey Street/Dufferin Avenue roundabout, and the provision of adequate parking and public transport measures. The provision of the latter would mitigate the effects of inadequate parking and enhance the site's accessibility.

In summary, the Roads Service has been pressing the applicant to provide necessary information on several matters, including the provision of adequate parking, before it responds formally to the Department of the Environment's Planning Service about the application. As I said in my initial reply, we received further information on 11 December. When it has been assessed, we shall respond to the applicant.

Pedestrian and Cycleways

7. **Mr Carrick** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's policy on adopting pedestrian and cycleways paid for by public money.
(AQO 490/00)

Mr Campbell: The funding available to my Department's Roads Service for road maintenance is limited. Resources must be prioritised to maintain the important road, transport and pedestrian routes in Northern Ireland. For this reason the Roads Service will adopt pedestrian and cycleways where they offer considerable transport benefits — for example, where they are useful additions to the public road network or where they encourage commuters to use alternative means of transport to the private car.

Mr Carrick: Does the Minister agree that the Department for Regional Development's narrow interpretation of the benefits and its failure formally to adopt publicly funded pedestrian and cycleways demonstrate serious flaws in efficient and effective government? Does he acknowledge that by refusing to co-operate formally in scheme implementation, the Department undermines these special projects designed to bring about a better environment and

benefit all our people? The Lough Neagh cycleway is a prime example.

Mr Campbell: As I said earlier, the budget is not sufficient to maintain all pedestrian and cycle routes in Northern Ireland — we must prioritise. That has meant looking at the routes which will be most heavily used. However, I understand the hon Member's concern about the money being spent on the route in his area. I undertake to re-examine the route that he has brought to my attention.

I return to a topic that I have often raised — the under-resourcing of a part of my Department. It is impossible for money to be spent on every avenue of every district of every constituency. My resources are finite.

"Home Zones" (Residential Streets)

8. **Mr Close** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to implement "home zones" in residential streets.
(AQO 504/00)

Mr Campbell: "Home zones" are an extension of traffic calming. They seek to reduce vehicle speeds to below 10 miles per hour and in effect to extend community living space to encompass part of the road.

My Department acknowledges "home zones" as an innovative approach to tackling social and road safety issues in residential streets. There is, however, a need to pilot the concept, and a scheme promoted by the Belfast Regeneration Office is proposed for the New Lodge area of Belfast. An evaluation of its outcome, and a small number of pilot schemes in Great Britain, will be used to inform future decisions on the implementation of other projects.

I want to accelerate action to increase traffic calming in residential areas. I propose to initiate up to 10 pilot schemes across Northern Ireland that will give local communities a greater role in agreeing what measures are appropriate in their areas. The outcome of these pilot schemes will inform our long-term approach to this very important matter.

Mr Close: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply and welcome that news. How were the 10 pilot schemes arrived at? Was an appraisal done to identify the areas involved?

Mr Campbell: The 10 areas have not yet been selected, but they are in the process of being so. They will be selected from the schemes that have already been prioritised. I have raised the matter in my Department because there has been a huge increase in the number of applications for traffic-calming measures in Northern Ireland, as the hon Member and others will know. In the Eastern Board area alone there are about 200 applications a year. To expedite matters, I have asked my Department to select the 10 pilot schemes from the schemes that

have already been prioritised. There will be no question of queue-jumping. They will be taken from the top of the list of prioritised schemes. They will be undertaken across Northern Ireland to see if there are measures that can be implemented more quickly and more appropriately to meet local needs.

Traffic Congestion (East Antrim): Railway Stations (Parking)

9. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he is aware of the traffic congestion in East Antrim and of the growing demand from communities for park-and-ride facilities and if he plans to develop further park-and-ride facilities at Whitehead, Trooperslane or Greenisland stations. (AQO 529/00)

Mr Campbell: I propose to tackle this growing problem in East Antrim, and elsewhere, by pursuing an integrated transportation strategy that will make the best use of the existing road network and that will develop and encourage the use of alternative modes of transport.

I expect that park-and-ride facilities will play an increasingly important role in future transportation strategy. Translink plans to expand the number of park-and-ride spaces at Whitehead from 20 to 29. As the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company and Translink will not have enough money to proceed with all worthwhile projects, they will have to decide whether an expansion of parking facilities at Whitehead is important enough to justify the necessary expenditure.

At present, Translink has no plans to develop park-and-ride facilities at Trooperslane or Greenisland. However, it is well aware of the value of such facilities in encouraging car drivers to switch to rail. When the track has been refurbished and new rolling stock provided, I am sure that it will wish to give serious consideration to more parking facilities at stations.

3.30 pm

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister accept that there has been considerable success in developing park-and-ride facilities at Carrickfergus central station, which is operating virtually at full capacity? In developing future park-and-ride facilities at Trooperslane, will he ensure that roads, culverts and footpaths are upgraded so that those working on the IDB sites will have an alternative means of using public transport when going to work?

Mr Campbell: Part of the problem is finding suitable land. Land is available for park-and-ride at Trooperslane but not at Greenisland. I shall write to Mr Beggs as soon as possible.

Mr O'Connor: Will the Minister ensure that developing park-and-ride facilities and making the Carrickfergus-Belfast line more attractive and more profitable does not

take away from necessary work on the line at Larne? Some of the track is in a very poor condition.

Has EU grant assistance been sought for this track, which has been designated part of the Trans-European Network (TEN)? The South has managed to attract 85% funding from the cohesion fund to extend the Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) network to Malahide. Does the Minister plan to consider that in the future?

Mr Campbell: The hon Member raises several questions. He can rest assured with regard to the Larne rail connection, as it is constantly to the fore in the Department for Regional Development's thinking. I met the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company only last week to discuss developing stretches of that line. It is under constant discussion.

I have no information on whether grant applications have been made to the EU for the line but I shall find out and inform the Member.

Railway Station (Global Point)

10. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans for a new railway station to serve Global Point (Ballyhenry business park). (AQO 503/00)

Mr Campbell: Translink has no plans for an additional halt to service Global Point, the proposed business park at Ballyhenry, Newtownabbey. However, Translink hopes to provide a new halt at Mossley West on the corner of the business park site as part of the Antrim to Bleach Green line reinstatement. Translink has asked the business park developer to take the planned Mossley West halt into consideration when the park's internal road network is being planned.

Mr Neeson: The business park is not in my constituency, but it will directly affect my constituents. Does the Minister recognise that this is a major economic investment opportunity? If it is to reach its full potential, good infrastructure is essential.

Mr Campbell: I accept that. The Mossley West halt is due to be completed in February. Its cost is estimated at £916,000, on which Translink is due a 75% grant of £687,000. I am aware of the contribution that it will make to transport links and to the underlying economic links between that part of Northern Ireland and the greater Belfast area.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 in the name of Mr John Fee has been transferred to the Department for Regional Development, which will respond in writing. Similarly, question 13 in the name of Mr Seamus Close has been transferred to the Department of Health, Social

Services and Public Safety. It too will receive a written response. If that is clear we shall proceed.

Biodiversity: Coastal Forum

1. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans to institute the coastal forum as recommended by the biodiversity working group.

(AQO 527/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster):

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall take questions 1 and 8 together. I have no plans to set up a coastal forum. I am grateful for the substantially increased resources proposed for the Environment and Heritage Service in the Executive's recent draft Budget; they will help to implement EU Directives and to develop a biodiversity strategy. However, even these resources do not allow me to do everything that I wish, so I cannot establish and support a coastal forum at present. I agreed, in correspondence with Mr McGrady, that the Department could have supported such a forum only if all its bids had been successful. Subject to the agreement of other Ministers with responsibility for sea defences and infrastructure, however, I shall continue to keep the benefits of a coastal forum in mind for future budget rounds.

My Department will also continue to liaise with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which is responsible for sea defences, and the Department for Regional Development, which is responsible for road, water and sewerage infrastructure in coastal areas.

Mr Ford: I suppose that I must thank the Minister for his response but I cannot thank him for its content. The report was published some months ago and the issue has been around for some time — one of his predecessors, Lord Dubs, promised action five or six years ago. I am disappointed that the Minister cannot provide any firm commitment. How much would it cost to establish a coastal forum and why is it such a problem for his Department in the Budget?

Mr Foster: I cannot give details of the cost at present but I shall do so in a written answer. I understand that the previous direct rule Administration did give an undertaking to establish a coastal forum to advise on the development of a coastal zone strategy. However, as in so many areas of environmental protection and conservation, no additional resources were allocated at that time to fulfil the commitment. There is no point in making commitments if they cannot be backed up with resources — that is my problem.

Mr McGrady: I note that the Minister's answer is definitive and that a forum will not be established. That is a great pity, and I ask the Minister to reconsider. A coastal forum involving environmentalists and representatives of district councils and tourism bodies need not cost a

great deal of money. It could almost be provided for by the relevant district councils.

On one hand, there is great concern about the economic development of coastal areas, and on the other about their environmental protection. The Antrim and Down coasts are suffering terrible erosion. Some measures must be taken, otherwise there will have to be a retreat from the ravages of the sea. Can the Minister also take the matter up with the North/South Ministerial Council?

Mr Foster: Coastal erosion is the responsibility of several Departments, not just mine. It is the duty of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development through its Rivers Agency to maintain sea defences. The Department for Regional Development's Roads Service is responsible for roads, water and sewerage infrastructure, including any affected by coastal erosion. We are not against the forum, but we lack the money at present.

The Northern Ireland biodiversity working group presented recommendations to me in October 2000 for a Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy. Those recommendations are being examined. I acknowledge the potential benefits of a coastal forum but I cannot agree to this or to any other recommendation unless the money is available. Despite what Mr McGrady says, it would cost money, and we do not have any at present. However, I shall continue to keep the benefits of a coastal forum in mind in future Budget bids.

Mr Shannon: I am disappointed that a coastal forum cannot be established. In the Ards Peninsula in Strangford erosion has caused the loss of farming and leisure land. In the absence of a coastal forum, how does the Minister intend to tackle coastal erosion?

Mr Foster: I shall liaise with the other Departments on the matter. I am aware of the problems of coastal erosion in Strangford and shall be meeting the Member next month to discuss them. I shall be better placed to answer his points at our discussion.

Conservation and Townscape Areas (West Belfast)

2. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans to designate (a) areas of townscape character and (b) conservation areas in west Belfast.

(AQO 486/00)

Mr Foster: I have no immediate plans to designate any areas of townscape character or conservation areas in west Belfast. The Belfast urban area plan for 2001 did not identify any areas in west Belfast that met the criteria for designation as areas of townscape character or conservation areas.

However, I shall launch the Belfast metropolitan area plan in January 2001 and I intend that preparation of this plan will involve a widespread consultation exercise. That

will offer the public the opportunity to make suggestions with regard to areas in the west of the city and throughout the Belfast metropolitan area that may merit special protection because of their heritage value.

It is not possible to anticipate how the outcome of that exercise will affect west Belfast or to make suggestions for designations. However, my Department will address any suggestions on their planning and heritage merits.

Proposed Belfast Metropolitan Area

4. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what progress has been made in developing planning and structural policies for the proposed Belfast metropolitan area. (AQO 512/00)

Mr Foster: The statutory development planning framework for the Belfast metropolitan area is provided by several plans. These include the Belfast urban area plan and the Carrickfergus, Lisburn and Newtownabbey area plans. The North Down and Ards area plan covers the North Down Borough Council area, which falls into the Belfast metropolitan area.

I shall launch the Belfast metropolitan area plan shortly. It will provide a planning and policy framework for future development up to the year 2015. It will take account of the draft regional development strategy, any subsequent amendments made to the strategy as a result of scrutiny by the Executive Committee and all other relevant considerations.

The programme for the preparation of the plan involves the publication of an issues paper in autumn 2001, publication of a draft plan towards the end of 2002-03 and adoption of a final plan in 2004-05. I intend the plan to include widespread and inclusive consultation, involving councils, business and community interests and the public.

The intention of the issues approach is to hear the public's views on future development in order to assist the Department to develop planning proposals and policies. The action plan has been made possible by the Executive's allocating the resources needed to assemble the Belfast metropolitan plan. This is very good news. It was announced in the 1999 Agenda for Government and confirmed in the Programme for Government and in the draft Budget.

Mr Neeson: I am pleased that widespread consultation will be part of the process. Does the Minister recognise that there will be a need for interdepartmental co-operation to devise the necessary structures? Does the Minister also recognise that the present processes are causing uncertainty because of the ambivalent approach to the status of the local area plans?

3.45 pm

Mr Foster: I assure the Member that everything will be given due consideration and that nothing will be

taken lightly. It is a very important matter. If there is a policy void or if some area plans reach their end dates before the adoption of the Belfast metropolitan plan, current development plans provide detailed location and planning policies for the relevant parts of the Belfast metropolitan area.

Some of the plans will reach their end date before the publication of the Belfast metropolitan area plan. The plan for north Down and Ards reached its end date in 1995; the Belfast urban area plan, Carrickfergus area plan and Lisburn area plan, which is yet to be adopted, will reach their end dates in 2001; the Newtownabbey area plan will reach its end date in 2005. Nevertheless, these will be material considerations in all decisions. The plan recognised that there are strong local identities, and it will seek to give expression to this diversity.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that adopting alternative sustainable forms of metropolitan transport, an effective railway system, for example, would be a major advance in solving the traffic congestion and pollution problems of the Belfast metropolitan area? Will the Minister and his Colleague the Minister for Regional Development co-ordinate their Departments' policies to achieve that?

Mr Foster: We shall co-operate wherever possible.

Mr P Robinson: Is the Minister aware of the judgement in the English High Court on the case of *Alconbury et al*? What implications does that have on the metropolitan plans and on the other plans, particularly the procedure for objectors? It concerns the implications that the Human Rights Act 1998 will have on the planning system in Northern Ireland. Has the Minister considered that? Has he received papers on it, and will he make a statement on it?

Mr Foster: I have been aware of the human rights issue for some time, and a paper has been presented to the Executive Committee. It is a complex area of law. Although the Executive are fully committed to complying with the Human Rights Act 1998, I am concerned about the implications for orderly administration. Therefore I have drawn the matter to the Executive's attention, and it will be considered at the earliest opportunity.

I am also aware of the High Court's judgement. It ruled that the "call in" procedures in the planning process in England and Wales and the decision making role of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions were incompatible with the Human Rights Act 1998. The planning process in Northern Ireland, including the independent Planning Appeals Commission, is different from the planning system in England and Wales in several respects.

The Department of the Environment will carefully examine the judgement to see if it has any implications for Northern Ireland, and all aspects will be taken into

consideration. The Department of the Environment has been aware of this issue for some time, and a paper has been sent to the Executive Committee for its earliest consideration.

Department: Cost of Consultancy

5. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of the Environment if he will (a) ensure that best value is achieved in the use of private consultancy firms by the Department and (b) detail how much has been spent in each of the last five years on consultancy; and if he will make a statement.

(AQO 530/00)

Mr Foster: The overriding objective in deciding whether to use private consultancy firms is value for money. Criteria taken into account when deciding to employ consultants include consideration of the expertise, skills or experience required and whether those are already available in the Department of the Environment. Consideration is also given to identifying new approaches or to introducing different perspectives. A full business case is required when a consultancy is expected to cost more than £10,000. Cases where consultancy contracts cost more than £20,000 are publicly advertised and contracts over £50,000 must be referred to me.

The Department of the Environment did not exist in its current form before devolution, and I cannot give a definitive answer on matters that pre-date devolution and for which the direct rule Administration was responsible. However, expenditure on consultancy since December 1999, when I took up office, is £709,602.

Mr McLaughlin: Does the Minister agree that such external resources should only be applied if they are less expensive and more efficient than in-house capacities and expertise? What measures has he taken to reduce dependency on such expensive external resources?

Mr Foster: We seek best value at all times in our daily lives. The Department subjects all significant expenditure on consultants to a formal economic appraisal. Larger contracts are referred to the Department of Finance and Personnel. An annual report on consultancy expenditure is also prepared. The proposed public service agreements will contain targets that will be used to ensure that departmental expenditure is value for money. We seek that continually.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister accept that placing all consultancy in the Department would be extremely expensive, as it would be impossible for the Department to maintain a body of people who were the experts in all subjects?

Mr Foster: We always seek expertise in the Department, and we have a great deal of it, but we do not have all the expertise. However, we try to ensure that we get best value for money at all times.

Climate Change

7. **Ms Hanna:** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the measures he has in place to raise public awareness of climate change. (AQO 518/00)

Mr Foster: I laid the United Kingdom climate change programme before the Assembly on 17 November. The draft programme had been the subject of two rounds of public consultation, first in November 1998 and then in March 2000. Copies of the March 2000 draft programme were distributed to Members, district councils and the industrial, business and voluntary sectors; they were also advertised in the local press.

One of the objectives of the consultation process and the subsequent publication of the programme was to raise awareness of climate change. The Department of the Environment is commissioning a scoping study for the implications of climate change in conjunction with the Scotland and Northern Ireland Forum for Environmental Research (SNIFFER). The study will be followed by more detailed research to identify specific measures for raising public awareness. One of the study's key aims is to consider the current and desirable levels of public awareness of climate change. The results of the study will be available by mid-2001 and the main findings will be publicised then.

Ms Hanna: I have seen the consultation documents. Has a date been proposed to reconvene discussions on the implementation of the Kyoto protocol? If public awareness is not raised, politicians will not be lobbied to make people aware of the urgency of reconvening the discussion.

Mr Foster: I am not aware of a particular date and I cannot fully answer the question but I shall give the Member a written reply.

Safeway Development (Bangor): Planning Application

10. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of the Environment if he will explain the delay in processing the planning application for the Safeway development in Bangor town centre. (AQO 511/00)

Mr Foster: The Department of the Environment received the application for full planning permission on 29 December 1999. The proposal involved building shops, including a coffee shop, crèche, financial services offices and associated car parking, petrol filling station and kiosk, and associated highways works. A previous outline planning application for a proposed food store, petrol filling station, and modifications to an existing car park on this site was granted permission on 21 November 1996.

The difficulties with the application principally concern car parking provision in the proposal. These matters

have not yet been dealt with to the satisfaction of the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service.

Consultation with the Roads Service on this application is not yet complete. Consultants acting on behalf of the applicant have provided the Roads Service with further information, and that is being assessed. Beyond these concerns, there are no planning issues to be resolved.

Mr McCarthy: Although Bangor is not in my constituency, this may benefit some of my constituents. Does the Minister agree that since there is so much controversy surrounding out-of-town shopping centres, it is incumbent on the Planning Service to do all that it can to help town centre retail developments? Does he agree that it would be scandalous if his Department were to refuse the application or to delay a positive decision unnecessarily?

Mr Foster: We are very much aware of the importance of town centre shopping. The Planning Service is not holding the process up; the Department for Regional Development and the roads problem are responsible.

The applicant has yet to answer several questions on the impact that the proposals will have on the surrounding roads. These include the operation of a Castle Street/Castle Park Avenue signalised junction and Abbey Street/Dufferin Avenue roundabout. Consultants acting on behalf of the applicant have provided the Roads Service with further information, and that is being assessed.

Mr P Robinson: Does the Minister agree that although the Member for Strangford is undoubtedly content that his constituents who have businesses in that area should lose out to developments elsewhere, the developers in those areas should meet the criteria set down by the Roads Service and that it should not lower its criteria to meet the developers?

Mr Foster: I accept the Member's point. There are policies, remits and parameters, and we must preserve them or we shall create precedents.

Environmental Protection Agencies

12. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm whether the environmental protection agencies are independent bodies, next steps agencies or part of a Civil Service Department. (AQO 523/00)

Mr Foster: Environment protection in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the Environment and Heritage Service, an agency in my Department. The equivalent body for England and Wales is the Environment Agency, and for Scotland it is the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency. Both are non-departmental public bodies outside the Government. The Environment and Heritage Service is also responsible for the conservation of the natural heritage and the built heritage.

In Great Britain responsibility for the natural heritage lies with English Nature, the Countryside Council for Wales and Scottish Natural Heritage. All are non-departmental public bodies outside Government.

Responsibility for the built heritage in England falls to English Heritage, a non-departmental body outside Government. The built heritage in Wales is the responsibility of Welsh Historic Monuments, and in Scotland it is that of Historic Scotland. These are agencies in the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Executive respectively.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister agree to examine carefully the advantages of an environment protection body in Northern Ireland's being an independent body outside Government, as in other parts of the United Kingdom?

Mr Foster: There are no plans at present to establish an environment protection agency for Northern Ireland. I am satisfied that the present arrangements for environment protection and heritage conservation work effectively. This will be enhanced by the use of additional resources that my ministerial Colleague Mark Durkan has allowed me to retain from receipts from new regulatory activities. I am not yet convinced that the apparent independence from Government that a non-departmental public body might enjoy would bring any material benefits to improving environmental protection. There are benefits in having environmental regulation under the direct control of a Minister accountable to the Assembly. It remains to be seen if the terms of reference for the review of public administration planned in the Programme for Government will include agencies such as the Environment and Heritage Service.

Local Authorities: Accounts

14. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of the Environment if he will ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General will be given full access to the accounts of local authorities. (AQO 517/00)

Mr Foster: The audit responsibilities of the Comptroller and Auditor General are ultimately a matter for the Assembly. The public expects those responsible for handling public money to be held fully accountable for the use of that money. Public audit is an essential element of that accountability.

The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 provides for the accounts of district councils being audited by a local government auditor appointed by my Department. The Comptroller and Auditor General has therefore no responsibility for the auditing of local authority accounts. However, he does audit my Department's payments to district councils. Local government auditors have full access to the accounts of local authorities.

4.00 pm

Mr Dallat: As we have been discussing the Budget, does the Minister agree that we should scrutinise all

public spending? Will he consider in his review extending the functions of the public auditor to include local authority accounts?

Mr Foster: I agree, without hesitation, that all public administration and expenditure should be given the closest scrutiny. The Programme for Government contained a commitment to review public administration. That may change many things, and we are not yet sure what will happen. The review will include local government.

The principles of public audit are very important. The Public Audit Forum identifies three fundamental principles that underpin public audit:

“the independence of public sector auditors from the organisations being audited; the wide scope of public audit, that is covering the audit of financial statements, regularity (or legality), propriety (or probity) and value for money; and the ability of public auditors to make the results of their audits available to the public and to democratically elected representatives”.

Audit must be open and transparent.

BUDGET (2001-02)

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2001-02 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 12 December 2000. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel*]

Which amendments were:

At the end, add

“subject to a reduction of expenditure, as necessary, on the following spending areas —

North/South Body: Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights

North/South Body: Languages

North/South Body: Waterways Ireland

North/South Body: Trade and Business Development

North/South Body: Special EU Programmes

North/South Body: Food Safety Promotion

Tourism Company

North/South Ministerial Council Secretariat

Civic Forum —

in order to reduce the increase in the regional rate from 8% to the current level of inflation”. — [*Mr Dodds*]

At the end, add

“subject to a reduction of expenditure, as necessary, in the Executive programme funds to reduce the increase in the regional rate from 8% to the current level of inflation.” — [*Mr Maskey*]

Mr McGrady: Many of the contributions this morning revealed a sense of newness and achievement at the presentation of a new Budget. Members called it the first independent Budget for Northern Ireland in thirty years. That is an overstatement: “independent” could be interpreted as meaning open-ended, but a budget is never open-ended. A budget is restricted, as any businessman or housewife will tell you, and is circumscribed by the amount of money available. In this case, income is restricted to the block grant and, to a lesser degree, the regional rate. No one gets everything, and priorities must be identified.

I listened with great interest to Members’ demands and their often justifiable criticism of the lack of provision for this, that or the other. No one proposed that taxes should be increased or other revenues sought to provide for those worthy endeavours. An increase across the board of 7.8% — or 5% in real spending terms — is no mean achievement.

The spread of funding across various actions illustrates the importance to Ministers of collegiality. Equally importantly, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has fully consulted the Assembly Committees and has made a significant response to their concerns where he could. He also made changes after consultation with the wider community. However, no budget can give everything to

everybody; there is always a limit, and in this case the limit is the amount of money available. Obviously, some items have been highlighted, and quite rightly so. We have all welcomed the commitment to the student support review, particularly for those students whose parents are on low incomes. This clearly demonstrated a commitment to listen to the responses received after consultation from the recipients and the students' unions. A greater partnership than the Executive is at work. There is a partnership between the Executive, the Assembly, the community and the vested interest in the community. That greater partnership is the most significant, and it is often overlooked although it has achieved a great deal in a very short time.

We may be committed to various causes, but our primary concern is of course our constituents and our constituency. This morning's commitment to a general debate was very significant — although some were sidetracked into particulars. Nevertheless, the debate ranged widely and was very welcome.

There are some matters in the Budget that I wish to speak about. Much has been said about deprivation, and there are many mechanisms for dealing with it. One of the greatest problems is the imprecision of the indices of deprivation, which can allow the relative wealth of a surrounding area to cloak severe deprivation. The Minister has told us that these indices are being studied much more closely in order to provide more precise targeting in future.

A thread that unites all the parties in this Government is the democratic desire to address the urgent social problems in all our communities. Our discussions on the Budget in recent months — ministerial statements, draft Budgets and monetary funding discussions on how policies should be applied — have brought to light some alarming revelations of what took place during 30 years of direct rule. In all Departments there is an enormously worrying and sometimes frightening shortfall in the development of our social services and in the maintenance and improvement of our infrastructure.

It is not very glamorous to talk about roads, but past underinvestment has left them in a shocking state. Unfortunately, we shall be unable to fix them in one or even two budgets. Some of our sewerage and water systems are in the same horrendous state. They are totally antiquated. These facts were kept hidden from us — and I say that advisedly: they were kept hidden from us for years.

We can now compare the per capita spending on health and education in Great Britain and in Northern Ireland, and it is obvious that there is a shortfall there too. Although the Minister cannot do it in this Budget, I urge him to amend the Barnett formula. Several Members called it the formula that dictates our revenue. During those negotiations, which I hope will take place in 2001, he should identify and quantify that shortfall and ask for it.

In the short term — five to 10 years — it is not possible for our community to finance what has been

denied effective funding for the past 30 years. We simply cannot do that without going into the figures. If I am correct, we shall continue to fall further behind in the competition for an infrastructure that can support industry and in the competition for a social programme that will improve our educational and medical facilities.

Although several issues must be tackled urgently, for the moment I would like to digress into an industry that is very rarely spoken of, mainly because it affects only two constituencies, South Down and North Down. It is the fishing industry. A further reduction in the total allowable catch for the ensuing season of 2001 was recently announced. Most people probably did not read that. Some might have asked themselves what it means. It means that our fishing industry is on the verge of collapse. That is not a melodramatic statement. Every major whitefish species has been cut dramatically — from 44% to 27%, and now to 10%. Ironically, the only species the total allowable catch of which has increased is herring, at 40% and over. People no longer fish for herring. It is a dead industry. Those who could fish for herring in the past can no longer do so. The nets are not right and the boats are not right. Therefore it is not a panacea.

I have spoken to fishermen in my constituency. Many have received only three weeks' wages since last August and they often fall outside the social security net. This is because they go to sea and may catch nothing; they have been working, but working for nought. The budget of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development must be rescheduled in the coming months to deal with this serious matter. I shall leave the question of the funding required in other areas to other Members.

I am surprised that there have been so few amendments. Only two questions have been raised in the entire Budget. That is very heartening for everyone — especially for the Minister responsible. One would have expected hundreds of amendments. We have only two. This shows that every party in the House — whether part of the Executive or not, whether pro-agreement or anti-agreement — is fairly content with the proposed Budget. That augurs well for the future.

The amendment to withdraw funding from the North/South bodies is transparently political and has very little to do with finances. The Assembly will treat it as such. I do not say that it is not a serious proposition — it is. It is the means by which the agreement could be destroyed. The intention behind the amendment was not to amend the Budget to get extra funds; the intention was to destroy one of the bedrock provisions of the Good Friday Agreement.

This is not a serious financial amendment, yet it is the only one from a major anti-agreement party. That is quite miraculous and I am very pleased about it. The other amendment concerning the regional rate increase of 8% was expected. Everyone would like the rates to be

reduced and to pay less in taxes. However, no one will decide where the money will come from.

4.15 pm

It is most surprising, given the collective responsibility of the Executive. I presume that the decisions on the funding from the block grant and on the regional rate were distributed and approved. A distribution cannot be approved without the approval of the receipt that provides for it. Therefore I assume that all parties were fully involved in agreeing the source of the revenue, followed by the distribution of that revenue to the various Departments.

The mover of the amendment did not give a very convincing reason why the two Departments primarily benefiting from the regional rate happened to be the Departments of Education and Health. However, if there were merit in the proposal that the regional rate should be reduced — and we would all love it to be reduced — one would have assumed that, being in the same party as the Ministers of Health and Education, the mover would have said that the extra money for those Departments could be withdrawn. He would be happy for it to be withdrawn and be pleased that there would be fewer services in health and education. I did not, however, hear that argument. It is as if there are two, or perhaps three, political parties under the same name supporting this amendment. When I heard the Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee's contribution — and, as you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, he was called to speak as the Chairperson — I thought it was a party political speech from beginning to end. Not only that, he was able by some mysterious means to assess the intent of a Committee that did not even vote on the matter. I would love to have such an understanding of any Committee that I served on; to be able to say "If my Committee took a decision it would decide thus". I have never in all my life been in that position and I admire a Chairperson who is. However, there is a serious point. The Chairperson was not conveying the corporate opinion of the Committee; he was merely making a subjective personal statement. That must be wrong, as a Committee Chairperson when addressing the Assembly in his capacity as Chairperson must express the opinion of his Committee.

There have been several astonishing contributions. We were told to put on our begging clothes, deepen our begging bowl and approach the British Government for more from the Exchequer. I support that argument. I have always supported that argument, and I found it very surprising from that quarter. I do not know about giving the argument some sort of rationale by throwing in "We shall approach the Irish Government as well with a different begging bowl, perhaps in punts". There was no serious debate about what was meant by the proposition to abolish the increase in the regional rate.

There is not a person in the Chamber or in the community who does not want to pay less tax. However,

I bet that the shopkeepers, the farmers who are so badly off, the fishermen and housewives would be prepared to pay a few pounds extra in their rates this year to get a better education and a better health service. I am almost certain that they would be willing to make the sacrifice. I would not make the same mistake that I accuse another of making — that of making a subjective judgement. A poll in Great Britain (although it was not voted for) showed that people would be prepared to make a sacrifice to ensure additional funding for health and education.

Mr Weir: The Liberal Democrats suggested in their taxation proposals that an extra penny should be raised from income tax. They were accused of increasing the range of services on which this extra penny would be spent. Is the Member in danger of falling into the same trap? Is he not in danger of spending the £11 million or £12 million from this increase over and over again to improve health and education? Is he not being too ambitious in what he thinks the regional rate rise can pay for?

Mr McGrady: The hon Member makes a strong point, and his question is almost self-explanatory. Although people did vote for it in an opinion poll, they did not follow this through by voting in the general election to implement a proposition that had been so widely supported.

The other matter raised was whether the rates increase is a kind of poll tax. There is no comparison between rates and the poll tax. They are entirely different in constituency, levy and circumstances. For the advancement of political posturing and to the disadvantage of the collegiate responsibility of the Executive, parties can play around with bits and pieces of the Budget.

It is astonishing, however, that there were only two amendments to a Budget of such size and change. That shows the extent of its support among all parties in the Chamber. Now that the diversions are over, we can deal with the serious matters in the Budget. I hope that the vote will have the support of the entire House and will enable the Minister to deal with some of the serious new issues.

I compliment not just the Minister responsible for the Budget but all the other Ministers — Sinn Féin, UUP, SDLP and the DUP from afar. They all made a magnificent contribution to the Budget. I have no doubt that the parties in the House will support their own Ministers, whose Departments will benefit from the Budget. If they do not support their own Ministers, they will show a lack confidence in them and in their ability to achieve a fair deal.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is always a pleasure to follow the hon Member. As a young boy, I sat in the Strangers' Gallery, as it was called, and listened to a debate one night when Cahir Healy, a famous Nationalist, spoke. I remember one Member rising to congratulate him, saying that it was a pity that he was not a family doctor. His attitude reminded the Member of a good family doctor

at the bedside who knew that he was well remembered in the patient's will. That describes Mr McGrady, who speaks with a quiet confidence that nothing he says can be called into question. Poor miserable specimens that do not share the vast brainpower that divides his ears must be patted on the head and told "We shall give you a fool's pardon". The people of Northern Ireland are not fools. The serious matter of the regional rate is something that we cannot ignore.

There is no use in telling us about the wonders of the Budget or about what Mr Durkan has done, or in saying that the only amendments are on the regional rate. This is the straw that will break the camel's back. It is right for the House to be aware of this. Members may not like the wording of amendments. They may not even like amendments, but we live in a democracy. This is not a fascist dictatorship yet. We are entitled to bring forward our amendments and to have them discussed. However, some people thought that by mighty denunciation of individuals they could brush this matter under the carpet and safely put it away. However, that cannot be done.

Mr Close got very warmed up about this matter. I am glad that he is in the House now. He got very frustrated. He tried to put forward the strange thesis that if one was in a meeting and one disagreed with what the meeting did one was nevertheless responsible for its decision. That is a complete negation of democracy. I am a Member of this House. I will disagree with many of the things that it does, but this House does not bind me at all. I am free, so far, to express my views. My two Colleagues happen, by the vote of the people, to have been put into Government. They were put there not by the patronage of Westminster, Mandelson or Mo Mowlam, but by the votes of the people. These are votes that his party, by the way, did not get. His claim that my two Colleagues must be held responsible for this Budget is utter nonsense. I want to repudiate the misinformation, half-truths and bundle of misrepresentations thrown together in anger to throw mud at men who have made their position absolutely clear.

Then we had Mr Roche, who is now absent along with every member of his party. He described Mr Peter Robinson as a "hypocrite". I have the statement that Mr Peter Robinson made. I shall read it so that those who read the report of this debate will know exactly what Mr Robinson said on the occasion referred to by Mr Roche. Mr Robinson said:

"May I very briefly set the context which allows me to respond positively to your enquiry about my willingness to take office. Everyone here knows that I am one of the sternest opponents of the Belfast Agreement. I have consistently maintained that the purpose and the objective of the agreement is to have Northern Ireland absorbed into a united Ireland through developing all-Ireland institutions. I still believe that to be the process underlying it. Whether a Member or a Minister, as a convinced Unionist I shall use every ounce of the influence I possess to frustrate and thwart Northern Ireland's being conveyed into a united Ireland."

Mr Roche, take note.

"My position, both in relation to the release of paramilitary prisoners and the destruction of the RUC through the apparatus devised by the Belfast Agreement, is on public record and is unchanged. Moreover, it remains for me a fundamental principle that only those who are committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means are suitable partners in government. The call of my conscience and the commitments I have given to the people of Northern Ireland are unalterable. I oppose terrorism in all its forms and of every shade. Whether it be the murder of a friend or that of an odious adversary, I oppose it without qualification and without any mental reservation.

As far as my conduct as a prospective Minister may be an issue, I want to place firmly on the record my intention and disposition to be scrupulously fair in every respect, while exercising such responsibilities as may be in my charge. The religious conviction or political opinion of any person or group will form no part of the judgement I will make on any matter. I shall work for everyone in this community, seeking for them a better deal. I consider myself to be the servant of all and master of none. I accept the nomination and affirm the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998."

4.30 pm

Of course, as Mr Peter Robinson's nominator, I was told that this could not be done. I was also told that if I nominated Members for the seats that the people of Northern Ireland had in their gift and which they gave to the Democratic Unionist Party, we would be ousted by law. We also heard the threats of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. However, it was all vain talk because our lawyers were better than theirs — they told us the truth of the matter. These Members are still in the places of Government given to them by the votes of the people, rather than by patronage.

Mr Close stood for election to the Forum and lost. He had to sit as a nominated Member. After the Assembly elections he told us that he had topped the poll but he did not tell us about the other figures. If he had looked at the other figures he would have discovered that although he might have topped the poll, the other candidates, after their votes had been added up, were miles ahead of him.

The Alliance Party leader told us that at the European election I would be laid very low and that he would come forward with such a bounce that the Alliance Party would be said to have been born again. The same man went down to my constituency to do his canvassing. He stood and waited at The Pentagon for half an hour and no one spoke to him so he issued a statement to the press. He said that he had been in the centre of Ian Paisley's constituency and that no one had broached him on the matter of opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Why was this the case? Because nobody spoke to him. It is wonderful that some people believe they know what people are thinking. The only solid way of knowing how people think at an election is to stand at the ballot box. Then one gets the answer — the real answer.

It is vital that the view that I express on behalf of my party be heard in the House, because this will be a very

serious situation. One would have thought that after all that, Mr Close's party would have moved a reasoned amendment; that he would have concentrated his great wisdom and powers on devising an amendment that might meet the need that he has in mind. However, no such amendment was produced. Our only means of expressing our views on that is to vote for the motion that will introduce the 8% increase in the regional rate.

There was legitimate criticism of Sinn Féin: it sat on the Executive Committee. Our Members never sit on the Executive Committee, yet Mr Close told us that they signed up to the Budget. They have never signed anything from that Committee and they never will.

They were pressurised. It is nice to know that the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety can be pressurised. Their party then decided that it would not do for it not to take a stand on this issue, so it made a change.

I did not speak today as Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee; I intended to, but I did not because I had to deal with political points. It should not alarm Mr McGrady that this party is still against the Anglo-Irish Agreement, as indeed is the majority of the Unionist people. If Mr McGrady thinks that he has converted the natives, let us have a referendum tomorrow, and I shall abide by the result of it. But no, he does not want to see referenda; some people here do not want to see local government elections. Some of them dread Tony Blair's going to the country too soon and would rather he delayed his application for a renewed mandate.

What better way is there of reducing people's financial burden than by forgetting about Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights? As the Irish Government have taken over these matters, let them pay for them. He that lights the light, let him pay for the oil. That is not in the Scriptures. I do not want Mr McGrady to think that it is.

A North/South body for languages — as if we do not all understand one language. Even in this place they all understand English — *[Interruption.]*

Rev Dr William McCrea: Even in the Dáil.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: And even the Dáil holds its debates in English; its letters are written mainly in English too.

The waterways of Ireland — well, we have plenty of water; the good Lord has seen to that in the last days, so we can do without interfering with the deity's prerogative by helping to pay for waterways in Ireland.

Trade and business development North and South; special EU programmes — an economic union that has destroyed our farming industry and does not allow the farmers the right to buy grain to feed their animals on the world market. Getting into the world market today would lift a great load off the farming community.

The North/South Food Safety Promotion Body, the North/South Tourism Company; the North/South Ministerial Council Secretariat and — hold on to your seats — the Civic Forum. It would not matter if these things were buried this day in a Sadducee's grave for all the difference they would make to this country. These things are not vital when the people of Northern Ireland are to be burdened with a rise in the regional rate. The House should say plainly to the Government and to those in power that we will not tolerate this terrible increase; that it will be a weight upon the shoulders of the people. It is very important that that be said.

Tomorrow my Committee will convene a special meeting to discuss the fisheries catastrophe, and I welcome Mr McGrady's words on this matter. A very bad decision has been made. I shall say no more until we have all the facts. However, I do know that the Minister told the Committee that she was sure that other representatives from the United Kingdom would stand with her in her battle — they did not.

The Old Book says "Put not your trust in princes", and certainly the prince who came from Westminster was not to be trusted, because up to the last minute he was going to go the right way only to go the wrong way.

We must find a way to save our fisheries. It is vital to the livelihood of the people who for generations have lived off the sea. Astonishingly, the United Kingdom joined the European Union with the greatest possible asset — the seas around our coasts. And what happened? Edward Heath, in his folly, handed over our assets. The Commissioner for Agriculture, Mr Fischler, who comes from Austria and who never sees the sea, tells us that this is good for the people of Northern Ireland, good for the people of Britain and good for the people of the seas — the seas that his Union stole from the people whose right it is to fish them.

The tragedy is that we shall have to have major decommissioning, but it could be worse than that: in the sorrows and sadness and tragedy of the moment too many men will leave the fishing industry. Even if there were a turnaround in fishing, these men would not be able to return to use their expertise to bring the industry back to life and viability.

I am sure that Mr McGrady knows that in Kilkeel many men who sailed the waters now break stones in the quarries. Like convicts, they have been sent to mine the stones. This is the death of our fishing industry. We must find a way to save it; we must do our utmost to alleviate the distress that false friends have brought and to undo the damage caused by those who did not make their stand for the people when they should have.

Why have we not tabled scores of amendments to this motion? Mr Durkan knows very well that this Budget has been rushed. He knows very well that the whole thing could have been stopped with one vote. But what

about the hospitals? What about the schools? What about the roads? What about employment? What about new businesses in the pipeline? This was a price that my party would not pay, and although we were hammered and criticised we let this Budget go through because we had no viable option that was good for our Province.

Now we come to consider the Budget. No doubt many issues will arise in the coming months that were not envisaged when the Budget was drawn up. Many things will come to light and there will be many hard places along the road. Nonetheless, a sum of money has been delivered to us, and it is our business to see that it is spent in the best possible way, for the best possible ends, and distributed to the neediest of our people. However, that is a matter for another day and for another debate.

Tonight, however, I commend my party's amendment. This issue must be highlighted, and if Mr Close felt the same he could have moved an amendment with no political tag attached. I am very glad that the Member for South Down has tagged our motion. I am glad that he recognises our uncompromising principles and that he accepts that we mean what we say and that we do what we say we shall do. The proposal to lay such a heavy burden on our people at this time is an outrageous one, and we must say so.

4.45 pm

Mr J Kelly: I congratulate the Minister on producing an historic Budget. It goes some way to redress the democratic deficit that has existed in this part of Ireland since partition. It is appropriate that a son of Doire Cholmcille — of Derry — should deliver the first Budget.

Much has been made of the amendment, but if ever anyone made a virtue out of cheap political opportunism it is the DUP, and that has been very evident today. Its amendment is not about rates or the abolition of rates; one need only read the seven references to North/South bodies to know that this is an attack on the Good Friday Agreement. It is a device used by the DUP not because it has a deep social interest in the effects of rates but for attacking the very premise on which the Good Friday Agreement was built. Seven times it mentions North/South bodies.

We live on a small island, and I do not think that any Unionist, let alone Nationalist, businessman does not see the benefits of exploiting all the island's potential for trade and business development. Hence the Trade and Business Development Body. We also have the Special EU Programmes Body and the Food Safety Promotion Board — there is no border for food safety. Those who know anything about tourism want to develop an all-Ireland tourism body because they recognise the potential in all-Ireland tourism.

The DUP's amendment is more about exploiting cheap political opportunism than about the very sore issue of

the rates. Sinn Féin's Ministers do not run the party — there are no pontiffs in Sinn Féin. We leave the popes in Rome or in north Antrim. The two DUP members of the Executive have resiled from their Budget responsibilities. They want the best of both worlds. They want to stand outside the tent; yet they want to live in it. They want power without responsibility. They want the trappings of power without its responsibility and obligations. They have not returned their ministerial cars and they do not refuse their ministerial salaries and all the other perks that go with ministerial responsibility. "Do not ever ask us to take responsibility" is what they say. They want to follow their nice, comfortable, little middle track waving bye-bye to those who are carrying the responsibility for the process — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: It is OK, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Let them finish. I can wait. The economic advantages, a LeasCheann Comhairle, of an all-Ireland economy are obvious in agriculture, tourism, fisheries — and Ian Paisley Senior has just spoken about that — transport, roads, electricity, telecommunications and the harmonisation of taxes. We hear much from the DUP about fuel taxes, but it never attempts to promote harmonising these taxes. Fuel is just one example of the harmonisation of taxes.

Ask the people of Omagh, Derry or Fermanagh whether cross-border co-operation on health and education has potential advantages. Those who live there know of the advantages that can be provided in those matters.

This Budget has not fully explored the peace dividend. As I said at the outset, the Budget cannot and will not deal with all the neglect and deprivation that has existed in this part of Ireland for the past 30 years — and for the past 80 or 90 years. It makes no suggestions on how to deal with the dreadful poverty among young people, the old, students and the sick. These elements of the fabric of our society have been neglected in the past 30 years and they continue to be neglected.

The Budget does not and cannot deal with those wants and needs in our society, as the money is not available. Those who wish to stay outside and those who wish to force others outside should stop playing games with the Executive and should develop a strategy to rectify the economic imbalance, the political discrimination and the social and economic deprivation in society.

The Executive have a wonderful opportunity to set up an economic task force to project the additional moneys that will be needed to underpin the social and material infrastructure of our society for the next 10 or 15 years. There is no reason why we should not approach the Irish Government to ask them to assist us. We should not approach them with a begging bowl but with a proposition that if they have an interest in reunification with this part of our island they have an obligation to assist in that reunification. There is no reason why we should not ask

them to provide subvention and to assist us by putting money into the infrastructure of this part of Ireland.

The British Government and the Dublin Government are the two sovereign Governments with ultimate responsibility for this part of our island. There is no reason why the British Government should not be compelled to make amends for the economic deprivation that they have caused. This deprivation has not existed merely since partition; it existed for several hundred years before partition. There is no reason why they cannot be asked to provide subvention to help to secure a more stable economic and social future for this part of Ireland.

There is an American dimension. Bill Clinton, among others, has spoken of the 40 million people of Irish descent who live in America. That is another area that we ought to investigate to see whether we can secure subvention for and investment in this part of Ireland. We recall how the Americans implemented the Marshall Plan, which played a major part in rescuing Europe from the economic desolation of the second world war, a *LeasCheann Comhairle*.

There is no reason for not going, like the Israelis, to America to launch a bond scheme. There is no reason for not, through the Executive, looking in a very imaginative way at launching a bond in America with the co-operation of the Irish and British Governments in an attempt to improve our financial situation over the next few years.

A *LeasCheann Comhairle*, these are matters that the Executive could profitably explore in future. It could deal with the very serious underfunding in all Departments in this part of Ireland — in health and education, for example. Consider the condition of the roads west of the Bann. It was once the case that travelling through Cavan one could tell who lived where by the state of the fields or how good the land was. If one travels west of the Bann one can pinpoint a green or orange area simply by the state of the roads.

These matters can and must be dealt with. I know that it is difficult and I congratulate Mr Durkan on this Budget. It cannot have been easy for him. However, in designing and structuring a budget within our financial parameters he has made a worthy first attempt.

We must look beyond the Barnett formula and beyond the technical formulations of the cold economic points that the Barnett formula tends to deal in. We must be adventurous and look beyond our own devices and our own shores.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee (Mr McFarland): I welcome the Budget. I must admit to feeling a frisson of excitement, for this is our first chance to have a serious debate on an important issue without a time limit.

Departmental running costs were mentioned earlier, and in many cases the increase is confusing. In his speech the Minister said that the Executive must make realistic provision for them and that departmental running costs were originally underestimated. It was a substantial underestimation, and these rises could be more easily understood were it not for the extensive use in most Departments of consultants, outside study teams and panels. Members will easily recall the acute hospitals review. The Department for Regional Development has made extensive use of outside management consultants on the port of Belfast; there is also a regional strategy panel. Outside consultants can be found in all Departments, and if they are deciding policy and strategy — which they are — the question arises of what the Departments are doing and why they need the extra money for doing less.

5.00 pm

Today we are asked to agree a Budget and to comment on how well the Departments have planned for next year. How many Members have been able to see how well Departments have stewarded their funds in the past year? Members may be interested to know that the latest published figures for the Department of Health are for the year 1997-98. Questions about this will be met with the reply that the accounts for subsequent years have not yet been officially audited. How can Members properly decide how much money a Department requires and whether such funds are justified in light of the Department's past performance if we are denied this information? The Minister of Finance and Personnel should consider this problem, because it will be a more serious factor in the next Budget.

Members will know that I am a member of the Regional Development Committee. For several weeks the Minister has been warning the Committee and the Assembly that road improvements announced by his predecessor are in jeopardy. I have here a letter — addressed to my Colleague, Mr Hussey, and dated last Wednesday — that says, quite clearly, that some schemes may have to be deferred. The latest figures from the Department on major roadworks over £1 million are therefore confusing. It is interesting that in 2000-01 £24 million was allocated. The projects over £1 million amount to a £7 million spend. I am not clear where the other £17 million or so has gone. Next year is even more interesting: £60 million has been allocated, but on the list is a £28 million spend; we seem to have lost or got confused about £32 million.

Do not forget that the Minister has said that he does not have the funds to start these road projects. He has made great play of that. Can the Minister of Finance and Personnel confirm that the Minister for Regional Development has been guaranteed 90% funding for projects in years two and three and that once the public service agreements are in place that will increase to 100% funding? I understand that the Minister has been told that the funding is available, yet he tells us that he does not have

this funding and therefore will not start the projects that were listed for the Assembly last week. That is very confusing.

Of course, these figures do not take into account Executive funds, which in year one are £7 million, £40 million in year two and £100 million in year three for infrastructure funds. The Minister of Finance and Personnel told us last week that railways and roads are key areas of infrastructure that are eligible for bids under the Executive programme funds — supportive noises there from the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Could the Minister for Regional Development have been misleading the House on the availability of funds for his roads?

I was struck by and agree with Mr Peter Robinson's statement on the railways — they were indeed heading for oblivion. It was heartening to hear him recognise the benefits of the Belfast Agreement and of devolution — brought about on behalf of the Unionist community by the Ulster Unionist Party, with no contribution, of course, from his own party. Perhaps it highlights the hypocrisy of some here. You have heard them today urge the Executive to do this or that. Is this the party that was going to bring the Assembly down and destroy it? Is this the party that sat last Friday with Sinn Féin in Belfast City Council and produced a full budget for the council? Amazing.

I am also a member of the Health Committee. The Minister of Finance and Personnel will be aware that the Health and Social Services Committee was unable to comment on the Budget. I mentioned the difficulty we experienced in obtaining figures. The NHS, despite valiant efforts on the part of its staff, is a disaster — £2.6 billion go in at one end while patients on trolleys and crises come out at the other. Funding is given to the boards; the boards allocate it to the trusts, and it sinks into the woodwork with a worsening output at the other end.

Are the Ministers of Health and Finance and Personnel not curious about where all this money goes? If ever there was a case for a public service agreement and a radical examination of the administrative system, it is in the Department of Health. I trust that by next year we shall know exactly what happens to the funding available to that Department.

I am struck by the opposition to the increase in the regional rate, which is in line with the Treasury's advice, and by the number of councillors who have supported the amendments. Perhaps those Members who are also councillors should have informed the House of a potential conflict of interests. I support the substantive motion.

Mr Bradley: We have heard a good deal about what is and what is not taking place in the Executive. I was pleased to hear the Minister describing the degree of co-operation between Ministers and Departments in drawing up the Budget.

First, I shall comment on the amendments, particularly the DUP's. Anyone who has the remotest interest in tourism, trade, business, agriculture or health must vote against the DUP's amendment. The only thing missing from its list is fresh air — we do not have control of that here yet, thank goodness.

I am as baffled as Mr McGrady by the Sinn Féin amendment; he could not understand why Sinn Féin should oppose its Ministers' stance. Under the provisions of the Budget, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's expenditure is to rise by 7.6% while a 10% increase in funding for personal social services is provided for. The Sinn Féin Ministers will not welcome their party Colleagues' amendment if it removes the 7.6% and 10% funding increases. Similarly, there is to be a 7.2% increase in funding for the Department of Education, the deduction of which Mr McGuinness would not welcome.

I am particularly interested in the Executive programme funds. I shall try to make my comments on this matter parochial rather than talk about billions of pounds. The Executive programme funds may soon be tested by the closure of the grazing lands in the Silent Valley as a result of a directive from the Minister of Health and an implementation of the ban by the Minister for Regional Development. After these had been closed, everyone ran to the Minister of Agriculture who, through no fault of her own, became the third Minister involved in the matter.

The loss experienced by farmers must be examined. This was not a one-off ban — it is to be repeated for the next three years until the new treatment plant at the Silent Valley reservoir is built. The Executive programme funds provide an opportunity for Ministers to discuss matters involving all Departments, and this is one case that meets those criteria.

Secondly, I welcome the £2 million for animal health. I have had a personal interest in this from the outset. I have never seen the sense in having two research centres and two different Governments working on animal health on the island of Ireland. Although there was some co-operation, it was not nearly enough. This £2 million will be welcome if it helps to reduce animal disease on the island of Ireland.

The third subject, which I shall discuss briefly, is the Executive's decision to increase their contribution to the free travel scheme from 50% to 75%. I recently asked the Minister of Health and the Minister for Social Development whether their respective Departments could fund the programme. I was disappointed in their response. At that point it would have meant dividing the balance of 50% between them. I was very disappointed and concerned that neither Minister saw the benefit. They said that it was not part of their remit to facilitate senior citizens by contributing to the scheme. I ask them to reconsider that proposition because I firmly believe that it could be

slotted into their Departments. It is only 25% now — 12.5% each. I believe that it would be difficult for them to refuse.

Finally, an additional £2 million has been provided for Mr Campbell today. It is a Christmas box that he could use well. I am being seasonal in one sense — he could use that £2 million for a road gritting scheme for rural areas. After all, main roads also go through rural areas. There have been no gritting schemes for 10 to 12 years, and matters would be improved if the £2 million were spent on such a scheme. I do not look for billions. Those are a few simple ideas. Perhaps I am being parochial but I would welcome their being encompassed in the Budget.

The Chairperson of the Environment Committee (Rev Dr William McCrea): First, I want to speak about some of the issues in the Budget in my role as Chairperson of the Environment Committee. I shall certainly let the House know when I am not speaking as that Committee's Chairperson but on my own behalf as an elected representative.

As Chairperson of the Environment Committee I wish to comment on the Budget's provision for the Department of the Environment. The Committee welcomed the increase of 12% in direct funding for the Department and the possibility of an additional 2.3% from the retention of receipts by the Environment and Heritage Service and the Planning Service. This has gone some way towards redressing the underfunding of important environmental and conservation work that has been undertaken in recent years. However, the Minister will not be surprised to learn that several Budget allocations still cause my Committee concern.

The Committee noted that a bid of £3.6 million for essential work on landscape protection and nature conservation was not met. Can the Minister tell the House what account was taken of the consequences of missing this bid when the allocation of funding to Departments was considered?

The Committee remains extremely concerned about the underfunding of historic buildings. The Committee welcomes the additional £1 million for this work, but I understand that this will not lift the moratorium. As a result, we shall lose funding that would be available from other sources. Will the Minister tell me what consideration was given to the effect that this may have on the built heritage? I hope that I do not have to remind the Minister or the Assembly that, like our landscape and natural heritage, once old buildings are lost they are lost for good, and we lose an important and irreplaceable part of our shared heritage and culture.

I trust that the Minister will agree that much of the Department of the Environment's work has important implications for everyone in Northern Ireland. Many issues cut across Departments, particularly the waste management strategy. Much of the implementation work on this

strategy will fall on district councils. They will not be able to meet the cost of the work without an increase in funding or an increase in rates. Many district councillors are deeply worried by the financial implications of the rates — the district rate in particular — and the burden on ratepayers.

5.15 pm

Additional funds have been made available to local councils in Great Britain, but not here. Why not? How can we hope to meet the vital targets for waste reduction and recycling in the strategy if they are not backed by the necessary money?

If the Department of the Environment fails to meet its obligations under EC Directives because it does not have the resources, which Department will meet the cost of any infraction proceedings? Will the Department of the Environment have to bear the cost because it did not have the necessary resources to put the structures and systems in place to meet its international obligations? It would be totally wrong not to make money available to it.

My final observation as Chairperson of the Environment Committee is to note that the Budget figures for 2002-03 and 2003-04 are indicative and are rounded to the nearest £10 million. They show an increase of almost £10 million for the Department of the Environment for both years. The Environment Committee welcomes the increase for the Department. Can the Minister confirm that the Department will benefit from that extra £10 million? If not, can he tell the Environment Committee and the Assembly what the real increase will be for 2002-03 and 2003-04? This document clearly says that the figures will be rounded to the nearest £10 million. It shows £110 million for the Department of the Environment, so the nearest £10 million would be £120 million. That would be deeply appreciated by the Department.

I wish to discuss other matters, speaking as a Member of the Assembly. We have received different signals from around the House today. I heard the Sinn Féin/IRA Member for Mid Ulster, Mr John Kelly, welcome Mr Durkan's motion. He differs from his party, because it did not welcome the motion but moved an amendment to it. I am not sure what is happening — is there another division in Sinn Féin/IRA? On one hand it wants to amend the motion; on the other it welcomes it. Those were Mr John Kelly's opening words. I am sure that it charmed Mr Durkan's ears when he heard that he was to be supported by Sinn Féin/IRA.

Mr John Kelly went on to say that the DUP wants the best of both worlds. That is interesting. The two Sinn Féin/IRA Ministers were at the Executive meetings; they were party to the discussions and they agreed the programme. They now find that their party has cut the feet from under them by making an amendment. They would accept the motion subject to a reduction of expenditure in the Executive programme funds in order

to lower the increase in the regional rate from 8% to the current level of inflation.

What do they want? Does Sinn Féin/IRA want the best of both worlds so that it can pretend to ratepayers that somehow it robustly defended their interests in the Assembly? In the secret closets of the Executive meetings their Ministers raised their hands in agreement to it. There seems to be a disagreement. I know that other parties disagree; but in that party disagreeing can have serious consequences. It will be interesting to see how this pans out.

In his defence of the Budget, the Minister said that an increase of 8% was justifiable because it would come from those who could afford to pay. I do not accept that. There is a major poverty trap in Northern Ireland that catches those whose wages are just above the minimum benefit level. They must pay for everything. It is they who cannot afford to pay. We find that instead of 2.9%, it will be 8%. This rate, as my hon Friend Mr Dodds said, is in line for several years to come — a constant 8%. Of course, there were howls of objections to that —

Mr Speaker: Order. I draw the Member's attention, and the attention of the House, to my injunction at the start of the debate. I trusted that when matters had been dealt with at substantial length earlier in the debate that Members would not repeat them. Many Members still wish to speak, and Members will have to be particularly creative and fascinating to get beyond 10 minutes before I call the next Member. If each Member takes even 10 minutes to speak, the debate will last for a very long time. I therefore ask Members not to exceed 10 minutes unless they are being particularly innovative in their ideas. I am listening acutely for that with all Members, not just with Dr McCrea.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I do not want to be treated differently from other Members. That rule of thumb has not been in use while I have been in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has not been listening. At the start of the debate I said that I would not impose a time limit so that Members speaking at the start of the debate would have longer to speak. I wanted Members who spoke in the later part of the debate not to repeat what other Members had said earlier. For that reason, if the Member, as he will undoubtedly do, not only attends to what I say but to what I do with regard to other Members he will find equity.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I accept your ruling, Mr Speaker.

However, the 8% is at the heart of this issue and of the amendment, and I have not heard many Members deal with the Minister of Finance and Personnel's statement on it. Very few have mentioned it or dealt with the claim that it will affect only those that can afford to pay. In fact, it will hurt those who are least able to carry the

burden. In saying that, I am guided by the Minister's statement. The burden is not placed upon those who can afford to pay the additional money; it is placed upon those who are in a very serious poverty trap. That is at the heart of the two amendments.

I hope that Members can speak to the amendments. The matter of the 8% is in both of them; it is topical, and rightly so. If there is a ruling that we do not deal with those matters, that we must deal with other matters, we shall have to consider carefully what we are supposed to say in the House.

Mr McFarland mentioned the budget for the Department for Regional Development and asked whether Mr Campbell was misleading the House. Mr McFarland knows that the Minister was not misleading the House. By making that cheap political point Mr McFarland may feel that he has done something in the debate to bring him some kudos. However, it is stupid and childish to talk about misleading the House on a very serious matter.

Getting money for the Province's roads is a serious matter. Anyone who thinks that the money that the Minister has given is sufficient to repair the Province's roads is mistaken. The Member must be in North Down and not in the rest of the country. The roads in Mid Ulster need a tremendous injection of finance. We want to ensure that we have enough money to build the Toome bypass and other vital roads in the area.

He also mentioned the Executive programme funds. People used to talk about "brown paper bags". Let us be frank: when people speak about Executive funding they mean the drip-feeding. When the Belfast Agreement gets into difficulties and the people do not see it as the way forward or do not agree with it, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister drip-feed another few million pounds into the community to keep the peasants quiet for another while.

Money for roads should go to the Department for Regional Development rather than into the central programme, where the Executive can interfere with a Department's finances. The programme, which my hon Friend has laid out in the considered amendment and on which we have been upfront and open, states exactly where the money would come from. The sad reality is that the Alliance Party has no alternative and therefore could table no amendment. The DUP has tabled a clear and considered amendment, and I trust that the House will support it.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom roinnt pointí a dhéanamh sa díospóireacht seo gan athrá nó pointí a lua a luadh cheana féin ag Comhaltaí eile.

Sa chéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom labhairt i leith an leasaithe a cuireadh chun tosaigh in ainm mo pháirtí ag an Chomhalta ó Iarthar Bhéal Feirste, Alex Maskey. Is

mian liom labhairt in éadan an mholta gur chóir an táille tís réigiúnach a mhéadú faoi 8% agus de réir sin sna blianta atá romhainn. Is mian liom fosta cur in éadan an mhéadaithe de 6·6% sa ráta tráchtála réigiúnach agus méaduithe níos lú, ach iad suntasach mar sin féin, sna blianta 2002-03 agus 2003-4.

Ar na pointí eile a ba mhaith liom béim a leagan orthu tá imthosca speisialta Chontae Thír Eoghain agus Chontae Fhear Manach, a bhfuil cur chuige cás faoi leith ag teastáil uatha; agus na buntáistí a bhaineas le comhchuibhiú uile-Éireann — go díreach, malairt an mhéid a bhí le rá ag an Uasal Nigel Dodds agus ag a Chomhghleacaithe sa DUP ní ba luaithe sa díospóireacht.

Cá bhfuil díbhinn na síochána a gealladh dúinn agus a hinseadh dúinn a steallfadh amach as coire Sheansailéir na Breataine?

I want to raise some points without being repetitive. I acknowledge the many good things in the Budget and commend the Minister and the Executive for their hard work. However, I want to argue in favour of the amendment moved by my party Colleague Mr Maskey. I want to oppose the recommendation that the domestic regional rate should be increased by 8% in 2001-02 and in subsequent years. I also want to oppose an increase of 6·6% in the non-domestic regional rate with lesser, but still significant, increases in subsequent years.

I shall briefly argue the special circumstances west of the Bann, of Counties Tyrone and Fermanagh in particular, which require a special-case approach and the merits of an all-Ireland harmonisation programme. In effect, the opposite of the case articulated by Mr Dodds and his DUP Colleagues.

5.30 pm

Where is the much heralded peace dividend that we were told would flow abundantly from the British Chancellor's coffers? Why should we oppose the increase in the regional rate? Because its impact would be much greater than the revenue it would raise. It is too much pain for too little gain. It amounts to double taxation and will have a crippling effect on already hard-pressed rate-payers, not least on those who are trying to make ends meet in small shops in towns such as Omagh, Strabane and Dungannon.

There is high feeling, anger and resentment among traders in Omagh, for example, at being rated out of business. They suffer when competing with large, out-of-town multi-outlet retailers. It is bad for the economies of small towns and rural communities.

Why should I plead a special case for west of the Bann? Because things are not equal. People there ask why they should be subject to the same percentage increase in their rates when they are wrestling with the consequences of decades of underinvestment, neglect and discrimination; when they have inadequate access to quality health

services; and when motorways end at Dungannon and just beyond Antrim. Poor roads infrastructure is a major disincentive for tourists and potential investors.

Why should there be a uniform approach when uniformity does not exist, where service provision is not uniform, allocation of resources unequal, and where there is no level playing field? Inequality must be recognised and legislated for, even if that entails a two-tiered approach and some affirmative action or rebates for disadvantaged citizens and disadvantaged areas.

The Executive could enter into a public service agreement with citizens living in disadvantaged rural areas west of the Bann to correct the huge imbalance in resources and underdevelopment.

I shall not indulge in what the DUP calls "North/Southerly". It is sufficient to assert the strength of the economy in the rest of Ireland, and the DUP, whether it likes it or not, is swimming against a very strong economic and historical tide. Looking at tourism, agriculture, industrial development and the knowledge-based economy, one can see that money spent on North/South development is money well spent. It is a progressive move and a sound investment for the future.

The Ceann Comhairle's invitation was to be innovative, and I shall be. One possible source of income has not dared to be spoken of today: the massive British military budget. Exact figures are difficult to unearth, but conservative estimates put the cost of maintaining Britain's military garrison in Ireland at between £800 million and £1 billion per annum. I want to use a visual aid. It is a map of the Six Counties outlining the British military presence.

Mr Speaker: Visual aids of this kind are not in order.

Mr McElduff: I accept your ruling, a Cheann Comhairle, but I wish to point out that there are about 52 British military installations in the Greater Belfast area.

Rev Dr William McCrea: What have military installations to do with the Budget? I was called to order a short time ago when I was speaking directly to the Budget, yet this person is completely out of line.

Mr Speaker: I am waiting to hear the relevance, Mr McElduff.

Mr McElduff: Picking up on your invitation to be innovative and responding to Mr McCrea, I ask: where will the savings be made to generate the £20 million that would otherwise be raised by imposing an unduly high regional rate? Will it come from the British Exchequer's savings or from the British war budget, which should be redirected in peacetime into a reconstruction budget?

A delegation from the Executive should meet the British Chancellor, Gordon Brown, and the Finance Minister in the rest of Ireland, Mr McCreevy, to ask where the

much promised peace dividend is. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Speaker: Whatever else I may say I can scarcely complain that the Member has not been innovative.

Dr Adamson: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it simply the advent of Christmas that makes so many people want camcorders?

Mr Speaker: I fear that the Member may need to avail himself of some of the classes that are springing up.

Dr Adamson: I would like to speak in Ullans, the literary standard of Ulster-Scots, and then give a translation.

Preses o the Tolsel an forgaithert Memmers, anent the siller ploy o Govrenment, A maun ettil at pittin forrits whit the Ulster-Scotch residents o this kintra maun an wad hae.

A heid-count daen wi McCann-Erickson speirin whit fek o fowk in Norlin Airlann thocht thairsells Ulster-Scotch cam up wi about 20%, an nummers mair nor that ledged thai war on for fendin an forderin the Ulster-Scotch leid.

Sic nummers maunnae be taen as the heicht, for mair an mair fowk is takkin tent o it, an a whein Ulster-Scotch fowkgates is on the rise. The Guideship Curn for a Siccar an Thegither Europe (OSCE), at a gaitherin o a colloque anent the fowk syde o its haundlin, gied grievance at

“belangin a minoritie leid wad be a bodie’s richt, an naebodie soud thole onie laich haundlin frae pittin sic richts forrits.”

Weill, aiblins mair nor 100,000 fowk in Ulster caas thairsells Ulster-Scotch, but thai cannae thole sic laich haundlin for aye. The pit-doun o jonik for the Ulster-Scotch leid an fowkgates maun cum ti an end richt nou.

The mair the BBC disnae pit aneuch anent the Ulster-Scotch leid on, fowks is cryin oot for it. Tak the nicht o Ulster-Scotch on BBC 2. Mair nor 120,000 pair o een wes watchin it. Echt yeir haes gien witness ti an ower ocht waukenin o Ulster-Scotch fowkgates daeins, but for aw that, maist heid-yins haes turnt a blinnd ee ti the kintra hoachin wi it, an whyles thai winnae gie jonik nor kennin ti it ava.

At the hert o the new waukenin o Ulster-Scotch fowkgates is thaim as haes been forderin the leid. The haundlin gien ti the Ulster-Scotch lede kythes mair nor ocht the pit-douns — or the pit-affs — at this native heirskip leid o our ain fowk o Ulster haes been gart thole. The Meinistrie o Fowkgates, Airts an Aisedom is ower ocht — an mair nor maist ithers apairt frae the Meinistrie o Leir — gart mak a repone ti the new waukenin o the Ulster-Scotch leid, an the repone gien maun be frae the heichmaist staundarts o jonik.

Big merkers haes been pitten down in Europe, staundarts the haundlin o the Ulster-Scotch leid maun be gaugit

agin. The Meinistrie o Fowkgates, Airts an Aisedom maun tak tent o thir staundarts nou, for thai haud athort langilt Europe. For the Scotch leid, our day isnae juist for cummin. Our day is here thenou.

It raxes oot ti aw, no juist aboot our auldryfe heirskip, for it haes a leevin spairk forby an can tak ti a modren

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Are not you and the rest of the House being discriminated against? When a Member speaks in the Irish language you have a simultaneous translation. However, when a Member exercises his right to speak in another language of his choice — and it is a right not a privilege — you are not provided with a simultaneous translation — unless you are a fluent Scotch-Irish speaker.

Mr Speaker: This big heid-yin can uise the Ulster-Scotch no tae bad — as onie a guid Ballymena man wad.

Dr Adamson: Fair faw ye, Heid Billie.

It raxes oot ti aw, no juist aboot our auldryfe heirskip, for it haes a leevin spairk forby an can tak ti a modren, ventursum, ootgangin an inventive kintra. Here ye hae the genius o our heirskip o leid, a heirskip we maun fend, forder an wauken new, sae as awbodie apen ti our ain mither tung nicht reap a hairst o blythsum leir.

Frae oot o aw this, A maun hae it pitten down in the skreived raicord, sae as the Meinistrie o Fowkgates, Airts an Aisedom is in nae dout o the staundart at maun be uised for gaugin hou weill it haes wrocht for jonik anent our fowk richts.

The Council o Europe’s Protocol Girdwark for the Beildin o Fowk Minorities hauds at a free an apen kintra, carefu o the richts o aw, maun tak respekfu tent o the fowk, kirk-gangin, heirskip an leid richts o awbodie at belangs an unner-lede o the kintra. An mair, Govrenment maun mak strecht an aisie the pads o fendin an forderin, sae as thaim as wad can kythe apenlie thair ain hert’s fowk leid.

For winnin ti siccan heich grund, indyte 2 o the protocol girdwark, airticle 4, pairt 2 gars thaim as unnerskreives the protocol ti —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has now used fully half his 10 minutes. If the Minister of Finance and Personnel is to respond to him in a manner to his liking, the Member should provide the translation now.

Dr Adamson:

“tak on haund the daein o aw that is needit in ilka pairt o leevin, siller haundlin, fowk graith an residenter haundlin, politics an fowkgates, for fu an wrocht-oot jonik aqueisht thaim as belangs the hert leid o a minoritie o fowk, an thaim belangin the maist fek.”

Mr Speaker: It is the translation of the English that I wanted.

Dr Adamson: Mr Speaker, I wish to speak about the Budget with regard to the needs and aspirations of the

Ulster-Scots community in Northern Ireland and in east Donegal.

The McCann-Erickson identity survey found that 22% to 23% of Ulster's population are happy to describe themselves as Ulster-Scots, while more than 50% of those surveyed expressed a positive attitude towards the language in particular. These figures must be regarded as the baseline for Ulster-Scots, because a rising tide of interest and enthusiasm is spreading across Ulster-Scots cultural interests.

The Conference in the Human Dimension of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe resolved that

"to belong to a national minority is a matter of a person's individual choice and no disadvantage may arise from the exercise of such a choice."

More than 100,000 people in Ulster chose to identify themselves as Ulster-Scots, but this minority is being disadvantaged and this discrimination must end now.

Although the BBC gives Ulster-Scots cultural interests only inadequate coverage, the Ulster-Scots night on BBC2 attracted an audience of more than 120,000. The last decade has seen a remarkable rise in interest in many Ulster-Scots cultural activities, but all this has taken place against a background of indifference, unfairness and outright discrimination.

The mainspring of the Ulster-Scots cultural renaissance is the Ulster-Scots language movement. The treatment afforded the Ulster-Scots illustrates graphically the discrimination and marginalisation to which the indigenous language of the Ulster people is subjected. It is vital that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure responds to the rising interest in the Ulster-Scots language in accordance with the principles of justice and equality.

5.45 pm

Happily, we do not depend on local definitions of what may reasonably be thought to constitute fairness, justice and equality of treatment. Important markers laid down in Europe will establish a standard against which the treatment afforded to the Ulster-Scots language can be judged.

Ulster-Scots has Part II status in the European Charter; that means that it is recognised as a regional minority language. The Irish language enjoys Part III status. This must not be used to justify discrimination or inequality of treatment. The Ulster-Scots community is not asking for preferential treatment, but it insists on equality because it aspires to Part III status.

The Irish language benefited from a development programme wisely embarked upon by the de Valera Government. This development programme was ideologically driven. In contrast, we maintain that the Ulster-Scots movement is entirely apolitical. Nevertheless, we require a language development programme suitable for our

specific regional needs and special circumstances. I welcome this opportunity to place before the House the undeniable claims of a people of genius, enterprise, industry, resilience and perseverance: the Ulster-Scots. They have often been inarticulate in the past but they have now found their voice through this Chamber and through the Ulster-Scots Agency of the North/South language body, *tha Boord o Scotch*, the establishment of which has at last created the conditions under which our community can grow strong.

The Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee (Mr O'Neill): Some said that we would never get this far. Well, here we are. We have a Government in place and a Programme for Government in the final stages of budgetary preparation. Sometimes we become too pre-occupied with our internecine wranglings and miss the bigger picture. We have certainly made some progress.

The development of the Budget has suffered from pressures of time and change. Many of those pressures are a result of changing from the traditional approach to a more equitable modern one. This is typified by the creation of the Executive programme funds, a very imaginative and innovative set of ideas approved by all the Ministers in the Executive. The Sinn Féin amendment is therefore all the more bizarre and unbelievable. If this amendment were made, which areas of the Executive programme funds would survive? What would be reduced and what would be abolished? A party moving a competent and responsible amendment at this stage of a budget should be required to outline any affect it might have. Sinn Féin has not done so.

With a funding allocation of only £25 million in 2000-01, this amendment would wreck any chance the programme had of getting off the ground. We have heard about the many good things in the special funds.

It is important that we hear more about this amendment, although I do not see how we could accept such an amendment at this stage.

The DUP's amendment has been accurately described as party political. I often think that our electorate is extraordinarily patient. What other electorate in the world would put up with the constant assault that the DUP has mounted on the overwhelming mandate given to the Good Friday Agreement, of which the cross-border bodies are an integral part? Its leader called today for a referendum and said that he would abide by the outcome. Why does he not abide by the other referendum on the Good Friday Agreement? Neither he nor his party has done so.

Interestingly, the special EU programmes also feature on the DUP hit list. The special EU programme provision is, of course, a cross-border programme — Peace II. Every party and almost every Member has supported not just its implementation but its early implementation according to need. Every party encouraged the establishment of the special European programme body to administer that

fund. And — guess what? — the DUP has appointed a member to that board. It has appointed an Assembly Member — Mr William Hay from the constituency of Foyle — to that board, and I am glad to see him in the Chamber. No sensible Member could possibly support this kind of self-contradiction and inconsistency.

Having made those general points, I have been asked to express some concerns on behalf of the Committee that I chair. Although recognising the Minister's difficulty in producing a sensible Budget — and that has been well achieved in the circumstances — we must put these concerns on record.

First, we were concerned because for several years the areas that comprise the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure have suffered disproportionate underfunding. There was therefore a strong argument for giving them special consideration. Unfortunately, only 25% of our additional bids were met.

Our concerns about the ability to buy out the commercial fishing nets around Northern Ireland's coastline have already been referred to the Minister, and he knows our views.

We are also concerned that the arts bid has only been met in part. Obviously, we should have liked greater emphasis placed on that. Also — and this is a very interesting and important point — no funding was included in the Budget for safety improvements to motorcycle racing facilities. As Members will remember, that has been the subject of much debate in our Committee and in the Department. All Members believe that it must be attended to. Clearly, that has disappointed the Committee.

However, it would be ungracious of me not to recognise that there is more money for libraries and for the languages of the North/South cross-border body, and that will help enormously.

Considering our difficulties, the changes that we want to make and the innovations that we want to introduce, we have made a great start.

Members should not be disappointed if their demands are not satisfied in the first round. We shall go from strength to strength. Who would have believed five years ago that we would now be considering the final stages of a budget for the programme of a new Government for Northern Ireland? In five years' time, how well honed will the new arrangements be? We shall be able to deal more efficiently with many of the problems raised today.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Education Committee (Mr S Wilson): Mr Speaker, I shall obey your injunction not to go over points that have already been made about the Budget and why the DUP moved its amendment. The arguments against the SDLP's stealth tax have been well made.

I wish to deal with the points made by some of the other parties about our amendment. As usual, Mr Close brought

a bit of life to the debate, although the arguments that he made were more or less dead. He opposed the amendment without moving one of his own. He said that he was being accused of taking a populist stance. No one could accuse the Alliance Party of being populist; "populist" implies that a party has a wee bit of support for its views.

Mr Close was also described as a magician, although he did not conjure up an amendment. Time and time again his party has lectured my party on being "negative" and on the need to offer an alternative. He was asked why he did not move an amendment, but no answer was forthcoming. I was intrigued by some of his reasoning: first he said that he could not move an amendment because the regional rate was a serious point of principle. Surely if the 8% increase in the regional rate were such a serious point of principle an alternative would have been offered. His fall-back position was that the voting system in the House was so rotten that it was not worth his while to move an amendment. His party supported that voting system. He objected — and I liked this bit — to his party's being designated "Other". That intrigued me.

The Education Committee discussed a document on the viability of integrated schools. The Alliance Party's submission described the present system of dividing people into Catholics and Protestants as unfair and called for a third category. What was that category to be called? Why "Other"! The Alliance Party objects to being called "Other" in the House and will not even table an amendment to the Budget because it is so indignant about it. However, it wants those attending integrated schools to be able to call themselves "Other". Mr Close said that he was sick of sectarian labels, although the Alliance Party's proposal for integrated schools suggested that we could have "Others" from a predominantly Protestant background and "Others" from a predominantly Roman Catholic background.

6.00 pm

This is the party that hates being labelled and that will not table an amendment because the voting system in the House labels it.

Even more intriguing was Sinn Féin's position. It said that the DUP's amendment was an assault on the Good Friday Agreement; that it was party political and an attack on "North/Southery". At least we were clear about what we were doing. Sinn Féin does not have a clue about what it is doing. We heard three or four speeches in the House today, some of which moved an amendment. Sinn Féin does not want the 8% increase. We then had a most articulate contribution from Mr John Kelly. If he had cut the "camcorder" out of it he would have halved his speech. In that highly articulate speech he actually welcomed the Budget. It seems that there are divisions in IRA/Sinn Féin. There are those who give "real" support to the Budget — the two Ministers, because they must have agreed to it; there are those who give

“provisional” support to the Budget by giving it a qualified welcome; and there are those who give it “continuing” support, because they say they do not mind the 8%’s being imposed in future. They are in a bit of a tizzy about it.

I am glad that Mr Billy Bell is here. He was speaking at a difficult time. The Ulster Unionist Party’s contributions all had the common theme of supporting the Budget and of attacking the Departments held by DUP Ministers. Billy Bell had a difficult task. First, he was trying to defend the indefensible; secondly, he was trying to do it before dinner time. I wondered at one point whether it was William Bell or dinner bell, because everyone seemed to rise to leave as he was speaking.

I was amazed at the Ulster Unionist Party’s contributions; I am even more amazed that some contributions have not yet been made. There was certainly no vigorous defence of the Budget. Time and time again I have heard members of the Ulster Unionist Party speak about the iniquity of the regional rate. I have heard them in Belfast City Council. Some of them are Ministers who must have supported the Budget. They are not here. They spoke more eloquently and more robustly than ever I did in condemning the Labour Government for imposing the 8% increase in the regional rate. It used to be said that while we in the councils sought to keep rates within inflation, the direct rule Administration imposed high rates increases upon us. The same people now support that increase, but they are not in the House to explain themselves.

One Member who is not here — and I shall be interested to see how he votes — is Mr Cobain, the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee. He has spoken previously in the House in support of the poor. He has described this as a middle-class Budget for middle-class people. I should like to have heard his comments; I should like to know how he will vote.

Paddy Roche accused DUP Ministers of writing a blank cheque. We have a blank seat, as we usually do, in his case. He never comes to hear me upbraid him. Given his opposition to the Budget, will he be here to vote against it? That will probably be a signal for him to come in to do precisely that. He certainly did not get it right because he said that it was impossible for people who had taken ministerial positions to mount credible opposition, as they had to support the decisions of the Executive.

He usually reads from a prepared script, but today he tried to ad-lib. I am sure that you were pleased by that, Mr Speaker. Unfortunately, in ad-libbing he missed the facts. If he had been reading from a prepared script or if he had looked at the Northern Ireland Act 1998 he would have seen that Ministers only have to operate in the Programme for Government when it has been agreed in the Executive Committee and authorised by the Assembly. No Minister is committed merely because it

has gone through the Executive Committee, whether there was a DUP Minister present —

Mr Speaker: Order. A script is no guarantee of facts or accuracy. Time is passing. The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr S Wilson: Whether they were in the discussions on the Budget or outside, as our Ministers were, they are not committed. If Mr Roche shows his face for the vote, he will see how bound the DUP Ministers are by this Programme for Government and Budget proposals.

I shall sit down in a moment although I had a few things more to say. This amendment should have the support of the House. It should have the support of those in the Ulster Unionist Party who tell us that they have a social conscience. The money should be spent on the people who count rather than on “North/Southerly”.

Mr McHugh: I should declare at the start of the debate that I am a councillor. I have no difficulty in differentiating between the work I do as a Member and what the Executive does. I had no part in what the Executive, in its wisdom, decided with regard to the Budget. Parts of it were, I am sure, not considered in the round. One of them is the rating system. Councillors are more acutely aware of that than anyone else.

The British Government should pay the extra money. It is a small amount, about £20 million. Someone said that it was insignificant; but it is significant to ratepayers and retailers in Fermanagh, where many are finding it difficult to survive. Some of the retailers may not be small, but they bear the major part of the 8% rise on top of annual increases.

Perhaps my own county is not in the same dire straits as some others that are trying to deal with the rise. Some areas will face much more than that this year and next year. It is unfair to burden ratepayers who cannot do anything about the predicament faced by business in their areas. Business is bad in some rural areas, and businesspeople are being asked to pay a significant amount of money. This Budget seems to depend on ratepayers paying such significant amounts.

We should have told the British Government to increase the block grant, which has been underfunded and reduced. We could raise the 8% here only to find that the British Government does not replace it in future and makes it a saving from the Exchequer. That is a possibility.

There is room for major savings in all Departments. It would not be hard to save £20 million. Farmers can see where major savings could be made in the expenses of Departments with which they are involved. The Barnett formula is another example. We must deal with people who talk about being treated equally. Unionists are not treated equally here, although they talk about equality with the rest of the UK, as they call it.

The British Government have saved billions of pounds from the conflict budget, yet they do not reinvest that money in an economy that they have ruined. Unionists can hardly regard that failure to reinvest as equal treatment.

Costs here are much higher than in England; electricity, for example, is much more expensive, and that affects people who must deal with cuts every day of the week. Those are our problems. We should not ask those people to come up with the money. It may be insignificant in the overall Exchequer funding from the British Government, but it is very significant locally.

The cross-border bodies are a vital part of the Good Friday Agreement. They are essential to the running of our island economy. Anyone with any business sense must admit that Ireland must be run as one island. Those who oppose it do so for purely political reasons; they know that it is not practical to work without cross-border co-operation.

An addition of £7.6 million has been made to the health budget. Will it be used to replace some of the gynaecological services that have been removed from the Erne Hospital? Other services, such as mental health day care, have been removed or are underfunded — not by very large amounts but by a few thousand. Many people depend on that, but the boards have not come up with it. The trusts blame the boards, but local people suffer because the money has not been drawn down. I seek the necessary extra funding.

Travel for the elderly is grand, but those in rural areas with very little rail or public transport will not gain by it. It suits cities, but we shall be asked to contribute to it without benefiting from it.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has received an extra £2 million for the LEADER programme and for disease control, both of which consist largely of administration. Its budget has been increased to £192 million, as well as £2 million and modulation money for farmers. What will the Department do with it all? How much of it is directed to Department administration rather than being drawn down to farmers? Farmers will have great difficulty in seeing its effect on farms.

The Budget does not provide for any of the schemes that we asked for: the environmental scheme, installation aid for young farmers, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development equality schemes, the vision groups and an increase in animal disease compensation. Although it may be necessary to help disease control at first, that budget would fall if effective disease control were achieved. How effective has the eradication of brucellosis or tuberculosis been if such increases are necessary? It is vital that these funds be properly and effectively used rather than exploited, which may happen.

The Department of Agriculture's administration budget is being increased while many can no longer afford to remain in farming. That is indeed a stark contrast. Will the

extra money be eaten up in administration; will nothing be directed to farmers? Modulation funding is farmers' money, but they have no say in where it goes. They are asked to pay yet they get no return. It starts at 2.5% in the first year and increases to 4.5% year on year for the next two years, yet farmers have no say in where it goes.

6.15 pm

The effect that the increase of the £26 million as well as the £7 million and the modulation money will have over the next two years is questionable. BSE is still mainly to blame for farmers' predicament. They will not be allowed to use meat-and-bone meals, and that will create an extra expense for farms. They are not allowed to use it now in feeds because the United States used genetic modification in the production of soya, and retailers will no longer accept it. Therefore, farmers must look elsewhere. How can quality beef schemes be implemented, given the farmers' situation? That will become clearer in the weeks to come.

The money that has been given to the electronic portal and to farm business development may benefit farmers, and I hope that it solves their problems. How much of the Budget has been designed to help farmers out of their difficulties — the stress and financial problems of having to go to the banks to restructure loans? The Budget must deal with that, but that may be the decision of individual Ministers and not of Mr Durkan.

Mr Ford: Mr Speaker, I am sure you will be relieved that at this time of night I have thrown away the Irish and Ulster-Scots versions of my speech. However, you will not be surprised to know that I cannot miss the opportunity to start by discussing the regional rate.

I do not propose to repeat everything. Those of us in this corner of the Chamber who talk about the need for tax-varying powers are frequently criticised by Ministers who oppose that principle. However, even Sammy Wilson adopted Mr Close's terminology and referred to the introduction of a "stealth tax". Of course, the major benefits are that, first, it is not seen and, secondly, if it is seen, the councils get the blame. I must warn the Minister that the councils are starting to fight back.

No doubt he has plenty to read: he may read the Derry papers but not necessarily the 'Coleraine Chronicle' every week. I draw his attention to an article in the edition of 21 November. A motion proposed by Alliance councillor Bill Matthews expressing concern at the rates rise and asking the council to write to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister was passed unanimously. Interestingly, among the councillors reported as having spoken on the issue was a Cllr Dallat, whom I see nodding to the Minister. *[Interruption.]*

DUP Members should wake up. They are a bit slow.

Cllr Dallat expressed some very interesting views, which I am sure Members wish to hear — they may inform SDLP Back-Benchers on the debate. To my knowledge, no correction was published in the edition of 28 November, so I presume that this is correct. Cllr John Dallat and Cllr Eamon Mullan agreed with the Alliance Party proposal. Cllr Dallat also reminded the council that this is a notional rise — 8% may not be the final figure. If we are worried about 8% it appears that there is a hotline straight from the council offices in Coleraine to the Department of Finance and Personnel in Bangor; it informs us that it will be March before we know the final figure. I hoped that the document the Minister presented to us and that we are debating today would give us the final figure.

The council unanimously accepted the Alliance Party's position — a precedent I recommend to the Assembly on every occasion. Similarly, I was informed by the 'Good Morning Ulster' programme this morning that Mr Close was getting the credit for running a "one-man campaign" against excessive rises in the regional rate. It is clear from the reaction to it that the "one-man campaign" appears to have won the majority opinion in the Chamber. Clearly there is some unity on that point.

All this has happened because the regional rate rise was shoved through. It is the bluntest possible tax, unless the Minister is proposing to introduce the poll tax next year. All that has been gained is about £10 million for next year, a sum that will be well covered by the increases in departmental running costs across the 10 — or is it 11? — Departments. I can never remember which.

Indeed, it could be covered by what I understand to be a significant underspend in the Assembly's running costs this year; money that can presumably be reallocated. It is time that the Minister told us whether he intends to play catch up with the council tax in England and Wales — or Yorkshire and Humberside, if those are the regions to which we are compared. If he does propose to play catch up, for how many years — not just the three years in this plan — must we have an excessive rise in the regional rate to facilitate it? Is that fair to those who are only slightly above the poverty line in Northern Ireland?

Free travel for pensioners also impinges on the rates. We used to complain in the bad old days of direct rule that Ministers made commitments while councils had the job of implementing them without the necessary funding. I suppose that we should be grateful for getting three quarters of the funding. However, the other 25% will lie as a charge upon the district rates. The Minister of the Environment has cut the district rate as part of his rates support grant, which is being funded by an increase in the regional rate. That is toytown economics — it does not add up.

Public service agreements were referred to but not dealt with. The Budget proposes including them for each

Department. Obviously, we welcome the greater accountability in delivering Government services. However, it is a clear example of putting the cart before the horse. We ought to have had a Programme for Government first. We should have costed it, and then we could have had public service agreements followed by a budget. Instead, it is being driven in the wrong direction. In referring to "Departments" the statement is unclear whether it means the 10 statutory Departments or the 11 effective Departments — the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister seems to have an ever greater say. Will the agreements apply to the whole public sector? How will they be introduced? Into whose bailiwick will the enforcement of public service agreements fall? Are they a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel? Is the Minister of Finance and Personnel being put up to speak on them for the Executive when they are yet another matter being centralised in the economic policy unit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister?

Of course, there is talk there about value for money. We all know that we have limited resources — limited not least because of the refusal to consider tax-varying powers. We all know what has happened in Northern Ireland over recent years with the introduction of the private finance initiative (PFI) and the change to public-private partnerships (PPPs), which seem merely to change a few initials without changing the principles very much. The Minister is well aware from the Adjournment debate a few months ago that I do not entirely oppose the concept of PPPs. Indeed, I can see benefits for the Antrim town centre development.

However, it is time for the Executive to tell us their proposals on them. Will they repeat the disastrous mistakes made with PFI on aspects of public services that did not sit well with the private management of public services? I have in mind the kind of problems that have arisen in hospitals, and in the Health Service generally, in parts of Great Britain. Given the problems of funding Translink — the railways, Ulsterbus and Citybus — will there be a proposal to sell it off? Will the Executive tell us soon about the virtues of private profit in maintaining rail safety or will they wait until the Hatfield news fades a little?

It is time for the Executive to make proposals that are more than a pale imitation of Gordon Brown's. For example, it could consider the proposal for a bonds issue; that is attracting considerable support with regard to the London tube. We should take a more imaginative look at leasing rather than accept the threat, which is implicit in how value for money is presented, that privatisation is the only option.

The proposed amendments, apart from adopting the Alliance Party's views on regional rates, seem to have different flavours. The DUP amendment opposes North/South bodies. Interestingly, it has also chosen to drag in

the Civic Forum. It is unlikely to attract support from across the Assembly — and certainly not from my party — in its attempt to put its political point into the Budget.

Sinn Féin has chosen to attack the Executive programme funds.

That surprises me. We must take a more imaginative look at this, although not, I hope, as imaginative a look as Mr McElduff's. The Executive programme funds are very different from the old direct rule proposals. They are an opportunity to make progress. Although it remains to be seen how well they work — they certainly do not attract carte blanche approval yet — they should at least be given a chance. We shall not support a proposal to remove money from the Executive programme funds as the only way of keeping the regional rate down.

Everyone knew from the beginning that the DUP would try to distance itself from the Executive as soon as it took its seats there. I find it bizarre that, although Sinn Féin participates fully in the Executive, its Members did their best to distance themselves from Executive policy.

On the whole, the Minister has got off lightly with his Budget proposals because of the proposed increase in public expenditure across the United Kingdom. This may have more to do with the prospects of a Westminster general election than with the needs of the Assembly. However, the Budget has demonstrated the failure of the Executive to set priorities. I did not support devolution merely to have a pale imitation of Gordon Brown's policies implemented without real regard for our society's needs. I certainly did not want a Budget that would lead to a sectarian dogfight. The Assembly should get away from such sectarianism and cheap motives. I appeal to Members to do the right thing and say "The Budget as it stands is not acceptable; it does not meet our constituents' needs. It should be opposed".

The Deputy Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee (Mr Savage): I welcome Northern Ireland's first Budget in 30 years. Local people are delivering a way forward in difficult times. The acid test of any legislative Assembly is its financial clout. Representative bodies are often judged by the potency of their spending power. The result of the Assembly's spending power has been a concentration of much effective decision making in local hands.

However, one great question lies unresolved at the heart of Mr Durkan's Budget. It is a question to which the Ulster Unionist Party would like an answer. I refer to the Barnett formula, which governs our relationship with the sovereign Parliament at Westminster or, more accurately, with the Treasury in Whitehall. The Treasury is known for its meanness; and the present incumbent of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's office is noted for a canny approach to public spending characteristic of his Scottish prudence. Coincidentally, of course, this has resulted in a massive war chest, which the Labour

Government will use through public spending to attract voters at the next general election.

It is time to deal with the Barnett formula properly, using all the emphasis that the Assembly can muster. I note that point 35 of the Minister's statement on 12 December says

"The Executive remains determined to engage with the Treasury"

on the Barnett formula. Our approach must be more formal and more aggressive. The Assembly must formally address Her Majesty's Government and the sovereign Parliament in Westminster, because they govern the relationship between the Assembly and the Executive and the Westminster Parliament and the Government of the day in the only issue that really matters — finance.

In the Minister's statement of 12 December I read with mounting concern that the practical effects of the Barnett formula are on European Union funding. Only one European Union programme, Peace II, is outside the operation of the Barnett formula. This is the only money that we receive directly from Europe. In paragraph 14 of his statement last Monday the Minister detailed the extra financial burden that he must meet in order to deliver the contents of European Union programmes effectively and appropriately. There is an extra £15 million in 2000-01, an extra £20 million in 2001-02 and an extra £20 million in 2002-03. That is £55 million over the next three fiscal years. This should not be. Those community programmes were designed to meet identified needs.

6.30 pm

Whitehall should not be pocketing the money for itself, yet that in effect is what is happening. The Minister agrees with this — he said as much in paragraphs 14, 34 and 35. Clearly, the operation of the Barnett formula irks him, as it does any right-thinking person. The Minister should tell us whether this European slippage is the only adverse effect of the Barnett formula. The key issue must be, of course, how much the loss of money through Barnett reduces our effective spending power.

Our approach to dealing with this matter should be formal rather than causal. The issues must be publicly and transparently aired. After all, Mr Blair's Government often tells us of the need for transparency — let us now see some of it.

I wish to comment on the additional money, some £2 million above the figure given by the Minister in October, which is being allocated to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. In a statement on 12 March the Minister said that the money was to be used for animal health programmes. No one disputes the importance of those programmes, but, as I have said before and will say again, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is much too consumer-orientated — it should be more producer-orientated.

The additional money should be used to tackle the real drop in rural development spending that augments so many farm incomes. This is at a time when the incomes of farmers and fishermen are dropping steeply — a point I made in a debate on the agriculture industry two weeks ago.

Only last week we heard about the severe cuts in the fishing quotas. This is the latest serious blow to an industry already reeling from disasters. For every fisherman who works on a boat another five are employed elsewhere in the industry. We must have equity across the whole agriculture and fisheries sector. We must also do something about farm incomes.

The only subheadings in the Budget which I can see effecting farmers' incomes are "Food & Farm Policy" and "Domestic Agriculture Policy". Together they represent about £55 million — only a quarter of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's total budget. That means that more than three quarters of the Department's budget is being spent on administration and not directly on farmers' incomes.

That is where the real crisis is. We must tackle new issues with new money and not continue to do more of the same. That is the essence of the proactivity spoken of in the agriculture motion unanimously agreed in the House on 5 December. Three things that people want are a reasonable education, a good job and to be able to own their own home. We politicians must create an environment where those things are possible. Farmers, farm workers and fishermen should not be excluded or ignored.

Section 2 on key Budget messages mentions an increase in health spending. We are all aware of the overcrowding in our hospitals and we are very lucky not to have been hit by an epidemic. Other important features are an increase of nearly 10% for agriculture and rural development, railways, provision for the first phase of the investment needed to make the network safe and action on vital environmental measures.

Those are only a few of them. I believe that the 8% increase can be spent wisely on important services that affect our everyday life, such as our hospitals and schools. I do not like the 8% increase; but if it can make a real difference where it matters it will be welcome. Those matters must be tackled. I hope that, as the Assembly makes progress and if the Budget is passed today, they will not be brushed under the carpet. They are real issues that affect us all.

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Dallat): It is not every week that the Alliance Party in Coleraine has an initiative, so it would be remiss of me to ignore it. It does have occasional initiatives on money. The debate in Coleraine took place before the Minister of Finance and Personnel announced an extra £31.7 million for Departments to achieve goals that I passionately

believe in — goals that Mr Ford and his Colleagues in the Alliance Party have no time for. It is a shame that the Alliance Party wants to turn its back on the socially deprived. Where is its vision for a future in which all people will be equal?

The Alliance Party motion was penned in one of the most affluent electoral wards in Coleraine, a town that also has the poorest electoral ward in Northern Ireland. On that matter, I rest my case without apology.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: I certainly will not. I have long experience of that.

The proposals in the Budget reflect broad agreement — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker, you must control your party Colleagues.

Mr Speaker: The Member's remark is wholly out of line. The Speaker is now outside party politics and has scrupulously maintained that position. He does not have any statements from inside or outside the Chamber to which other Members can refer, as has been the case here.

Mr Dallat: Mr Speaker, that was an historical reference. The proposals in the Budget reflect broad agreement among the main parties and reflect how the Assembly should spend its money over the next year. This is by any yardstick an historic occasion, as it represents the end of 30 years of direct rule and the disadvantages of absentee landlords. It also represents the beginning of direct accountability for how money is targeted, how it is spent and how waste can be avoided. I shall return to that when I speak in my role as Chairman of the Audit Committee.

There will be much disagreement, but that is in the nature of politics. Nevertheless, all Members must be honest with themselves and, more importantly, with the electorate in outlining where money can be saved if they believe that a particular Department should be prioritised. Last Friday, the Minister of Further and Higher Education, Training and Employment, Dr Seán Farren, announced his proposals on fees and other aspects of support for part and full-time students in further and higher education.

The package received broad agreement from the Executive and general approval in the wider community. Some matters must be clarified over the next few weeks, and I have no doubt that they will be. However, when the Further and Higher Education, Training and Employment Committee discussed the package of reforms I was taken aback by a remark of a Sinn Féin member. He told us that he was not concerned about the views of his Colleagues in the Executive, Bairbre de Brún and Martin McGuinness, who helped to approve the package.

I do not mean to tell tales on the hon Member for Mid Ulster: he has already said that there are no pontiffs in

Sinn Féin; nor do I wish to rubbish his independence as a Back-Bencher. I raise the matter to illustrate how strange it is to make demands that all of us could and would support in an ideal world but which cannot be delivered while funds are finite. In such circumstances it is right and proper that scarce resources be targeted at the socially disadvantaged. How can a budget ever be agreed if everyone does his own thing?

Although I do not share the political views of Minister de Brún or of Minister McGuinness, I am very concerned that they should have the resources to fund their Departments just as I want Dr Farren to have adequate funding for student finance. I hold the same view with regard to every other Minister, including the two absentee Ministers of the DUP. I take no pleasure in reading about Gregory Campbell's being stuck in a snowstorm on the Glenshane Pass or stuck in a traffic jam in Toomebridge.

Returning to health and education, I do not want to see a repeat of an incident last week when one of my sick elderly constituents had to be transferred by private car from Altnagelvin Hospital to Coleraine Hospital because there was no ambulance.

I want to see an end to the serious problems of poor literacy and poor numeracy, which, according to the latest provisional figures, are getting worse. Can anyone justify the fact that one in four people leaves school with serious problems in reading and counting? I think not. Term workers in schools who are not paid during holidays and who cannot receive benefits face problems. I want to see those problems resolved. I want that section of support staff to enjoy stability so that the children who need them most are not disadvantaged.

When we make demands and roar from rooftops or from open-deck buses let us keep in mind that while resources are scarce we have a duty to target social need and to protect the rights of the poor. We also have a duty to view the big picture when the resources are not adequate to meet everyone's demands. By and large, the Executive have done that in an equitable manner in spite of the unacceptable behaviour of the DUP, whose Ministers refuse to participate in the Executive. It seems strange — puzzling even — that any individual should abandon the principles of equality and targeting social need. I consider these principles to be much more important than any others that we may wish to see implemented when resources are more plentiful.

'Making a difference' is a fundamental theme of the Programme for Government to which the Executive are committed. That difference will be seen in the proposals contained in the Budget for the services for which the Executive and, ultimately, the Assembly are responsible as we decide upon the allocation of the resources available. That difference must be measured against new targeting social need (New TSN) and equality requirements, which are fundamental to the Good Friday Agreement. In

practice, they oblige us to target the needs of the poor. In other words, the needs of the poor must have priority when we allocate funds.

We must also make our allocations with due regard to the equality provisions of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This means ensuring that we not only avoid discrimination on the grounds of religion, politics, gender, race or disability, but that we actively promote equality.

The DUP amendment is not worthy of serious debate and the Sinn Féin amendment is also disappointing. The Executive programme funds are a product of devolution. They allow us to get more out of the Government by making Departments more accountable for their expenditure and by forcing them to be more imaginative when they seek funding. The Executive programme funds are about giving back to the people what the Government have taken away in the past. These amendments are informed more by the writings of Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' than by serious and responsible representative politics. One cannot accept power without accepting responsibility. It appears that Sinn Féin and the DUP want, just as the literary character did, to live one life inside Government and another outside it.

Mr Maskey proposed taking resources out of the Executive programme funds. He suggests that we remove resources designed to tackle social exclusion, to deal with the needs of our children, to regenerate rural and urban communities and to improve public services. I am not prepared to see priorities that have been neglected over 30 years of direct rule put on the back burner once again.

6.45 pm

I could go on but I have made my point. There must be an holistic approach to the spending of scarce resources, and that means that not everyone will be happy. That does not mean, however, that improvements cannot be made, that better ways of delivering services cannot be found; that is the task of Assembly Members, individually and collectively. It does not mean that I do not aspire to the abolition of fees or that I cannot work towards that as an individual or collectively with other Members.

Finally, the Public Accounts Committee or the Audit Committee that I referred to earlier may have to ask for funds to finance extra scrutiny.

Mr Paisley Jnr: It is interesting to follow Mr Dallat. He spent the first three or four minutes of his speech apologising for how he voted on the rates in the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee and in his local council. I hope that tonight, after one of our longest debates, he will know exactly how he is supposed to vote and will not make any mistakes for which he will later have to apologise. I also hope that he tells Dr Farren who Mr Robert Louis Stevenson is. In a recent radio interview the Minister

seemed to be unaware of some of the literary giants to whom Mr Dallat referred.

Several Members are also members of local authorities. Whenever a council set a scrupulously low council rate it wrote to the relevant Minister asking him not to take advantage of that to strike a high regional rate. I understand that Mr Durkan, when a member of his local council, followed that practice. I hope that tonight he will hear the plea of the people and accept that we should not take advantage of low council rates to set a high regional rate. I support wholeheartedly the comments of my Colleagues, the Members for North Belfast, Mr Dodds, and East Belfast, Mr Peter Robinson, who moved the amendment. The amendment shows that some cuts could be made to the Budget to untie the Minister's hands and to put the money into a better budget.

I also listened to the whingeing of several IRA/Sinn Féin Members; it serves absolutely no purpose. Mr John Kelly, the Member for Mid Ulster, opposed the DUP's argument on "North/Southerly" and our objections to spending money on the North/South bodies. Of course, Mr Kelly's party and its other wing — the Provisional IRA — have for several years been engaged in cross-border activities. One of the most recent was blowing up the heart of Omagh, killing 29 people. On several other occasions the IRA executed people and fled across the border.

We must object to the bloodthirstiness at the heart of Sinn Féin's cross-border policy. Its members read us a homily about supporting cross-border initiatives, although their party has used the border to hide from justice. That is a sick joke, and everyone will see through it. However, the hypocrisy of Sinn Féin Members caps it all. They are first in line with the begging bowl, asking for watchtowers to be ripped down and asking the British Government to stop spending on security for the people of Northern Ireland. Their hypocrisy is blatant.

The Budget is really all about who gets what and what they do with it. No one underestimates the difficulty of the Minister's task, but it would be irresponsible to give him a lap of honour and to heap praise on him when there are still serious problems with his Budget.

The Budget has totally failed to stop the waste that lies at its own heart. We are all aware of the waste on the part of some Departments, namely Health and Education. We all know that every month the Health Minister wastes approximately £2,500 on completely unnecessary duplication and translation costs. We all received the Health Department's 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care' document this week; it had been translated and published in Irish. How much did that cost? How much more waste of resources will the Executive tolerate before they stop it at their own heart?

The same Minister wasted £3,300 on a non-existent cross-border meeting in Enniskillen; money should not

have been wasted in such a manner. That Minister's decision on maternity services is now subject to a judicial review; that is yet another waste of resources by her Department, for she took what was a blatantly political decision. Now she is wasting money on primary care publications.

This waste, this rottenness at the heart of government must be eradicated. It exposes Sinn Féin/IRA's real agenda in all this, and that agenda has nothing to do with contributing to the good government of Northern Ireland. It is about one thing and one thing only — bleeding Ulster dry, and if it can use the Government into which it has been put to achieve that, it will not hesitate to do so. All this condemns those who thought that it was a good idea to put these bloodsuckers into the Government of Northern Ireland.

The debate raises the issue of the structure of government, and to some degree the report of the draft Budget for 2001-02 deals with this. The structure of government means that the Minister's hands, whether he likes it or not, are excessively tied. In many respects, this Government is a shambles. It is a shambles because there are too many Ministers, too many Departments and too much government, and for all the government that we have in this place there is very little legislation.

The DUP has shown that the structure of government lies at the heart of many of the Finance Minister's problems. When the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister introduced proposals to increase government to its present overwhelming size, we said that it was a political decision to give jobs to the boys. We said that it was excessive and wasteful, and today we have been proved right. There are people on the other side of the House who agreed in principle with this massive government who now see the folly of their ways. I see that my Colleague from North Antrim, Mr Leslie, is here. I noticed in a local newspaper that he called for a review of the size of the parties. I welcome that; it shows that some people realise that government here is too big and must be reduced. He also says that the only thing in favour of the DUP Ministers' non-attendance is that a Committee of 10 is probably easier to work than a Committee of 12. However, a Committee of five or six is considerably easier to work than a Committee of 10. It shows that this Government is excessive and that the Minister's hands are tied with regard to his Budget.

I found the Committee Chairpersons' comments in the report of the draft Budget very interesting — so much for a united approach. The Chairpersons of various Committees — and not just DUP Chairpersons, but Ulster Unionist, SDLP and Sinn Féin Chairpersons — all criticised the Budget proposals. The exceptions were the SDLP Chairperson of the Health Committee, who did not bother reporting to us for various reasons; and the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee,

Mr Cobain, who is too busy writing articles for the 'Shankill Mirror' to report his concerns on the matter.

Every one of them talked of excessive shortfall and of their acute disappointment in the Budget, which Dr Birnie mentioned, its inadequacy and its lack of provision for victims. That shows that the Budget and the House are by no means united.

Therefore we should have a cost-cutting exercise and we should endorse the DUP amendment.

I want very briefly to concentrate on the waste that lies at the heart of government because I think that this waste —

Mr Speaker: The Member will have to be brief as there is only one minute left.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I shall concentrate on a couple of points. Time and time again I have tried to plug the issue of waste by asking certain questions. I understand that the Minister of Agriculture is prepared to spend £2,400 on the steering committee on cross-border rural development, although all its work could be adequately performed by her Department.

However, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's pièce de résistance must be its recent decision to spend money on a peace maze at Castlewellan. A peace maze is well and good, and it might even attract tourists — there is, of course, no business programme for that — but this project cost £138,000, 25% of which came directly from the Department of Agriculture. Indeed, her Department contributed the other 75% or £103,500.

This waste, and that which is replicated across all Departments —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Paisley Jnr: The waste across all the Departments must be plugged. I appeal to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to deal with the question of waste when drawing up his next Budget. Only then shall we see a real and meaningful budget.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to debate the Budget and I acknowledge that it is a fairly substantial and generally good piece of work by the Executive. I congratulate the Executive and the Minister on their work.

However, as a member of the Social Development Committee I am extremely disappointed that the Department for Social Development failed to negotiate any substantive increase in its budgetary allocation.

Some departmental running costs are outrageous. Running the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, for example, accounts for 51.4% of the

total expenditure, followed by the Department of the Environment. The Department for Social Development is not far behind. The Department's central administration unit, the Child Support Agency and social security benefited most from additional cash.

Unfortunately, the community and voluntary sectors, which do sterling work in areas of great social need and which employ many people, have not received adequate funding. We must spend much more on these sectors to eradicate the differences between communities and to end discrimination rather than starve them of resources.

Many community workers deal with long-term unemployment or drug and alcohol abuse while giving advice and practical assistance to the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in our communities. The sector employs thousands who work in communities for local people, yet many have already lost their jobs because of a lack of gap funding. As more people are employed in the community and voluntary sectors than in the textiles industry, we should try to stabilise employment in order to give job security to them in carrying out this valuable work.

The regeneration of our towns and villages has also been a victim of this Budget — the yearly allocation for this has been slashed by 4.4%. In recent years millions of pounds of public and private money have been pumped into east Belfast through the Laganside project. It follows therefore that increased expenditure in towns and villages would be a more appropriate means of levelling the playing field. No public finance has been channelled into regeneration, and the effects can clearly be seen in parts of our cities and towns. A great deal of work has been done, particularly in areas that have suffered deprivation and neglect for generations.

However, I shall concentrate on the area that has suffered most in this Budget, and that is housing. I welcome the allocation of £3.5 million for disabled adaptations and accept that this will greatly alleviate suffering and improve the quality of life for many disabled and elderly people, some of whom have been waiting for over two years. However, this is not enough. The Housing Executive's budget is being increased by 1.5%, although when inflation has been taken into account, there is actually a decrease.

Thousands of pounds are taken out of Housing Executive coffers every year in receipts from the sale of Housing Executive properties, leaving the Executive to pay interest for years on money that has long been returned to the British Exchequer.

7.00 pm

This situation is not acceptable.

Furthermore, the Minister for Social Development proposes hiking Housing Executive rents by GDP plus 2%, despite the Committee's rejecting this ludicrous plan.

If the Minister were really trying to avoid increasing rents, surely he would have made a bid for additional resources and gone to the Executive to argue his case. Although the Minister has told us how many kitchen and bathroom adaptations could be made if this increase were approved, we have not heard how this would affect those who are on benefits. What are the implications for those Housing Executive tenants who cannot get work or who are not fit to take it? I fear that these increases would ensure that every Housing Executive tenant would be on benefits, resulting in Housing Executive estates all over the Six Counties becoming a dumping ground for those who cannot get work or who are not fit to work. Mixed tenure housing would be a thing of the past, and the many people who cannot afford to go out to work could expect to see out their days in poverty.

Why should young people who grow up on some of these estates strive to achieve anything at school if they are part of a culture that ensures they cannot afford to get a job when they leave? What shall we instil in future generations if they grow up believing that they will be dependent on benefits because the cost of living for those who work is too high? If the Minister insists on forcing these increases through, he will be making a mockery of targeting social need and will only highlight his lack of understanding of the needs of those who live in social housing.

In conclusion, I add my name to the list of those who are opposed to an increase in the regional rate. The pain involved is not worth the gain, and many small businesses will go to the wall, particularly in rural communities. The difference between the pound and the punt means that businesses in my constituency are already struggling to make a living, but this increase will ensure that towns such as Aughnacloy, Dungannon, Kinawley and Belleek will have to shut up shop and accept defeat. No representative of rural and border constituencies can allow this rate to go through unopposed.

I acknowledge the amendments tabled by the DUP and by own party. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker, I cannot talk while that rabble is making such a noise.

Mr Speaker: If Members wish to hold conversations, they should do so in the Members' Lobby.

Ms Gildernew: I was interested in what the Alliance Party had to say. Has it any practical suggestions to make on the differential? It is easy to criticise; we can, however, seek alternatives. We should insist that moneys be made available from the peace dividend and we should think of more imaginative ways of resourcing our necessary services. Why should the Dublin Government not be asked to contribute to health, to roads and to an infrastructure that is already desperately poor in certain areas? We will not resort to bleeding the disadvantaged dry; we will not fleece those who pay for services to which

they no longer have access; we will not ask people who must travel over 30 miles to the nearest accident and emergency or maternity unit to pay an additional 8% on their rates bill. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Morrice: Rev Dr Ian Paisley said this afternoon that this Budget should be spent

"in the best possible way, for the best possible ends, and distributed to the neediest of our people".

Dare I suggest that no one in the Assembly would oppose that? We all want the best possible way and the best possible ends to those most in need. That would be a good start.

I want to focus on road safety, as urgent measures are needed to improve it, and to improve it quickly. I appeal to all those Ministers into whose portfolio it falls. We need a major injection of funding to tackle the terror that stalks our roads, particularly at Christmas.

How many more mornings shall we wake to hear the tragic news of another death on our roads? These are young deaths, avoidable deaths. When shall we realise that more must be done?

Having studied the Budget and the Department of the Environment's plans, I commend the decision to increase the road safety budget over the next four years. It will increase from approximately £4 million to £10 million by 2004. That is valuable; but it is not enough. It is not enough.

I also commend the Executive Committee's decision to fund a recruitment drive to increase the number of road safety education officers. Come on! Road safety education officers are not enough. Just look at the death toll on our roads. We need much more. We must attack the cause of this scourge of modern society at its root and from every direction. We need a cross-departmental package. We must reduce speed limits, introduce more traffic-calming measures, especially in urban areas near primary schools and hospitals and in areas where children gather. The laws on speed limits and drink-driving must be applied more strictly. We must fund public transport. We have been speaking this afternoon about road improvements — and they are needed, in rural areas as well as in cities. However, to get people off the roads and into buses and trains increased funding of public transport is also needed, particularly for rail transport. That would reduce congestion and reduce the danger to pedestrians.

The Committees have highlighted the urgent need to reduce the overcrowding of children on buses. I do not have the exact figures to hand but I believe that 100 children may be transported on a 50-seater bus — without seat belts. We know what happens if we are stopped by the police and a child in the back of the car is not wearing a seat belt. However, we can cram our buses,

which are not equipped with seat belts, full of school-children and get away with it. What are we doing?

One vital issue that is probably not being tackled properly is the need for much more funding and more victims' support groups to counsel the families of road death victims and the injured. Terrible trauma and tragedy are inflicted upon these families, and many have nowhere to go for the counselling that they need to bring them through the crisis.

These are areas where a whole package of measures could be put into place immediately. I know that Members are aware that the issue is topical. However, it is not just topical: it is a matter of life and death and must be dealt with urgently.

I want to consider the breakdown of funding in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Office has many responsibilities, but in the Budget allocation there is no mention of some of the important ones, such as the amount of money that will go to victims. That is number one.

Secondly, there are women's issues. Do not forget that women's centres are important for promoting lifelong learning, education and training. How much will go to them? Why has it not been broken down in the Budget?

Community relations is another. A famous gentleman, who was in the Province recently, said that peace is not a spectator sport. We have recognised that by urging more cross-community contact. Where is the money to support those grand words? Where is the money? I want to know.

One example that I always cite is integrated education, and I am glad that the Minister is present to hear this. How much more money do we need to promote the valuable cross-community work of integrated education? This morning there was a festival for integrated education in Irish-medium schools. That is valuable in bringing the matter to the fore, but I want money where mouths are. I want integrated education to be recognised as hugely important for the future of Northern Ireland, for peace building and for reconciliation.

I could mention many other topics such as industry and agriculture; I could mention marketing matters that must be dealt with. We must spend more on innovation, on energy efficiency, pollution control and waste. Where is the money to go into the things that Northern Ireland needs? However, I said that I would be brief and I shall finish there.

Mr Weir: I had intended to start by congratulating the Minister on making full use of the resources available to him. However, during the debate I have had something of a Damascus Road conversion. Listening to Mr John Kelly from Mid Ulster, I understood how lacking in innovation the Minister of Finance and Personnel had been. As well as looking for more money from the

British Government, Mr Kelly said that we should speak to the Irish Government to find out how eager they are to fund reunification. If an approach were made to the Irish Government to put substantial funds into the Exchequer, perhaps we would see just how keen they really are beyond the rhetoric. We are also told of the great pool of money in Irish America.

Let us not leave the matter at that. We heard from Mr Kelly that we could perhaps trace Strongbow's relatives to the root of Ireland's historic problems and get them to finance the increases in the Budget. Let us not limit ourselves to the earth — the Executive could set aside a little bit of money for a satellite to go to far-flung galaxies that may be prepared to provide funding.

Mr Speaker: Order. The relevance to the earthbound budget is increasingly distant. I ask the Member to stick to the earth, please.

Mr Weir: This is an historic day; that, however, is not necessarily a compliment. After all, the Battle of Hastings was an historic day, but depending on whether one was on the side of King Harold or King William it was either a good historic day or a bad one. The Administration's key test will be the people of Northern Ireland; and the test of the Budget will be the system of government's ability to change things for their good.

I want to return briefly to Mr Close's remarks. He quite properly raised the question of the regional rate and its inequities, but his party's position beggars belief. Mr Close told us to avoid being Pontius Pilate, but the Alliance position on the two amendments is precisely that. The position of Mr McGrady and others in supporting the increase in the regional rate is an honourable one. They said that we should either justify the increase or back one of the amendments or move an amendment of our own. However, to say "We do not like the regional rate, but we will not table an amendment to the Budget proposals" is the epitome of Pontius Pilate.

7.15 pm

I should say, to give some comfort to the Alliance Party, that I watched a programme during the week in which the potential new Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, who is racing ahead in the polls, is a member of a centrist group called New Alliance. I should point out, in case the Alliance Party gets too excited, that it was a work of fiction. Similarly, the Alliance proposals have been completely fictional, because they do not materialise at any stage.

On the whole, I welcome the Budget. Mark Durkan has done a fairly good job. In particular, I welcome the spending on health, education, and railways — which have been neglected by our society — and on transport for the elderly. I also welcome moneys going, albeit belatedly, towards student fees. However, having a good

Budget that has been broadly welcomed does not mean that the Budget is perfect.

That brings me to the amendments. Although neither is perfect, both are an improvement, and consequently I shall be supporting them.

Much has been made of the regional rate, and it is a particularly iniquitous tax. The increase in the regional rate will hit many who can least afford it. It is not a progressive tax. Some of us belong to a party that does not believe in regional tax-varying powers. Indeed, one of the few good things in the agreement is the absence of tax-varying powers. Having ensured that tax-varying powers are not contained in the agreement, we should not let them in by the back door. If we are to have tax-varying powers such as the regional rate let us at least be honest about it. Let us not produce something that merely passes the buck — and the blame — to local government.

I can speak as one, to use Mr Close's expression, "with clean hands". I have no connection with local government, and I am not a councillor trying to remove the burden from it.

What arguments were used in favour of this increase in rates? Mr McGrady told us that the £11 million or £12 million — that is what it will amount to — is needed for education and health. They are the sectors, it is claimed, that will be hit by refusing this increase in the regional rate. However, the regional rate is not directly targeted at any particular aspect of Government. Therefore it is nonsense to suggest that refusing the increase in the regional rate will affect education and health.

We are also told that reducing the regional rate increase to the level of inflation will somehow offend the Treasury so much that any argument on the Barnett formula will be rendered completely null and void. I could accept the merit in that argument if we were proposing a reduction in the regional rate or even suggesting that the regional rate remain at its present level. However, these amendments propose that the regional rate increase purely at the rate of inflation. By saving £11 million or £12 million, the Assembly does not damage its argument that we do not get an equitable deal from the Barnett formula. We must push for it. This is a matter in which the Assembly can be innovative and not simply copy direct rule.

I said that there were some flaws in the amendments. My only concern with the DUP amendment is whether we could raise all £12 million through the changes that it suggests. In favour of its amendment, I agree that there is a layer of fat in "North/Southerly", particularly in the Civic Forum, which serves no useful purpose. Savings could be made there.

I turn to the Sinn Féin amendment. That party signed up to the Budget in the Executive and it can justifiably be accused of hypocrisy.

Its proposals are vague and are directed purely at the Executive programme funds. Nevertheless, if we are to take an innovative step to keep the regional rate down, changes must be made. However, where will the money come from?

Some suggested scaling down the British military budget. It is interesting that those who suggest this could reduce that budget by delivering decommissioning. Leaving that aside, were either of these amendments agreed, we would be unlikely to see either the North/South bodies or the Executive Budget completely destroyed, as Members of the Executive regard them as the sacred cows of this process. Were either of these amendments agreed, the money would mysteriously be found. In the various monitoring rounds we have seen savings of £40 million, £50 million, even £60 million being pulled out of the hat. Making either of these amendments will reduce some of the fat in the system.

For example, departmental running costs are projected to rise by 10%. If the increase in departmental running costs was pegged back to the rate of increase across the spend — 7.8% — we would generate more than enough money to keep the regional rate in line with inflation.

Money can be saved there, and the increase in the regional rate is iniquitous. We should take this opportunity to send the message that we are breaking with the past. We must stop the regional rate increase and reduce it to the rate of inflation.

Mr Speaker: Members may be puzzled about why I have introduced several Members who are Committee Chairpersons or Deputy Chairpersons without giving that information. That is because I only call Members as Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson when they have said that they wish to speak in that capacity. Sometimes I do not have the information to hand; sometimes the Member chooses, although holding an office, not to speak in that capacity. I am aware that this has created a degree of uncertainty.

The Chairperson of the Education Committee (Mr Kennedy): I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on the Budget for 2001-02 and on the public spending plans for the following two years. The Education Committee considered the draft budget for the Department of Education in detail and passed its comments on to the Minister. The Committee notes that, with regard to education, this Budget allows for little more than maintenance of current spending with uplift for inflation.

The education of our children and young people is important for a vibrant and growing economy. It is important that the Assembly, the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel recognise that funding education is an investment in the future of Northern Ireland.

I welcome the Minister's making an additional £1.3 million available for repairs to school buildings in his

revised Budget. The Education Committee has heard at first hand of the appalling conditions in many of our schools and of the poor accommodation that pupils and teachers cope with every day. Those problems include lack of space, leaking roofs, unsafe windows and buildings, crumbling concrete and appalling personal conditions. These are all health risks. The Committee pressed for more money to tackle these problems.

We believe that every child deserves safe, appropriate and excellent educational facilities in which to learn. Although the extra money will be put to good use, it is not enough to improve the appalling conditions of the school estate. I hope that the Minister will take account of the representations made by the Education Committee and will include them in his spending plans for the next couple of years.

I welcome the consolidation of the March 2000 Budget addition of £15.2 million for schools. The Education Committee is holding detailed discussions with departmental officials about how the money available for schools should be allocated. However, the application of the Barnett formula has had a real effect on the allocation of money to schools and raises issues of equity. Applying that to the Chancellor's announcement last July, the Department of Education received only 3.3 %, rather than the increase needed to match the amount given to schools in England. That was a shortfall of millions of pounds. As a result, schools in Northern Ireland rightly believe that they are being treated less favourably than schools in England. The Education Committee has major concerns about Northern Ireland not getting its fair share under this formula. We seek a commitment from the Minister that he and his Executive Colleagues will continue to press the issue hard with the Treasury to achieve a more equitable approach to the allocation of funding for education.

I also note that the allocation of the Executive programme funds will be considered early in the new year. Again, the Education Committee outlined detailed bids in its response to the draft Budget, and I would like an assurance from the Minister that account will be taken of those bids at the appropriate time.

The Minister — indeed all Members — will recall the debate of 28 November. Members endorsed the motion calling for the payment of a retainer fee for term-time only workers and actually commended the Education Committee's proposal to provide money from the education budget to pay the salary costs incurred. I understand that the management of the education and library boards has put comprehensive draft proposals to the trades unions that represent term-time staff to resolve this long-standing issue. Those proposals will be subject to available moneys being found. Given that the Assembly endorsed the Education Committee's call to provide additional funds, will the Minister give a commitment that the necessary additional funds will be made available in the

education budget to ensure an early and equitable settlement to this long-running affair?

The Education Committee has held in-depth discussions with the Department on the draft Budget. We shall discuss with the Department how to make the best use of scarce resources to achieve value for money.

In doing so, the Committee will ensure sure that pupils, schoolteachers and principals see the real benefit of the available funding.

7.30 pm

I also welcome the Minister's statement of 12 December 2000 that in future the draft Budget will be presented earlier so that the scrutiny Committees can execute their statutory duties properly. I would like the Minister to deal with the points concerning term-time staff and the education budget as a whole.

Mr Gallagher: I have heard little today in the two amendments proposed by the DUP and Sinn Féin that leads me to believe that either could produce a worthwhile outcome. The Sinn Féin amendment refers, among other things, to how the rates burden is spread and its adverse effect on small businesses.

As a representative of a border constituency, I am aware that there is some unfairness in how rates are levied. The economy of border constituencies has suffered from currency differences, as everybody knows; yet, property owners in border areas must pay the same rates as property owners in areas where currency differences have little or no effect. According to the Sinn Féin amendment, rates could be reduced across the board. However, businesses in areas of economic decline would still pay the same rates as businesses in prosperous areas. The amendment makes no distinction between businesses that are doing well and businesses that are trading in very difficult circumstances. I am at a loss to see the fairness of this amendment.

If we are to have fairness — and it is important that we do — we must consider levying rates to take account of the economic climate in which trade and business operate. There are very wide variations in the economic climate of border towns and towns such as Bangor, Belfast or Ballymena. Will the rates review be effective in considering those issues, and will the Minister set out a timetable for completing the task?

Members referred to the rates burdens in rural areas. Shops and businesses in rural areas find rates a very heavy burden. In England, under a rural rates relief scheme, some businesses now benefit from rates rebates of up to 50%.

I call on the Minister to do the necessary preparatory work immediately to introduce a rates relief scheme for trade and businesses in rural areas of Northern Ireland.

The DUP amendment proposed that the North/South bodies be wound down to make savings. Waterways Ireland is located in Enniskillen and plans are now well advanced to build a new headquarters there and so create 70 new jobs for an area that sorely needs them. Several factories have closed in Fermanagh, and any attempt to restrict a job-creating initiative like this would be a disaster.

The potential impact of the all-Ireland tourism body cannot be overemphasised, especially in areas where tourism makes a significant contribution. Fermanagh is such an area. In 1999 tourism generated £20 million for the local economy. People in my constituency are looking forward to the increased benefits of an international marketing body working for the whole of Ireland. Under this arrangement all areas with tourism potential, from Belleek to Belfast, will have more resources at their disposal. The money that will be spent on marketing tourism in all parts of Ireland will be well above what Northern Ireland could afford on its own. I am certain that those who run hotels, bars, restaurants, caravan parks and cruiser-hire businesses will see no merit at all in the DUP's amendment.

I also welcome the increased allocations across Government Departments, especially in the two areas in which I have a particular interest as a Committee member: health and education. The allocation for health is some way short of the Department's initial bid; a shortfall that was further emphasised last week in a report that dealt with per capita spending in England, Scotland and Wales. In Northern Ireland we spend £875 per head compared with £927 in Wales and £1,056 in Scotland. There is a clear need for greater investment in the Health Service, and that has been evident from recent crises in bed shortages and in the treatment of fractures.

More detail is needed on how the Department's resources are allocated. Mr McFarland referred to this problem, and it also came up last week during the debate on children's services. How do allocated funds end up being used for unintended purposes as they make their way from the Department through the various authorities?

I want to comment on the withdrawal without warning of key services from some of our hospitals — the latest being the Erne hospital in Enniskillen. From now on it is essential that there be complete openness and transparency about the use of money as it filters down from the Department through the various health authorities. I ask the Minister whether the Department of Finance and Personnel will provide an audit trail in future so that the Assembly can follow what happens more closely.

I shall finish with a reference to the Executive programme funds. As Members know, these funds cover strategies to eradicate poverty and to support children in need and young people at risk and other initiatives to improve health and education in particular. Considerable funding will be directed towards those Departments

with Sinn Féin Ministers. I am therefore astonished at the Sinn Féin amendment.

Ms Gildernew raised the important issue of support for the community and voluntary sectors, but in the Budget the greatest scope for improvement in that area comes from the Executive programme funds. If Ms Gildernew wishes to demonstrate genuine support — and I know that her feelings on the subject are genuine — it is difficult to see how she can support her party's amendment.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): I listened intently to the last Member. I am sure that Mr Lenin and Mr Stalin would have been proud of him: he creates more jobs by creating more bureaucracy. He thinks that making more jobs for civil servants is real job creation. However, it has been pointed out for years that Northern Ireland relies too heavily on the public service sector and that more opportunities should be created in manufacturing — real jobs showing real returns.

I do not wish to go over matters already dealt with by the mover of the amendment, Mr Dodds, other than to say that he outlined clearly and concisely how savings could be made so that we could avoid raising the rates by 8%.

I listened to the bluster of my Colleague from Lagan Valley, Mr Close, but I come from Lagan Valley and am well used to it — all sound and no substance. He did not move an amendment; but he could not support an amendment. If we were to follow Mr Close's line we would have no money in our Budget. We would have no hospital beds and we would not be able to fix a pothole because we would not want to use the money in the Budget.

Mr Close's policies would give us taxation without spending. I am well used to his policy of raising rates well above the rate of inflation. In Lisburn Borough Council he was always very keen to do that. I find that interesting.

It was amusing to hear Sinn Féin speak of a peace dividend. There has indeed been a lack of investment in hospitals, in the capital development of schools, in basic infrastructure and in roads and sewerage systems, but that is because each year the Government have had to siphon off so much money for the security budget and for compensation. Why? Primarily because of IRA terrorism and the damage it caused the economy.

Our schools, hospitals, roads and sewerage systems lag behind those in the rest of the United Kingdom because of the devastating effect that the IRA/Sinn Féin bombing campaign had on the Province. It is they who have taken money from the Province. It is they who have taken it out of the hands of the people of Northern Ireland; money that has had to be used for rebuilding and

redeveloping shops in Belfast city centre — shops that were blown up by that organisation.

I wish to raise some matters on the subject of agriculture before I speak about the Committee of the Centre. There is little in the proposals to develop agriculture's infrastructure and there is little to benefit farmers. There is more about building Departments than about building the agricultural economy.

There was an extra £1 million in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's budget for capital expenditure on libraries. I hope that the Minister will give serious consideration to the matter of library provision in Lisburn, as it has been outstanding for 25 years. I hope that he will stop pussyfooting around with private finance initiatives that he knows will not materialise and that he will put in place plans to give Lisburn the library that it deserves.

The Minister must find ways of dealing with waste in the 10 Departments and with the quangos that were supposed to cease when the 10 Departments were established. I do not know of one quango that has ceased since devolution.

The Committee of the Centre has studied the number of people employed in senior ranks in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. There is the head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and seven under-secretaries. The cost of those under-secretaries — salaries, pensions and National Insurance contributions — is £95,000 each a year.

There are also 14 under-secretaries costing £70,000 each a year. A further two under-secretaries at £70,000 each a year facilitate the two junior Ministers whom we do not need. No one seems to know what they do — they disappeared into Castle Buildings, and nobody ever hears of them. There are also a further 40 staff at grade 7 level, costing £50,000 each. That comes to roughly £4 million.

Of the Department's £26 million spending, £4 million goes to senior staff; it is top-heavy and overloaded. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister must deal with this. How can we take them seriously with such a staffing structure? They have yet to set out a corporate or business plan for their Department. That Department could not make a case for money for victims. The victims sought £500,000, which is not a great deal of money; they failed to get anything. In October they received £200,000 — a drop in the ocean.

7.45 pm

In this era, electronic communications are the way ahead. "If you are not in, you cannot win"; and we must keep abreast of developments. Despite requests for £14.9 million to develop e-government and a second request for £900,000, nothing was received. The delay will cause Northern Ireland to lose out on savings that could be made through proper e-government. It will allow the

digital divide to open and will result in different levels of access to government.

Shall we get the benefit of joined-up e-government? Shall we continue with disjointed expenditure and repeat examples of incompatible computer systems in different parts of government? Some parts of government operate Lotus, while others operate Microsoft. The two sections of staff cannot communicate with each other on the electronic system because their systems are incompatible. Why has that not been rectified? Why are we not making savings in that area?

I am concerned about the Executive programme funds. The Executive will have built up to £220 million by 2003-04. It worries me that the Executive are taking over so many areas. The Executive programme funds will have more money than the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Department of the Environment, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. One wonders what agenda is behind this attempt to claw so much money into the Executive programme funds.

I support the amendment of my Colleague Mr Dodds. He has identified waste in the Government. He has identified unnecessary spending, and the House would do well not to place the burden of that waste and unnecessary spending on businesses and on the ordinary man and woman in the street who will have to pay the extra tax.

It is unfair to call it the Durkan Tax: it is the Mowlam/Durkan Tax. Mowlam proposed it and Durkan is imposing it. It is not a good tax, and I urge the House to support the amendment.

Mr Leslie: I reviewed the remarks that I made at the conclusion of the take-note debate on the Budget. It would be straightforward to read them again and save myself the trouble of having to make another speech, because the same points have been raised. Will the Minister of Finance and Personnel restrain himself from spending so long repeating those points? There may be some new ones for him to cover.

The Minister knows that I have consistently questioned the level of the rates and he also knows that I have consistently questioned him in the Finance and Personnel Committee on the total cost of government. There will inevitably be a j-curve — things will get worse before they get better. However, we must plan for the "getting better" in two or three years' time. I therefore urge the Executive to put that nearer to the top of their agenda as they plan for the future.

All Government expenditure must be scrutinised by the Assembly to ensure value for money and to ensure that the public gets a good deal for the money that is being spent. That is particularly true for one lot of money

that is directly contributed by people in Northern Ireland — the rates.

The Ulster Unionist Party has lobbied the Minister intensively on the housing budget and on housing improvements. We must be mindful that some of these measures appear to disadvantage people on low or no incomes. A stratum of people is not feeling the benefits of economic growth and falling unemployment, and it is incumbent on us to deal with their needs very specifically. In the July and October monitoring rounds it was clear that much of the extra money was generated by the sale of Housing Executive properties.

I remind the Minister that we are, in a sense, living off capital. We have disposed of a capital asset and we still have a debt on it that we must settle eventually. Meanwhile, our income to service that debt is being reduced by the depletion of the capital. By improving Housing Executive properties, we are reinvesting in that asset and improving its quality. That in turn should make it easier to achieve more sales.

The argument has been made that Northern Ireland pays less in rates than the rest of the United Kingdom. It should be borne in mind that the rest of the United Kingdom pays regional rates and water rates. So far, we have been spared domestic water rates, although businesses pay them. If this argument is to hold water, I look forward to the Minister's undertaking an intensive exercise with Colleagues in Wales and in Scotland to formulate a review of the Barnett formula to present to the Treasury.

Sinn Féin's amendment at least spreads the burden of finding the money evenly by targeting the Executive programme funds. However, the Sinn Féin Members who spoke seemed to take a different line. They did not want any reduction in money, but somebody else would have to come up with it — everybody but the people of Northern Ireland. We must stop looking to others to provide us with money. We should be looking forward to paying our own bills and to standing on our own two feet.

I was intrigued by some of Mr Molloy's remarks; perhaps they give us an insight into an item in the next Sinn Féin election manifesto — the one for elections to the Dáil. I understand that his Colleague Mr Adams, among others, proposes to stand for them. When Mr Adams is targeting a seat in Donegal, will his manifesto include a commitment to ask the people of the Republic of Ireland to cough up another 4% of their rates? Will he ask them to give the money to the people of Northern Ireland to avoid an 8% increase in rates here?

It also seems curious that although Sinn Féin's two Ministers were involved in devising and agreeing the Budget, their party has moved an amendment that fundamentally disagrees with some of its contents. It is

completely inconsistent. They must take responsibility for popular and unpopular elements.

The DUP's amendment was much more targeted at where the money would be deducted. It came as no surprise to these Benches that it looked towards the North/South bodies. We should remind ourselves about the selection of ministerial posts. DUP Members claim to be the most devout and evangelical defenders of the Union (despite agreeing with Sinn Féin that the North/South bodies are a stepping stone to a united Ireland). However, when the d'Hondt formula was run, the DUP specifically avoided taking a position on these bodies.

It targeted instead two Departments with no cross-border bodies. How would DUP Members defend their Union by avoiding those Departments? It is curious that the DUP goes on and on about the problems in the agriculture industry and about what should be done about them; yet presented with two opportunities to take the Department of Agriculture, which contains a cross-border body, it seized neither.

As with the rates, and as with all Government expenditure, we must get value for money from the North/South bodies, and the tourism body stands out in that respect. If the tourism body works well, the £5.8 million will be well spent on behalf of Northern Ireland, but we must scrutinise this constantly and review how the money is spent to satisfy ourselves that we get good value for it.

We hear throughout these debates about deprived areas, which always seem to be along the border and always seem to be west of the Bann. Moyle district in my constituency has, sadly, the worst rate of unemployment in Northern Ireland. It is a deprived area not adjacent to the border with the Republic of Ireland; it is, however, adjacent to the border with Scotland. Is that sufficient to get it within the purview of the money that must always be spent on deprived border areas?

Reverting to the need for a review of the Barnett formula, I note that a recent audit identified social security fraud of more than £50 million. In Northern Ireland social security is administered by the Department for Social Development. Would it not be a good thing to root out social security fraud in order to reduce the money that we spend not just under this Budget but under any budget? That would strengthen our hand in negotiations with the Treasury for a review of the formula.

Finally, I must point out again that I am no fan of any form of taxation and no fan of the rates, but the figure that Mr Peter Robinson quoted of £12 million is the difference between 2.9% and 8.8%. If that is a correct figure, and there are roughly one million adults in Northern Ireland, it would be £1 a month on the present rates for every adult. It is not a king's ransom, provided that we get good value from the money. I urge Members to reject the amendments and to support the Budget.

Mr Shannon: I rise to support the DUP amendment and also to highlight a couple of matters in the Budget. Leir an lairmin bes ae gait o leevin whaur the Ulster-Scots fowk, an in parteiclar thaim as taks ocht adae wi the leid, luiks for byordnar farin. For a guid whyle, the Ulster-Scots leid haes tholed mukkil mair skaith an backhaundin nor Erse Gaelic, an thon wey o gangin cannae be hauden on onie mair.

Education is one area in which the Ulster-Scots community, and in particular the Ulster-Scots language movement, calls for significant improvement. Historically, the Ulster-Scots language has suffered from much greater discrimination and marginalisation than Irish, and that is no longer acceptable.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's budget shows that funding for the North/South languages body will be increased in its first year; in the second year it will be increased by £1.2 million. Is this money being well spent? I suggest that it is not. Some of it will be spent on the Irish language TV channel. We are well aware of the numbers who watch it. It has some of the worst viewing figures in the whole of Ireland, in the whole of the United Kingdom and possibly in the whole of Europe.

A TV station in Antarctica might get fewer viewers, I suppose, but the Irish language channel wins the prize for having the fewest viewers in Ireland and the United Kingdom. If it were not for westerns and Premier League football, nobody would watch it.

8.00 pm

There has not been parity for Ulster-Scots in education or in promoting the language in other ways. In the past few years, Irish language, culture and tradition has received £11 million, whereas Ulster-Scots has received £1.2 million. That highlights the lack of equality. Such parity is not apparent in the Budget, and the more we look at it, the more serious the problem appears. What criterion is used to justify promoting the Irish language above Ulster-Scots? Where is the fair play in the system? There is very little of it.

We do not need the North/South bodies; we should take away the budget of £3.5 million, proposed for 2001-02, and put it into something better. Members from our party have said that there is a great deal of waste in some of the Departments; we should look at that.

There is a marginal increase for fisheries, an increase so small that it could easily be missed. We realise the position that the fishing industry is in. The code of restrictions has hit the industry hard. Is there money in the Budget to address the problems of the fishing industry? I am thinking particularly of the villages of Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie — my own village — on the Ards Peninsula? Where is the help for the fishing industry? It cannot be provided from within the fisheries budget.

That money is for improving harbour facilities in two or three areas.

There is talk of improving children's services. There are many deficiencies in that part of the Budget. For example, there is not enough money for children with special needs and with disabilities. Where will the money come from? We understand that an extra £7 million is available, and we would like to see whether it will go towards those who are in most need. That is how it should have been. It is good to know that free travel for elderly people — a DUP initiative — is in the Budget, but it is disappointing that it will be 2002 before it happens.

We could save money by taking it away from the North/South bodies or the Civic Forum. All that money is being used for no purpose other than to promote a political viewpoint. We in the DUP want to see the money being well spent — on health, education, roads and those with special needs. That would be the wise way of spending the money, and I urge Members to support the DUP amendment.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. At the start of the debate, the Minister said that he was looking forward to what he hoped would be a constructive debate on the amendments. For the most part, that has been the case but, as usual, some Members could not contain themselves.

The purpose of today's debate was to consider the draft Budget; it represents the Executive's best guess. As the Minister said, there has not been enough time to consider the Budget fully, and I pay tribute again to the Ministers who are working hard, grappling with competing demands and doing their best for all the Departments. However, the purpose of today's debate was to scrutinise the Budget and make any necessary amendments. That is why the draft Budget was published — for consultation.

If, as some Members suggested, we are to be beholden to what the Executive have agreed, Members might as well go home and forget about having a say in the matter. My party has clearly demonstrated that it is prepared to work hard in the Executive and the other institutions and will continue to do so. However, where we have a difference of opinion with the rest of the Executive, we will put it on the record and, as a party with its own mandate, we will pursue our aims in the best way that we can.

This morning I tried to put our amendment into a positive and constructive context, and I will continue to do that. I commended our amendment to the Assembly on the basis that there has been criticism and anxiety about the proposed rates increase, particularly in the small retail sector. The increase would impose an unfair burden on those least able to pay it, while whole swathes of the manufacturing industry would not have to pay a thing.

The DUP's amendment — at least they had the courage to table one, unlike other people in the Chamber — is a

party political stunt. Peter Robinson said — this is where he contradicted himself, so he might want to listen to what I say — that Sinn Féin's amendment would take money from the Executive programme funds, which were all but allocated except for the minutiae, and that it would take money away from children's programmes. He then said that the Executive programme funds only existed so that Trimble and Mallon could deliver good news stories. It cannot be both; it has to be one or the other. My party supports the notion of Executive programme funds and will continue to do so, because they represent an important way of making strategic interventions for infrastructure or other programmes that Members might support from time to time.

Mr Gallagher said that he could not understand why we were asking for a reduction in the rate increase. He suggested that we look at preparatory work on rates relief. I would support that, but if we did it without thinking it through or costing it, we would reduce the revenue that we would raise by the proposed increase.

Sinn Féin's amendment is simple. To increase the rates by more than the rate of inflation will not realise the funds that the Executive need and will be an unfair burden on those who have to pay it. Our amendment would create a breathing-space, during which we could use some of the money from the Executive programme funds for a specific purpose. It would be a one-off and would give us the time to do what Mr Gallagher and others are suggesting. I make no apology for saying that the British Government — or indeed the Irish Government — have a responsibility to pay extra money into this part of Ireland.

I was especially annoyed and offended by Mr McGrady's comments about the begging bowl. Perhaps Mr McGrady's life is comfortable and things are OK for him. However, other people in his constituency do not consider it as begging to go to the Exchequer or the Irish Government for extra funding for services that we have been denied for many years because of discriminatory and neglectful policies. It was regrettable that Mr McGrady introduced that tone to the debate.

Sinn Féin will be constructive about the matter. This morning I paid tribute to the Ministers in the Executive who attend and work together. Where there is a difference of opinion, Sinn Féin will be consistent and will put that opinion to the Executive. If we feel that it is necessary, we will advance those arguments.

I am sure that there have been regular differences of opinion in the Executive. Why would there not be? There are at least three parties working together on the Executive who have different mandates and different manifesto positions. Therefore, it is appropriate and reasonable that there should occasionally be differences of opinion. If those people are committed to working with each other, rather than against each other, the good

work that has been achieved by the Executive and all the other institutions will continue to be built upon.

It is important that Members argue about each other's point of view, but it is silly to make crystal ball analyses of where one party or another might be. Mr Leslie should be more concerned about where his own party will be. His task in the months ahead is to establish his party as a credible force in the Executive. We support the Budget. We are trying to amend it, but we support the Budget as a whole, difficulties included. We also support the Programme for Government, which the Unionist Party is undermining by its activities. The Unionist Party would do well to analyse the Barnett formula. It is easy to dismiss the arguments and say that we should pay for ourselves: we have neither economic nor political sovereignty. Until we do — or are allowed to — we cannot expect to do all the things that we want to do.

We have a mandate and we have a manifesto that we will do our best to pursue. However, that manifesto commits us to work with the parties in the institutions. We will never be found wanting on that. The other parties should accept their responsibilities, rather than making cheap remarks.

I sit on the Committee with Mr Close. We have heard so much hot air and so much bubble from him about the rates, but he did not even table an amendment this morning. Perhaps we should not worry ourselves about that. Mr Close talks about a manifesto position, but the rate of increase in support for his party suggests that he will not have to worry about manifestos. We will leave that to the electorate.

I commend our amendment on the basis that it represents an opportunity to draw breath before we impose an unfair rates increase. It is very rare for rates to come down once they have gone up. Furthermore, there are commitments throughout the Programme for Government concerning reviews and re-examinations of the entire structure of Government and the various programmes. That gives us plenty of scope to increase the money available, even within the current grant. The amendment would allow us to draw breath and take stock before we impose an unfair burden on those who are least able to carry it.

Mr Dodds: I shall respond to some of the points that were made about our amendment. Mr Close suffered a fair amount of criticism in the debate — rightly so, in the opinion of virtually everyone in the House. I felt rather sorry for him, because all the bluster, passion and energy that he worked up could not disguise the fact that he slept in when it mattered most. He did not bother to put down an amendment. He waxed so lyrical on the issue, but it was all just empty rhetoric.

The Alliance Party recently produced an alternative Budget. As an alternative Government — I can see four of them sitting there — they had the wonderful idea of

presenting a Budget. Today they have not produced a single alternative to the Minister's Budget.

8.15 pm

Mr Close stretches credulity when he suggests that simply voting against the Budget is sufficient compensation for failing totally to have put down any realistic alternative to it. Then he tells his party Colleagues and us that he looks forward to other parties joining him in lobbying against the increase in the regional rate. Next he will tell us that he is glad that the 190,000 or so people who voted for Dr Paisley are going to join the 14,000 people who voted for him in the European elections to fight in Europe for the farmers of Northern Ireland. The absolute audacity of the 2% party to my right lecturing others about joining them in lobbying really does beggar belief when it has not even had the sense or wit — or perhaps even the ability — to table an amendment to the Budget. Despite its pretence and spurious attempts during the debates on statements in the House to claim this issue as its own, it is the Democratic Unionist Party that raised the issue before the Alliance Party.

Do not get excited, there is more to come. Now I can see why you do not want anything to do with your former Colleagues, Mr Speaker, and why you were earlier at pains to distance yourself from any association with them. In the last major debate on the Budget, we had Mr Close admitting that all the quotations and points that he was going to make had already been made by those of us on this side of the House. So let us have a little bit of reality and common sense.

This morning Mr Close then told us that people were hand-wringing and scrambling to distance themselves from the decisions of the Executive. Clearly, there has been some running for cover on the parts of those who attended the Executive and who signed up to those decisions from which they now want to run away. We will let the two Sinn Féin Ministers hang out there to dry. We are not responsible for what they are doing. We will put a knife in their back — Sinn Féin can do what it likes in the Assembly.

As far as this party is concerned, we did not attend the Executive; we never gave our assent to this Budget; we never agreed to any increase in the regional rate. We have been totally consistent. However, Mr Close tells us that we are Members of the Executive and therefore, responsible. So, since he is a Member of this Assembly, if the Assembly votes this Budget through tonight, is he responsible?

Mr Close: I will be voting against it.

Mr Dodds: He will be voting against it, just as we will be voting against it, just as we did not assent to the Budget in the first place. So at last the logic of the position dawns on Mr Close. I am so sorry that it has

taken until 8.15 at night for that reality finally to dawn. But then, since he did miss the 9.30 deadline for tabling amendments this morning, we will allow him that bit of latitude.

Sinn Féin, in particular, agreed to this regional rate increase in the Executive and never raised any objection to it until today. Indeed, a previous contributor — the Member of Sinn Féin who was on the Finance and Personnel Committee when this issue was raised — described those of us who criticised the increase in the regional rate beyond the rate of inflation as having adopted a shallow approach. This was a shallow approach. He did not want to have any debate; he did not want to have any vote. He did not want the Committee to come out against the regional rate. Now he comes to the House and beats his chest because somehow his party is now against the regional rate, having supported it in the Executive, having omitted to speak out against it until now, and having refused to speak against it in the Committee — when he attended the Committee. I never see that particular Member there. He certainly did not fight. Calm down. Do not get excited.

This proves that what we have said all along about the nature of this system of government is true. There is no collective responsibility whatsoever. Every Minister does his or her own thing in his or her own Department. The Minister of Finance can come here and make proposals which can even be agreed in the Executive, but when it comes to the House, every party is free. Nobody is bound, and even Ministers can vote against what they agreed in the Executive.

We will wait and see if the two Ministers who supported this proposal in the Executive, but then had a rebellion on their hands in their Assembly party, will go into the Lobbies to vote against what was agreed in the Executive by the UUP, the SDLP and Sinn Féin. All these parties agreed in the Executive that the regional rate should increase by 8%. The people of Northern Ireland have already seen that rate increase by over 8% in the last two years.

Dr Birnie, in commenting on the DUP amendment, described the amount of money as being insignificant in the context of the overall Budget — that argument has been trotted out on a number of occasions. The people of Northern Ireland will regard as significant another 8% increase in the regional rate. They will regard as significant the expenditure of some £20 million, taking into account the all-Ireland tourism company, which was last year taken as part of the all-Ireland bodies. I have already outlined what that money could do to reduce the regional rate and, if the Executive were so minded, how that expenditure could alleviate a whole range of social needs. We are not dealing with trivial amounts of expenditure; this is real money. This issue affects people's pockets and it deserves to be taken seriously.

We were also told that those who had been working within the Departments would simply be working under new bosses in the North/South implementation bodies. If that is the case, it is up to the Minister to decide where that necessary work should continue within the local Departments. In our amendment we have said that he should take sufficient amounts from the budgets of the North/South implementation bodies and the Secretariat of the North/South Ministerial Council and, if necessary, from the Civic Forum to pay for the reduction in the rate. That should leave him enough to get on with the necessary, day-to-day work within the Departments that employ those people.

Mr McGrady and others on the Nationalist side have berated us because they say we are acting against the Belfast Agreement. They are greatly surprised and shocked that we on this side of the House should be continuing our opposition to this aspect of the implementation of the Belfast Agreement. We make no apology for our stance — that is the basis on which we were elected and we will continue to take that stance in this House. Those who express surprise, shock and horror are perhaps surprised, shocked and horrified that there is at least one Unionist party in the House that does stand by its election manifesto commitments.

Mr McGrady had to admit that our amendment was a serious one and I give him credit for acknowledging that. He acknowledged more than his Colleague, Mr Dallat, who said that the amendment should not be taken seriously. Mr McGrady should have a word in Mr Dallat's ear and let him know what an amendment is in parliamentary terms. I thank you for your assent to that, Eddie, well done. No doubt Mr Dallat will be going back to Coleraine Borough Council to explain why, having voted against an 8% regional rate increase, he is now in favour of it. He tells us it is because he has suddenly discovered that Mr Durkan found £31 million. If, next year, he has to come back and take some money away, he might be running back to the Council to reverse his vote.

Mr McGrady told us that the fact that there were only two amendments was an indication of most parties' support for the Budget. Members will indicate their support for or rejection of the Budget when they vote. How we vote, rather than the number of amendments tabled, will determine whether there are people in the House who support the thrust of the Budget.

The Sinn Féin/IRA party has also tabled an amendment and it has described people as being opportunistic. What could be more opportunistic than to agree the motion in the Executive and to support it throughout, never opposing it in Committees, but then to call for a reduction in the regional rate at the last minute, in terms almost identical to our amendment. It is clear where the opportunism lies. I heard one contributor from that party talk about having sympathy for Mr Durkan. With friends like that in the Executive, he deserves every piece of sympathy he can get.

It was suggested that this should all be paid for out of Her Majesty's Treasury. The interesting suggestion that Dublin should be asked to stump up as well, in addition to the taxpayers of Northern Ireland, was also mooted. Everybody should be asked to contribute, except those who were actually responsible over 30 years for most of the destruction, mayhem and economic deprivation in this country — IRA/Sinn Féin. They are the ones who brought many parts of this Province economically to its knees, and yet to listen to them, you would think that it was the fault of the British Government, the Unionists and everybody else. They are the ones who blew up factories and who murdered industrialists and employers. They are the ones who are responsible for much existing economic deprivation. *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Dodds: Some people talked about perks of office. I remind this House and the people of Northern Ireland that we do not keep the perks of office for ourselves, be they the salaries of Ministers, Committee Chairmen or other office-holders in this House.

I have to correct the Member for South Down, Mr O'Neill, who got up and refused, despite being told that his facts were wrong, to take a point of information. He accused the DUP of actually appointing an MLA, as he put it, to serve on the special North/South EU programmes body. In fact, he got that absolutely — *[Interruption]*.

Mr O'Neill: You are not listening.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Dodds: If you would please listen to what we are saying. He said that we had appointed a Member to this body; and yet we were totally opposed to it. We were suggesting that money be taken from it. Of course, he got that completely wrong. We are talking about the monitoring committees. People from all parties have been appointed to them. They are the transitional monitoring committee, the Peace II committee, and the overall structural funds monitoring committee. Today, however, we are dealing with the EU special programmes North/South implementation body. This is a completely different organisation on which, as I understand it, no MLA actually sits.

Perhaps Mr Durkan can again help his Friend understand that. One of the problems is that, having got it wrong, Mr O'Neill is not now prepared to listen in order to learn something from it.

A number of contributors have outlined criticisms of the Budget, not only in relation to the regional rate. Some Members have been very vocal outside this House. Some have been very concerned about the social aspects of the Budget, and the harm that it might do to very socially deprived people. Where have they been today? When asked to give a response to the Finance and Personnel Committee as to how —

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

Mr Dodds: I will, Mr Speaker. Each departmental Committee was asked to give a view on the priorities for spending within the Budget. Every Committee Chairperson responded, except Mr Cobain of the Social Development Committee, who has been waxing lyrical about the issue. He could not be bothered to respond on behalf of his Committee, nor could the Health Committee, which has not made a contribution here today either. The hypocrisy is staggering.

Finally, there is no proposal, as was alleged by Ms Gildernew, to increase Housing Executive rents by GDP plus 2%. I am sure that all those who have opposed the rent increase of GDP plus 2% — and I see them all on the Ulster Unionist Benches in particular — will now come and join us in the Lobbies to vote against an even larger increase in the regional rate, which affects all households in Northern Ireland. We are determined that whether people are in social housing or in private housing, whether they are in industry or are shopkeepers, they should not be penalised by increases in rent or rates above the rate of inflation.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister to speak, I would like, on behalf of the House, to acknowledge the fact that this is probably our longest ever debate on any individual motion. That is characteristic of financial and Budget debates, but the Minister has done the House the courtesy of remaining here throughout the debate. I want to recognise that on behalf of the House.

8.30 pm

Having made that peace with the Minister, I hope he will also take the length of the debate into account when considering the length of his winding-up speech.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that the Minister left for a few minutes. I hope it was water he was drinking and nothing stronger.

Mr Speaker: I hesitate to speculate on why the Minister might have left for a minute or two.

Mr Durkan: To clarify the matter for Dr Paisley, it seems on these occasions we end up talking about water. My relationship with water, for the few minutes I was out, was not as a consumer.

When I opened the debate, I looked forward to a vigorous but responsible discussion of the Budget, and I believe we have achieved that goal in the debate. Members' contributions have ranged widely. They put their points clearly and forcefully. I have carefully noted these points.

I want to emphasise that the Budget vote tonight addresses the full range of our responsibilities and our total budget of £5.7 billion. There has been a good deal of focus on increases, particularly on those since the draft Budget, but we should remember that tonight we

are voting on the Budget as a whole. We have been able to increase spending on agriculture to £200 million, spending on health to £2.3 billion, spending on education to £1.3 billion and spending on regional development to £460 million. The debate touched on many aspects of these budgets. Substantial increases and opportunities paint the total picture of this first Budget under devolution.

I emphasise at the outset that we are determined to improve the transparency of the processes of planning, evaluation and audit. We need good public service agreements at the planning stage before, during and after expenditure. We also need better information under resource accounting and budgeting. Through our own Public Accounts Committee we need a stronger and more appropriate audit. There is considerable scope for Assembly Committees to examine these issues. This should begin as early as possible.

We must now move to the final act of this debate. First, I propose to deal with the amendments. Secondly, I will deal with some general points made by Members. Finally, if time will allow, I will deal with as many of Members' specific questions as possible.

Mr Dodds proposed the first amendment on behalf of the DUP. It attempts to link cuts to the budgets of the North/South bodies to a reduction in the proposed increase in the regional rate. The amendment is designed to undermine the agreement and the basis of the institutional settlement.

It is facile to suggest there can be a reduction to the cost of the services assigned by agreement between the two Governments to these new bodies. The Northern contribution to their budgets in 2001-02 will be approximately £11.7 million. We are also proposing a major drive in the promotion of tourism through the new North/South company which accounts for most of the £5.8 million we plan to spend on that area. Together with the small budgets for the North/South Ministerial Council Secretariat and the Civic Forum, the total for the function specified in the amendment is £18.5 million. Most of this spending relates to ongoing functions or arenas that make good commercial sense for the Northern Ireland economy.

One wonders if the proponents of the amendment are proposing that these services be cut. What do they say about food safety? What about the promotion of tourism — surely we all want our waterways to be developed? The fact is that there is no real substance to this amendment, beyond the politics and the procedural rectitude. We have an agreement, the North/South bodies are part of that agreement, and they will be properly funded.

The second amendment, introduced by Mr Maskey on behalf of Sinn Féin, also seeks to moderate the increase in the regional rate, this time by taking resources from the Executive programme funds. The Executive programme funds are central to the Budget and the Programme for Government. I re-emphasise that they

constitute a new way of promoting the development, on a cross-cutting basis, of priorities set out in the Programme for Government. They will enable the Executive and the Assembly to make a real difference to the allocation of resources in the region.

I stress that in creating the draft Budget, the Executive was disappointed that it was possible to put just £16 million into the Executive programme funds for next year. We were glad to be able to supplement this with £9 million carried forward from the October monitoring round. This is because we want to make the best possible start to the work of the new funds, and to show strongly the devolution difference. The £25 million for the first year is essential if we are to make best use and lay the best plans for the more significant amounts of money that will come through in years two and three. The programme funds have to be allocated to services, and we will do this in the new year. The funds have been created as a response to our new circumstances. They are a positive and imaginative step forward, and they give us a means of showing, in important and effective ways, the devolution difference.

As has been pointed out, both amendments concern the regional rate. The Budget plans for 2001-02 are based on an assumed level of regional rate revenue of £334 million. To generate that revenue, it is estimated that regional rate increases of 8% in the domestic regional rate and 6.6% in the non-domestic regional rate will be required next year. As I have already stated, the indicative allocations for 2002-03 and 2003-04 would imply further increases of 8% in the domestic regional rate and 5.5% in the non-domestic regional rate.

I have declared those planned increases on the basis of current figures, just as I openly stated the proposed increases in the regional rate, both domestic and non-domestic, in the draft Budget. It is certainly not a stealth tax. We have been upfront, the issue has been well debated, and everybody has centred on it, in one way or another. It is a bit odd that an increase that has been made in such a transparent way — albeit not necessarily universally popular — should be branded stealth tax.

These increases are necessary to fund spending in the priority areas identified in the Programme for Government and in various Committee contributions. As I have already made clear, we cannot on the one hand say that the Barnett formula does not provide sufficient resources and on the other hand fail to try to raise further resources from revenue here. That would leave us open to the charge that we expect our services to be paid for by taxpayers in England, Scotland, Wales, the Irish Republic, and anywhere else, but that we do not seek funding from our own resources.

We must recognise some points about the regional rate. Ratepayers in Northern Ireland make a much smaller contribution to the cost of local services than their counterparts in Great Britain. On average we only pay half as much, and of course we do not face a separate and

additional charge for water and sewerage services. Even when the lower level of household income here is taken into account — and many Members have rightly stressed that point — we are still making a smaller contribution.

It has been pointed out that increases in the regional rate will increase poverty. The housing benefit system does, of course, provide protection for the most needy in society. Overall, about 186,000 people — around 31% of all households — receive some assistance with rate bills through rate rebates. The worse off are completely protected. I recognise that there are deficiencies in the regional rate, and I have recognised those before in this Chamber and in discussion with the Finance and Personnel Committee. That is why I have announced a comprehensive review that will look at all aspects of this tax, including the nature and range of reliefs that are available.

The point has also been made that district councils are blamed unfairly for the regional rate. I agree that there must be clearer responsibility for the different components of the rates bill. We need to clarify the proportion of rates that will go to the district councils and how much will go to the services directly controlled by the Assembly.

At the outset, I said that the Executive accept responsibility for the rate increase as part of grown-up, realistic politics. I confirm that the Rates Collection Agency will take steps to distinguish between the regional and district rates in the rates bills for 2001-02 and in future years.

The supporters of the first amendment sought to make much of the continuation of the uplift in the regional rate going on from the 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review. Have they forgotten how strongly some argued for the continuation of the increases in water and sewerage spending, which had initially been linked — as they so often reminded us — to those rate increases? The Executive have confirmed those increases in water and sewerage spending.

I point out that, from time to time, I have been urged to link the regional rate to water and sewerage expenditure and turn it, in part, into a water rate levied on households. It would be a household tax similar in form to the regional rate. I hope that some consistency is shown by those who preach to others.

There were also concerns that the regional rate could become an issue akin to the poll tax. Apart from the unpopularity issue, I am at a loss to understand how this comparison is valid. Our rating system — with all its faults — is based on properties and households. It is not based on the taxation of individuals. We will need to look at the effects of the system on different types of households, including single householders, but I do not see any sign of such difficulties as the registration of individuals which the poll tax produced in England.

Mr Dodds indicated the opposition of Ministers to the increase in the regional rate. I am at a loss to recall the

circumstances in which information including the proposals for the regional rate was circulated to all members of the Executive or when any representations came to me or to the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister in the terms suggested.

Mr Close suggested that we use in-year monitoring money to address increases in the regional rate. He misunderstands the nature of monitoring expenditure during the course of a year and planning expenditure for future years. In-year changes can rise or fall. This year's pattern is not guaranteed and prudent planning is required. That means taking sensible decisions based on the information available at the time of each decision. It would be imprudent to anticipate that money might become available from end-year slippage or end-year flexibility. Our view is that it is better to take any benefits that come from emerging underspends as and when they might arise.

The regional rate will be finalised early in the new year. We will then need to set a final rate that will produce — on the best available information — the level of revenue that we adopt in this Budget. Members will recall that last February it was possible to reduce the percentage uplift in the non-domestic regional rate below that which I had indicated in the draft Budget statement last December because the forecast yield was slightly higher than previous forecasts. Therefore, we will keep this under review in the same way this year. The regional rate will be examined, but the job will be done properly. These amendments are not the proper way to proceed, and accordingly, I ask the Assembly to reject them.

8.45 pm

I will now turn to some general points about the Budget raised by Members. Mr Dodds expressed concern about the adverse effects of the Barnett formula, as did Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Ms McWilliams and Ms Lewsley. As the debate went on, nearly every Member who made a contribution recognised the case in relation to the Barnett formula. The Executive have made clear its concern about the Barnett formula. That point has been stressed by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, not just here but in other locations as well.

The formula is now over 20 years old and has outlived its usefulness. We cannot accept that a formula, which is only based on population and ignores wider needs, is satisfactory for our funding requirements. Our views have been made known to Treasury Ministers and to others. By the time of the next UK spending review, we hope to have the basis of a new arrangement that suits our needs better, and is more acceptable to this Assembly's Members. However, I do not wish the Assembly to believe that this will be a simple task. The formula is clearly well entrenched in the Treasury. Again, I stress that we will do ourselves no favour in this argument by avoiding resource decisions — difficult though they may be — that are within our remit, such as that on the regional rate.

Many Members, particularly Mr Dodds, Mr Molloy, Mr P Robinson, Mr Close, Mr B Bell and Ms McWilliams expressed disappointment about the restricted timetable for this Budget. I indicated before that the time available for consideration of this year's Budget has been regrettably constrained. As the Assembly knows, there was a UK spending review during the year, and that meant that there was not a clear indication of the total resources available. As soon as possible thereafter, we moved to bring forward a draft Budget. Within the time that was available, I believe that all that was possible was done to facilitate meaningful consultation with the Assembly and outside groups.

All Departments have worked closely with their Committees, and I would like, once again, to record my own thanks to the Finance and Personnel Committee for facilitating the Budget debate in November and for its report to me.

We were also able to hold two conferences on the equality dimension of the Budget — one in Derry and one in Belfast. Over 100 groups were invited to these conferences, and the needs of minorities were met by providing summaries of the draft Budget in alternative formats. Next year the process can start earlier, thus giving more time for the Budget proposals to be scrutinised by the Assembly and accessed by wider community interests.

The issue of departmental running costs was raised by several Members. The Executive are committed to a full re-examination of Departments' costs and those of the wider public sector. We face an enormous range of pressures on spending, and the efficient and economic use of resources must be promoted. It is important to note that the increase in costs between 2000-01 and 2001-02 — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. While I understand that Members may want to have a brief and quiet word with each other from time to time, there is a constant hum of conversation, which is unfair to other Members and the Minister. If Members wish to have conversations, I ask them to go to the Members' Lobby or somewhere close by. Please give the rest of the House and the Minister an opportunity.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Why stop close by if you can go beyond the range of the Division Bell later?

It is important to note that the increase in costs shown in the Budget paper between 2000-01 and 2001-02 reflects the basic requirement to provide for the cost of employing staff to deliver services to the public. Also, the 2000-01 figures understated the actual level of spending, because they exclude the additions that the Executive agreed in July. The Executive have made realistic provision for the costs of Departments in 2001-02.

Once again we are in a position from which we cannot will the end — to provide good service to the public and

to the Assembly — without willing the means. The truth is that the needs of the new institutions, including the needs of Committees, and the needs of many Members in relation to asking questions, have created a major increase in workload for Departments.

The creation of the new institutions results in a great increase in accountability, which is one of the most important steps away from the pattern of direct rule. That has a cost. We need to recognise that, though we also need to ensure restraint. I welcome Members' consideration in that regard.

There were also a number of more specific questions raised during the debate. In particular, Mr Peter Robinson raised the matter of roads capital funding, and wondered if, on raising it for a third time, circumstances would allow me to answer. I can confirm that the Budget for 2001-02, which we are voting on this evening, contains all that the Department for Regional Development sought for roads capital expenditure.

I can also confirm that while the Chancellor's initiative funding does decrease in subsequent years, the indicative allocations for 2002-03 and 2003-04 for mainstream roads capital funding provide for an uplift of over one third on the 2001-02 allocation. In addition, there are the substantial resources in the Executive infrastructure fund, through which the Department for Regional Development can bid for road schemes.

Mr McFarland questioned the approach to the planning of the Budgets for the years 2002-03 and 2003-04. The position is that the figures set out in the Budget are indicative and will need to be reviewed fully in the next Budget cycle. I have undertaken that there will be fuller scrutiny next year. It follows that there should be genuine scope for these plans to be revised next year, but the published figures, rounded to the nearest £10 million, show the basis on which we are currently planning.

Mr Dodds pointed to the increase in the figures for departmental running costs. We need to be careful when interpreting these figures. They now include the costs of running Welfare-to-Work programmes, which were previously accounted for separately. Also, it is wrong to assume that all increases in departmental running costs simply add to bureaucracy.

Large amounts of departmental running costs go towards providing services to the public. For example, in the Department for Social Development — one of the Departments that Mr Close was targeting in his remarks on departmental running costs — some £12.5 million of a rise of £18.6 million has been allocated for the implementation of the Welfare Modernisation Programme. That programme is designed to provide work for those who can work, and security for those who cannot.

In relation to the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, the allocation pro-

posed includes an additional £2.25 million in 2001-02 to meet the cost of the PFI contract for the provision of IT services. That increase is required because provision was inadequate to meet existing demands for Phases I and II of the contract. In addition, Phase III has recently been negotiated to allow for a significant increase from 500 to 1,150 in the number of simultaneous system users. Those facilities are vital to the proper functioning of the Department and its jobcentre network.

Questions were raised about the peace dividend — the matter was raised first by Mr Molloy and followed up by other Members. Our Budget is quite separate from that of the NIO. We do not have to make any contribution to the cost of reforming the Police Service and the Prison Service. We are also protected from any pressures arising from the review of criminal justice or, indeed, any other aspect of NIO business. In short, it is unlikely that any available savings will fall to us during the period of this spending review.

Questions were also raised — again, the issue was first raised by Mr Molloy — about the acute services review, and why provision had not been made for this in the Budget. The independent review group, appointed by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and chaired by Maurice Hayes, is due to report by the end of February. After that there will be, as the Minister has indicated, wide public consultation.

We will need to carefully assess the cost of the emerging strategies to ensure that what we propose is affordable. The Budget allocations for 2002-03 and 2003-04 are indicative and we will have to decide how best to address the costs of the acute services strategy as part of next year's Budget considerations.

Mr Molloy, Mr Gallagher and several other Members raised the issue of the rural community. There are significant increases in the Budget for agriculture and rural development. It is planned to provide £193 million, an increase of £28.7 million over 2000-01. Even allowing for distortions in animal disease compensation and considering that provision for less favoured areas (LFAs) is normally adjusted during the year, the increase for 2001-02 is £16.8 million, or 10.2%. That allocation will provide for, among other things, the introduction of a scrapie eradication programme, the launching of the beef quality initiative and business development and training. The allocation also includes £3.9 million for match funding relating to modulation.

Some Members appeared to suggest that those programmes are not directly benefiting farmers, and therefore do not count. I hazard to guess that if that money were not put into those schemes, members of the farming community would soon tell us of the importance of those schemes to their continued operation.

Mr B Bell, and other Members, raised the matter of housing funding. I assure him that the Executive do not

regard housing as a low-priority matter and that the Housing Executive budget is not being cut. The Programme for Government contains the commitment to work to provide high quality and affordable social housing for those on low incomes. We spend two-and-a-half times more on housing than is spent in England. Therefore, on any objective basis, it continues to be given priority. For 2001-02 the Housing Executive budget is being increased by £6.5 million and the budget for housing associations will rise by £1.5 million. All told, housing funding will rise by 4.3%.

Members will be aware that in past monitoring rounds we have continued to respond to particular pressures in the housing programme. So long as resources are available in future monitoring rounds we will continue to respond to those pressures and ensure the best possible spend of the available money.

Mr Ford, among others, suggested that there is nothing new in the Programme for Government. On the contrary, there is much that is new. Local politicians have agreed on actions across a range of local public services that directly affect local people's lives. Priorities have been set out for Northern Ireland's future for which we will use the resources available to improve people's health, education skills to create jobs, tackle disadvantage and protect the environment. We have set out challenges that need to be addressed.

The Programme for Government also explains the importance to Northern Ireland's future of co-operation for mutual benefit — north and south, east and west, with Europe and America. In short, we are getting down to the business of improving the services to the community for which Ministers are responsible.

Ms McWilliams asked when the regional development strategy would be published. The Programme for Government commits the Executive to agreeing a regional development strategy and seeking the Assembly's agreement by spring 2001.

Ms McWilliams also claimed that the Executive have no information on the number of children living in poverty on which to base their spending plans. She rightly identified that as a matter for Mr Morrow.

9.00 pm

However, although some information is available here on child poverty from the family expenditure survey, the main survey used in Great Britain for investigating poverty is not carried out in Northern Ireland. I am advised that the extension of the family resources survey to Northern Ireland is currently being considered.

Dr Birnie raised matters relating to student support concerning how the proposals address equal opportunities issues and how information flows can be improved. With regard to how the proposals address equal opportunities issues, the package of measures announced by Dr Farren

is designed to ensure that more students from lower income backgrounds have access to further and higher education. These measures will open up access to further and higher education for many more people who would not have previously considered participation and, therefore, will help to promote much greater equality of opportunity.

On how information flows can be improved, I draw Members' attention again to Dr Farren's statement of last Friday. He announced that he asked officials to work with the education and library boards and student representatives to develop material for advice to potential students on financial matters. Ms McWilliams also raised the issue about the Department of Education and consultation before selling land in South Belfast. That sale was carried out as part of the provision of a new school for Wellington College, which is being provided under the private finance initiative.

During the bidding process the Belfast Education and Library Board negotiated a value-for-money deal with Northwin Construction Limited, which included the transfer of land at full market value. The board is not required to consult on the sale of the land, but I understand that the development of any surplus land at the school is subject to the normal planning procedures, and that is only right.

With regard to the use of private finance initiative solutions, we have to be receptive to new ways of securing the services that our community needs. These deals are looked at very carefully to ensure value for money.

Mr Roche asked, in certain terms, why the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development did not lift the ban on BSE when she had the opportunity. The Minister has never been in a position to lift the BSE ban in Northern Ireland. That ban was imposed by the European Union and can only be lifted by the European Union. The Minister has made every effort, since taking office, to have the ban in Northern Ireland removed or relaxed. However, the current climate relating to BSE across Europe makes it unwise to raise the case now. The Minister has made it abundantly clear that she will take the case forward as soon as the climate is right, and that commitment is clear cut.

Some concerns were also raised about the Health Service's budget, including arrangements for funding the boards and trusts and, in particular, some Members followed up Ms McWilliams's point on the whole notion of audit trails. No one can deny that the system for the management of boards and trusts is complex, yet it is essential that these organisations and structures are best suited to our needs.

Now that devolution has been achieved, there is a recognised need to consider the efficiency of all existing public administration structures. The Executive are committed to doing this through the Programme for Government. Ms McWilliams also queried the apparent

reduction in the capital budget for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Budget contains revised figures for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's capital budget compared with the October draft. The revised figures do not alter the Department's spending power.

Following the publication of the draft Budget some technical adjustments had to be made to facilitate the move to resource budgeting. These resulted in a shift of provision from capital to resource. This reflects more accurately the new resource budgeting classifications and does not affect the spending power on the ground. Since the draft Budget was announced, an additional £5 million has been allocated to the Department of Health's capital budget in 2001-02. The Executive programme funds will offer further opportunities for capital expenditure.

The proposed closure of Downe Hospital was also raised. Generally, our hospitals serve much smaller populations than those elsewhere in the UK, and many are in need of modernization, as Members will agree. With expert staff so widely dispersed, the viability of some smaller hospitals has come into question. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Not content with disturbing the peace, some Members are disturbing the furniture as well. Please allow the Minister to speak.

Mr Durkan: In preparing its report, the review group appointed by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will be expected to take into account the views of individuals, organizations and groups which have an interest or involvement in the provision of hospital services. We will need to develop a strategy for acute services, and that strategy will have to be costed, for consideration in next year's Budget negotiations.

Ms McWilliams also raised the question of funding for provision for mental health and children. In 2001-02, there will be an additional £4 million to help address the gaps in community services to people with severe and enduring mental illnesses and learning disabilities; that should significantly reduce hospital admissions. An extra £3.5 million has been allocated in 2001-02, to facilitate the implementation of 'Children Matter' in areas such as learning care, adoptions, and preventive care services. Finally, the children's fund will provide the Executive with a useful means of providing support for children in need and youth at risk. The Deputy First Minister has already said that consideration would be given to the proposal for a children's commissioner, possibly funded out of Executive programme funds.

Provision for victims is a matter of considerable concern to the Executive Committee, particularly to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Their Department has specific responsibility for making sure that all Departments give due consideration to the needs of victims. The Executive aim to put a cross-departmental

strategy in place, to ensure that high quality help and services are available to meet the needs of victims. The Executive have already agreed to provide £200,000 this year to get work under way to identify the needs of victims and raise public awareness of those needs. It is also anticipated that funding from the European Union's Peace II programme will be available for a programme for victims. Once the strategy is in place and the Peace II position is clear, we will be better placed to identify the additional resources required.

I was asked, not least by Mr Roche, to confirm that the student support proposals were well thought through. Although the findings of the student support review are still under consideration, the Executive have taken the view that resources should be made available now to meet the most pressing needs. In the next few weeks, further proposals will be subject to policy appraisal and evaluation, to ensure that they are effective and can meet their objectives.

I was also asked how the Minister for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment could make an announcement on student support in advance of the decision on the allocation of the Executive programme funds. The position was set out clearly in my statement last week: the Executive have definitely agreed an allocation of £5 million for 2001-02, £7 million for 2002-03, and £8 million for 2003-04 for some key aspects of the review.

We have also set aside further money in the New Directions fund, which is our way of showing clearly that there is further provision available for aspects of the student support review after the details have been considered further by the Executive. The Executive's decision on these resources, and on other aspects of the Executive programme funds, will be decided and announced in the new year.

Mr McGrady, Dr Paisley and Mr Shannon asked what could be done to assist the fishing industry. The Budget allocates £125,000 per annum to cover costs associated with the Cod Recovery Plan. In addition, the Minister announced her intention to formulate a scheme to assist the decommissioning of fishing vessels — you know why I took a gulp of water before I got to that word. The quota cuts made at the December meeting of the EU Fisheries Council now make this a top priority.

Dr Paisley commented that Bríd Rodgers was not supported by other UK agriculture Ministers on the issue of quota cuts. On the one hand, I welcome the fact that there was no attempt by the Chairman of the Committee to apportion blame. However, negotiating priorities are jointly determined by all the United Kingdom's Ministers who are responsible for fisheries. I am glad that Dr Paisley appreciates that the Minister has done her best.

Mr McFarland raised the issue of health costs, which he said needed to be reviewed. There are many demands

upon the health budget, and it has to respond to the increasing health demands of an ageing population, costs of modern medicine and greater public awareness and concern about health issues. To deliver the necessary services to the public, the structure of boards and trusts must be best suited to our needs and that is relevant to the consideration of a wider public administration review.

Several Members have raised the issue of the projected increase in the Housing Executive rents. The discussions on the Budget have been based on the assumption that rents would increase by 2% more than the rate of inflation, which is forecast by the Treasury as being 2%. I have looked further at the cost implications of this and, following further scrutiny, it does appear that the difference between a real increase in line with inflation at the GDP deflator, plus 2%, would be £5 million — not the £7.8 million, which I reported last Tuesday. That figure was a revision of the £5.4 million I reported previous to that. I am saying this before anyone else might take the reins and try to do an announcement trail on this.

The final decision on the rent increase is a matter for the Minister for Social Development. The Executive are proposing a budget for the Housing Executive, which is £6.5 million higher than in 2000-01, and an increase of 5.3%. This funding more than reverses the £3 million reduction proposed by the Labour Government, which had been built in to the plans we inherited on devolution. I recognise, as many Members have stressed today and on other occasions, the strong concern to ensure that we carry through with proper investment in social housing, particularly in relation to the Housing Executive's budget. I also recognise the particular pressures and challenges faced by the Housing Executive. We have tried before, in monitoring rounds this year, to make good those other pressures as they arise, as well as making this significant commitment to the annual Budget.

Several points were raised about the public service agreements and the regional rate. I think it was Mr Ford who alleged that, in relation to the regional rate, we are simply following a catch-up policy. The proposed increases on the regional rate are needed to generate the resources that the Executive deem necessary to deliver their priorities. The estimates of how great the increase in rate poundage should be will be kept under review. These increases will be adjusted if there is greater buoyancy than we have allowed for.

Public service agreements are vital to the effective and efficient pursuit of our objectives. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel have joint responsibility to work with Departments on developing public service agreements and policing them.

9.15 pm

Mr Bradley raised points about our proposals for providing free travel for elderly people. As you will know,

the Executive are committed to introducing free travel for older people in the Programme for Government. Provision of £4 million has been made in 2002-03 and 2003-04 to take this important new proposal forward, subject to a full policy appraisal.

Points were raised about finance for road gritting by Mr Bradley and Ms Morrice. The Budget contains provision to sustain the current programme of road gritting, however, prioritization within this programme is, of course, a matter for the Minister for Regional Development.

Rev Dr William McCrea, as Chairperson of the Environment Committee, raised a number of issues. He acknowledged the fact that the Environment and Heritage Service is enjoying an increase of over 30% more than the funding provided in the current year. This will allow for the first stage of a progressive implementation of European environmental legislation. We cannot do everything we wish to do immediately, especially when faced with a range of competing priorities. Nevertheless, I can assure the Member that a major part of the additional funding will help district councils meet the cost of their obligations under the waste management strategy, as has already been provided for in Great Britain.

I also note the reference to the moratorium on the historic building grant applications. In fact, the extra in-year allocations to this area should enable an earlier lifting of this moratorium, but the precise timing is a matter for the Minister of the Environment. Rev Dr William McCrea also mentioned the possibility of European infraction proceedings because of the backlog in implementing European legislation. The substantial increase in this area demonstrates the Executive's determination to move quickly to eliminate the backlog. If, despite this evidence, infraction proceedings are taken, we will address the issue of any resulting costs at that time.

Issues were also raised about the overall underfunding, as it was put, of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Mr O'Neill asked why no funding was provided to buy out commercial fishing nets or to improve safety in road racing. While I acknowledge that only 25% of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's bids for funding were met, all bids are considered according to relative priorities and not on the proportion of bids submitted by each Department. This year the Executive have recommended that the Department's budget be increased by 7.8% compared to last year, and I should point out that this is the fourth highest increase proposed in the Budget. In addition to the Budget allocations, the Department will also have the opportunity to bid for funding under the Executive programme funds.

With regard to the buying out of commercial fishing nets, although the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure submitted a bid for funding, its policy in this area is still being developed. Until the policy is developed and evaluated, the Executive cannot consider allocating funds,

as we are not yet able to determine a relative priority of the policy within the Programme for Government.

As far as improving safety in road racing is concerned, the Department is currently consulting with interested parties and has set up a working group to look at addressing the long-term safety of motorcycle racing on both road and track. Until the policy in this area has been developed and evaluated, the Executive are, again, unable to allocate funds.

Mr Close asked about receipts from the sale of Housing Executive houses. Additional receipts from all sources need to be looked at in the context of the most pressing needs across all our programmes.

It would not be sensible to assume that they should be allocated to the area from which they have arisen. Not all Departments have an equal ability to generate receipts. The present practice ensures that their needs can be taken into account when the allocation of additional receipts is considered.

Mr McHugh asked where the increase of £7 million — which was allocated to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety since the draft October Budget — will be spent. The capital budget for next year has been increased by £5 million, and an additional recurrent £2 million has been allocated to the acute services budget. The precise distribution will be determined by the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr McHugh raised an issue which had been mentioned earlier by Mr P Robinson. He said that free travel for the elderly would do little for those living in rural areas because they currently have few public transport services. As I said earlier, a policy appraisal of the proposal is awaited. The Executive will want the differential impact and benefits of free travel to be properly appraised.

Mr Savage and others expressed concerns about the effects of European Union funding. The Executive have to work within the total allocation of funding set by the Treasury. That includes the amounts available on a ring-fenced basis for the Peace II programme, for which we are especially grateful to the European Union. The Executive are able to work alongside the European Union on programmes such as community initiatives.

In these instances, and in aspects of transitional Objective 1 funding, we have decided to allocate additional funding within our departmental expenditure limit, because we can support those actions on their own merits. For example, the urban community initiative initiates actions that we support. Furthermore, we have provided for complimentary actions to be listed among the bids on the Executive programme funds.

Mr Paisley Jnr has challenged the costs arising from the structures of Government. This demonstrates a failure to recognise the sheer value of having a local administration. There are 11 Departments in the Assembly, and this structure makes for substantial scrutiny and accountability

of the workings of Government. This is a major change for the better, by comparison with the restoration of direct rule, where we had no accountability at this level. Some of the more prolific questioners of that accountability should bear in mind that every activity in this Assembly, at both Committee and individual level, does have a bearing on departmental running costs and does bear down on other performance aspects.

We were also asked by Mr McHugh and Mr Poots about whether the allocation for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should be spent on administration costs, rather than on farmers. In the past, the Department has run capital grant schemes for farmers. However, the time is not appropriate to ask farmers to contribute further to such schemes. Instead, the Department aims to increase education and training, information technology, and to introduce a focus on quality competitiveness, such as in beef quality. To that end, the Budget provides for important work, including the launch of the beef quality initiative, business development, education and training for farmers, and the introduction of the scrapie eradication programme.

The £2 million per annum funding of the beef quality initiative is an example of a successful idea emerging from the expert vision group set up by Ms Rodgers to develop a strategic vision for the future development of the entire agri-food industry. With regard to Mr McHugh's other queries, there is scope for an increase in administration to deliver all of the Department's statutory obligations, including a satisfactory equality scheme.

On modulation, the Budget provides for farmers' money to be matched pound for pound by the Treasury, which will bring more money into the Northern Ireland economy and to the agriculture industry as a whole. The Department will be consulting with farmers' bodies about the use of modulation money and match funding for the 2003-04 period. Also, the payment of compensation is an important element in the control of animal disease, ensuring that farmers report outbreaks early so that effective remedial action can be taken.

Mr Savage asked what Ms Rodgers was doing about the crisis in farm incomes. The increase in the allocation to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development provides very substantive evidence of the Executive's commitment to farming. There will also be significant funding allocated through European subsidies, which will be additional to this budget.

Mr Paisley Jnr queried waste, and pointed in particular to the £2,000 spent on a cross-border rural development group. I know that the Minister of Agriculture supports that proposal to build stronger rural communities on a cross-border basis. She also supports the proposal for the new peace maze in Northern Ireland, which is funded by the peace and reconciliation fund, because of its particularly strong cross-community appeal to young and old alike. She considers both to be valuable initiatives.

Mr Ford queried the indicative allocations in the Budget for free travel for the elderly and the question of the remainder falling on district councils. The estimated cost of existing half-fares scheme is £4 million. On that basis, the increased travel by the elderly due to the availability of free travel is likely to raise the full fare cost to £11 million. However, as I said before, a policy appraisal is awaited. A common feature of free travel schemes is that the operator should not be placed in a better position than he would have been had the scheme not existed. In other words, he should not gain because an empty seat is now occupied by someone travelling free. On that basis, the cost of free travel to the public purse is still far from clear. Against that background, the Executive have proposed that funding of twice the current level should be made available. The rest, if any, will come from district councils, based on an assessment of the benefit that their residents enjoy.

Mr Ford also asked about a public/private partnership for Translink. Obviously, that is initially a matter for the Department for Regional Development, but we must recognise that a single monopoly that is not exposed to competition is unlikely to provide the most efficient service delivery, and forthcoming European legislation could well force change. I am sure that, in scrutinizing proposals, the Department for Regional Development, the Executive and the Assembly will recognise the problems created by the highly fragmented railway privatization in Britain. I hope that Members are assured on that point.

Mr Dallat, among others, referred to problems with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Trust. The additional allocation of £1 million to the service's budget in 2001-02 will fund the replacement of the existing vehicles, thereby contributing to the fleet's modernization. The recently completed strategic review of the ambulance service highlighted a range of problems. We will need to consider carefully what options exist to address these. The outcome of the review into the acute hospital sector will also be relevant in defining future needs.

Ms Morrice commended the decision to fund recruitment of road safety education officers, increasing their number from 11 to 21, and more significant investment in road safety promotion issues. That investment has enabled the Department of Environment to reinforce its key road safety messages. More importantly perhaps, the Department of the Environment, in conjunction with others across Government, is currently preparing a new road safety strategic plan for the period 2001-10. A consultation document will be published shortly, and I am sure that what Ms Morrice properly calls "a life and death issue" will be fully and rigorously addressed in that review.

9.30 pm

Ms Morrice also sought further information about the allocation of funding to victims, women's issues and community relations. The Budget provides for the work

of the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister, and that includes funding for community relations, and the promotion of gender and equality issues. As I mentioned earlier, the draft Programme for Government aims to put in place a cross-departmental strategy to ensure that the needs of victims are properly met.

Mr Kennedy is anxious that we address the backlog of repairs to the school estate in future years and arrange retainer payments for term-time staff. The Executive recognise the importance of maintaining safe and appropriate school facilities, and has allocated an additional £10.5 million for that purpose this year. I assure the Assembly that the Executive will continue to address the inherited backlog in repairs when allocating Executive programme funds and constructing the Budget in future years.

Ms Gildernew asked about the impact of the reduction in urban regeneration and community development funding. While the mainstream funding is falling by £3.1 million as the 94/99 EU Single Programme comes to an end, there is an increase in EU Peace funding of £6.2 million. In addition, there will also be £6 million in the social inclusion community regeneration Executive programme funds if the Sinn Féin amendment does not succeed.

Ms Gildernew then went on to say that receipts from the sale of Housing Executive houses had been returned to the British Exchequer. In fact, all receipts from Housing Executive house sales have become available to spend in Northern Ireland, on housing or other programmes. Decisions on where that money should be allocated are taken by the Executive and ultimately by the Assembly.

Mr Poots commented on some aspects of the budget for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and laid particular emphasis on library capital works. Responsibility for determining which projects should be given priority within that budget lies with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. It would, therefore, be inappropriate for me to comment on any particular library, much as Mr Poots might want me to do so.

Mr Weir suggested that the increase in the regional rate could be forgone simply by reducing departmental running costs. This relies on the assumption that departmental running costs are spent on bureaucracy. I emphasise that that is far from the case, as many front line public services, such as roads; water and sewerage; environmental services and the payment of benefits are met from these costs. It would be impossible to make the sort of reductions that are being called for without cutting back on these and other vital public services.

In revisiting some points that he had made in winding up the substantive debate on the draft Budget, Mr Leslie emphasised the benefits of housing investments. At present, sales of houses are running at record levels, and far from reducing investment in housing, the Budget produces a 4.2% increase next year in housing provision. We have already indicated our determination to ensure

that our housing programme continues to target social need. Despite the comments from some Members, housing continues to be a priority for the Executive. We also have to make sure that we pursue that priority alongside the many other competing measures we are advocating. We will continue to keep that point and other matters under review as regards future budget rounds and monitoring rounds.

I have tried to cover most of the issues raised in this debate. Some points were more substantive than others. Any that I have not covered I will follow up by letter, regardless of how Members vote on either the amendments or the Budget.

I want to pay tribute to all the Members who participated in the debate. It has been a useful exercise and has demonstrated that this Assembly is functioning as an Assembly should. There has been the challenge of alternative perspectives. Different opinions have been aired. I did not come here with the expectation that the Budget would be a lap of honour, either for the Executive or myself.

Proposed amendments have focused on one particular aspect — the regional rate. Most of the offerings have tended either to indicate some approval and welcome of the increases that the Executive have been able to afford to various programmes, or to ask for more expenditure on others. I am at a loss to understand how we could meet all the demands and suggestions for even more expenditure, when we are also under pressure, through the proposed amendments in relation to the regional rate, to reduce the resources available to us. I have said previously how I liken these occasions to close encounters of the absurd kind. We have seen some of that again. We are being asked to reduce the resources available to us, and at the same time increase expenditure.

Nevertheless, I recognise that people have their own case to put and their own role to play. I have a particular role as the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and I hope to discharge that properly on behalf of, and on a good working basis with, all my ministerial colleagues.

I want, as some other Members did today, to pay tribute to all my ministerial Colleagues for the contribution that they have made to the first Budget round. They have all put forward good cases. They all made bids, as their respective departmental Committees know. Unfortunately, the Executive do not have the resources available to meet all of those bids, and that is why we have had to develop a budget exercise very much informed by the key priority setting of the Programme for Government. In paying tribute to my ministerial Colleagues, I want to pay tribute to all the other members of the Executive Committee who have deliberated on the Budget decisions with us. We have taken these decisions collectively. I pay tribute, in particular, to the work of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in overseeing and in sharing in, not just this Budget round, but also the important work on the Programme for Government.

I appreciate that Members are still saying that they would like to see more of the public service agreements before voting on the Budget. However, let us be clear — the public service agreements will be coming forward to the Assembly in detailed form in January. We cannot really do anything about those public service agreements until we have confirmed the Budget. Their finalisation will be on the basis of the Budget lines confirmed here, and will set things out in a more meaningful way than we have been able to do in the tables so far. Members have rightly said that some of the more meaningful detail is absent from the Budget at this stage. That more meaningful detail should be available and set out in the public service agreements, which will form part of a consolidated Programme for Government.

Hence, the requirement in the agreement for the Assembly to be able to vote on a Programme for Government that incorporates an agreed Budget will be fulfilled. This is an important stage in that process. We have a Budget that is derived from a Programme for Government. It is not the end of the process. Confirming the Budget will lead to the further elaboration of the Programme for Government and will fulfil the information needs that many Members have outlined.

I hope that Committee members will further pursue the details of the public service agreements and the valid concerns that they have indicated. Through the Committees, they can ensure the best use of resources. People should not wait for a flag to fall from me, or from the Department of Finance and Personnel, before they scrutinise those issues.

Tonight we must decide if we are to confirm the Budget for next year. Indicative figures, consistent with the priorities reflected in the Programme for Government, have been provided for the following two years. I ask the Assembly to reject these amendments. They would damage the Budget, and, specifically, its realisation of our commitments to North/South structures under the Good Friday Agreement, and to the key priorities set out by the Executive in the Programme for Government. Having rejected both amendments, I also ask the Assembly to strongly endorse our first Budget under devolution.

Mr Speaker: The amendments will be taken in the proper order — first, number 2, then number 1 — followed by the motion in the form then agreed. If the motion has not been amended, it will be taken as on the Order Paper. As I reminded the House at the start of the day, it is clear from section 64(2) of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) that votes on the draft Budget require cross-community support. Until now, in the case of all propositions requiring cross-community support it had to be clear that there were no votes against; otherwise the Chair has pressed the House for Division. However, at this late hour I am hesitant to put the House to unnecessary and time-consuming Divisions. If it appears absolutely clear to the Chair that a proposal has not

achieved a cross-community vote, I will so declare following the collection of voices. However, if it is challenged in the normal way by restating, then I will call for a Division. If it is not necessary to have a Division, I will not press the House to do so. The matter is in the hands of Members.

Question That the amendment in the name of Mr Maskey be made *put and negatived*.

Question That the amendment in the name of Mr Dodds be made *put*.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 23; Noes 63.

AYES

Unionist

Paul Berry, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Jim Shannon, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Nationalist

Alex Attwood, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Seamus Mallon, Alex Maskey, Donovan McClelland, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Eddie McGrady, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney.

Unionist

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Esmond Birnie, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Reg Empey, David Ervine, Sam Foster, John Gorman, Derek Hussey, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, David McClarty, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Dermot Nesbitt, Ken Robinson, George Savage, David Trimble, Jim Wilson.

Other

Jane Morrice.

Total Votes	86	Total Ayes	22	(26.7%)
Nationalist Votes	39	Nationalist Ayes	0	(0.0%)
Unionist Votes	46	Unionist Ayes	23	(50.0%)

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Main question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 62; Noes 26.

AYES

Nationalist

Alex Attwood, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Seamus Mallon, Alex Maskey, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Eddie McGrady, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney.

Unionist

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Esmond Birnie, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Reg Empey, David Ervine, Sam Foster, John Gorman, Derek Hussey, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, David McClarty, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Dermot Nesbitt, Ken Robinson, George Savage, David Trimble, Peter Weir, Jim Wilson.

Other

Jane Morrice.

NOES

Unionist

Paul Berry, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Jim Shannon, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

Other

Seamus Close, David Ford, Kieran McCarthy, Sean Neeson.

Total Votes	88	Total Ayes	62	(70.5%)
Nationalist Votes	37	Nationalist Ayes	37	(100.0%)
Unionist Votes	46	Unionist Ayes	24	(52.2%)

Question accordingly agreed to (cross-community vote).

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2000-02 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 12 December 2000.

Adjourned at 10.10 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 19 December 2000

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS: USE OF ASSEMBLY E-MAIL

Mr Speaker: Dr Paisley raised with me the use by a Member's researcher of the Assembly e-mail address as a point of contact in respect of an article that the researcher had written, and which was published in 'The Irish Times' on 7 December. The researcher is a Mr Steven King. The matter relates to a member of staff, not a Member of the House, so it is for the Assembly Secretariat to deal with it. I have put it in the hands of the Head of Administration for his attention.

I can tell the House that the Head of Administration has ruled that Assembly e-mail accounts are provided for staff use on Assembly business only and that their private or commercial use is prohibited. The Head of Administration is writing to the Member's researcher to remind him of the rules governing the provision and use of Assembly services and to inform him that any further breach of these rules will result in the withdrawal of Assembly services.

I have to advise the House that the Second Reading of the Electronic Communications Bill on the Order Paper for today has been withdrawn by the relevant Ministers.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to thank you for your ruling. I am glad that this matter is being dealt with as you have described.

Mr Molloy: A Cheann Comhairle, go raibh maith agat. With regard to the issue of my speaking as Committee Chairperson yesterday, the point was raised by Mr McGrady that I had extended that by actually making a political speech. It is quite clear from Hansard that I made a differential between speaking as a Committee Chairperson and speaking as a party member. I want to draw that to the attention of the House.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Hansard reports that I spoke as the Committee Chairperson. I was not called as the Chairperson, and I

made it clear to the Speaker that I was speaking in my own capacity.

Mr McGrady: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it possible for a Member who is a Chairperson of a Committee to be called in privilege and precedence as a Chairperson of a Committee and then use that calling as Chairperson to make a personal political speech?

Mr Speaker: May I refer all the Members to the comments I made yesterday, which are recorded in Hansard, about the calling of Members as office holders in the Assembly. I pointed out that on some occasions Members who were office holders were not called as such because they had said that they did not want to speak in their office. There is a dilemma for those Members who are office holders who wish to make reference to matters which are the subject of their office but also want to make reference to other matters, as under Standing Orders they may only be called once in the course of any debate. They could not be called once as a Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson and then subsequently called again.

I hesitate to make an immediate ruling on that matter because it is a difficult one and I wish to give it further consideration. I will return to the matter when I have considered it and consulted with the Business Committee.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I made it clear to the Deputy Speaker that I did not want to be called as Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee simply because political points had been made against my party and, as its leader, I wanted to answer them. I did not take any precedence whatsoever — I was well down the list. Therefore, Mr McGrady can go home and sleep well, knowing that everything was done decently and in order.

Mr Speaker: I can confirm that Dr Paisley was not called in his capacity as Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee and did not have precedence either in the Assembly or, I note, even in the speaking order of his own party.

LANGUAGES: NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL SECTORAL MEETING

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) languages meeting which was held on 5 December 2000.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to report to the Assembly on the second meeting of the NSMC in language sectoral format on Tuesday 5 December 2000 in the National Art Gallery, Dublin.

Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Dr Farren and I attended the meeting. The Irish Government was represented by Mr Eamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister of State. This report has been approved by Dr Farren and is also made on his behalf.

The meeting opened with a progress report by the joint chairperson of the Language Body, Maighréad Uí Mhairtín, on the activities of the body and by the interim chief executive of Foras na Gaeilge (The Irish Language Agency), Mr Micheál Ó Gruagáin, and the interim chief executive of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch (The Ulster-Scots Agency), Mr John Hegarty.

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

The Council considered and approved an interim programme of activities for Foras na Gaeilge for 2001, including interim staffing arrangements to manage that programme. The programme of activities is divided into four main sectors: the development of a corporate plan and detailed organisational structure for Foras na Gaeilge, subject to the approval of the NSMC; allocation of more than IR£7 million to Irish language organisations and projects, including funding of an estimated IR£750,000 to an new pre-school organisation, and an estimated IR£400,000 for Irish language newspapers and journals; projects and partnerships run by Foras, including book publishing and distribution; and administration and personnel, including an increase in staff numbers from 40 to 65 and the establishment of a permanent office in Belfast.

The Council also noted a progress report on Foras na Gaeilge's corporate plan. The Council approved, in principle, funding of IR£3.1 million — that is £2.37 million sterling — over a five-year period for a modern, high-quality English-Irish dictionary which would supersede the current major English-Irish dictionary edited by Tomás De Bhaldraithe, which was first published in 1959. The new authoritative dictionary will have 50,000 key words and 250,000 sample sentences.

The Council also agreed, in principle, a three-year action plan to ensure that there is an adequate provision of Irish language textbooks and resources for primary and post-primary schools and colleges. The plan would include ensuring that teachers are released from their teaching duties to produce the resources and that they would receive training to do so. The material would be made available in printed and electronic formats.

The Council considered and approved the body of the corporate plan of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch. The plan supported four major themes at a total cost of £1.45 million. They are: supporting Ulster-Scots as a living language and promoting its use and development; acting as a key contributor to the development of Ulster-Scots culture; establishing partnerships with the education and community sectors to promote the study of the Ulster-Scots language, culture and history; and developing the public's understanding of the Ulster-Scots language and culture.

The Council considered a request by the chairperson of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch for assistance to carry out his duties and agreed a means by which this could be done. The Council also noted the resignation from Foras na Gaeilge of Cllr Cionnaith Ó Súilleabháin and appointed Gearóid Ó hEara as his replacement.

The Council considered the draft equality schemes for Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch and Foras na Gaeilge. It noted both drafts and advised that they should be amalgamated into one scheme for the North/South Language Body. It acknowledged that further work would be required to agree the final format of the draft, taking account of the need for each agency, in its particular context, to be able to consult fully and comprehensively. The final draft equality scheme for the North/South Language Body will be submitted to NSMC for approval before public consultation.

The Council considered the recommendation of a selection panel on the appointment of a chief executive to the Special EU Programmes Body. The name of the candidate put forward by the selection panel was accepted by the Council and a further announcement will be made in due course following acceptance of the appointment. The Council agreed to meet again in this sectoral format in Northern Ireland in February/March 2001.

The Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee (Mr O'Neill): I welcome the Minister's statement and pay tribute to him and his Colleagues for the work they have been doing. This issue is at an important stage, and the Committee will be interested in examining it. Will the Minister provide us with the details of the programme of activities in the Gaelic section and of the corporate plan for the Ulster-Scots section?

I welcome the work that has been carried out on the dictionary, which is currently in great demand. Was there any discussion about making it available in disc form?

That has become an increasingly important format, both in language teaching and in the development of the language.

10.45 am

Mr McGimpsey: Both agencies — Foras na Gaeilge and Tha Boord o Ulster Scotch — have undertaken work on producing dictionaries in Ulster-Scots, for the first time, and an updated Irish one. That is an important piece of work for both agencies. There is no reason why the Ulster-Scots Agency's corporate plan cannot be given to the Committee. I will also undertake to provide it with a programme of activities for Foras.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee (Mrs Nelis): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This is a very welcome progress report. I welcome the appointment of Gearóid Ó hEara, whom I know personally and who will be an excellent replacement for Cionnaith Ó Súilleabháin. In particular, I welcome the fact that resources will be directed to teaching duties, that teachers will be able to be released from their duties so as to produce these resources, that they will receive the necessary training and that material will be available in both printed and electronic form. Nollaig shona dó.

Mr McGimpsey: Important work is under way as far as the North/South Language Body and the two agencies are concerned. The level of co-operation that exists between the two agencies is very helpful. It is a very welcome move.

Dr Adamson: I thank the Minister for his fine work in providing a more culturally supportive environment in core Ulster-Scots areas, including specific recognition of the Ulster-Scots language. I would like him to take note of several other recommendations.

He could mebbe tak a luik at the wey English bes lairnt in skuils for ti gie wecht til the mukkil Ulster-Scotch cums in on the local wey o tawkin. He could lay oot whit wey the Ulster-Scotch leid nicht could be lairnt up ti GCSE an GCE A Heicht. Mairatower, he could lay oot plenishin for the fittin leir o yins cummin oot o universitie ti be dominies; ettil an pit thegither dedicate skreivins for the lairnin; an lay oot whit thai could dae wi for haein Ulster-Scotch lairnin for collegianers.

First, a review of how English is taught in schools to take account of the heavy influence of Ulster-Scots on local speech. Secondly, provision for the study of the Ulster-Scots language to GCSE and GCE A-level. Thirdly, provision for appropriate teacher training. Fourthly, a drive to produce dedicated educational support materials. Fifthly, provision for Ulster-Scots studies in tertiary education.

A'm pittin down aw thir avisements ti ettil at makkin siccar o jonik daeins an aiven-haunditness for the leid an fowgate heirskip o the haill fek o residentsers.

The objective of each of these recommendations is to promote, on a basis of equality and fairness, the linguistic and cultural heritage of an entire community.

Mr McGimpsey: I agree with much of what the Member said about our rich and varied indigenous linguistic tradition, not least the tradition of Ulster-Scots. A number of his points were well made, in relation to teaching, studying for GCSE, teacher training, educational support and also availability for study at tertiary level. Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch is looking at all those areas, and it has a number of exciting plans for the linguistic and cultural development of Ulster-Scots. That is obviously a very rich vein of our shared heritage and tradition. The agency is well aware of those areas, and I am confident that its work will encompass all of them.

Mr Hilditch: Further to yesterday's award of £1.2 million to be spent on the language issue, I would be interested to hear the Minister's views on accountability and reporting. I note the points he made this morning on the proposed corporate plans for both the Irish language and Ulster-Scots, but there is a clear need for full and detailed plans to be made available as soon as possible, giving precise information on the proposed activities of the body and the funding implications.

Looking at the information, I am concerned that once again proposals for the Irish language, including additional jobs and the establishment of a permanent office in Belfast, far outweigh and outstrip the resources being made available for the promotion of Ulster-Scots.

Will the Minister detail what mechanisms or directives are in place to ensure that a full report of the North/South Language Body and its activities for the current year will be presented at the earliest opportunity, given the non-presentation of any previous corporate plan?

Mr McGimpsey: The flow of information is very important, and we are trying to increase this communication through, for example, this statement. Everything is accountable to the North/South Ministerial Council and, therefore, to this Assembly. That is why I have made this statement. There is a clear flow of information from both the North/South Language Body, answerable to the North/South Ministerial Council, and from the two language agencies, which are answerable to the body.

The corporate plan for Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch is complete in draft form, and the draft corporate plan for Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish language body, will be available early in the new year. Those will come together as part of the plan for the body as a whole. It is also important to reflect that an equality statement is a key part of that organisation, in common with all the other bodies attached to this Assembly and to the settlement. Equality statements have been prepared for both the agencies and, as I said in my statement, are in the course of being amalgamated into one single statement that will govern the work of the North/South Language Body.

Mr Hilditch mentioned the disparity in funding. Under direct rule, Ulster-Scots got £118,000 per year. In the first year of devolution we multiplied that by five, and took it up to £667,000. In the second year we have doubled that to £1.3 million. As a result of devolution, over the past two years we have seen a tenfold increase in funding for Ulster-Scots. We recognise its importance. It was not getting the sort of support and resources that it merited.

As for the number of staff employed, it is wrong to benchmark one language against another. Ulster-Scots is clearly in a more embryonic developmental form. Gaelic is much more mature in its development. As I said this morning, the Irish-English dictionary is being updated. The dictionary currently in use is some 50 years old, and needs to be updated, whereas the Ulster-Scots agency is about to undertake the very first dictionary. That gives an indication of the different levels of development of, and, therefore, the different degrees of resources needed by each language.

Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch will say that funding is adequate at the moment, and that it has its hands full in relation to work programmes. The Foras na Gaeilge staff is increasing from 40 to its complement of 65. That increase has been slow, because of the concern that the suspension would not be lifted early and the resultant delays in recruiting permanent staff.

Tolerance, respect and understanding of languages, including Irish, Ulster-Scots and ethnic minority languages, are the key policy objectives towards which we are working. Currently, Irish Gaelic has Part III European Charter status; Ulster-Scots has Part II status. The Ulster-Scots agency is confident that the language will achieve Part III within 10 years, and Ulster-Scots can claim to be one of the fastest growing minority or regional language movements in Europe. There is much to be welcomed, not just in the activities of the Boord o Ulster-Scotch, but in the activities of Foras na Gaeilge.

Mr McCarthy: It is important that the Assembly take steps to support Irish and Ulster-Scots, so long as they are complementary to each other and are not just restricted to one tribe or the other. I look forward to the day when we will hear substantial contributions in Irish from Unionist Members and Ulster-Scots from the Nationalists. We would support that, but not if the language issue is going to be split down the middle by each tribe.

Fewer people are using the languages as first languages; in most cases, they are simply exercising a cultural preference. I welcome the fact that people have that choice.

Mr Poots: Is it in order for the Member for Strangford to describe constituents in Northern Ireland as tribes?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is not unparliamentary language.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister tell us what steps — if any — are being taken by the North/South body to promote the provision of services in other important languages, such as Cantonese, Mandarin and Urdu? Does the Minister agree that more people on this island speak those as first languages? Many of those people have difficulty understanding English and miss out on important information and opportunities. Has the Minister any plans to raise those genuine concerns at future North/South Ministerial Council meetings?

Mr McGimpsey: Tolerance, respect and understanding for languages, including Irish, Ulster-Scots and the ethnic minority languages, are overriding principles of the Belfast Agreement. The North/South Language Body comprises two agencies — the Irish language agency and the Ulster-Scots agency. The Irish language agency is Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots agency is Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch, and each of those has a specific remit. I have received no proposal for a third language agency, and I am not sure whether it would be appropriate to consider that now.

There are other methods of funding and supporting ethnic minority languages. I agree with the Member that it is important; there are 8,000 Cantonese speakers in Northern Ireland, which is a sizeable constituency. For many of those people, Cantonese is their first language and English their second. If we are to promote tolerance, respect and understanding, it is important that resources be directed towards, for example, the Chinese Welfare Association, with which I have had some contact. There are mechanisms to provide support, but I do not know whether that support is adequate. The matter does not fall within my remit, but I think that those groups would be the first to agree that there is support available to them.

Mr McMenamin: I welcome the plan to ensure that there is adequate provision of Irish language textbooks and resources for primary and post-primary schools and colleges. The new dictionary is also welcome. Language is an essential element of our cultural heritage and is part of our sense of identity.

I ask the Minister if Ulster-Scots and Irish can be implemented, sooner rather than later, as part of the curriculum in all primary schools. Will he consider setting up a sub-office in a border region, particularly in the west Tyrone area? I wish him a happy Christmas.

11.00 am

Mr McGimpsey: A Foras na Gaeilge office is being set up in Belfast. Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch has its headquarters in Belfast, and it is setting up an office in Donegal. Attempting to straddle and to reach the whole constituency is very much part of the agenda.

There is a resource allocation for support at primary-school level. This is not just the Department's responsibility — the Member is aware that boards of governors are responsible for delivering the curriculum in the classrooms. Their support comes from education and library boards, which, in turn, derive strategy from the Department of Education. It would not be for me — or, indeed, for the language bodies — to determine what happens in the classroom. There is certainly an interest in providing that type of support. I also refer to the answer that I gave to Dr Adamson. I said that both agencies see it as part of their remit to look at how they give support to primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Mr Shannon: I wish to ask the Minister a number of questions and to make a number of points. First of all, I want to express disappointment. I know that the Minister has said that the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council and the language society are happy. I understand that they are far from happy about the funding that has been offered to them. If you look at the overall figures, it is very clear that Ulster-Scots is almost an afterthought. It is a poor relation. To be honest, it is a very, very poor relation when it comes to the funding which has been allocated to the different organizations.

I have no problem with the promotion of the Irish language, as long as it is done to promote the language and not used as a political tool. Perhaps the Minister can reassure us that the promotion of the Irish language will be on that basis and will not be used by political organizations to promote an ethos, culture or political viewpoint which would be alien to a large proportion of the people in the Province. I would like that reassurance first.

The Minister also mentioned staff and locations. We see that the staff in the Belfast office for the Irish language agency will be increased from 40 to 65. He also mentioned that an Ulster-Scots office will be established in Donegal. Can he tell us when that will be established, what the staffing numbers will be, and where the staff will come from? What criteria will be used in choosing the staff of the Ulster-Scots office? Can he also tell us how many staff will be in the Belfast office, and what criteria will be used to select them?

I also have a question about book publishing and distribution. I am a bit disappointed that Ulster-Scots has not been given significant — or, indeed, any — help towards book publishing and distribution. I know that the Minister is aware of the Ulster-Scots books that have been written by a number of enthusiasts who are committed to the Ulster-Scots language, culture and tradition. They have paid for the publications from their own pockets and through private funding. Where is the funding for this?

The Minister also mentioned the English-Irish dictionary that will have 50,000 key words and 250,000 sample sentences. Can the Minister say whether there will be similar help for Ulster-Scots? In the last sentence —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Shannon, I ask you to be a bit more concise when asking your questions. They are quite difficult to follow.

Mr Shannon: On the last page of his statement, at the third paragraph from the end, the Minister states that the final draft equality scheme for the North/South language body will be submitted to the North/South Ministerial Council for approval before public consultation is carried out. Can the Minister confirm once again that the public will be asked for its opinion once the recommendations have been made?

May I also ask the Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Technically, the Minister may answer only one of those questions. You cannot keep adding points.

Mr Shannon: This is my last question. Can the Minister confirm that the Ulster-Scots language, history and cultural tradition will, and can, receive funding so that they can be adequately promoted? Will that commitment be given here today? Unfortunately, we have not had it so far.

Mr McGimpsey: As you said, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am only required to answer one of Mr Shannon's questions, but I will do my best to answer all of them, not least because it is Christmas.

I have responded to his question about funding on a number of occasions, both here and in writing, but I do not mind answering it again. Two years ago, funding for the Ulster-Scots tradition was £118,000. In the first year of devolution, we multiplied that figure by five to bring the total funding up to £667,000. The following year, we doubled it again, so we have now seen a tenfold increase in funding. That is as much, I believe, as the Ulster-Scots movement can handle at the moment. It has a three-year corporate plan to develop this funding. We are not trying to force this mushroom to grow; it is doing so of its own volition. This is not simply about money.

The Ulster-Scots tradition, language, heritage and legacy do not revolve around money. They depend on the dedication and interest of a large number of people in this country — it is wrong to put a price tag on everything. One of the problems which affect our culture, heritage and legacy is that people throw money at them, walk away and forget about them. That is not what this is about.

Mr Shannon said that the Ulster-Scots Agency is not happy — that is news to me. Nobody is content; everybody could spend more money, but it has the support that it needs for the moment. It is, however, a rapidly growing movement, and I am determined that it should get support.

Mr Shannon asked for assurance that the Irish language would not be used by political organizations. The North/South language body has two agencies, both of

which are governed by certain standards. In response to his question about the recruitment of staff, each agency has its own equality scheme. Neither Foras na Gaeilge nor Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch is about politics — they are about promoting tolerance, respect and understanding of the languages. The headquarters for the Ulster-Scots Agency is in Belfast, and there will also be an office in Donegal. Foras Na Gaeilge has a headquarters in Dublin and an office in Belfast. None of this information is new; it is all available in libraries and elsewhere.

The Irish language body, Bord na Gaeilge, was taken over by Foras Na Gaeilge, which took over existing Irish language organisations. There is almost a replication of what was there before, and the Irish language movement is not getting the same level of increases as the Ulster-Scots movement. But this is not a competition; this is not a zero sum game. One culture is not diminished by the promotion of another or vice versa — we are seeking to enrich all cultures. The Ulster-Scots movement, in its corporate plan for the first three years, is intending to recruit 12 staff. We are looking at the budgets as well. That is what is in its corporate plan, and that is what it believes it can handle.

Part of its work is an Ulster-Scots dictionary and another project is an academy of Ulster- Scots, which I understand has been agreed with the University of Ulster. It is also working not just on the regional office in Donegal, but also on new partnerships throughout the academic arena and the community. It is also looking very carefully at east/west links through Scotland, mirroring somewhat the sort of links that it is seeing through the Colm Cille Initiative for the Irish language.

My understanding is that the Ulster-Scots Agency is benefiting from advice from the Irish Language Agency. The agencies do not see themselves in competition, and this agency is taking Ulster-Scots down the same path that the Irish language movement has trod in the past. The Irish language movement is not slow to offer advice. It does not see this as a competition. We are supporting the dictionary and part of its funding.

I totally refute the argument that because they do not get the same amount of money, one is being treated unfairly. The key here is equity of treatment. That is our aim. I have told Mr Shannon that there has been a tenfold increase in the amounts given in the past couple of years. It is wrong to try to force-feed and force growth; this is not about money.

The Ulster-Scots movement is strong and vibrant, and it is growing. Incidentally, it is a movement that Mr Shannon and I are comfortable with because we come from that tradition in Newtownards. He does not have the right or the authority to make the charge that this is all about money. I repeat: this is not about money. This is about equity of treatment, and together with the

House and the Executive Committee, I am determined that everybody be treated properly and fairly.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire sa Tionól inniu agus ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis dá bharr. Tá mise sásta go bhfuil an Foras Teanga ag dul i neart agus go bhfuil sé de rún aige oifig bhuan a lonnú i mBéal Feirste roimh i bhfad. I want to welcome the statement from the Minister, and I am pleased to observe that Gaelscoil Uí Néill continues to go from strength to strength. The three-year action plan to ensure adequate provision of language textbooks and resources for schools and colleges is extremely important. To date, many schools have been lacking those resources. Given yesterday's announcement that Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta in Coalisland and Strabane respectively have reached grant-aided status, it is clear that increasingly the Irish-medium sector needs to be properly resourced in this way.

I particularly welcome the news of the imminent establishment of the pre-school organization, and I would like some more information on how that may interact with Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. Similarly, I welcome plans to establish a permanent office in Belfast and will be glad to learn where that will be situated and when it will be fully operative. Finally, I just want to wish the Minister Nollaig shona agus Bliain Úr faoi mhaise

Mr McGimpsey: A temporary office is being established at the moment. It will move to permanent offices when premises have been found. I understand that the temporary office will be in Berry Street in Belfast. A permanent place will then be decided upon.

With regard to the pre-school organization, I do not have the information at hand to help the Member in that respect, but I will try to find it for him. If we have it, I will give it to him, and, if we do not, we will tell him where to get it. I assume that the Department of Education or, perhaps, the education and library boards know more about this than I do. Incidentally, discussions are ongoing between officials in my Department and Department of Education officials.

There is a clear interest in Irish-medium sector education and Foras na Gaeilge recognises that. This is why it is updating Irish-language textbooks and dictionaries. Its three-year action plan is not yet available, but Members will have an opportunity to look at it and comment on it early in the new year. Foras na Gaeilge and Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch recognise the interest that schools have and the need to promote educational texts and dictionaries.

11.15 am

Mr Poots: First, can the Minister tell the House what party and what council Mr Cionnaith Ó Súilleabháin represents? I know what his replacement represents, but

I am not sure if Mr Ó Súilleabháin represents Istanbul city council. Perhaps the Minister can inform us.

As for the £7 million allocation, can the Minister tell us how much of that comes from the Northern Ireland Budget? Does he agree that, given the constraints on library spending, an excessive amount of money is being spent on the Irish language when towns like my own, Lisburn, do not have a decent library that is open and available to everybody?

Mr McGimpsey: I do not know which council Cionnaith O Súilleabháin represents. He was appointed to the board of Foras na Gaeilge, he resigned, and he has since been replaced. I will certainly find out and I will pass the information on to the Member.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will provide £2.3 million to the North/South language body in its start-up year. Of that, £1.8 million will go to Foras na Gaeilge, and £0.5 million will go to Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch. Indicative funding will rise next year, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will provide a total of £3.5 million to the Irish language and Ulster-Scots. Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch will receive £1.3 million, which represents a tenfold increase on the funds it received a couple of years ago.

And then we are back to a library for Lisburn. I can add nothing to the answers I have given the Member on other occasions. I am actively bidding for capital funding for libraries — I am straying off the subject, Mr Speaker, if you will forgive me. It has been decided to go down the private finance initiative (PFI) route for a library for Lisburn rather than go down the traditional route of approaching the Department for capital funding. If that is successful, a library will be provided, and if it is not, traditional funding will doubtless be sought from the Department, as was the case with other libraries.

Libraries are important, but our language and our heritage are also important. Heritage is valuable to us, and, as Dr Johnson said, “Language is the pedigree of nations”. Languages are an important part of our culture and our heritage, and we are particularly lucky here in Northern Ireland, and in the British Isles in general, to have a rich and indigenous linguistic tradition. It would be a shame if we were to lose that.

There is an oral tradition in Ulster-Scots that is vanishing because time marches on and the tradition is held by elderly members of our population. Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch is recording that oral tradition so that the vocabulary and phraseology are not lost. This is very timely.

We have to be prepared to spend some moneys, and this year we are contributing £2.3 million to language. Next year we will be contributing £3.5 million. From the overall Budget of £6 billion that was discussed yesterday, the allocation of £2.3 million to preserve something as important as the tradition of Ulster-Scots,

for example, is worthwhile. I also firmly believe that we have rich indigenous linguistic traditions in Ulster-Scots and Irish that are worth preserving. The small amount that we are talking about to ensure that Ulster-Scots is preserved and promoted is important because it enriches all of us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That was the last question, but I believe Dr Adamson wishes to speak.

Dr Adamson: I thank the Minister for his work for the language movements throughout the year and I wish him a bonnie Yuletide and a blyth New Year.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I want to make a statement on the reorganization of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's economic development agencies. Members will recall that the Programme for Government identified the focusing of the economic development agencies on the new challenges as a key issue. I have considered how the economic development agencies within the ambit of my Department should be reorganised to meet those new challenges in the most efficient and effective manner. Several agencies fall within the ambit of my proposals.

The Industrial Development Board (IDB) employs 358 staff and has a budget of £135 million. Since it was set up in 1982, it has been responsible for attracting inward investment, encouraging the growth, improving the competitiveness of indigenous companies and promoting and assisting the development of international trade. The IDB is an executive arm of my Department.

The Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) has 187 staff and a budget of £28 million. Set up in 1971, it is responsible for supporting local economic development and promoting the establishment and expansion of local enterprises that normally employ fewer than 50 people. LEDU is a company limited by guarantee.

The Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) employs 143 staff and has a budget of £22 million. Set up in 1992, it is responsible for spearheading the drive for competitiveness in Northern Ireland companies through innovation, research and development and the use of technology and technology transfer. It also provides a range of scientific, technological and environmental services to the Government and industry. Since 1995, IRTU has been a Next Steps agency.

The Company Development Programme (CDP) was formerly administered by the Training and Employment Agency. However, it is currently part of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and employs 30 staff. It provides assistance to management and skills training in companies.

Finally, there is the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), which, in addition to its promotional and marketing roles, has some 30 staff who administer financial support to businesses in the tourism sector. The NITB is a non-departmental public body.

As a first step in this process, I commissioned detailed research on the current arrangement and on how economic development support is administered in other parts of the UK, in the Republic of Ireland, in mainland Europe and further afield. I also asked for a detailed report on local enterprise provision. In October, I issued a consultative paper entitled 'Towards a New Structure for Economic

Development Support in Northern Ireland'. I sent it to ministerial Colleagues, the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, the business bodies, other social partners, through the Economic Development Forum, and NIPSA, the trade union representing staff in the existing agencies. Responses were received from over 40 interested parties, representing a wide cross-section of opinion. The clear and constructive input of ministerial Colleagues and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee was particularly appreciated and helpful.

The overwhelming weight of opinion supported the view that the time is now right for a better and more efficient delivery of economic development services, and that the best and most efficient means of achieving this is through the establishment of a new, single agency. The clear predominance of opinion is that the agency should have more flexibility and creditability and it would also be more responsive to the needs of its clients if it were at arm's length from Government. In short, it needs to be capable of responding quickly and should not play catch-up in an intensely competitive global market place. It must be dynamic, nimble and focused, with more emphasis on getting the job done and less on bureaucracy and it must have as its core a more aggressive and targeted approach to the international stage to position and promote Northern Ireland as a business base with few rivals.

In my deliberations, I have examined a wide range of options. These include: integration of service delivery entirely within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; the status quo and minor variations from it; a lead-agency scenario, and the setting up of a single agency both inside and outside Government. Many commentators and respondents to the consultation paper have been adamant that structures should follow strategy and that if the strategic context and policy direction are not right, the structure, in itself, will not contribute significantly to the success or otherwise of our efforts.

Although the work I have undertaken has been focused primarily on the most appropriate structures, I should emphasise that a great deal of work has already been done on both the strategic context and the policy framework. This includes not only work on Strategy 2010, but more recently, the detailed work which led to the draft Programme for Government and ongoing work in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on corporate planning on a three-year basis and operational plans for the coming year.

The Department has also been looking critically at aspects of service delivery that cut across a number of the existing agencies. These include: export services and programmes; the use of repayable forms of assistance; and how indigenous businesses are handled.

These deliberations have been set in the broad framework of post-Strategy 2010 thinking, in the context of

Northern Ireland business's operating in a global economy and facing ever more rapid technological change and in the context of the growing role of local government in economic development.

Globalization means that all businesses in Northern Ireland — large and small — face the same challenges, and all must innovate and respond to new technologies. In turn, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment must provide a comprehensive service to businesses, and I believe that a single agency is now the most appropriate vehicle to deliver this.

Some may ask "Why bother?" That is a valid question, and the answer is simple: for years, our agencies did sterling work, both at home and abroad, against the backdrop of a reign of terror. They had to grapple with the negative image of Northern Ireland created by the gunman and the bomber. Corporate doors were closed to them — not unnaturally. Potential investors sought stable economic and political regions before even considering the sales pitch. This means that the successes they have scored were all the more remarkable, and for that they are owed a debt of gratitude.

The climate is changing, however. Northern Ireland is climbing slowly back to normality, and we need to capitalise on the new opportunities that are opening up. That means that to attract the best, we have to modernise, innovate and seek new ways of doing the job.

I have considered in detail whether such an agency should be inside or outside Government. With the advent of devolution and the re-organization of Departments, there are plausible arguments for keeping such significant expenditure — currently in the region of £200 million — within the direct control of Government. However, in order to meet the challenges of the knowledge-based economy — which we must promote even more keenly — we need structures which facilitate rapid decision taking and give flexibility to respond to changing markets. We need to be able to employ key specialists and offer the terms necessary to motivate them. I am convinced that this cannot be easily achieved within the Civil Service. Northern Ireland is unique in the United Kingdom, and, indeed, in these islands and further afield, in having economic development responsibilities so close to Government.

11.30 am

I have, therefore, concluded that the right model is a single economic development agency in the form of a non-departmental public body (NDPB) sponsored by my Department. In such an arrangement, accountability will be a key issue. The details are yet to be defined, but the permanent secretary will remain as overall accounting officer. I have had helpful input from the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Durkan, and officials from his Department on accountability arrangements and financial and personnel implications. We shall wish to

follow up on the detail with the Department of Finance and Personnel in due course. I also wish to consult with other ministerial Colleagues in order to learn from best practice on accountability in their areas.

Although the performance of the existing agencies has been strong, particularly in the last few years, we face new challenges, and the new agency should be designed to meet them. It will not be an amalgamation of the existing agencies, but an entirely new body. As an NDPB, it will have an executive board. I shall consider the composition of this board carefully, but shall certainly wish to include representatives of the social partners. The agency's ethos will be professional, businesslike and responsive to customer need. The mainstay of its focus will be the promotion and facilitation of innovation and entrepreneurship in the economy.

The new approach will facilitate a shift towards assistance more appropriate to the needs of dynamic indigenous businesses seeking to respond quickly to the rapidly changing demands and skill requirements of the knowledge-driven, service-based global economy. It will seek to accelerate the modernization of our traditional businesses and will strongly promote international trade in support of GDP growth. It will liaise with and develop appropriate partnership arrangements with local government and will be responsible for attracting inward investment aggressively.

The creation of jobs and wealth is essential to it all. Talent is a precious commodity, and we have it in abundance. We cannot afford to export it to other countries where it flourishes. We must be creative in finding new ways of keeping that talent at home, of saying and then proving to our people — our asset base — that they need not emigrate and put down new roots elsewhere, for everything they want is right here. To do that, it is vital that we engineer the right business and economic culture to allow talent to blossom, new products to be developed, and jobs to be created.

This "road map" to address the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead is therefore people-centred and people-driven. I do not suggest change for the sake of change; change is imperative if we are to realise our full potential and build the kind of future that many of us in this House have worked for so long to achieve.

I therefore propose to establish an entirely new economic development agency that will have a high degree of autonomy, but also be clearly accountable to my Department and to myself. It will have a remit including the existing activities of the IDB, LEDU, IRTU, the company development programme (formerly part of the T&EA) and the business support activities of the NITB.

As Members will be aware, the new North/South Tourism Company will promote the island of Ireland as a single tourist destination to the mutual benefit of both parts of the island. However, the NITB continues to have

statutory responsibility for its important functions of promoting Northern Ireland as a holiday destination, regulating the industry, and assisting its small businesses. Through this restructuring, I propose to integrate the development of Northern Ireland's tourism businesses into mainstream local economic development.

In response to my consultation paper, many of those commenting on tourism were firmly of the view that assistance to the tourism sector was no different in principle or practice to business support for any other business sector. Indeed, it is perceived that support for businesses in the tourism sector will be strengthened in the new economic development agency. This transfer of business support functions will free the NITB to concentrate on functions which should remain with a free-standing statutory tourist board. Of key importance is the need to build a strong, professional marketing role based on an understanding of what Northern Ireland has to offer and how it should best be communicated.

It is imperative that the NITB continues to work closely with key industry interests in tourism, so that a coherent approach is presented and understood by all.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will continue to exercise its responsibilities in relation to wider economic development policy, energy, tourism, health and safety, consumer interests and business regulation. The Department will retain the key responsibility to set and drive policy in relation to the new single agency. As noted, the Department will be a key link in the accountability chain for the agency's expenditure.

I am acutely aware of the importance of integrating strategy and policy with service delivery. In developing detailed implementation plans for the new agency, I will be seeking to build in mechanisms to ensure close working relationships between the agency, the Department and the other Departments that have key roles in economic development.

The policy, practice and implementation of industrially focused research and development will be centrally embedded within our new economic support structure. By effectively harnessing our existing expertise, the new agency will fully exploit the contribution of the science and technology base in the creation of a sustainable, knowledge-based economy. In furtherance of this, relationships between the agency, the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, the universities and business will be fully developed. The mainstay of our focus will be the promotion and facilitation of innovation and entrepreneurship in the economy. The "golden thread of innovation" will be woven through the entire fabric of the new agency.

The restructuring I am proposing will not of itself impact on the arrangements for local economic development. At present, LEDU has the lead role within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment for liaison with

the councils and other bodies that undertake local economic activities. The IDB has a separate but important responsibility to work with the councils to market their areas to potential inward investors. These two functions will be brought together and enhanced in the new agency within the context of the small business strategy, which is one of my actions in the Programme for Government.

There is considerable scope for better co-ordination and elimination of duplication in local economic development, and my aim will be to make as much progress as possible on this, pending the review of local government. I welcome this review, and I hope that a restructured local government will be better placed to develop its relationships with the new agency and to exploit the greater scope which will exist for specific actions to be undertaken in due course by councils.

Closely related to local economic development is the social economy, and we have accepted that this is a sector that has potential to contribute more to our social inclusion agenda. At this stage, I have not decided whether the new agency should have the lead role on the social economy within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment or if this should remain with the Department. I will be considering this as part of the detailed planning for the new agency.

Staffing of the new agency will be critical. We are indebted to our existing staff for their efforts hitherto, sometimes in very trying circumstances. I am proposing to build on the expertise of the agency staff who will be working at the new agency from its launch. I expect many of them to remain and develop their careers therein. The existing staff are a mix of civil servants, mainly IDB and IRTU staff, but it includes a small number of former T&EA staff in the Business Support Division, and public servants, mainly from LEDU. There is also a small number of employees from the NITB, who currently administer grant support to small businesses in tourism. I have, therefore, decided that the best way to proceed is to second the civil servants to the new agency, transfer LEDU staff and relevant staff of the NITB, and give the agency the facility to recruit directly in order to meet its changing needs quickly and flexibly. The agency will have a strong regional profile and will draw up and implement its own equality scheme. A high level of priority will be given to both equality and New TSN issues. I am wholly and practically committed to determining how more efficient and effective business support can be increasingly focused in the areas of highest need, many of which also now offer the best opportunities for employers to attain the employees they need.

Although decisions have been taken in principle, there is still significant work to be done. I want to pay particular tribute to the restructuring unit in my own Department, which has worked so hard and coherently over the last six months. Preliminary assessment shows that the changes that I am contemplating are likely to

have a positive financial impact, but a full cost-benefit analysis will be required as further details are established. Work has been carried out on the equality implications of such a change, but, again, more comprehensive consideration will be required, and consultation with section 75 groups and others will be undertaken.

I will present a policy memorandum to the Executive Committee in January, seeking approval to introduce legislation as soon as possible thereafter. However, on the basis of the weight of legislation currently under consideration, I feel that it is unlikely that the legislation will be passed before autumn 2001. The new agency will be formally established as soon as it is practicable to do so thereafter.

I will conclude by summarizing matters. Currently, Northern Ireland is substantially a small and medium-sized (SME) business economy. In recent years, great strides have been made towards normality. In business terms, significant and welcome progress has been made. For example, in 1999 employment in Northern Ireland in the new industries — tradable services and information and communications technology — increased by over 30%.

Significant new challenges still lie ahead. The economy must be increasingly geared towards meeting the needs of the rapidly changing, knowledge-based, global economy, where demands are increasing all the time. To do this, we need more vibrant, entrepreneurial, local businesses, which are capable of winning export business and generating greater wealth. It is imperative that the Northern Ireland economy grasp the opportunity now available to it. We must respond with confidence to these new challenges. If it is done correctly, the future can be faced with confidence — a future with greater wealth and prosperity for all in an inclusive, fair and stable society.

Northern Ireland has a long and proud tradition founded on its inventiveness and its ability to innovate. That same business acumen and courage will dictate the shape of our second industrial age. Already, efforts to nurture knowledge-based industries have been impressive, but I must tell the House that they are merely a beginning. If this necessary restructuring of our agencies is driven with vision and vigour, we can fast track the growth — along with the hope — that we all need in the Northern Ireland of the new century.

I know that more investment can be encouraged from home and abroad. I also know that our local businesses, our workers, and the staff in my Department and its agencies have the confidence to achieve what is needed for the future. I ask the House to support me, my Department and the new agency in the daunting task that lies ahead.

The Chairperson of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee (Mr P Doherty): A LeasCheann Comhairle, I welcome the Minister's statement, and I wish him well in completing the enormous task that he has set himself by autumn next year. I also welcome his

kind comments about my Committee. The Minister recognised the clear and constructive, collective input that the Committee had made to this report. I recognise in the Minister's statement a commitment to innovation, co-operation, the tourist industry, industrial and information technology development, the social economy and equality.

Can the Minister reaffirm the new single agency's commitment to New TSN as a core value? I acknowledge the comment on page four of the Minister's statement that the climate is changing and that we are slowly climbing back to normality. However, does the Minister recognise that the North's negative image has many more roots than those mentioned in his statement?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his comments.

11.45 am

I said in the statement that New TSN and equality issues will be, and will continue to be, at the heart of this. We have set targets in the Programme for Government. Those targets are very ambitious, and are aimed at achieving not only 75% of first-time visits into TSN areas by potential inward investors, but 75% of new jobs in those same areas. Those are very ambitious targets.

In my opinion, there is potential in many of those areas, because they have the potential resource of personnel that companies need. I said in my statement that I believed that we could match the needs of companies to the skills in those areas. That is not something that can be done by my Department alone. We will need to audit the TSN areas to ascertain the skills base and training needs to match the skills of the local community to the requirements of the new businesses, and the indigenous businesses which we hope will expand.

That is a huge task, and I must acknowledge the co-operation of Dr Farren, Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, and his Colleagues, because we are working very closely with them to ensure that there is a real possibility of achieving those objectives.

I do not want the House to doubt for one minute our desire to succeed. One of the purposes behind the new agency is to create the recognition that Northern Ireland is a small economy. Its compactness, the free movement of ideas, and the joining together of the different themes will help to accelerate our achievement of the aims set out in the Programme for Government.

Our negative image goes back a long way. We owe a debt of gratitude to those working in tourism and to those who have tried to achieve inward investment and indigenous expansion against our background of the last 30 years. It would be churlish not to place on the record our debt of gratitude to those civil servants and other public servants who have achieved very considerable success against such a terrible backdrop.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee (Mr Neeson): I warmly welcome the Minister's very important statement today. During the Committee's investigation into 'Strategy 2010', we found very strong support in the community for the proposals which the Minister has brought forward this morning.

In his statement, the Minister said that Northern Ireland is substantially a SME economy. We made a very successful visit to North America in August. We visited the offices of the American Small Business Administration, which is very innovative in dealing with small businesses and encouraging a much wider remit for the development of small businesses than we have under LEDU. Bearing that in mind, will the Minister be taking on board some of the ideas and lessons that we learnt from that visit, and does he also recognise that, through such innovative developments, more women can be encouraged to participate in business?

Finally, does the Minister also accept that, if we are to move away from the grant culture towards providing softer incentives for business development, local banks will need to become more involved in the economic development process?

Sir Reg Empey: I am indebted to the Member for his comments. I accept that our economy is primarily a small-business economy. We are indebted to LEDU for the work that it has done, and is continuing to do, in that sector.

Our visit to Washington in August, when we met representatives from the Small Business Administration, was not our first encounter with that organization. Dr McDonnell and I, along with our colleagues, met Aida Alvarez, the American Cabinet Minister, who is responsible for the Small Business Administration, in Belfast in 1998. We were impressed then, as we were in August.

There is no doubt that the vast growth in the American economy has come from employment in small businesses. The major Fortune 500 companies have not increased employment. Small businesses have also brought many more women into business. Most of those setting up new businesses through the Small Business Administration are women. Northern Ireland is behind in that area, although we are improving. However, we should take a new look at how to develop the required packages. We are trying to move away from the grant culture and, in the case of small businesses, we are — to a significant extent — succeeding. However, further work is required.

There is continuing criticism of the role of the clearing banks in business in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom. In America there is a different legal framework which obliges them to provide certain services to local communities. I am keen to explore the idea of offering loan guarantees to replace grants.

We must change the way that we offer assistance. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is considering proposals on how to rebalance the packages that we can offer. I am open to the Committee's views on how that could be best done, but I am conscious that a new agency will want to focus on what it believes to be the best way of getting back the spirit of entrepreneurship that used to be dominant in Northern Ireland. A century ago, Northern Ireland had one of the most innovative economies in the world. I want us to return to that, because we have been languishing in recent years, despite some significant improvements. Much more could be done, and that is one of the major challenges that we face.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members and the Minister that many Members wish to speak, and therefore they should be as concise as possible.

Dr Birnie: I congratulate the Minister on dealing with this issue. It has been long discussed but, until now, no action has been taken. It has often been said that form should follow function. Given that, how does the new structure promote innovation and the attainment of a higher rate of research and development spending in the local economy?

Does the Minister think that the Company Development Programme (CDP) is better located in the new agency or in its former home, the Training and Employment Agency? The statement is relatively silent on the issue of the internal demarcations in the new agency. Will there be sub-divisions, for example, for internal industries and externally owned firms?

Sir Reg Empey: One of the principal reasons for the reorganization was to put innovation at the core. In the consultation document, I said that the golden thread of innovation would run right through the agency. The IRTU, which was the most recent of the organizations to be set up, has made a significant improvement to our recognition of the importance of research. The Department has tried to take that work forward through the information age initiative, but I felt that it was wrong to have it sitting in splendid isolation; it must be brought into the centre of things. I assure the Member that a top priority will be to reach the targets set out in the Programme for Government for an increase in research and development.

That is the only way that we will keep ahead of the competition. It is the key issue in the knowledge-based economy to which we are committed. The CDP was not put into the Training and Employment Agency when the new Departments were created, because CDP concentrates on training for people who are in work, as opposed to those who are out of work.

I said to Mr Doherty that the key will be to match the needs of companies to the new situation and, therefore, to the skills of their employees. We have to bear in mind that we are in the era of lifelong learning, so when an employee joins a company, he has to be continuously

trained and retrained. It is one of the mechanisms we can use, as opposed to grants — one of the softer forms of assistance that we can make. For that reason, I am fully committed to having the CDP as an integral part of the agency.

There will be internal demarcations, but I wish to consult further with the Department, and I may engage other assistance, because we must remember that we have a transition programme to move through. There is a great deal of detail to be worked out, and consultation must take place with regard to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, so it will be some time before I can bring forward detailed proposals. All of these matters will have to be addressed in the new agency.

Dr McDonnell: I warmly welcome the Minister's statement. Now that we are in the twenty-first century, we all recognise that there is a desperate need to refocus our efforts on the whole range of economic development. We have seen how many North American cities and regions have reinvented themselves over the last few years.

The statement goes a long way towards clearing the air and removing the uncertainty and indecision that prevailed. I particularly welcome the Minister's comment that the new agency will need to be capable of responding quickly and not playing catch-up in an intensely global marketplace; that it must be dynamic, nimble and focused, with more emphasis on getting the job done, and less on bureaucracy; that it must have, at its core, a more aggressive and targeted approach —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr McDonnell, will you please come to your question?

Dr McDonnell: We desperately need this new agency to meet the challenges that we face. We need a much stronger emphasis on innovation and research. Can we assume and ensure that the "golden thread" that the Minister mentions is sufficiently robust and effective, and that it is not so fine that we can barely see it? That is the nub. We can have a golden thread running through it, but if it is very fine, it may get lost. That thread will need to be very strong, because it will form the backbone. Can we get the necessary legislation moving much more quickly? I am a little worried by the suggestion that it will take a year to put the whole thing in place. We need to avoid wasting time. What can we do now to begin to implement the reshaping and restructuring that will move the process on? The rest of the world will not wait for us; we have to get ahead.

Sir Reg Empey: I assure the Member that the whole purpose of doing this, from my point of view, is to introduce innovation and research into people's natural way of thinking — to make them systematic. That is why I was concerned about the IRTU's being isolated; I was also concerned about the information age initiative's being isolated. I want the ideas, skills and knowledge of people in those organizations to continue to exist

throughout the new agency. If that does not happen, we will have failed, and we will not be successful in the market place. It is as simple as that.

12.00

With regard to the Member's point about legislation, I was trying to end the uncertainty, as he suggested. I am conscious, however, that a great deal of staff there are doing a good job. I am conscious that they have careers, and I do not want to delay or lose the momentum of the agencies. I will be doing everything to work with the staff to ensure that that does not happen.

Members control the legislation, and the best thing we could do would be to improve the speed with which we pass legislation. In reviewing the Assembly's performance so far, it seems that we have not passed legislation with the speed which we would like. If this legislation could be passed more quickly, I assure the Member that I would not be holding it back.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister accept that there would be a general welcome for what has been proposed? It is very much in line with what the Committee decided.

I welcome the tribute paid to the staff who played such an important role in promoting inward investment during a very difficult period of Northern Ireland's history. Does the Minister accept that there will be a great deal of concern and uncertainty on the part of the staff of the present agencies about his statement that a "majority" of the staff will be transferred to the new body? The implication is that a number of staff members will not be transferred to the new body. Can he tell the House how many staff will not be transferred and what grades will be affected? Can he assure the House that those who are not transferred, but who are civil servants, will be offered alternative employment within the Civil Service? What will happen to those members of staff who are not civil servants, and who have not been offered an opportunity of employment in the new body? Will he accept that there will be some concern if the reward for staff who have been working for 10 or 15 years, trying to promote Northern Ireland in terribly difficult circumstances, is to be made unemployed as a result of this decision.

Sir Reg Empey: Inevitably, in any change process, there is bound to be concern. I have made it clear, on a number of occasions this morning, that I appreciate the work that has been done. I said that, from day one, the agency will be staffed by people currently working for existing bodies. The precise scale has not yet been determined. There are outstanding matters. For instance, I have not concluded how we should treat the social economy — whether it should be done in the Department, through the agency, or by some other mechanism. However, we have been in close contact with our trade union representatives, and I have assured them that there will be no compulsory redundancies as a result of this

activity. I have further assured them that no individual member of staff will be personally disadvantaged as a result of this reorganization.

Staff in the agencies are of various categories. Some are civil servants and some are public servants — for example, LEDU is a company limited by guarantee outside the Government. People are of different status. Within the IDB, civil servants have different categories. It is a very complicated issue, but it is our intention to ensure that nobody is disadvantaged; there will be no compulsory redundancies, and staff have been assured of this.

We will be working as hard as possible to ensure that we do not lose our present momentum. When it comes to carrying out the reorganization, people will be given every opportunity. I believe that the majority will choose to remain in Economic Development and develop their careers there. Obviously, there may be positive financial aspects from this, as the total number of staff may be less than is currently employed. The precise details of that have not been worked out, but I can assure the Member that people will not be disadvantaged or made redundant.

Dr O'Hagan: As a Member of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, I look forward to working with the Minister on this and other issues in the coming months. An overhaul of the agencies, especially the IDB, has been long overdue. Concerns have been expressed about accountability, transparency, performance and value for money. These were especially outlined by the Westminster Public Accounts Committee. Will the Minister assure this House that adequate measures will be taken to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated?

The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee intends to visit the South of Ireland, Scotland and Wales in January. We will meet with other bodies in those three jurisdictions. It is to be hoped that those meetings will show us how they do things, and we will pass that on.

A Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment working group reported that there was considerable scope for greater co-operation in trade development on the island of Ireland. What links and co-operation does the Minister foresee between this new body and the Industrial Development Agency (IDA), Enterprise Ireland and the all-Ireland trade body, InterTrade Ireland, which was established under the North/South Ministerial Council? Go raibh maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: I am looking forward, obviously, to hearing from the Committee after it visits the other agencies in these islands to see how they do things. As I said, we have carried out a body of research, which I am sure has been available to you, and it will be interesting to meet people and to see how they see things.

Of course, we must remember at all times that we are competitors and that we are fighting for many of the

same pieces of potential inward investment, but that has not stopped us from co-operating. In May, the IDB and IDA met for the first time. They have undertaken some work, particularly in the north-west — as the Member's Colleague will be aware — and there has been further communication since then. I have every reason to believe that the board of the IDB is planning to continue that work.

InterTrade Ireland has specific roles, which do not include inward investment, but it does have the role of promoting trade, in which it has been very active. There is a good deal of communication between all the development agencies and InterTrade Ireland for the simple reason that it is necessary to work together to ensure that there is no overlap. InterTrade Ireland had a focused remit in the first few months of its life, which was drawn from the agreement. It had a particular agenda to work through from its inception. It is working its way through that, and a progress report was given at the last meeting of the body. It is beginning to develop its corporate plans and find the most effective use of its time.

Co-operation between these organizations — joining up their activities — is common sense. I am confident that the new agency will, as part of its natural development, be able to harness any communications and work together with other organizations to avoid duplication. I do not doubt that it will wish to review the general memorandums of understanding that exist in these islands to ensure that we are not involved in Dutch auctions for potential inward investments.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the Minister's reassurances that no staff will be disadvantaged by the change and that there will not be compulsory redundancies in any of the agencies. Does the Minister agree that one of the benefits of having a central body is that there will be less central administration than within the former four bodies? Does he agree that this will provide better support for local businesses and enable more money to be spent on support and advice to businesses, rather than on civil servants who are operating administration within the various Departments?

Sir Reg Empey: A central administration will possibly be more effective than having three or four, and, as I pointed out, the impact of this is likely to be financially positive, but quite apart from the savings, it will bring organizations together with the exchange of ideas, networking, and so on.

If people who are doing the same sort of work in isolation, inevitably, a great deal of experience and knowledge will be lost as a result of that. We want to minimise the bureaucracy and focus the maximum amount of resources on the delivery of a service to businesses. I must say that I agree.

There are up to 300 different organizations in Northern Ireland that deliver some form of economic development or training service. This illustrates our huge task of

ensuring that there is no duplication, that we do not spend more money than is needed on administration, and that the maximum effort is focused on service delivery. Despite the financial aspect, this will ensure that the same quality of service is delivered throughout the Province. That is why the organization must have a regional focus.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's comprehensive statement, particularly the thrusts and themes it contains. The Minister is certainly grasping the nettle in relation to economic development agencies.

I contend that LEDU was so successful because it was very close to people in all regions through its area offices. We must ensure that a more centralised, bureaucratic system does not evolve as a result of the creation of a single agency. Will the agency have area offices in all the regions?

Secondly, it is important that the board reflect all of Northern Ireland, and not simply specific or preferred persons. A geographical spread is needed. The staff and the culture of the staff are vital, and I pay tribute to the employees that have been involved. However, if there is to be an enterprise-driven culture, it will be necessary to develop a more innovative and energetic culture among the senior management of this new agency. This will promote the enterprise drive that we will have to face in the future.

Finally, I have been concerned about inward investment for some time, particularly the almost unhealthy relationship that exists between preferred consultancy firms, accountancy firms and the agencies. This causes annoyance to other smaller accountancy firms, which feel that they too could prepare professional business plans and make good assessments of potential projects. Can the Minister assure us that, in the future, there will not be the same cosy relationship that might, in the past, have existed among some of the larger accountancy firms?

Sir Reg Empey: I will take note of the Member's last point and seek advice on it.

This organization will have a regional focus, but I cannot make any assurances to the Member about West Tyrone, which is presumably what he is driving at. If the agency is to be effective it must be represented throughout the Province, rather than in only one location. I have made that clear.

Furthermore, I have said that the board will reflect the social partners, and all issues will have to be incorporated. We must have effective people. I am conscious of the regional aspect involved, and that has been taken into account in appointments to existing boards. It is a very difficult task. There will be competition under the normal guidelines for membership of this new board, and, when we are setting the criteria, we will have to take care to get it right. Once those are set, the matter is

beyond our control. We will certainly wish to take those points into account.

12.15 pm

We have all talked about grasping the nettle. Among those of us at local government level, the issue has been raised on and off for years. I hope my response to Mr Wells clarified our direction. I was anxious to end the uncertainty, not to create more. Staff are now conscious of what we are doing, and they know where we are going with this. Our task in the next few months is to ensure that we carry this out in a businesslike and professional way. When the final distribution of area offices is determined, we will see whether the Member believes that I am grasping the nettle.

Mr Poots: I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the point about putting more emphasis on getting the job done and reducing bureaucracy, and everybody would welcome that. Further to that, can the Minister outline the efficiency that would result from the amalgamation of the agencies? Will he also tell us about ongoing developments with local authorities? The Minister talks about doing this on the basis of a review of local authorities, but it might take up to four years before that is complete and the new local authorities are in place. In the past, there has often been a "hands off" relationship between local authorities and, for example, the IDB. Can he also outline the relationship with the North/South Trade and Business Development Body? When will the issue of accountability be clearly defined? Will the Minister guarantee that the appointments to the non-departmental public bodies will be made fairly, and that people will not be excluded because of their political viewpoints?

Sir Reg Empey: With regard to the relationship with local authorities, the Member will know that I spent many years working in local economic development. I strongly believe in local economic development and in a specific role in that for local authorities. A few years ago, we were given that opportunity for the first time, and it has been a resounding success in councils across the Province. It has given councils a focus. Against the background at that time, we were not even allowed to control car parking — incidentally, we still have no control of that. We were not fit to do that. When people gave us something to do at local government level, we did it, and we did it well. I strongly believe that the improvement in local government is due, in no small measure, to the handing over of some local economic development powers to local authorities.

I sincerely hope that it does not take four years to sort out revised local government arrangements. I accept that there has been a "hands off, stay away" approach in the past. I have experienced it myself, and I understand the reasons for it. I hope those days are over. I believe that

local government must have a meaningful relationship with the new agency.

Local authorities should have an increased role in local economic development as we move forward. One inhibiting factor is the fact that some local authorities, because of their size and financial base, are at a significant disadvantage and are not, therefore, capable of implementing programmes which I would like to see implemented. The Member knows what I am getting at.

Nevertheless, it is my intention that local government will continue to play a significant and growing role in the delivery of economic development services. That, I believe, is what people want.

With regard to accountability, I said that I am in discussions with the Department of Finance and Personnel. As an Assembly, we have to take a view, and the legislation, when it is passed, will give Members the opportunity to satisfy themselves that the accountability mechanisms in place will be adequate.

The appointments to the board will be carried out properly and people will not be penalised for their political views. The agency's relationship with InterTrade Ireland will be a matter for the agency. InterTrade Ireland does not have an inward investment function and the organisations will not, therefore, clash in those areas. All the agencies and bodies involved in this matter, including local government, will find it easier to deal with a single organisation, rather than having to replicate their lobbying activities with three or four organisations.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I add my voice to those who welcome the Minister's statement. As the Minister stated, we need a rapid-response mechanism to cope with changing global situations, which we have not had from the IDB and LEDU. There are concerns about what has taken place at the Hawkes Bay factory, Ulster Ceramics, Carrington, Viyella, Milanda and United Technology and the raft of closures in the Foyle constituency because, in large part, these jobs are filled by women.

How will the new agency service those areas, which are seen by some as the far-flung reaches of the Six Counties, namely the west and the north-west? All of the stars, a LeasCheann Comhairle, cannot be located in the east; therefore, does the Minister envisage the new agency establishing local offices in those constituencies with the highest unemployment, working in tandem with councils and their social partners?

I also welcome the Minister's decision to integrate the tourism business into mainstream local economic development work, in co-operation with the North/South tourism company. Why does he feel it necessary to keep the NITB in place? Surely, this will be an unnecessary expense as well as causing some confusion?

Sir Reg Empey: I will deal with the last point. The NITB will be required and will continue because it has the role of promoting tourism in Northern Ireland. Do not forget that the NITB and Bord Fáilte have established the tourism company. The new company is a marketing company in which the two tourist boards are shareholders. It will effectively be the delivery mechanism for regional marketing but the substance of that regional marketing will come from the tourist boards. Their chairmen and chief executives will be on the board of the new company.

There is also the matter of the whole range of other promotional activities. There is the regulation of the industry, and a range of other matters including how aid is given to tourist businesses. In my statement I said that the business support mechanism for carrying out and administering grants or other forms of assistance to tourism and businesses is currently undertaken by about 30 persons in the NITB. They are doing the same job as, for instance, the IDB, which operates on a much larger scale. Just because a business focuses on tourism, it is not necessarily different from other businesses. It does not change the grant mechanism or the processing of the work. Therefore it was natural to bring those business support mechanisms together under one umbrella.

There will be an ongoing need for a tourist board. The Republic, Scotland and Wales are all promoted by strong tourism boards. That will remain the case. I detect no desire on the part of Bord Fáilte to close itself down.

I have made it my business to be in the north-west as frequently as possible and I hope, if I am spared, to be there again very shortly. I am aware of the recent closures. I am also aware of the recent openings and announcements. Some of them have been very positive, and I hope that before the week is out we will have another positive report to make.

One of the key issues is the ability to provide a rapid response. The nature of the businesses that we are dealing with has changed. Quicker answers are required. The time between starting a project and getting it under way has been greatly reduced. Our system has clearly been creaking somewhat in its attempt to keep up. The time is right, particularly with the new types of industries and businesses that we have to deal with, to review how we deliver the service. That is part of the rationale for reorganisation.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister's announcement on the restructure of the agencies. I am aware of the work of local councils, including my own, Derry City Council, in the field of economic development, and I welcome the Minister's commitment to this. As a former member of the NITB, I also welcome his commitment to it.

What response will the Minister or the existing agencies make to the disastrous announcement made yesterday

by Hawkes Bay about redundancies in Derry and Newtownards? As the Minister is aware, 5,000 jobs have already been lost in the manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland since 1997, often at the rate of 300 per month. I come from a socially deprived area which, in the past, depended on the shirt-making industry. This is a further blow to an already ailing textile industry, which is facing an uncertain future. We need urgent action to counteract these job losses.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that questions must be based on the statement.

Sir Reg Empey: I always admire the resourcefulness of Members from the north-west in managing to squeeze something in. I also welcome the Member here. I am very aware that this is a digression, but we should perhaps get it out of the way because it is obviously on a number of people's minds. I am aware of the issue to which the Member refers. However, that particular matter may not be finished, and people will have to be patient.

These redundancies come at a terribly bad time, but compared with other areas, our manufacturing sector has been holding up remarkably well — far better than that in Great Britain, for instance. There have been problems, but they are not as bad as they might have been. The gains are still exceeding the losses, and we have to remember that.

I hope that this new agency will be very focused. In response to Mr P Doherty's statement, I have said that new targeting social need and equality issues will be at its core. That has implications for the regions. I can assure Members that that will be one of the methods by which its success will be judged.

Mr Hussey: I welcome the Minister's statement. I was not in the Chamber to hear it, but I heard it on the radio on my way here. It is long overdue. The Minister is aware — and I think this is where his reasoning has come from — of the idea that LEDU deals with small businesses and the IDB deals with the large ones. A group of small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) has always been caught in the middle. Can the Minister assure us that the new body will have a broader banding than merely "big" and "small"?

I welcome the greater coherence in job creation, with the involvement of local economic development organisations, including local authorities. This will encourage the growth of indigenous SMEs, particularly at local level.

Has it taken on board the tremendous potential for growth in tourism? Can the Minister further assure us that the new organisation will not be bogged down in red tape, that the application forms for support from the new agency will be simpler, and that the agency will be of immediate help to those who are seeking to set up or to expand a business?

12.30 pm

Sir Reg Empey: I am glad to see that the Member is here, and in good form, after his late night yesterday. As the Member suggested, the size differential was one of the reasons for change. The problems of a business are very often the same, irrespective of its size. Major growth is taking place in small and medium-sized enterprises, while the big battleship companies, which employ thousands, are few and far between. It does not make any difference whether you employ 49 people or 51.

There have also been overlaps — some companies with more than 50 employees are under LEDU's wing, while others with fewer than 50 employees are under the IDB's wing. That has been a source of confusion. In addition, certain policies have been delivered in different ways by different organisations.

I am trying to get rid of banding and to treat the problems of small businesses and larger businesses in the same way, although issues of scale prevail.

With regard to red tape, a review was carried out of the forms, and a number were reduced. I started a re-examination in my Department within the last two months. I am looking at every piece of paper that is issued by each division in every organisation. I want to ensure that every piece of paper is essential. If it is not, we will try to get rid of it.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's announcement. Will he consider giving local authorities a more active role? I want to emphasise to him the need for localised offices to represent the new agency so that local entrepreneurs can, at first hand, avail of the important services that will be available. I think, in particular, of the needs of my constituency and of Newry and Armagh, which would both be very important venues for such an agency.

Sir Reg Empey: I understand that Newry and Armagh are important venues for the Member, and I am very pleased to see that the south-east is at least trying to compete with the north-west. On a serious note, I said that there will be a regional dimension to this organisation's work, and the precise nature of that is yet to be determined, but I am sure that the Member will have more to say to me about that on another occasion.

There is significant potential for a more active role for local authorities. I believe very strongly in local economic development, as the Member knows. However, as I said in response to Mr Poots, the attempt to accelerate the work of local authorities is, to some extent, constrained by the present scale of some of the local authorities. I would like to see some reorganisation, and I see no reason for that to take four years. I hope that it will happen much sooner. A restructured local government with a clearer view of what local authorities should be doing

would deliver. Local authorities have proved that, if given responsibility, they can deliver.

I assure the Member that that will be one of our priorities.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr P Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me this opportunity to wish the Minister, his family and his entire Department a Happy Christmas and a good New Year. I am looking forward very much to the autumn of next year when I will welcome him to West Tyrone to open the regional office there.

Sir Reg Empey: It is tempting to say “No comment,” but I think — *[Interruption]*

I know who is at my back, Mr Speaker. I will not fall into the trap that has been set for me. It is safe to say that the Member may be seeing me sooner than that, if things go according to plan tomorrow.

I do take the regional dimension to this extremely seriously; perhaps I have been taking it even more seriously as the morning has gone on. Perhaps it was unwise even to suggest it, but it will have to have a regional dimension — of that there is no doubt. I thank Members for their contributions.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: The Second Stage of the Electronic Communications Bill has been withdrawn.

DOGS (AMENDMENT) BILL

Final Stage

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I beg to move

That the Dogs (Amendment) Bill (NIA 7/99) do now pass.

For the benefit of Members I shall summarise why the Bill was introduced and its main provisions.

Under existing legislation, courts and resident magistrates have no discretion in dealing with a dog that has attacked a person or has worried livestock. They must order that the dog be destroyed. There are relatively few cases each year where destruction orders are made; there were 56 last year. However, I consider it appropriate that courts and resident magistrates should have some discretion in determining the fate of a dog. The major change proposed is that rather than order the destruction of a dog, a court may opt to make an order requiring certain measures, such as muzzling or confinement, to be taken to prevent the dog from being a danger to the public and livestock.

Mr Peter Robinson was concerned that this did not go far enough, in that it did not cater for special circumstances in which a court might wish to absolve the dog instead of applying restrictive measures. Consequently, he moved an amendment at Further Consideration Stage which the Assembly accepted and which, in effect, gives a court the discretion not to apply restrictive measures if it is satisfied that exceptional mitigating factors exist. A court will, therefore, have the widest possible discretion.

The second change relates to dangerous dogs. At present, when a person is convicted of an offence relating to a dangerous dog, the court must make an order for the destruction of the dog. The Bill will give the courts the discretion not to order the destruction of the dog if they are satisfied that it will not be a danger to the public.

The third change relates to the powers of resident magistrates in connection with the seizure of dogs. Under the Bill, a resident magistrate must still order the destruction of a dangerous dog, but the Bill, if passed, will allow a person to apply for a certificate of exemption from the requirement to have the dog destroyed. The conditions of this certificate must be complied with within two months of the date of the order. In relation to all other seized dogs, the Bill proposes that a resident magistrate should have discretion not to order the destruction of such a dog, if he is satisfied that it is not a danger to the public.

Finally, the Bill also allows for a reconsideration of cases where it has been ordered that a dog be destroyed but where the destruction has not taken place.

I am grateful to the Members who contributed to the debate on the Bill. I also wish to express my thanks to the Chairman and members of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee who carried out detailed scrutiny of the Bill and who afforded my officials the opportunity to give evidence to it.

Mr P Robinson: The Bill has been improved by the Assembly's acceptance of the amendment. May I say to the Minister that since my election to the House of Commons in 1979, I have probably proposed over 100 amendments at Westminster. Never once did I succeed in having an amendment accepted, so I welcome the fact that the duck has been broken by the Minister and the Assembly's accepting the amendment at Further Consideration Stage.

From a local government point of view, I will closely monitor several other elements to which the Minister responded in writing to see how they work out in practice. If further amendments are necessary, I will be happy to let the Minister know the reactions of the people who have to enforce the legislation that this House will pass.

Ms Rodgers: I welcome the Member's comments. I am pleased that these new structures have not only allowed us to bring this Bill forward, but have also allowed Mr P Robinson to break new ground. I hope he recognises that his Northern Ireland Colleagues perhaps have a more open mind and are more flexible than his Westminster Colleagues. That is also a bonus.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Dogs (Amendment) Bill (NIA 7/99) do now pass.

SALARY OF COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Dallat): I beg to move

That the annual salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General shall be increased to £100,028 with effect from 20 December 2000.

As this is the season of goodwill, I hope we will not have too many problems with the motion.

Legislation requires an Assembly motion to change the Comptroller and Auditor General's salary. Under the terms of his appointment he was due an increase from 1 April 2000. I have agreed with the Minister of Finance and Personnel that it is appropriate for me as Chairperson of the Audit Committee to move this motion in the light of my Committee's important role in the examination of the expenses and work of the Comptroller and Auditor General. The Audit Committee has considered the background to the amount stipulated and recommends it to the Assembly.

I will explain the reasoning behind this. If amendments proposed to the Government Resources and Accounting Bill are passed, it will further increase the Comptroller and Auditor General's ability to follow public money wherever it goes in Northern Ireland on the Assembly's behalf. This would increase his workload and responsibility, an issue which my Committee will be reporting on in its forthcoming report to the Assembly.

The Comptroller and Auditor General is an officer of the Assembly and plays a vital role in providing it with independent assurance, information, advice and proper accounting for the assets and liabilities of Northern Ireland Departments, as well as other public expenditure. He is required by statute to examine and certify the accounts of all Northern Ireland Government Departments and a wide range of other public sector bodies, including Executive agencies. He also audits several central Government accounts by agreement with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the bodies concerned and, on behalf of the National Audit Office, the accounts of the NIO and the Northern Ireland Court Service. He also reports to the Assembly on value for money, and the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the use of resources, which makes Departments accountable to the Assembly for the money they receive from the public purse.

My Committee has seen at first hand the commitment and dedication of the Comptroller and Auditor General and the staff of the Northern Ireland Audit Office in carrying out these tasks. I therefore commend the motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: There have been no requests from Members to address this matter.

12.45 pm

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the annual salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General shall be increased to £100,028 with effect from 20 December 2000.

ASSEMBLY MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES DETERMINATION

Rev Robert Coulter (Assembly Commission): I beg to move

That the Northern Ireland Assembly (Members' Allowances) Determination 2000 (NIA 26/00) be approved.

Before getting into the detail of the allowances determination, Members may find it helpful if I set out the background to the Determinations and to the one that the Assembly will consider shortly.

In February 1999, the Assembly Commission presented its first report to the Assembly, which established the basis for the Assembly estimates of £36 million. After a debate, the Assembly passed the following resolution:

“That this Assembly will accept the recommendations of the Senior Salaries Review Body in respect of the salaries and allowances for Ministers and Members.”

— [*Official Report, Vol 12, No 3, p125*].

The Assembly Commission has remained faithful to that principle during the passage of three Bills dealing with Members' pensions, financial assistance to political parties, severance allowances to Members, and the 1999 Determinations of salaries and allowances.

The Commission has continued to follow the recommendation of the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) that the allowances Determination should be uprated by the increase in the retail price index for the period 1999-2000, calculated at 2.6%.

I will now deal with each allowance as I go through each paragraph of the schedule to the Determination. Paragraph 1 deals with travel allowances. The rate for mileage under 20,000 miles has been increased from 51.2 pence to 52.5 pence per mile, with the 20,000-plus miles rate increasing from 23.6 pence to 24.2 pence per mile. The rate for mileage in a hired car also increases from 51.2 pence to 52.5 pence per mile. For those hardy souls who travel by bike, the rate per mile increases from 6.5 pence to 6.7 pence per mile. I am sure that will be welcomed by them all.

Paragraph 2 covers subsistence rates. The rate for hotels inside London is increased to a maximum of £150 per night, with a maximum of £100 per night elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Those changes reflect the difficulty of finding suitable accommodation at the present rates of £100 and £80 respectively. Outside the UK, the provision in this Determination has been set at a maximum of £200 per day on a full-board basis. That provision removes the need for reference to outdated Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) rates, which caused Members travelling abroad some confusion. However, the Finance Office will use up-to-date FCO rates as a guide to expected outlay. There is also an allowance of £5 for out-of-pocket expenses.

Paragraph 3 of the Determination adds 2.6% to the office costs allowance, an increase from £34,850 to £35,756 per year. Many Members will welcome that increase, modest though it may be.

The disability allowance remains unchanged. However, for the purpose of clarity, the word "disability" has been defined in paragraph 4 and "session" has been redefined as a year.

Recall expenses remain the same, and paragraph 5 refers to this. In paragraph 6, travel allowance for employees remains as before, although the opportunity has been taken to define "Inland Revenue rates." Paragraph 7 does not change previous arrangements for staff pensions and redundancies, although the wording has been changed slightly to increase clarity of expression.

The rules on temporary secretarial allowance in paragraph 8 have been radically altered. Previously, that allowance was payable only after office cost allowance had been exhausted. The new provisions separate those two allowances. A temporary secretarial allowance can now be paid irrespective of the position in regard to office cost allowance. That is in line with new arrangements at Westminster.

Paragraph 9 is new. It allows for the annual uprating of certain allowances in the Determination according to the change in the retail prices index over the previous year, as recommended by the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB). This provision obviates the need for an allowance Determination to be brought before the Assembly annually. More importantly, it will allow Members to arrange for the uprating of the wages of their support staff at the beginning of the financial year.

Paragraph 10 is also new, although it contains little that is different. It merely defines some of the terms used in the Determination, many of which appeared as sub-paragraphs in the 1999 Determination. It is proposed that with the agreement of the Assembly — and I stress that — the provisions of this Determination will take effect from 29 May 2000, which was the date of the reinstatement of the Assembly following suspension. Obviously, we cannot legislate for the period of suspension.

The Commission is aware that there is some discomfort with the principle of backdating rises in allowances and salaries. However, I remind Members that the Commission is only proposing to put in place the same arrangements as exist in Westminster, Scotland and Wales: a 2.6% uprating of allowances with effect from 1 April 2000. Many Members have already introduced wage increases for their staff. These Members will experience financial difficulties if the rise in allowances is not backdated to the beginning of the financial year. I commend the allowances Determination to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: There is one amendment on the Marshalled List, standing in the name of Mr Conor Murphy.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg to move the following amendment: At the end add

"subject to the date in paragraph 1(5) being amended to 31 March 2001".

This amendment is intended to be consistent with the other amendment that we introduced, which, apparently, others have come to support. Its purpose is to ensure that this comes into effect on 31 March. I sympathise with those who work in our offices because I am aware of the amount of work staff in my own office cover. However, I doubt Rev Robert Coulter's assertion that Members are in financial difficulties over this.

This Assembly has a duty. In the debate yesterday, many impassioned arguments were made on behalf of those who face hefty rates bills over the coming years. We have a duty to set an example in our dealings with our own finances. If we backdate our current allowances, which will include the travel allowance, Members will be remunerated for finances lost between 29 May and the present.

The public scrutinises our actions — that is both appropriate and welcome — and we have a duty to it. We have a duty to show that we are restrictive in awarding finances to ourselves. This amendment is consistent with the previous amendment regarding salaries. I urge the Assembly to support this amendment.

Mr Speaker: There have been no further requests to speak.

Question put That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 15; Noes 52.

AYES

Bairbre de Brún, Pat Doherty, Michelle Gildernew, John Kelly, Alex Maskey, Barry McElduff, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Pat McNamee, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dara O'Hagan, Sue Ramsey.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Alex Attwood, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Paul Berry, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Mervyn Carrick, Seamus Close, Wilson Clyde, Robert Coulter, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Nigel Dodds, Reg Empey, David Ervine, John Fee, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Oliver Gibson, John Gorman, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, David Hilditch, Derek Hussey, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Kieran McCarthy, David McClarty, Donovan McClelland, William McCrea, Alasdair McDonnell, Alan McFarland, Eugene McMenamin, Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice, Sean Neeson, Danny O'Connor, Eamonn O'Neill, Edwin Poots, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson,

Peter Robinson, Brid Rodgers, George Savage, Jim Shannon, John Tierney, Jim Wells, Jim Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Northern Ireland Assembly (Members' Allowances) Determination 2000 (NIA 26/00) be approved.

ASSEMBLY MEMBERS' SALARIES DETERMINATION

Rev Robert Coulter (Assembly Commission): I beg to move

That the Northern Ireland Assembly (Members' Salaries) Determination 2000 (NIA 27/00) be approved.

My Colleague, Mr Fee, when he presented last year's salary Determination, referred to his role as a "poisoned chalice". I hope that I will not have to lift such a chalice on this occasion, and I assure the House that I will be abstaining from any strong or spirited beverages.

I do not intend to make a lengthy preamble, but I will respond to some of the recent press coverage on this issue which, at best, has been grossly inaccurate. The proposed rise of 2.9% in salaries is below and not, as reported, above the rate of inflation, which is 3.2%. Today, the Assembly is not voting for a Members' pay rise above the increases to be awarded to their support staff. It is for individual Members as employers to agree pay rises for their own staff. I am confident that all Members will act fairly on this issue.

Furthermore, the Assembly is not passing the task of determining Members' salaries over to an independent body. Under section 47(7) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Assembly may not delegate the function of making a Determination on salaries and allowances.

The Commission is proposing in paragraph 3 of the salaries Determination that salaries be uprated annually by a percentage rise recommended by the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) for the senior Civil Service pay bands. It will always be in the Assembly's gift to vote on different arrangements for the Determination of Members' salaries and allowances. However, as with the allowances Determination, the salaries Determination is designed to keep in line with SSRB recommendations and to achieve parity with arrangements in Westminster, Scotland and Wales.

The SSRB recommended that Assembly salaries should be uprated each year, in line with the average movement in the nine senior Civil Service pay bands below that of permanent secretary. For 2000-01, the increase is 2.9%, which compares favourably with the current inflation rate of 3.2% and an average rise in public-sector pay levels of 3.4%.

As I have already said, the Determination provides at paragraph 3 for an annual uprating of salaries, so that there is no requirement to present salaries Determinations on an annual basis. Certain minor flaws in the 1999 Determination, with regard to dual- and triple-mandate Members, have been corrected in this new Determination. The Commission has recommended that the new salary should take effect from 29 May 2000, the date of the reinstatement of the Assembly following suspension.

I note from the amendments put down by several Members that retrospection is a matter of concern. In bringing forward this Determination, the Commission is trying to ensure parity with other United Kingdom legislatures, where pay rises of 2.9% took effect from 1 April 2000.

I commend the salaries Determination to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Three amendments have been submitted, and I have selected all of them. They all address the date of implementation, but have different dates from that in the motion. I intend to deal with them in chronological order.

Each Member who has tabled an amendment will be asked if he wishes to move it. When all such Members have spoken, a debate may ensue if other Members wish to speak. Then, as usual, in reverse order, each Member who has moved an amendment will be given an opportunity to wind up. The mover of the motion will then wind up, and we will vote on the amendments in chronological order.

If an amendment is taken — if, therefore, it is made by the Assembly — the subsequent amendments will fall, because those amendments, if passed, would not make sense. They would simply be wrecking amendments. They would simply add dates. If the first amendment is made, the other two amendments fall; if the first one falls and the second amendment is made, then the third one falls; if the first two amendments fall, the third amendment may be made, and so on.

If Members are clear, as I trust they are, on a matter of such interest to them, I will take the amendments now in chronological order.

Mr Ford: I beg to move the following amendment:
At the end add

“subject to the date in paragraph 1(4) being amended to 19 December 2000”.

I concur with many of the remarks made by Mr Coulter on behalf of the Commission. I am pleased that even the British Broadcasting Corporation now seems to have recognised that the Commission is recommending only that which was recommended by the SSRB, and that it is a rate of increase below that of inflation.

There is a wider recognition by the media that Members are starting to do the job for which they were elected. However, it would be naive and a tad optimistic to suggest that the people of Northern Ireland think that Members are fulfilling the responsibilities that they were elected to do. That is why Mr Close and myself tabled the amendment. I make no apology for supporting much of the Determination.

1.15 pm

In future, Members will no longer be directly involved in this haggling over money, and salaries will be linked, like those of the other authorities in the United Kingdom,

to the public-sector pay scale. This is an appropriate way of saying that Members are seeking to distance themselves from the matter as much as possible. However, Members have to face up to the decision that must be taken today.

The people of Northern Ireland do not believe that Members have yet done the work that they are here to do, although they might accept that Members are starting to do it, having heard the long and detailed Budget debate. There is still much to be done on such issues as the Programme for Government and the playing of a full role in new legislation. This morning Members once again failed to advance one Bill, so we are still not fulfilling all that we should be.

That is why the Alliance Party believes that it is inappropriate for the pay increase to be backdated to 29 May. It should become effective from today because we are taking the decision today, and we are seen to be taking our responsibilities from this time.

I would have no difficulty with the concept of applying the 1 January date, but I would have some difficulty in suggesting that we take the pay rise on 31 March, given that Members are due next year's rise on 1 April. Two annual rises in two days would be a bit much for anybody to stomach.

The amendment says that we should take our pay rise from today on the basis of independent settling and not on our own decisions. I ask Members to support it.

Mr Hussey: I beg not to move the amendment standing in my name.

Mr C Murphy: I beg to move the following amendment: At the end add

“subject to the date in paragraph 1(4) being amended to 31 March 2001”.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It appears that Mr Ford's stomach has become more delicate since the Alliance Party accepted and supported the backdating part of this proposal at the Commission. He has suddenly developed a distaste for backpayments.

It was not possible to amend the date to any later than 31 March because the report applied to this financial year. Therefore that was the furthest date that could be provided.

Since the Assembly Commission voted on this issue and since Friday, when the media began to shine the spotlight on it, the ghosts of Christmas appear to have visited some of the parties and that is evident from some of the amendments. The SDLP, UUP and Alliance Party voted for what is contained in the motion, but since the spotlight has been shone on it —

Mr Ford: Does the Member accept that Commission members do not have a party role? The decision that they make has no reference to their Colleagues.

Mr C Murphy: That argument occurred before when it was alleged that a Sinn Féin Member had voted in the shadow Commission, thereby linking Sinn Féin to that vote. Members cannot have it both ways. Either a party representative is representing his party on the Commission, or he is not. I am sure that representatives of the Alliance Party consult, as most party representatives do, with their party on matters of such importance.

Therefore I assume that the Alliance Party backed this matter in the Commission, and I did not hear from any members of the Alliance Party on Friday. Perhaps they were not listening to the media when this was debated. I did not hear any reticence about the proposals until this morning.

There is a similar case concerning the UUP. In the media on Friday a UUP Member tried to defend the backdating of the pre-Christmas lump sum that they were preparing to receive. Once again, we see the UUP moving to distance itself from the Christmas bonus.

Mr Fee: It is grossly unfair to suggest that the members of the Commission act as party representatives, particularly when Mrs E Bell represents all the smaller parties and, as far as is possible, consults all of them. The Commission makes its decisions under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and under the direction of the Assembly. The Assembly has voted twice in the past to act in line with the SSRB. Today, Members can decide on these amendments, but the Commission was simply fulfilling its responsibility to the House.

Mr C Murphy: During the sitting of the Shadow Commission we informed the Member that we did not support the recommendations of the SSRB. He said that Sinn Féin supported it in the Commission, but people cannot have it both ways. Either a party Member is identified with his party on the Commission, or not. I accept that the commissioners act on behalf of the whole Assembly, but if Members vote in the Commission to give themselves pre-Christmas lump sums, the parties cannot then attempt to distance themselves from it.

Members queued up yesterday to take pot-shots at Sinn Féin over our proposed amendment to the Budget motion, and claimed that we had supported it in other forums. People cannot have it both ways. In effect, the lump sum proposed by the Commission would give Members a pre-Christmas bonus of between £500 and £1500. Even Jeffrey, in his "letter to Santa", which was subsequently plagiarised by the First Minister, would not have been so audacious in his request.

Sinn Féin has no difficulty with linking the salaries to annual increases that reflect inflation because that is a common trade union argument. We have argued that this should be the case for pensions, allowances and benefits. We do, however, have a difficulty with people proposing to give themselves a lump sum backdated to 29 May.

Assembly Members are quite well paid, and we all accept that every elected representative has a difficult job and is entitled to an appropriate level of pay. Members should send out a strong signal by saying that they will forego the backdating of this pay and not accept any pre-Christmas pay rise. In effect, that is what Mr Ford's amendment does. He scurried away from the backdating of the pay, but he is voting for a pre-Christmas pay rise. If we forego that by voting in favour of the 31 March 2001 option, we will send out a signal that the gravy train is not operating in the Assembly, contrary to the signal that has consistently been sent out since the Assembly began. The last time we debated the SSRB proposals, I said that if a substantial pay cut had been proposed, Members might not have been so willing to accept it. The same applies in this instance. We should reject the clause in the Assembly Commission's recommendation that we backdate this to 29 May. We should also reject the pre-Christmas pay rise proposed by Mr Ford, and we should accept the amendment and bring this report into effect from 31 March.

Ms Morrice: It has been useful to listen to the debate this morning and to take into consideration our opinion on this. We agree that there should be an annual upgrading of salaries and allowances in line with normal practices in any workplace. We accept that this matter has now been taken out of the Assembly's hands and given to the SSRB. That was an important decision for the Assembly. The decision is made once and for all. We do not agree that it should be backdated; that is inappropriate. We agree that we should wait until the annual upgrading of salaries, as foreseen in this Determination; that is important.

Members will have heard mentioned the salaries of those who are "double jobbing" — that is the term we use to describe Members who sit in the Assembly and at Westminster. Paragraphs 2(1), 2(2) and 2(3) provide for the salaries of Assembly Members who are also Members of Parliament at Westminster and Strasbourg to be reduced to take account of this "double jobbing."

Mr Speaker, are you aware that the Disqualifications Act 2000 which has been passed in the House of Commons allows for Assembly Members to become TDs? Why is there no reference to the need for salaries to also be reduced in such cases, in the same way as for Members of Parliament or Members of the European Parliament? Can either the Assembly or the Commission do anything about that?

Mr Speaker: I should respond to that myself, since it is a matter of the authority and competence of the Assembly. The Member is right that in section 47(4) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provision is made for a reduction in salary if the Assembly Member is also a Member of either House of the Westminster Parliament or of the European Parliament and is receiving a salary for that. If he or she is a Member of the Oireachtas,

there is no such provision for the Assembly salary to be reduced. If such a reduction were sought, section 47(4) of the 1998 Act would have to be amended to refer to membership of the Oireachtas, consequently the salaries Determination would have to include such a reference.

It is regrettable that since this anomaly arose from the Disqualification Act 2000 no opportunity was taken during the passing of that Bill to address the matter, the more so since the Assembly itself cannot legislate on the matter. It is a good example of why this Assembly should be consulted on any legislation that affects it, but it is not a matter that the Assembly itself can address. I hope that that clarifies the matter for both the Member and the House.

Mr McCartney: I do not agree with the awarding or the acceptance of any pay increase. The amendment that comes nearest to my own view is that advanced by Sinn Féin. After the Act of Union in 1800, Lord Castlereagh said that he had purchased the fee simple of Irish political corruption. I wonder whether it has to be repurchased in every generation.

This Assembly has 108 Members to represent roughly 1.65 million people. The Scottish Parliament, which represents 5 million people, has 129. On a pro-rata basis with Northern Ireland, it would have over 300 Members. The Welsh Assembly has 60 Members and represents a population of just under 3 million. There can be no doubt, and very few people would argue, that some of the 108 Members — and that number was chosen specifically to include as many people from as many different parties as possible, some of them of questionable genealogy as far as democracy is concerned.

I have heard it said — I have not checked the figures — that at the date of the Assembly election, some 30 of the 108 Members who grace this Chamber were unemployed. How many Members of this Assembly can honestly put their hand on their heart and say that they were in receipt of a bigger salary than the £29,000 that was originally granted before this Assembly voted itself an increase of over 30% and brought it up to the current £39,000? Here this Assembly is arranging to increase its salary again.

The argument to which everybody has clung to justify this is that the Assembly is not actually fixing the amount.

1.30 pm

However, the Assembly is agreeing and fixing the criteria by which that amount is measured. It is done on the basis of taking the average of the salaries of the nine fairly high-ranking civil servants beneath the rank of permanent secretary, and determining the percentage increase. In this case it is 2.9%. Having set the criteria for working out what one is going to get at a fairly high level, one then adopts the “holier than thou” attitude of saying, “Well, it is not us that is awarding it; it is being

awarded by the SSRB.” However, the SSRB decision is based upon criteria that have been approved by the Assembly.

The public are looking at this Assembly, and appreciating that the running of the Assembly and the 11 Departments — there were formerly six — is costing over £670 million this year and is budgeted for £750 million next year. That sum, which now includes 11 Departments, is coming out of the block grant — the block grant that provides money for the Departments of the Minister of Health, the Minister of Education and the Minister of the Environment. Everybody knows that, for example, the Health Department is grossly underfunded. Everybody knows that many of the buildings providing educational facilities for our children in Northern Ireland are grossly defective and need a great deal of capital investment.

I am not suggesting that the 2.9%, backdated, discounted or otherwise, will make a vast contribution to those Departments. However, it shows that the Assembly is conscious of the lack of money affecting many people in Northern Ireland. Some people are not having heart bypass operations, people who are having children in maternity facilities that really have very little to rejoice about, and children, particularly in rural areas, who are in school buildings that are really Victorian in their design and facilities. They will now say that Members of the Assembly, who have scarcely broken ground in delivering anything in Northern Ireland, are, for the second time in a year, voting themselves a substantial and significant salary increase.

I, for my part, have no great affection for this — *[Interruption]*. I am told that I do not need it. That might be right, but is the fact that one needs it a justification for taking it? That is the point.

Mr Neeson: Which Committee is the Member on?

Mr McCartney: I am not on any Committee, and I am coming to that point — *[Interruption]*.

We have howls from the people who want the money.

Come on, howl. Howl for your salaries. Howl for your increases. Put down those who would question for a second that one should not fill one's own pockets. That is democracy at work. That is the picture that Members are projecting to the people of Northern Ireland. It does not matter that Members howl, sneer or ask questions about which Committees I am on. Sticks and stones may break bones but words will certainly not hurt me. However, the words that Members use and the attitude that Members display on the television cameras will go out to the people of Northern Ireland, and they will be watching Members howling to fill their purses.

Ms McWilliams: Does the member remember Hollywood?

Mr McCartney: I remember all about Hollywood. To get back to the fundamental issue, I think that what this

Assembly should do is say that we are entitled to this money according to the decisions and deliberations of the SSRB, but that entitlement does not justify acceptance. Members should say "Certainly not. We are not going to take this." Indeed, I question whether there should not be a moratorium on salaries for at least the next two years.

Would anybody be seriously hurt if he did not get his 2.9% this year and again next year? Would it not show a good example to the people who see enormous sums being spent on this place? Someone asked me the other day "If they vote this increase through, Mr McCartney, will you be taking it?" That is a very pertinent question. The answer is yes; I will be taking it. However, I will not be keeping it. If this is voted through — and I am entitled to any increase along with everyone else — it will be divided equally between the Belfast City Mission, St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army. I think that at Christmas instead of Members voting themselves a big backdated bonus, as recommended by the Commission, they should be thinking about those who do not enjoy all the facilities and benefits that they do.

I am not speaking as a party politician; I am speaking as someone who, whatever committee he serves on, may from time to time serve the purpose of jogging the consciences of others who do.

Mr Attwood: I want to make four or five points.

Mr McCartney says that people will draw conclusions about the Assembly based upon the salaries Determination which may go through today. If they do, those conclusions will be based upon a shallow premise. However, I think that people will look at yesterday's debate and say that it was characterised by a voice from the Government, such as Mr Durkan's, and a voice close to the Government, such as Mr P Robinson's. The quality of their contributions, and their statements on the future society that they want to construct, will have a greater affect on people's conclusions about the Assembly than the vagaries of the salaries Determination on which we are about to vote.

Mr McCartney also told us that Irish political corruption is being repurchased this afternoon. Well, I draw two conclusions from that. Either we are cheap at the price — because the Determination proposed by the Alliance Party will amount to £380 between now and the end of this financial year — or the contention is evidently ludicrous. Mr McCartney makes some incredibly powerful contributions inside and outside this Chamber, and this contention is at odds with the quality of many of his previous contributions.

Mr McCartney also said that 30 Members of the Assembly were unemployed before they came here. You move on to very dangerous territory when you bring that sort of argument on to the Floor of the Assembly. This is for two reasons: first you leave yourself vulnerable, and I know you did not mean this —

Mr McCartney: Why would I say it if I did not mean it?

Mr Attwood: Well, some people —

Mr Speaker: Order. May I request all Members to address their comments through the Chair.

Mr Attwood: Some of the people who are watching and listening to this debate — which, as the Member rightly pointed out, deserves to be heard — may misinterpret what he said. They might believe that it echoes a past when people did not qualify because of their religion, gender, sexuality or class. Those politics do not have any place here. But more importantly, people who are unemployed have the same right to stand for political office as people who are employed.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way once I finish this point. They have an equal entitlement. On the other hand, to suggest that unemployed people who take up political office are in that office because of the money is demeaning to them and diminishes the contribution that they make to our society.

Mr McCartney: The hon Member evidently did not understand the relevance of the point. The relevance of the point was in relation to the increases, and the point from which the increases were being given. If you were unemployed and are now on a salary of £39,000, whether you were fit to stand or not, is irrelevant. What is relevant is whether you need an increase on that at this stage.

Mr Attwood: As politicians, we have a duty, and that duty should be based on principle. Principles inform the judgement that has been made by the Commission and, presumably, the amendment proposed by the Alliance Party. It is a valid principle to pay people what they are entitled to. There have been far too few examples of this having been done in the years of Tory misrule in this part of the island of Ireland and in Britain.

There is also the principle that when one makes an independent adjudication of what a politician, doctor or a nurse may be entitled to, it must be honoured. A time will come in this Chamber when we will have to make a judgement. Will we back a salary review recommendation for someone else in the public service? We will be tested and judged at that moment. However, by applying the principle to ourselves to uphold the independent assessment of what we are worth means that we will, in the future, apply a principle about what others are worth. That is why the amendment for the Alliance Party should be endorsed.

Mr Speaker: As there are no further requests to speak, I call Mr C Murphy to make his winding-up speech.

Mr C Murphy: From some of the impassioned defences made today, it appears that the light has been switched on in the shop, and people have been caught with their hands in the till.

I observed some of the parties before today's debate started. There were some hurried consultations between the Ulster Unionist party, members of the Commission, who were obviously not representing their own party, but happened to belong to the SDLP, and the Alliance party about the amendments and what parties would and would not accept. The Ulster Unionists obviously decided that they could live with an extra 10 or 12 days of a pay rise, instead of going for 1 January and withdraw their amendment. Nobody was fit to enquire what Sinn Féin thought. We also had an amendment tabled, but no one asked what we thought or what they were interested in when coming to an arrangement with the others. There was, it appeared, a hurried coalition of interest between some of the parties that had previously supported the backdated pay rise, and which are now supporting the pre-Christmas pay rise. They have scurried away from the proposal for a pre-Christmas bonus.

The DUP has very little to say on this matter. They said yesterday that their hands were clean in all of this, and obviously they have decided to keep their hands clean again today. They will adopt that position. I have noticed that when there is a debate on salaries in this Chamber, their Front Bench is always empty. The DUP always appears to be able to distance itself by sitting further towards the back of the Chamber in the hope that somehow they will not be involved in the debate. They will, however, take the pay rise or whatever bonus comes along, but they will not get involved in the debate, so it will not be their fault.

We are faced with a choice. The Commission has proposed a pre-Christmas bonus for Members. Mr Ford's amendment withdraws that but gives us a pre-Christmas pay rise. I think that we should support my amendment. It sends out a signal that we recognise that there is a great deal of hardship in this society, and that many face a very bleak Christmas. We have a responsibility to send such a signal to show that we will play our part by not giving ourselves a pre-Christmas bonus or a pre-Christmas pay rise. We must demonstrate that we have a responsibility to those people, and that we will accept that responsibility.

Mr Close: I do not intend to deal in any depth with our amendment. The case has been made succinctly by my Colleague, Mr Ford.

1.45 pm

It is necessary to respond to some of the other Members' comments. The word "principle" has been bandied around, and I use that term deliberately. The labourer being worth his dues has been well recognised, and it is fitting for the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Members to accept an increase. We had difficulty in backdating it for obvious reasons. The Assembly was not fully functioning at that time. However, it is right that the appropriate increase, which was due some months ago, should be paid as and from now. I make no apology for that. We

are following the standards of the SSRB. I find it interesting that Sinn Féin is making a big issue about a pre-Christmas increase. It has also attempted to mislead the public by deliberately using the bonus figures — £500 or £1,500, or whatever — while fully conscious of the fact that there is no bonus at all if the pay increase takes effect from today. That was an attempt to mislead. I also find it ironic that in rejecting a pre-Christmas —

Mr Maskey: Does the Member accept that the pay rise referred to by Mr C Murphy represents a scale comprising Members who do not hold office right through to Ministers? That ranges from £500 to £1,500, even before the various allowances are counted. The figures cannot be ignored. They are presented by the Assembly Commission, of which the Alliance Party is a member, and which it supported.

Mr Close: I apologise if I misunderstood Mr C Murphy's comments. I understood that he was referring to "bonus", and that he deliberately used the word "bonus". A bonus is over and above a pay increase. A bonus entails some degree of backdating, and that is what I understood him to say. If that is the case, I stand by my original comments.

I find it interesting that Sinn Féin rejects a pre-Christmas increase but is anxious to have a pre-Easter "rising" increase. Could that be coincidence? I wonder. I also find it interesting that there may be some pangs of guilt emanating from Sinn Féin, following what it did yesterday — crying about the poor people and needs, et cetera, yet happily going into the Lobbies and supporting an 8% increase in the regional rate.

Mr C Murphy: The Member will know, if he was listening earlier, that I asserted — and the Speaker nodded in assent — that this could not have been done beyond the end of this financial year. Therefore the date was not to ensure a pre-Easter "rising" pay increase. I am not sure on what date Easter falls next year, but this was the latest date that we could give for these proposals. I made that point at the start, and it was acknowledged by the Speaker.

In relation to yesterday, if the Member was so exercised about the rise in the regional rate, why did he not bother to get in early enough to table an amendment to the motion.

Mr Close: We will not rehearse those arguments again. The reason my party did not table an amendment, and subsequently voted against the 8% increase, has been well examined. It cannot be denied that the Member is proposing a pre-Easter increase.

Mr McCartney began his comments by complaining about there being 108 Members. Whether he likes it or not, those Members are here to fill what was referred to as a democratic deficit; to try to bring proper accountable government to the people; and to represent the people of

Northern Ireland through the appropriate Departments. Any member of the public would accept that and would recognise the import of the 10 Departments and their respective statutory scrutiny Committees which, I believe, are doing a reasonable job.

Mr McCartney: Does the Member accept that the number of Departments was determined not by —

Mr Speaker: Order. I must intervene at this point, because the debate is moving from the salaries Determination to questions about the fundamental basis upon which the Assembly is set. I must call the Member who is speaking, and the Member who intervened, back to the salaries Determination.

Mr Close: I apologise. Perhaps, in taking other Members' points, which are off the subject, I am being too charitable.

It is good practice, not only in public life but in general, to keep charitable acts to oneself. One should not use a public platform from which to extol "how great thou art".

Rev Robert Coulter: As far as the Commission is concerned, we have carried out our statutory responsibility by bringing forward the salaries Determination. If the Assembly decides to amend the date on which the Determination will have effect, the Commission will be happy to concur.

Question, That the amendment in the name of Mr Ford be made, put and agreed to.

Main question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Northern Ireland Assembly (Members' Salaries) Determination 2000 (NIA 27/00) be approved subject to the date in paragraph 1(4) being amended to 19 December 2000.

Adjourned at 1.55 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 15 January 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

THE LATE MR TOM BENSON MLA

Mr Speaker: It is my sad duty to inform the House of the death of Mr Tom Benson, a Member for the Strangford constituency. Mr Benson died on Christmas Eve, 24 December, and was buried on 28 December. He was a member of the Ulster Unionist Party, whose leader, the Rt Hon David Trimble, I now call.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to say a few brief words about the death of my Colleague Tom Benson on Christmas Eve, two months after he suffered a stroke.

Tom Benson gave 30 years of service to the Royal Ulster Constabulary before becoming active in party politics. He was elected to Ards Borough Council in 1985. The extent of his commitment to local government is clearly evidenced by the fact that he served as mayor of Ards Borough Council, chairman of the South Eastern Education and Library Board, and chairman of the Association of Local Authorities.

Tom Benson's contribution did not end there. He was an elected member of the Forum and then of this Assembly. He consistently gave dedicated service, both in the Forum and the Assembly, to politics in Northern Ireland. He gave consistent support to us during negotiations for the agreement and subsequently in the implementation of the agreement.

I am sure that many other Members, like myself, will feel that they have lost a friend. However, Northern Ireland has also lost a dedicated public servant.

Mr Speaker: It has been decided that, instead of further tributes in the House at this time, a service of thanksgiving for the life of Tom Benson, in which his family will be able to participate, will be held in the Senate Chamber. The date and time of the service will be arranged by agreement with the family.

As a token of our respect for Mr Benson, the House will now be suspended until 11.00 am.

The sitting was suspended at 10.35 am.

On resuming —

11.00 am

WEATHER CONDITIONS (CHRISTMAS PERIOD)

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Regional Development that he wishes to make a statement on the response of the Roads Service to the severe weather conditions over the Christmas period.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): The exceptional weather over Christmas gave rise to considerable difficulties on the roads. We experienced the most significant widespread snowfall for nearly 20 years. Because of the public interest and the important operational and policy considerations surrounding the issue of salting the roads, I felt that it was important for me to make a statement to the Assembly.

I have already undertaken a preliminary review of the Roads Service response to the extreme weather conditions from 27 to 31 December and, in co-operation with the Regional Development Committee, I intend to reappraise the policy considerations pertaining to the salting of roads.

Before I deal with the detail of the operation over Christmas, it will be helpful to Members if I set out the current policy concerning salting.

Roads Service spends £5 million per year on salting roads in Northern Ireland, or £70,000 each time the entire designated network is salted. This allows for salting of that portion of the network which carries approximately 80% of the traffic in normal conditions. Unfortunately, this money can be washed down the drain if rain falls and washes the salt away. If Roads Service were to extend its salting schedule to those roads that carry 90% of the traffic, the bill would immediately double to £10 million annually. That does not include £18 million of additional costs for capital equipment. Salting the entire network would require a capital investment of £36 million, and quadruple the running costs to £20 million per year.

Strict criteria were established in a review undertaken in 1996 and are applied regularly in order to determine which roads are included in the salting schedule. The purpose of having criteria is to ensure that optimum use is made of the limited resources available. The criteria are based primarily on the levels of traffic using a road, with other relevant considerations taken into account depending on the individual situation. Only last year, the Northern Ireland Audit Office reported on the Roads Service winter maintenance policy. Its report said that

“NIAO welcomes the objective criteria now being used by Roads Service to select roads which are salted or provided with salt bins or grit piles.”

The data-gathering system deployed by Roads Service in deciding whether or not to salt is at the leading edge of technology. There are 17 weather stations across Northern Ireland, covering different climatic conditions. Linked to each weather station is an ice-detection sensor positioned in the road surface. The information collected by these stations is transmitted to a central computer and is accessed by Roads Service duty engineers, via their laptop computers, on a 24-hour basis.

The computers display thermal maps showing the variation in predicted road surface temperatures across the entire salted network and other weather forecast data for Northern Ireland supplied by the Met Office. Based on this and local knowledge, each duty engineer decides whether or not it is appropriate to salt in his local area. The timing of the salting is carefully judged to benefit the majority of vehicles and, as far as possible, is completed before freezing occurs. The Roads Service does not normally undertake salting during heavy rain, as the salt would simply be washed away, or on dry roads, since ice would not form even if the temperature were to fall below zero.

A number of general points should also be made about the limit of what can be achieved by salting roads. If it rains, the salt is washed away, and if the temperature falls below zero, the wet surface may freeze. Salt does not act immediately. It needs the action of traffic to turn salt and ice into a solution before it becomes effective. The effectiveness of salt is dramatically reduced as the temperature falls. Salt is not as effective on fallen snow.

Between 27 and 31 December, the Province experienced exceptional weather conditions. The minimum road surface temperature measured by the road sensors was below -10°C. The minimum temperature measured on the surface of the snow by the Met Office was -18°C. The main band of snow reached the Foyle Basin by 1.00pm on 27 December and had reached all parts of Northern Ireland within four hours. It reached the greater Belfast area by 2.45pm. There were accumulations of snow of up to seven inches in depth in the east of Northern Ireland, and in the greater Belfast area in particular.

The Met Office forecast had given prior warning of some snow, which prompted the Roads Service to initiate precautionary treatment of the salted network. Prior to the onset of the severe weather, a major Roads Service operation was put into action, involving approximately 400 people, including engineers, technicians, drivers and associated staff, as well as a fleet of 135 gritters, many of which had to be fitted with snow ploughs.

The Roads Service informed me that on 27 December, during the 12-hour period prior to the snowfall, salt was spread on all roads on the salting schedule. For example,

salting in Belfast commenced at 3.30am and recommenced at midday. However, the effectiveness of the salt was reduced because of the very low temperatures, the depth of the snow and because the action of salt on snow is not as effective as it is on ice. As a result of the exceptionally low temperatures and the prevailing weather conditions, a blanket of snow lay until Sunday 31 December.

At the end of the four-day period, a total of 17,000 tonnes of salt had been used. This represents one third of the average winter salt used over each of the past five years. Also, 50,000 miles were covered by the gritters and snowploughs when salting. This is equivalent to journeying twice around the world.

The entire Roads Service operation cost more than £850,000. This was additional. Therefore, such was the severity of the conditions that in four days we spent 17% of the winter maintenance budget.

I trust that this summary of events has demonstrated the difficulties encountered by the Roads Service during the recent cold spell. I hope that Members will agree that the 400 or so members of Roads Service staff involved in the salting operation deserve credit for their efforts in what were very exceptional conditions. In particular, the drivers of the gritters deserve special mention.

Immediately after the Christmas holidays, I instigated an internal review of the approach undertaken by the Roads Service. I received a full briefing on that last week, and overall, given the conditions and the resources available to them, the Roads Service staff performed exceptionally well during this period.

It is important, however, that lessons be learned. The following actions have been agreed as a result of the interim review. The present communication links will be reviewed to ensure that the public is kept informed; the establishment of priority routes for treatment will be considered to guarantee access to key public services in snowy conditions; the criteria for the establishment of self-help salt boxes will be reviewed; consideration will be given to a general winter service leaflet drop to all households prior to the winter season; the salting schedule will be provided, (for example, to local papers and on the Internet); district councils will be invited to work with the Roads Service to clear pedestrian areas and town-centre footpaths during extreme weather conditions; and the arrangements for dealing with a prolonged emergency will also be reviewed.

Given the size and prolonged duration of the operation, most things went well. Inevitably some things went wrong. However, I believe that the issue of winter salting is important for the entire population of Northern Ireland and their public representatives. Now that we have a Regional Development Committee, I feel it is appropriate to revisit the issue. The last review was five years ago, and we should examine the decisions taken at that time. I will therefore initiate a reappraisal of the current policy

when I meet members of the Committee this Wednesday, and I will request their involvement.

In conclusion, I am aware of the common perception that salting and ploughing can ensure ice-or snow-free roads, regardless of the severity of the weather. As I mentioned earlier, this is not possible. No matter how much we choose to spend, ice-and snow-free roads cannot be guaranteed, as the recent spell of bad weather has proved.

Over the Christmas period, Northern Ireland experienced its worst weather for almost 20 years, leading us to mount the biggest ever response operation. The Roads Service has at no time displayed complacency. The points that I outlined indicate that we must build on our strengths in these areas and analyse further areas for improvement.

The Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee (Mr A Maginness): All of us recognise the exceptional weather conditions that existed during the period referred to by the Minister in his statement. No one, not even I, can blame the Minister personally for those conditions. However, as Chairman of the Regional Development Committee, I share Assembly concerns about the operational response of the Department and the Roads Service to this difficult situation.

I thank the Minister for his statement on the Department's handling of road gritting during the recent, severe cold weather spell. I further thank the Minister for agreeing to come to the Regional Development Committee's meeting on Wednesday to discuss this issue and consider a reappraisal of those policy considerations which relate to road gritting and salting. The Committee looks forward to that meeting. It may well be that the criteria used for the selection of roads will be subject to further review and consideration.

However, I must say that —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question.

Mr A Maginness: I am somewhat disappointed by the lack of detail in the Minister's statement. I hope that further detail will be forthcoming. I have one specific question for the Minister. While I acknowledge that the extreme weather conditions at the time were severe, the public perception is that the Department failed to keep the main arterial routes open.

11.15 am

In particular, the M2 and the M22 were severely affected. It seemed to the public, from anecdotal evidence, that the route from north-west Belfast to Belfast International Airport was closed for a considerable time, and that when it was reopened it was treacherous. Why was that important arterial route not kept clear for the free passage of traffic?

Mr Campbell: This is the first occasion on which I have spoken here since the deplorable attack on the Belfast premises of the Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee. I utterly condemn such attacks on the property of any elected representative.

As for the issue that he raised, there will always be locations where individual public representatives and members of the public are concerned about what they perceive to be the non-salting or the inadequate salting of a road. That will always be a difficulty in such extreme weather conditions. I undertake to respond to Mr Maginness verbally on Wednesday morning and, if necessary, in writing, in relation to the salting of the M2 and the motorway network.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's statement. Like him, we offer no criticism of the Roads Service staff who were employed in attempting to deal with the great crisis.

However, a number of issues are outstanding. The Minister will undoubtedly be aware of the real anger that many people felt all over Northern Ireland, and particularly in my constituency of Newry and Armagh, about the lack of gritting on what are classified as minor roads. Can the Minister assure me that he will undertake an urgent review of gritting schedules in my constituency? We need to ensure that roads classified as minor roads, but which are nonetheless important link roads, receive equitable treatment in wintry conditions.

Will the Minister tell us how much grit was available in regional depots in advance of the extreme weather conditions, and whether those supplies were considered adequate? The Minister said that the Met Office gave a warning about weather conditions. When was that warning received? Were adequate measures put in place to ensure that it was dealt with?

Finally, I want to ask —

Mr Speaker: This is an opportunity for individual Members to ask individual questions, not questions with as many legs as a centipede.

Mr Kennedy: Mr Speaker, I am grateful for your indulgence.

Given the stringent criteria used by the Minister's Department, surely his Department is left open to some criticism. The road network around Parliament Buildings was gritted, yet roads throughout Northern Ireland were not.

Mr Campbell: I have no figures for the precise amount of salt available in the Newry and Armagh area, but I will undertake to see if it is possible to establish them. I draw the Member's attention to the figure of 17,000 tonnes of salt that I cited for all of Northern Ireland.

I attempted to cover the issue of advance knowledge in my explanation of the role of road sensors — which are the responsibility of Roads Service — and Met

Office information, both of which are used to ensure that advance salting takes place.

In the greater Belfast area there were two advance salting treatments — one at 3.30 am and one at midday. I did not make reference to the Newry/Armagh area but I will establish what advance preparation took place in the Member's constituency and write to him regarding that matter.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Any reasonable person will recognise that the turn in the weather was severe and quick. As Chairman of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, I ask the Minister if he feels that urban areas have an advantage over outlying rural areas in the gritting programme. Outlying rural districts have more problems as a result of such a turn in the weather than do rural districts. As a result, farmers in those areas have difficulty foddering their stock. In the Minister's reappraisal, will he announce an enquiry into allegations that some farmers who asked to be supplied with gritting material were refused? Those farmers said that they would pay for it but the Department for Regional Development would not sell it to them. That is a serious matter — if it in fact arose.

Regarding the vehicles that required attachments, there is evidence to suggest that in some cases the attachment was at one district office and the vehicle was at another, and due to the snow the vehicle could not get to the place where the attachment was. The Minister must examine that claim.

The Department did the best it could in such a freak storm, and I do not think that anyone here will want to indict the Minister or his officials. However, the Department for Regional Development must instigate a complete review of the situation and deal with the points raised by public representatives — just as Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) did when it got into trouble.

Mr Campbell: My reassessment will include a review of the criteria for the establishment of self-help salt boxes. In rural areas, particularly where the farming community needs to gain access to the more heavily used routes, salt boxes ought to be — and for the most part are — provided. However, the Department for Regional Development will endeavour to see where additional measures of assistance can be taken.

I am not aware of any problems regarding the provision of snowploughs and their required attachments, or of a problem where an operation took place in one division while the work to be carried out was in another. If such problems exist, I will undertake to investigate them and ensure that they are ironed out immediately before further snow falls. The Department's difficulty in reviewing the criteria will be one of resources. Whatever happens as an outcome of the reassessment will have implications for the budget of the Department for Regional

Development. However, I am happy to take those and other views on board.

Mr Speaker: It may be because this is the first sitting since recess, but Members appear to have got out of the good habit of being concise in their questions. I appeal to Members to be as concise as possible as many Members wish to put questions. Standing Orders set a time limit of one hour for these questions, and we want to try to get as many asked as possible.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom na daoine ar an talamh a mholadh as an obair ar fónamh a rinne siad. I commend those who worked so hard on the ground over the Christmas period, although it is clear that Members who are sporting healthy tans did not experience the problems that some of the rest of us did with the winter gritting schedule.

I would like to see fresh, innovative thinking from the Minister and the Department. I would also like to see the establishment of an interdepartmental task force consisting of representatives from the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the farmers' unions. This body could aid the Minister to examine the possibility of tasking farmers to grit some of the network which is not being reached, and of remunerating them to do so. This is already in order with respect to some snow clearance work, but it could apply similarly to gritting in rural areas. Given the current crisis in agriculture, this would supply a good supplementary income for farmers. Will the Minister assure the House that he will consider establishing such a task force, with these aims in mind?

Mr Campbell: Members will recall that one of the seven reassessment points that I mentioned was that I would invite district councils to work with Roads Service in the clearance of pedestrian areas and town centre footpaths during extreme weather conditions. I am prepared to analyse what help district councils could provide, and what co-operative arrangements we could enter into with them to assist in dealing with very extreme climatic conditions. If other matters pertain, particularly to the rural community, I will be happy to invite district councils and others to assess whether the current methodology is the best one, and, if not, how we can improve upon it.

Mrs E Bell: I also welcome the statement. I agree that Roads Service staff did the best job they could in the conditions. Local difficulties arose, but we need to recognise that these were freak weather conditions. In his statement the Minister talks about salt, about its disadvantages and the fact that it does not always work, especially with snow. I take on board what the Minister said about money and the fact that we do not have these conditions all the time, but I have been told by people from other countries that there are other types of salt which work with snow. In the review, will consideration be given to the type of salt that should be used?

In some ways it was good that the snow fell during the holiday period, but if it had happened during a time when many people were going to work, I am sure that the main roads would have been salted.

Mr Speaker: I press the Member to put her question.

Mrs E Bell: They are questions, Mr Speaker, but I appreciate what you are saying.

Will the criteria of roads, especially school routes, be looked at? Finally, is the Minister satisfied with the level of co-ordination between sections of Roads Service and other agencies?

I also welcome the review. It is very prompt work by the Department.

Mr Campbell: Alternative de-icing materials is an issue that raises its head from time to time and one on which I requested information immediately after the Christmas holidays. I am informed that there are a number of alternative materials such as calcium magnesium acetate and calcium chloride.

11.30 am

The fact remains that salt is still the main material used on the European roads network. Urea is used on steel bridges, including at least one in Northern Ireland, as well as on airport runways because it is less corrosive to steel and aluminium. However, it is less effective, more environmentally damaging, and twice as expensive as salt. Clearway is used to de-ice runways, but costs 30 times more than salt. Even those authorities using Clearway struggled to keep airports open throughout the four days mentioned.

There are many other materials, the cost and effectiveness of which range widely. I have to reiterate that there is a need to be cognisant of the substantial additional cost that would be incurred if we were to consider some of the much more expensive materials that I have itemised. We will look at these. However, to consider using materials that cost up to 30 times more than salt would substantially inhibit the amount of such material that would be available. It would reduce, rather than increase, the extent of the roads network which could be covered in extreme weather conditions. I will write to the honourable Member in response to that particular issue.

Mr Boyd: Heavy snow was forecast for the afternoon of the 27 December, yet traffic was at a standstill on the M2 and the M5 with lorries jack-knifed and vehicles abandoned. Whilst the conditions were extreme, it was taking drivers up to four hours to travel a distance of about seven miles. Will the Department undertake to investigate why there were so few emergency vehicles? There were none on that stretch of the M2 and M5 for long periods during the rush hour despite heavy snow having been forecast well in advance.

Mr Campbell: I will undertake to analyse the time period. I heard the reference to the M2 and the M5 and I take it that the Member was referring to the afternoon of 27 December. I will undertake to establish, if possible, the number of vehicles that were salting that route at that time, and I will respond in writing.

Mr Fee: I cannot welcome the statement because it pre-empted a motion I tabled last week, which is no longer going to be discussed. Nonetheless, may I invite the Minister to go back to his office, put on his wellington boots and stick the boot into Roads Service management, who allowed this complete fiasco to happen. It may happen only once every 20 years, but the lack of forward planning and preparation was scandalous.

For instance, the Minister referred to 135 gritting machines. Drivers and technicians were deployed in Newry, but the snowploughs were in Armagh city. The vehicles could not do their work. Something is drastically wrong when that happens. The Minister also talked about considering the establishment of priority routes. Will he reconsider the old classification of roads: A, B, C and unclassified? That classification is almost 100 years old and does not take into account the location of nursing homes, health centres, GP out-of-hours services, hospitals and other essential services.

Will he also consider ensuring that at least one food retail outlet is available in all rural areas? During the Christmas storms many people were stuck without transport, water, food, heat and power.

Finally, will he use his good offices and those of his Department to try and help co-ordinate responses to these circumstances? There was no co-ordination among the district councils, the Water Service, the Roads Service, the Ambulance Service, out-of-hours GP services and the police. It was a complete fiasco. We cannot wash our hands and say that we are all absolved just because the men and women on the ground did a good job. We have got to sort this problem out.

Mr Campbell: I hope that, upon mature reflection, Mr Fee will reconsider the advocacy of physical violence upon some of the staff.

I readily concede — I have said this several times to my officials and to public representatives — that there is a huge disparity between the public expectation of snow-free and ice-free roads and the reality on some occasions. There must be, and there will be, no complacency whatsoever in the Department for Regional Development; however, we must operate within existing confines.

I understand the Member's frustration, and that of the people whom he represents, in relation to the situation in his area. It is often the case that in traversing the main roads of Northern Ireland members of the public will have the perception that a main thoroughfare has not been salted if vehicles are sliding or there is a sparkle on

the road. If they do not see a salting vehicle they again have the perception that the road has not been salted. It is very difficult to bridge the gap between public expectation and what happens on the ground. I repeat that there is not, and there will not be, any complacency.

I will review the arrangements in relation to Newry and Armagh as for every other part of Northern Ireland. I reiterate, however, that, given the extreme circumstances, with a temperature of minus 10 degrees Celsius, or even lower, on the road surface, salt was not fully effective. People assumed that roads were not salted when in fact they were. I assure Members that we will review the conditions that people were faced with from 27 December to 31 December. *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: I am not quite sure what the Morse message being transmitted was, but we will try to make sure that it is picked up.

Mr Hussey: I too thank the Minister for his statement, and I join in the widespread expression of thanks to the Department for Regional Development's staff on the ground — it is well deserved in many cases. I welcome the proposed review and the possibility of the inclusion of district councils in the solution to the problem.

I want to turn to an issue, on page two of the statement, which has already been touched on by many Members. The problem lies with the objective criteria. We are seeking greater subjectivity, particularly for the 20% of the population who are not covered, as Dr Paisley mentioned, by the present criteria. People want to know that their children can get to and from school safely. They want to know that those involved in community care — doctors, nurses and home helps — can exercise their duty of care. Farmers want to know that feed lorries and milk tankers can get through. Householders want to be sure that refuse can be collected. In short, the rural population wants proper services. Perhaps it does not mind the 8% increase in regional rates so much, providing that it gets value for money from it. Can we be assured that a review will take this on board?

As regards salting materials, the Minister talked about the cost difficulties in relation to the materials being investigated. However, is there ongoing research and development into alternative salting materials that could be utilised in severe weather conditions?

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for his question, or series of questions. First of all, I accept, with regard to the salting of 80% of the network, that the remaining 20% is untreated. Mr Hussey, who is a member of the Regional Development Committee, will be aware that I will be in front of the Committee on Wednesday, and I have no doubt that we will look at the possibility of extending the salted network.

I reiterate that if we were to increase the 80% coverage of traffic in normal conditions to 90% —bridging the

gap by only half — the bill would double from the existing £5 million to £10 million. That figure does not include the £18 million of additional cost for capital equipment.

If we were to do the entire road network the running costs would quadruple and the one-off initial capital investment of plant would increase to £36 million. Of course, we will consider these issues and discuss them in Committee session, but, as I have said, I have to be cognisant of the cost factor.

The Member mentioned the 8% increase in the regional rate. I understand that Members may learn later today whether people are accepting this increase, and Mr Hussey may then find them less accepting than he appears to think that they may be. However, that is a separate issue.

I will be in front of the Committee on Wednesday, and I will consider these complicated issues and their resource implications. We will discuss them, and I have no doubt that the Member and the rest of the Committee will give their views on Wednesday.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I welcome the Minister's statement and ask him to accept my appreciation of the Roads Service staff's work during recent exceptional circumstances. However, does the Minister accept that there is a danger in the uneven level of salting, or gritting, across the Province? Quite often there is a differential between district councils, and one can actually see where one ends and another begins. Each council seems to have a different policy, which is dangerous. Can we have more co-ordinated arrangements between district councils to make road travel safer? Does he understand that there is a concern about the safety of the public and school children? We thank God that recently an accident was spared involving children on a bus. Can something be done about salting school routes on small country roads to ensure safe travelling?

Mr Campbell: I am conscious that in various divisions section engineers use their own judgement about whether there will be salting, when it will occur and to what intensity it will be undertaken. I am conscious of the Member's comments, particularly about people travelling across Northern Ireland. I have heard, historically, of palpable differences between one division and another. I have taken note of the Member's comments, and I will investigate them to ensure that there is a standard degree of implementation across Northern Ireland.

11.45 am

The Member mentioned school bus runs, particularly the one that was in the news recently. As the second point in the internal review, I am considering the establishment of priority routes for treatment to ensure that there is access to key public services in snow conditions. In conjunction with the Regional Development Committee, I will be examining how to include access to schools as part of that review.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister clarify whether there has been a change in the working conditions of those employed in gritting roads in the South Armagh and South Down areas? It appears that their working conditions were changed in December 2000. Can he also explain why the salt boxes in many housing estates were not seen to, considering the forecast of bad weather conditions? Those boxes ought to have been filled with sand and salt prior to the arrival of the heavy weather in December. In my area, there were incidences where people could not get out of some housing estates. Things would have been much easier for them had there been some sand and grit available.

Mr Campbell: I am not aware of any change in working conditions during December, although I will undertake to investigate the issue. I will be revising the criteria for the establishment of salt boxes. It is difficult to indicate whether criteria will be applied for the establishment of these boxes. If no criteria are applied, tens of thousands could be supplied. The Road Service can and will respond to requests for salt boxes. We are currently reviewing the provision of such boxes.

Mr Byrne: The Minister's statement is very comprehensive given the circumstances we have just been through. Given that the primary criterion used is "the one thousand vehicles per day" criterion, does the Minister accept that most rural car owners travel, on average, 10,000 miles more per year and, as a result, they pay £750 extra on fuel duties and VAT duties? Does he accept that car owners in the more provincial rural areas need and aspire to having roads treated equally to those living in the Belfast metropolitan area?

Mr Campbell: As the Member is also on the Regional Development Committee, this point, among others, will come to the surface at the meeting on Wednesday, where they will be looked at and analysed. I am very concerned about the numbers of people in the rural community who feel that urban centres receive a higher concentration of resources than they do. However, we must have criteria. The current criteria were developed in 1996, and we are reviewing them now in conjunction with the Regional Development Committee. The Member and I are conscious of the higher concentration of vehicular traffic existing on main roads, as well as the necessity to try to ensure that a concentration of resources is present there. I fully accept, however, that we cannot do that to the exclusion of the rural dweller, and I look forward to the discussion that we will undoubtedly have on Wednesday.

Mr Armstrong: We have to be very thankful that there were no weather-related deaths on the roads over this period. That is one thing that some of us perhaps forgot.

In the event of further sudden adverse weather conditions, what contingency plans does the Minister have to deal with disruption and gridlock on roads throughout

the Province, particularly rural roads? The M2 was closed for a short time, and since that is the main road between Coleraine, Londonderry and Belfast, it is very important that it should be kept open.

I agree that urban areas have an advantage over rural areas, and that people in rural areas are more vulnerable than those in towns. That has to be considered. It was good that the frost and snow did not last any longer, and since we have government now in our own hands and in the control of local people, we hope that the situation will not arise again. Will the Minister consider using local contractors or farmers under the direction of the relevant area engineer? That might be more cost-effective.

I have written to the Minister, and hope that I will be having a meeting with him at a later date.

Mr Campbell: The Member raises a number of issues, some of which I hope I have dealt with. As I have said, I undertake to establish the circumstances with regard to the M2 on the afternoon of 27 December. I appreciate and accept the central nature of the M2 corridor. Given that I use it almost every day, the member would expect me to say that.

I accept the issue of rural dwellers from the Member, as I do from others. We will have to examine that, given the circumstances that prevail, but I will not go over the concentration on the other areas. However, I will not go over the issue of the exclusion of rural dwellers again.

The issue of using farmers and small contractors has emerged in the past and we will examine that as part of the review.

Mr Speaker: I encourage Members to listen to the questions that other Members are asking and not simply repeat them. That takes up time, and we may not be able to get through all the questions that Members wish to ask. Of course, the Chair accepts that sometimes a Minister does not give a full enough answer to a question. Then it is perhaps best to ask a different question, or to couch the question in another way — in a probing fashion — to elicit a different response, rather than simply reiterate questions to which the Minister's response is "I have already answered the question." I encourage Members to think in that way.

Mr R Hutchinson: I welcome the Minister's statement. As a member of the Regional Development Committee, I look forward to meeting him on Wednesday in relation to some of the country roads in my area, at Glenarm, Carnalbanagh and Feystown. Some of the comments from the people living in the town areas were interesting. We sometimes forget that folk in country areas experience this weather quite often throughout the year.

Under normal circumstances, when an adverse weather forecast is received from the Met Office, at what time do the gritters and salters get out on the roads? How does

that compare with what happened over the Christmas period?

Mr Campbell: The Member referred to the issue that is central to my statement — the extremity of the conditions. Normally — for example, on recent nights, when temperatures have been anything between minus one and minus three — Roads Service might salt in the evening, but certainly in advance of the early-morning rush hour. It might complete the salting of the road network by, for example, 6.30 am. Of course, it depends on the overnight weather conditions.

That compares starkly with the conditions we faced between 27 December and 31 December. The surface snow temperature was minus 18 degrees Celsius and very heavy snow throughout most of that period meant that the gritters were working almost continuously. That is why I wanted to go to some considerable lengths to pay tribute to the staff of the Roads Service. I accept the many commendations from Members, including Mr R Hutchinson, to the staff who worked throughout the holiday period in severe climatic conditions and I will pass on those commendations.

Mr McHugh: A Cheann Comhairle, I welcome the statement. I suppose it covers the basic questions that have been feeding in to the Department.

When looking at the rural versus the urban situation with regard to covering 80% of the road network, what percentage of Fermanagh and Tyrone roads would that figure cover? I imagine that the area would be very low in terms of the number of roads covered, given that we have a large network of minor roads and that people have to negotiate these to get to services. What impact was there on access to key services such as emergency, care, refuse collection for those in rural areas compared to those living in Belfast? I know that in some areas refuse collection did not take place until after the thaw. Farmers had to wait for milk to be collected — if they had enough tank capacity to last until then.

Mr Campbell: We are concentrating on the rural provision, which I have already covered, but I am happy to respond again before the Regional Development Committee and on subsequent occasions in the Assembly.

Rural dwellers need to be catered for and there is a need to ensure that there is adequate provision in terms of the winter maintenance budget in their areas. It may be difficult, but I will endeavour to establish what proportion of the overall Northern Ireland 80% roads coverage relates to the Fermanagh/South Tyrone area.

We are debating the period 27 December to 31 December. Just nine days before the beginning of that difficult weather period, the Assembly voted on the Budget. In that Budget, the Roads Service received a nominal uplift in road maintenance. I do not wish to dwell at length on the matter, but I am constrained by the

budget allocated to me. If we consider any amendment or enlargement of the salted road network, then the consequences for the allocation of resources may be considerable.

I would expect to receive the support of Members if we decided, as a result of this review, to enlarge or enhance the salted network.

12.00

Mr Bradley: The greatest disappointment in my area during those terrible days was the situation on the main A1 route to the border, at Killeen. The route was completely impassable at times, and yet the roads from the border to Dublin were completely clear in spite of the fact that there was similar snowfall there.

We have heard about reappraisals and a review — and everyone agrees that these are very necessary — but reviews are for the future. I want to ask the Minister what the situation would be on routes such as the A1 if we had a repeat of the Christmas snowfall later today, tomorrow or next week.

Mr Campbell: There has been some reference, both in the House and in the public domain, to the A1. The salting of the A1 from the border to Sprucefield is controlled by the southern division. The road is divided into four separate salting sections. All of these sections were salted at 20 grams per square metre. This started at 6.30 pm on Tuesday, on the A1, and recommenced at 4.30 am on Wednesday. Salting was done again at 2.30 pm, and continued thereafter until 31 December. Considerable effort was put into the salting of the A1. As I said in my statement, the eastern part of Northern Ireland was the most heavily affected by the snow, and that, of course, includes the A1. We will look at that route again, as we will look at others.

I take the Member's point about the Republic of Ireland, although I am not sure about the extent of the snowfall there. We will be able to establish that. I will respond to the Member in writing, as I will to the other Members who have made specific points.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement and put on record my thanks to the Roads Service staff who worked through the exceptional weather conditions to try to keep the roads free.

I welcome the Minister's invitation to local councils to assist in clearing footpaths in town centres. Does the Minister accept that some local government vehicles could be easily adapted to have snowploughs added, thereby providing additional assistance during such exceptional weather conditions?

Will the Minister also undertake to advise of the specific cost of ensuring that all school bus routes are gritted? The general figures that he talked about today were given to me by Lord Dubs over two years ago. If devolution is going to mean anything, we should be

getting more precise information and be aware of what those costs are. Does the Minister accept that gritting school bus routes would protect children's safety and also open up the main rural routes to emergency services, should they be required? Will he ensure that there is greater transparency in identifying what costs would be involved and the benefits to the rural community which would ensue?

Mr Campbell: As I have said, I wish to invite district councils to work with us in clearing pedestrian areas and town centre footpaths. I am aware of very extreme conditions that prevailed in some pedestrian areas on the north coast over the period, and some measures were taken to try to alleviate the situation. I understand that several years ago the Roads Service did try to establish a working relationship with district councils. In fact, some small, localised arrangements do exist among a small number of councils.

However, I want to revisit that issue to see if it is possible to expand those arrangements across Northern Ireland. It would obviously help if, in doing so, we were able to utilise some of the local councils' vehicles, but we will have to examine the implications of that. I understand that, on previous occasions, the councils experienced difficulties in trying to establish this relationship, but further progress will be sought.

Mr Beggs also mentioned the cost of gritting the bus routes. The establishment of priority routes will be an issue, including the treatment of bus routes to schools, which has been mentioned on several occasions by Members.

Mr McCartney: I welcome the Minister's statement and join in offering the thanks of my party to the staff of the Roads Service who worked in extreme and trying conditions to keep the traffic moving. This was the first serious snowfall since 1982 and there has been a general increase in the mildness of winters. Given these facts and the town and country argument about who is getting more of the cake, will the Minister indicate the cost of having on hand sufficient machinery and manpower to cope with an emergency that occurs perhaps once every 15 or 20 years and give parity of treatment to every road, rural and urban?

Mr Campbell: During the period between 27 and 31 December temperatures were the most extreme — minus 18C — and snowfall was the highest across Northern Ireland since approximately 1982.

It would cost £36 million of capital investment to provide a winter maintenance schedule that would ensure that every road in Northern Ireland was salted, irrespective of the number of vehicles that normally use some roads, and to ensure that we had enough gritters and the snowploughs to do that. An extra £20 million would also be needed on an ongoing, annual basis to ensure that this could continue to be done.

In addition, trying to ensure that all the roads were salted in approximately three to three-and-a-half hours, as happens with many at the moment, would cost a substantial amount more. So, the short answer, I am afraid, is that this service would cost considerably more money than we have available to us at present.

Mr Gibson: Will the Minister pass on my thanks to his 400 men? In the circumstances, they carried out personal tasks for many of us, such as accommodating funerals and helping with other emergencies — this was welcome.

The Minister has already mentioned the variations in the treatment of roads in different areas. Can he tell us why the M1, an arterial route, was less well salted than roads in the more remote areas of west Tyrone, and is he aware that the figure of £870,000 is twice that of the budget for minor works to roads throughout west Tyrone?

I am bearing in mind that this was a holiday season with a third less traffic on the roadway than normal and no school buses running. Would it have been a dire emergency in normal times, or would the cutting edge of the traffic have made better use of the salt?

Mr Campbell: In relation to the Member's latter point, I think I made this point clear, and I know that Roads Service personnel did in media interviews at the time: it is a fact that traffic on a salted road enables the salt to take effect. The greater the flow of traffic on the road, the more effective the salt becomes. Conversely, the less traffic there is on the road, the more difficult it is for the salt to work effectively.

Mr Gibson raised the issue of the M1. Let us return to the issue of public perception, which I recognise to be a factor. When Members of the public get into their vehicles there is an expectation, even in times of extreme weather conditions, that a main route like the M1 or the M2 will be clear. Whether the motorway had been salted one, two, three or even four hours before, there is an expectation that it should be clear. That is not always the case, particularly in the very extreme circumstances that we were faced with in this four-day period. However, I undertake to have the degree of salting of the M1 on those days examined, and I will write to the Member concerning that.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. While I welcome the Minister's statement, it is unfortunate that it has obviated the need for a proper debate on the matter. This is a perennial debate — year in, year out, we have the same argument about the lack of gritting. The issue was worthy of a proper debate in the Assembly, and it is unfortunate that we are not having that.

I would like to commend all those workers who went out and did their best, especially in my council area.

Will the Minister quantify the cost to the Health Service and the community of the increase in fractures? Also, I was surprised to hear one of his officials saying that there is no statutory obligation on the Department of Regional

Development to grit the roads. I want the Minister to bring that matter to the Executive and to ask the Executive to make gritting a statutory obligation.

Mr Speaker: The time is up, so I have to ask the Minister to respond in writing to the Member's questions.

However, I wish to make some comments. First, if Members had not insisted on thanking and commending all of those who worked so hard during the emergency before asking their questions, all those who wanted to ask questions would have been able to do so.

Secondly, if Members had not asked questions that were merely repetitions of previous questions, forcing the Minister to repeat a previous answer, we would have had more than enough time for all Members.

Finally, Members should check their questions to be sure that they are being put to the proper Minister. For example, a question on the effect on the Health Service has to be a question for the Minister of Health and not for the Minister for Regional Development.

However, I accept that with the degree of cold and the freezing up of the thinking processes during the recess, Members are not quite into the full way of going. Perhaps Members will recall those points when we come to questions to the Ministers later today and at other times.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS BILL

Second Stage

12.15 pm

The Junior Minister (Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Electronic Communications Bill (NI 9/00) be agreed.

I would like to begin by explaining the need for this Bill and its importance to the development of e-commerce and e-government in Northern Ireland. I will then deal with the detailed content of the Bill and its implications for the Government, for business and for the ordinary citizens in Northern Ireland.

The need for legislation stems from two European Union directives. First, the 1999 directive addresses a community framework for electronic signature. An electronic signature is a secure personal code which, combined with a device or a piece of specific information, uniquely identifies an individual. All Members of the House will be familiar with the automatic teller machines, or the holes in the wall, as they are commonly called. You insert your cash card, you key in your personal number and you take out cash, that is if you have any cash.

The combination of the card and the personal identification number (PIN) make up an electronic signature. There are other more sophisticated forms of electronic signature but in essence they all boil down to the same thing: a swipe card, or some other device, plus a piece of personal information that is known to you and is unlikely to be known by many people — for example, your PIN, your mother's maiden name or your date of birth. Some telephone services ask you to verify your identity by providing such information. The 1999 directive established a common legal framework for electronic signatures and the related arrangements for accreditation and certification across the member states of the European Union. This was done to ensure that different definitions did not constitute barriers to electronic commerce across the European Union, and all member states must comply with this directive by July 2001.

Secondly, there is the 2000 directive on electronic commerce, which creates a legal framework to ensure the free movement of information society services between member states. A key requirement of the directive is that each member state has to amend any legislation that contains requirements that are likely to curb the use of contracts by electronic means. Member states must comply with this directive by January 2002.

In response to these two directives, the United Kingdom Government brought forward the Electronic Communications Act 2000, which received Royal Assent

in May 2000. The Act is a key element in the Westminster Government's vision of making this the best place in the world to conduct e-business. In particular, it provides for the removal of legislative barriers to e-commerce, as required by the EU directive.

The purpose of the Electronic Communications Bill that is before the House today is to ensure that Departments in the Northern Ireland Executive have the same powers as their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales to permit, and indeed to promote, electronic commerce. Specifically, the Bill will allow Northern Ireland Departments to modify existing Northern Ireland legislation for the purpose of authorising or facilitating the use of electronic communications.

These powers were conferred on Ministers of the Westminster Government and on Ministers of the devolved authorities in Scotland and Wales under the Electronic Communications Act 2000. During key stages of the passage of that Bill through Westminster, the Northern Ireland Assembly either had not achieved devolution or was in a state of suspension, and the Bill, therefore, did not bring us into line. The purpose of the Bill before the House today is to bring us into line now with England, Scotland and Wales.

A great deal still needs to be done by each of the devolved Administrations to identify and deliver the programmes of subordinate legislation necessary to remove barriers to e-commerce. Under the powers proposed in this Bill, legislation may be amended that will affect all Government Departments and enable a range of transactions to be carried out electronically. Those could range from vehicle registration and taxation to companies' registration and social security claims — a wide range of interfaces between citizens and the Administration. An inter-departmental group of officials is already working to identify the specific pieces of legislation in need of change. A consequential programme of amending legislation will be drawn up and prioritised to bring appropriate Northern Ireland legislation into line with the requirements of European Union directives.

This Bill in itself will not directly affect Northern Ireland's businesses and citizens; it will merely enable Northern Ireland Departments to amend their legislation. Subordinate legislation made under the powers conferred by the Bill will have a more direct impact on business and citizens than the Bill itself. Where a responsible Department considers it necessary, it will be subject to an affirmative procedure in the Assembly.

I have already said that the Electronic Communications Act 2000 is a key element in the UK Government's vision for e-commerce. However, it will also facilitate a quantum leap in the electronic delivery of Government services to the public. Legislation was made in July 2000 in the Republic of Ireland for the same purpose. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have

agreed that Northern Ireland should be part of the revolution in electronic commerce and in the electronic delivery of Government services. It is important that we keep abreast of the developments currently taking place in both Great Britain and the Republic on both the East/West and North/South axes.

It might be helpful to give a brief summary of the Electronic Communications Act 2000. Its main purpose is to help build confidence in e-commerce and the technology underlined, and to remove any statutory barriers to using electronic signatures and data storage. The Act covers a number of separate aspects. First, it covers an approval scheme for businesses and other organisations, providing cryptography or secure encoding support services such as electronic signature services and related confidentiality services.

Secondly, it covers the legal recognition of electronic signatures and the process under which they are verified, generated or communicated. That effectively affords electronic signatures the same status and the same legal status as a written signature on a piece of paper. Finally, it removes obstacles to the use of electronic communication and storage in place of paper storage in other legislation.

Approval schemes for cryptography services are a reserved matter under section 4(1) and paragraph 29 of schedule 2 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 — I hope Members are able to follow that — so the provisions of the Electronic Communications Act 2000 already apply in Northern Ireland. Cryptography involves the electronic encoding of a document so that its content can be accessed and read only by the sender and intended recipient. The recipient must have the necessary code or key to enable the message to be decoded. Suppliers of cryptography services will be permitted in the first instance to be self-regulating in setting and complying with industry standards. However, the UK Act provides for Government regulation in the future, should it be needed.

The legal recognition of electronic signatures is similarly dealt with in section 7 of the Electronic Communications Act 2000. The Bill before us relates primarily to the third and final issue — the removal of obstacles to the use of electronic signatures and data storage in other legislation.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Clause 1 of the Bill contains powers designed to remove restrictions in existing legislation that prevent the use of electronic communications and storage, and to enable the use to be more clearly defined where it is already allowed. A large number of existing statutes make provision for a wide range of services requiring the use of written signatures. These include applications by businesses or members of the public to the Government for licenses or grants — for example, applications for driving or fishing licenses, claims for housing benefit, social security benefits and so forth. The powers afforded by clause 1 can be used to modify legislation to enable

such transactions to be conducted electronically. That would make such transactions quicker, more efficient and more convenient, both for businesses and members of the public.

It is important to note that the Bill does not remove the option to use any of the traditional means of transacting business. Citizens will still be able to fill out the traditional paper form and send it in the normal way. The Bill will provide for legislation to be amended so that the ordinary citizen can do these things electronically over the internet. Citizens and businesses will still be able to conduct business by letter, by telephone or by attending a Government office. This legislation simply adds the option of doing all of that electronically.

The uptake of this electronic option might be gradual, but Government should make the option available now and encourage people to use new technology to improve the quality and responsiveness of Government services to businesses and to individual citizens. The number of citizens with online capability is increasing, and as every parent in the Assembly knows, when the present generation of children leaves school that will increase dramatically. Each of us is aware of how much more sophisticated our children are in the use of electronic communications than our generation.

Clause 2 contains standard provisions commonly bestowed on the executive arm of Government to make subordinate legislation so that complementary and supplementary provision can be made if necessary.

Clause 3 is a complicated and technical-sounding provision. It is designed to prohibit the introduction in any subsequent legislation of what is called “key escrow”. I shall briefly explain what that means, as I did not know myself until recently. It was explained earlier that the secure transmission of an electronic document requires the use of a secure private code or key. Key escrow would require such private keys to be deposited with a trusted third party, such as a bank. There are concerns that if banks or similar agencies stored codes or keys of this kind, other interested parties could possibly gain access to them without the knowledge or approval of those using those codes to send or receive documents.

Our parliamentary counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales rejected the imposition of a key escrow scheme. Clause 3 of our Bill similarly seeks to prohibit this requirement. If someone believes that they have a legitimate right to access an encrypted document, they will have to apply to a court, giving good reason why they should be able to see it. The situation is similar with paper documents today — if anyone seeks access to private documents, they have to get a court order. It will be the same for electronically stored data.

Clause 3 allows for arrangements to be made to ensure that an electronic transaction can be continued in the event of the key being either damaged or lost. In

such cases there will be a back-up that will ensure that electronic transactions are not entirely nullified by the loss of, or damage to, a key or code.

Clauses 4 and 5 are formal and self-explanatory provisions.

12.30 pm

In summarising, I would like to take a couple of moments to put this Bill in context. The electronic age has been upon us for some time and businesses and the public are rapidly realising the benefits, in speed and convenience, which the new technologies make possible. The Government have to take full account of these developments to ensure that citizens and businesses in Northern Ireland are afforded the best possible services, on a par with those in any other part of these islands or, indeed, in any other part of the world. Our colleagues in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland have already taken similar powers to those we propose today that the Assembly should give to the Executive. We in Northern Ireland must align ourselves so that we can stay abreast of the progress made possible by new information and communication technology.

It has already been stated that the powers proposed in this Bill will not directly affect individual citizens or businesses. They will simply permit Northern Ireland Departments to amend legislation, where necessary, in order to legalise the use of electronic signatures and the storage of data by electronic means. The consequential subordinate legislation made under these powers will have a direct impact on citizens and businesses in that they will give them the option of conducting transactions electronically.

Much work is already in hand across Departments to capitalise on the new technologies. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, through the information age initiative, is encouraging the development of an innovative, knowledge-based economy in Northern Ireland. Corporate frameworks, technical strategies and e-business strategies are being developed to ensure that we have the capability to offer more efficient and more effective public services in the information age.

An Internet portal for the Northern Ireland Administration is being constructed and will form one of the main electronic interfaces between the Administration and the public. Information will be readily available in a format that will relate to people's needs and not to how the Government providers are organised. The information will be available in a format that is user-friendly to an individual citizen rather than in a format convenient for bureaucracy.

The technology and capability are already available to enable the Government to conduct their business electronically. However, we need to amend our laws to accommodate these developments, and this Bill will

provide us with the necessary powers. We will try to deal with any questions that arise in the course of debate. My Colleague Mr Nesbitt will respond to questions that are raised when he winds up.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): I thank Junior Minister Haughey for bringing this Bill before the House on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The House will generally welcome the main principles of the Bill. In November the Committee of the Centre considered the Bill's policy issues and agreed with the need for this legislation to be brought forward. It will bring us into line with the rest of the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland should play its full part in the UK's overall drive towards the modernisation of Government services. The adoption of this Bill is an essential part of that.

I noted what Mr Haughey had to say in his concluding remarks. It is important that the Government recognise the benefit of electronic communication for delivering government efficiently. This will take more than legislation and words; it will take adequate resources for e-Government actually to be delivered. Of course, we have the service modernisation fund. In the last spending round, some £14.9 million was applied for but nothing was achieved.

We cannot deal with this issue realistically without resourcing it adequately. I know that the Ministers will take that point on board.

Clause 2 subsection 3 makes provisions for regulations made under clause 1 to be subject to negative resolution of the Assembly and that, in certain circumstances under clause 2 subsection 4, regulations will be subject to affirmative resolution of the Assembly. It is important that these regulations are subject to the scrutiny of the Assembly. I hope, and I am fairly confident, that the regulations will allow the involvement of technology in this particular field. It will improve safeguards and will help to reassure Assembly Members and the public.

I am pleased that clause 3 prohibits the imposition of a requirement to deposit a key for data with an intended recipient, except when that person is the intended recipient. This is an important human rights safeguard. Mr Haughey indicated that a bank could be a trusted third party. I wonder if everybody would be as trusting in such a third party as he would be.

I support the general principles of the Bill and look forward to further debate and discussion at Committee stage.

Mr Neeson: I enthusiastically welcome this legislation and I hope that its provisions can substantially enhance the potential growth of e-commerce and e-government in Northern Ireland.

There are essentially four types of electronic communication: business-to-business e-commerce, business-

to-consumer e-commerce, citizen-to-government e-government, and individual-to-individual transactions.

In 1998 it was estimated that there was \$43 billion in global business to business e-commerce. By 2002, it is estimated, this figure will increase to \$300 billion. In 1998, business to consumer e-commerce was worth \$7 billion worldwide. It should be worth \$80 billion in the year 2002. E-commerce is the way of the future. It creates price—transparency, competition, and consequently economic growth. E-commerce is part of the emerging global economy. As Members know, it is an issue the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee has been dealing with. Northern Ireland companies have to compete in this global economy.

Economic growth will be concentrated in those countries and regions that are most tuned in to the information and communication technology revolution. Governments have a duty to facilitate these opportunities rather than cramping growth through over-regulation. It is incumbent upon Government to provide for security, integrity and confidentiality of transactions and to guarantee standards to enhance business confidence that the rule of law applies to cyberspace.

I hope that the Minister will work with UK Ministers and our European and international partners to create common European and international standards. I strongly believe that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment should move swiftly to establish an e-commerce taskforce for Northern Ireland, in order to promote the use of information technology in business and to help identify specific opportunities.

We have only got to look at the success of the recent LEDU television advertisements in promoting e-commerce. E-government can provide a more efficient, transparent and accountable service. First, it improves Government services and connections with its services. It allows greater economies of scale in procurement. It is a more effective means of delivering services. It is a more consumer-friendly way of delivering services, providing 24-hour access, seven days a week, and often avoiding the need for queues. Finally, it is a much more comprehensive system.

The problems with e-government are related to matters of trust and access. They include a competitive communications market, universal access, digital signatures, on-line privacy and consumer protection, all of which I hope will be addressed. It is hoped that this draft legislation will go some way towards addressing these concerns.

However, there are broader issues that must be addressed by the Assembly and the Executive. Targets have been set in Westminster for the delivery of e-government — it should be possible to deliver 25% of Government services electronically by 2002. In my opinion, the Executive have a duty to place increasing numbers of its services on-line. It is also important that Government

services be effectively linked together to provide the joined-up government that so many of us desire. In addition, care must be taken to improve access. There is a danger that a divide will open up between the wired and the non-wired. Alliance is keen to provide portals in as many public places as possible, and there is a potential role for post offices, in particular, in this respect.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you may recall the recent visit by the Committee of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to Nortel Networks in Monkstown. Northern Ireland is at the forefront of this new field of technology, which will be of universal benefit to citizens and, more importantly, of major benefit to the people of Northern Ireland. I welcome the opportunity to address the issue, and I look forward to the Bill's progress through the Assembly.

The Junior Minister (Office of First and Deputy First Ministers) (Mr Nesbitt): I thank the two Members who asked questions. Although I say that with a smile, I genuinely appreciate the Chairman of the Committee of the Centre's warm words of support. He stated that he welcomed the general principles behind the Bill. I also thank Mr Neeson, who enthusiastically welcomed the Bill in his opening comments.

I wish to address the specific points of funding and resourcing, which were raised by Mr Poots. Such questions are helpful, because we are all concerned about funding. No specific funds were allocated to e-government in the Budget for next year. However, Departments will be able to bid for Executive funding for service modernisation, new directions and infrastructure capital renewal. Departments will also need to look to their existing budgets, which already include significant resources for information technology and ensure that they are used to best effect to move the e-government agenda forward. Some key steps in the e-government agenda, as outlined in the draft Programme for Government — such as the production of a corporate, strategic framework and a corporate information technology strategy — are not particularly resource intensive. Therefore, while we need and are looking for resources, certain activities are not entirely resource-orientated.

Mr Neeson referred to e-commerce and e-government as the way forward. I do not want to intrude on the domain of other Ministers by outlining their departmental plans, but, from an e-government point of view, we are working on an interdepartmental basis on a number of fronts. A corporate strategic framework for e-government is being developed and will form a basis upon which "citizen-centred" services will be delivered in the future. The intention is that services will be integrated across organisational boundaries to meet our customers' requirements. A corporate information technology strategy is also being developed to ensure that the diverse range of technologies that exist in Departments are comparable and operate to a common standard.

12.45 pm

A public service network is under construction, which, over time, will provide a wide range of value-added services for all Departments and, eventually, all parts of the public service. Targets for electronic service delivery for Northern Ireland Departments are currently under consideration along the lines of those announced by the Prime Minister for Great Britain — and I will say more about that in a moment.

Finally, I would just like to add that from the point of view of Government and e-government and the importance that Government puts on e-government, we now have the “UKOnline” web site. The local version “Online NI” went on-line on 4 December. That will become the electronic interface between Government, businesses and the public.

I also referred to e-commerce and the importance of that as well — never mind the importance of e-government. Figures published by a commercial enterprise in September 2000 showed that 21% of the population here have had some regular use of the Internet. My Colleague has already highlighted the fact that the next generation coming through the schools will be much more computer-literate and more competent users than we are — those of us in my generation at least.

Sir John Gorman: Hear, hear.

Mr Nesbitt: “Hear, hear.” to whoever said that. Oh, it was my Colleague.

That compares with 45% in Great Britain and 21% in the Republic of Ireland. The 21% figure for Northern Ireland is up from just 3% in 1998. That shows a significant growth, but it also shows that we have much further to go.

On 11 September 2000 the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey, announced the results of an international benchmarking study conducted by the Department of Trade and Industry. The Minister said

“The survey reveals that 75% of businesses in Northern Ireland are now using at least one of three key connectivity technologies — e-mail, web site or electronic data exchange — a 32% increase, compared with 43% last year. This represents the fastest growth of any UK region.”

So we are taking a leap forward in e-commerce.

I said that I would refer to targets in more detail. It is right to refer to targets; they give us something to aim for and a means of knowing whether we have achieved all that we committed to deliver.

As far back as October 1997 the Prime Minister set targets for electronic service delivery. They were that within five years — therefore by 2002 — a quarter of all dealings with Government would be able to be done electronically, with 100% capability by 2008. Early assessments in Northern Ireland Departments show that they were well placed to meet the 25% target. The Prime

Minister revised the targets in March 2000, and 25% of all services are now to be delivered electronically by 2002, with 100% capability by 2005.

The devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales have indicated that they will adopt similar targets, albeit within the control of their own Administrations. It is important that we should respond no less speedily. I take note of Mr Poots’s comments about welcoming the aspect of comparability within the United Kingdom — this ties in with that as well. I emphasise that it is important that we should respond no less speedily than the rest of the UK — indeed, than the rest of these islands — in developing our electronic delivery of the key services.

In the draft Programme for Government the Executive Committee has given an undertaking to set local targets for electronic service delivery and to monitor progress. It is planned to put a paper on targets for electronic Government services in Northern Ireland to the Executive in the future.

I think that that should answer the questions which were asked. If I see from the transcript that I have overlooked any matters, I will address them in written form.

I thank Members for their forbearance and for being present. I particularly thank the two Members who asked the questions. The Electronic Communications Bill is a vital component for our transition to the electronic age. It paves the way for Departments to offer a speedier and more comprehensive service to our citizens, on a par with our colleagues in Britain and the Republic of Ireland. I commend the Bill to the House, and I urge that the Second Stage be agreed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Electronic Communications Bill (NIA 9/00) be agreed.

PLANNING (COMPENSATION, ETC) BILL

Consideration Stage

Madam Deputy Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the seven clauses of the Bill, followed by the three schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS BILL

Referral to Committee of the Centre

Resolved:

That, in pursuance of Standing Order 31(1), this Assembly orders that the Electronic Communications Bill shall stand referred to the Committee of the Centre and, for that purpose, paragraphs (2) to (5) of that Standing Order and Standing Order 33 shall apply in relation to the Committee of the Centre as they apply in relation to a Statutory Committee. — [*Junior Minister (Office of First and Deputy First Ministers) (Mr Haughey)*]

The sitting was suspended at 12.55 pm.

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

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

St Patrick's Grammar School (Downpatrick)

2.30 pm

1. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to allocate capital funding for a refurbishment and extension programme at St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick; and if he will make a statement.

(AQO 534/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The Department of Education accepts fully the need to extend and refurbish the accommodation at St Patrick's Grammar School in Downpatrick. The planning is at an advanced stage and the school is being considered, alongside other priorities, for a place in this year's capital programme in light of the resources available. However, I can give no commitments at this stage.

Mr McGrady: I understand that the Minister has many competing demands on the funds available in the capital programme. However, the programme has been in place for 18 years. In fact, many of the mobile classrooms at St Patrick's Grammar have been in use for over 30 years. In addition, the roll now includes girls as well as boys and there is only one very small changing facility for sports activities. A new technology suite is also needed, and the ambit of health and safety considerations also need to be brought into account. So, while I am aware of the very great demands from many quarters, I would like to think that this school would be very high on his schedule for the granting of capital funding.

Mr M McGuinness: I accept the case made by Mr McGrady absolutely. I want to reassure him that very serious consideration will be given to all the competing priorities, and St Patrick's Grammar School is one of them.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister clarify that any funding allocated for the refurbishment and extension of St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick, will not impact on funding proposed for Down High School? Would he also confirm that the programme of improvement for Down High School has been agreed?

Mr M McGuinness: These are completely separate situations. The situation at St Patrick's Grammar School has been described by Mr McGrady very eloquently, and I accept fully all of the points made. With regard to Down High School, people will have to wait until we make the announcement on the school capital building

programme. I expect to make that announcement some time next month. All of the schemes that are ready and have been processed will be given very serious consideration, including Down High School.

Integrated Colleges

2. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Minister of Education if he will reduce the number of students per year required for new integrated colleges from 80-plus to the pre-1992 level of 60-plus. (AQO 550/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I announced on Monday 18 December 2000, on completion of the viability criteria review, the reduced viability criteria for new integrated and Irish-medium primary schools. While the secondary level viability criteria have not been reduced at this stage, I am committed to looking strategically at the development of second level provision in consultation with appropriate education partners.

Mrs E Bell: I was pleased with the viability criteria set out in the paper the Minister talked about earlier. Does he agree that the numbers are excessive given that they are for the start-up year and are not carried over a number of years? Will the Minister look at that issue in the review?

Mr M McGuinness: I hope that discussions between officials in my Department and groups interested in making a contribution to the consultation will continue with a view to resolving whatever difficulties people may have. At present, it is important to point out that there are no proposals from the Irish-medium sector or the integrated sector with regard to new build or new proposals for secondary schools.

We are going to discuss all of these issues with the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and obviously with Comairle na Gaelscolaíochta, because we undoubtedly need to be prepared for up the road.

Mr Hussey: In his answer, the Minister referred to the new viability criteria, where Irish medium is related to primary schools, and, indeed, I have a written answer regarding the definition of urban and rural. Does the Minister agree that, given the difficulties which exist in rural primary schools in particular, both in the maintained and the controlled sector, there should be no specific criteria, and that the same criteria should be applied to all primary schools?

Mr M McGuinness: In dealing with this issue we must bear in mind the responsibility that we have regarding the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. My Department has been charged with the duty of encouraging and facilitating people involved in the integrated education movement and in Irish-medium education. The fact that we have now dealt with some of the concerns expressed by both groups over the course of many years allows us to move forward to ensure that

the reduced criteria enables them to facilitate the needs of people within both sectors. It is very important to point out that the criteria are a benchmark for all schools. We are dealing with this issue on an ongoing basis, and we are dealing with it in such a way as to not disadvantage any school. Our approach to this is one of equality to ensure that everybody is treated fairly.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Education Committee (Mr S Wilson): Can the Minister tell the House how he continues to justify the unequal treatment that he metes out to different sectors of the education system? It is not sufficient for him to say that the Good Friday Agreement allows him to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium schools or integrated schools, while at the same time applying a different standard to controlled, maintained or other schools when it comes to the viability criterion? Can he tell us how that reduced viability criterion is going to impact on the budget at present, and which sector of education he intends to take the additional funds from, in order to pursue his one-sided educational policy?

Mr M McGuinness: Again, I stress that the arrangements are designed to operate within the context of the commitments of the Belfast Agreement. The Department's statutory duties are to encourage and facilitate integrated and Irish-medium education and to ensure that parental choice will provide effective education, and will not involve unreasonable expenditure. It is important that I point out that I have reviewed only one group of the criteria for the establishment of the new integrated and Irish-medium schools. That is the intake criteria. A whole range of other criteria are also applied to such proposals, such as the availability of alternative provision, the impact on other schools, school premises, objections, affordability and educational standards, and these criteria will still apply.

The use of robust criteria for the establishment of new schools facilitates parental choice and provides equality of educational opportunity within the context of a pluralist society, reflected in a pluralist education system. The intake criteria for new Irish-medium and integrated schools will represent the benchmark for the assessment of proposals for any new type of school. Some 390 schools already exist that would not meet the reduced intake criteria. It is important to clarify that the proposals are for intake criteria and not for total enrolments at the relevant schools.

In relation to justifying the reduced criteria regarding pressures that they will create on an already stretched education budget, I recognise that the addition of new schools to the education system will inevitably give rise to financial pressures, particularly regarding capital costs. However, in reducing the primary school criteria, at this stage, I aim to strike the appropriate balance between facilitating parental choice and taking forward the Department's statutory duties. We wish to avoid unreasonable public expenditure and any unacceptable

adverse impact on existing schools and ensure effective education. That approach is reinforced by the proposals for medium-term target intakes of 15 and 20 that schools must achieve before they can attract capital funding.

There is no question of our dealing unfairly with any sector of the education system. We rigorously ensure that we abide by all our commitments under the Good Friday Agreement. As well as promoting, supporting and facilitating integrated education and Irish-medium education, we have responsibilities to ensure equal treatment for every school sector; we intend to abide by those.

Free School Meals

3. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education to confirm that the free school meals entitlement will continue to be the basis for the allocation of additional funding schools in all areas. (AQO 536/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Additional funding for schools will be allocated using methodologies that best meet the intended purpose. Where the aim is to counter the effects of social disadvantage, free school meals entitlement will continue to be an important factor.

Mr McHugh: How do schools receive additional funding on the basis of free school meals entitlement?

Mr M McGuinness: There are three current examples. First, in line with Government policy on targeting social need, there is an additional 5% of Chancellor's funding, over and above formula-funded budgets, for distribution directly to schools, on the basis of free school meals entitlement. Secondly, the school support programme provides professional support and modest additional resources to support agreed action plans. Free school meals entitlement is one of the factors that are taken into account in decisions about which schools should join the programme. Thirdly, there is the group 1 schools initiative, which provides additional funds to support agreed action plans for schools for which the support offered through the special education support programme (SESP) is insufficient, due to the scale of socio-economic and educational disadvantage.

Ms Hanna: Has the Minister taken any additional steps to target resources at the areas of highest social need?

Mr M McGuinness: My answer to Mr McHugh's question set out our approach. We will listen carefully to any ideas or suggestions relating to the local management of schools, a topic that may well be raised again towards the end of this Question Time. We are moving forward with the common formula to ensure that we distribute educational resources more sensibly and justly. I have outlined today the indicators that we are working with at the moment, but we are prepared to consider any better suggestions or ideas that are put to us.

School Performance Tables

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Education to include socio-economic status (SES) information in school performance tables. (AQO 537/00)

Mr M McGuinness This question has been overtaken by events. I recently carried out a review on the subject of school performance tables. The consultation exercise showed that the vast majority of respondents were opposed to the publication of the tables and favoured allowing schools to provide the information directly to parents and others. I have therefore decided to introduce that system, with immediate effect, and discontinue the publication of the tables. In that way, schools will be able to give parents and others a more rounded picture of the school and put examination performance in context. In coming to that decision, I took full account of all the responses and the views put to me by the Education Committee. Therefore, the question of the inclusion of SES information in the tables no longer arises.

2.45 pm

Mr McElduff: Cuirim fáilte roimh an freagra on Aire.

I welcome the Minister's response, and I would like him to explain why he favoured option two as opposed to option three. Can he assure us that information provided by schools will be both accurate and provided in a common format?

Mr M McGuinness: I chose option two for three main reasons. First, it is the option that the majority of respondents favoured. Secondly, it will provide the most up-to-date information on examination performances. Thirdly, it means that parents will receive the fullest information about any given school from a single source. We need to be concerned about ensuring that the information is in a common and accurate format. Schools are already required to publish a range of information, including information on examination performance, in their prospectuses. My Department will carry out a review of the information required to ensure a consistent and standard approach by schools. It is my intention that schools will be fully consulted in this review.

The Chairperson of the Education Committee (Mr Kennedy): Will the Minister give a commitment — as requested in the Education Committee's response to the review of school performance tables — to identify, as a matter of urgency, performance indicators which will reflect the value added by a school to those pupils who attend it, so that accurate, comparative information can be provided? Will he give a commitment that the information can be made widely available?

Mr M McGuinness: There has been research carried out for a number of years on the "value added" issue. As yet no satisfactory means has been found of including such information in a way that would recognise progression

made through a broad range of qualifications and which at the same time would be readily understood by parents. I do not think that there are any special factors relating to our schools which would justify commissioning further research, but the Department will continue to monitor developments.

We are now adopting an approach that effectively asks schools to provide as much information as possible to parents. Although the announcement has been widely welcomed across the community, I know that some people may have concerns about whether the prospectuses will include the fullest possible information for parents. I have every faith in the schools, the boards of governors and the school principals. They will be as keen as the rest of us to ensure that the fullest possible information is provided. It is important that we understand that academic achievements are vitally important, and we are keen to ensure that progress continues to be made in relation to such achievements.

However, we also need to understand and appreciate the tremendous work that goes on in many of our schools, and the extra-curricular activities and pastoral work which the teachers participate in. I was very privileged to be at Holy Trinity College's school concert in Cookstown before Christmas. It was one of the finest concerts that I have ever attended. During the performance a person sitting beside me leaned over and asked me if I was enjoying it. I said that it was absolutely tremendous. He then asked what I thought was a very telling question: "How do you put that in a performance table?" I think that he hit the nail on the head.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the Minister's decision on the school performance league tables. However, given that it is an important policy decision, did the Minister consult his Colleagues in the Executive before he made it?

Mr M McGuinness: There were no discussions at the Executive about this decision. My responsibility was to ensure that there was full discussion and consultation with the Education Committee. That consultation took place.

We made a decision, based on the discussions and the analysis of the respondents' contributions, which has been welcomed throughout our community. We must now press on to ensure that we further encourage our schools, our boards of governors, principals, teachers, parents and pupils to see the type of approach that we have adopted in terms of education.

Some people may say that our situation is different to that in England, Scotland and Wales. However, the Welsh Education Secretary is also considering a review of the publication of the performance tables. We have made a progressive move and we have provided essential encouragement to our educators so as to ensure that we press on and advance our education system in a more enlightened way.

Teachers: Occupational Health Care

5. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Education to outline the availability of occupational health care for teachers; and if he will make a statement. (AQO 551/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The provision of employee access to occupational healthcare is an important element of the employer's role. Within the teaching profession, the employing authorities in all school sectors recognise that staff may require occasional support in resolving health and welfare matters that may impact on their working lives. Such authorities have been making their own arrangements to provide support and referral to specialist services.

A working group, chaired by the director of the Northern Ireland Civil Service Occupational Health Service, has been commissioned to take forward an in-depth analysis of the issues surrounding teacher welfare. I look forward to the results of that work and to the recommendations the group may make in this area.

Mr Ford: The Minister shares the concerns of other Members and myself regarding the increasing pressures on teachers and lecturers, which can lead to difficulties such as long-term sickness and early retirement. How long is it likely to be before the Minister receives the recommendations of the review group? Can he assure me that when the review work is complete we will have an occupational health service for all teachers and lecturers which is both comprehensible and accessible to all those who require it?

Mr M McGuinness: I cannot say for certain when that report will be finished. As this is an issue of serious concern to many teachers, the unions and the Department of Education, it is crucial that the work be completed as soon as possible. We are very concerned to ensure that teachers are supported in a fashion that takes account of the pressures and stresses that they are undoubtedly under.

As regards the research, the tenders will go out later this month. Although it will take some time, we are keen to press forward with all speed.

Mr O'Neill: The Minister said that he has every faith in the teaching profession to meet his targets for the inclusion of yet another piece of administration. That is very nice. However, when will he do something about the intolerable pressures and administrative workloads being placed on the entire teaching profession? For headmasters, in particular, administration represents the highest wastage of any single element in the profession. The Minister needs to do something to allow classroom teachers to teach rather than become administrators.

Mr M McGuinness: I share the concerns of many regarding the pressures and stresses within the teaching profession. My Department has been at pains for considerable time to appreciate the difficulties many teachers

face in terms of the perceived bureaucracy that has come into the system in recent times.

There are ongoing discussions between my Department and the teachers' unions. It is incumbent on our Administration to ensure that when these issues are raised, we are moving in partnership with the teachers and their unions to address and, I hope, to resolve many of the difficulties that teachers face in trying circumstances.

Sale of School Playing Fields

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of the sale of school playing fields; and if he will make a statement. (AQO 549/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The agreement of my Department is required to the sale of any school playing fields. Such agreement would not be given if my Department considered that the facilities were required to enable the school to carry out its curriculum responsibilities. At present, I am not aware of any formal proposals with the Department for the disposal of school playing fields.

Mr McCarthy: In this era of excessive greed on the part of some developers and the large sums of money being offered for land, does the Minister agree that school playing fields ought to be one of the last areas to be sold for development, bearing in mind the ongoing need for all schools to provide good, healthy outdoor facilities for the coming generation?

Mr M McGuinness: Normally the Department would agree to the disposal of playing fields only where a school had closed or where the playing fields were considered to be surplus to requirements. It is certainly of concern to us. I know that there was some discussion in the media about the situation at Wellington College. It is important that people understand that in the case of the private finance initiative (PFI) scheme for Wellington College, while part of the playing fields was transferred to the PFI contractor, new and improved replacement physical education facilities will be provided for the school as part of the contract.

Ms McWilliams: Can the Minister confirm that, in a recent planning appeal concerning the PFI scheme on the Wellington College grounds, the Department of the Environment stated that a community impact survey should have been carried out before the Department of Education agreed that those — or any other — playing fields were surplus to requirements? Can he confirm that those community impact surveys have not been carried out?

Mr M McGuinness: I was certainly very interested in the publicity that surrounded the situation at Wellington College. Monica McWilliams made a valid point in relation to the contribution that the local community can make to this type of development. The Department will give very serious consideration to ensuring that, in the future, there is community participation.

Local Management of Schools

8. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Education to detail how he proposes to take forward the review of the local management of schools formulae. (AQO 543/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I wonder where Question 7 went.

A consultation paper containing proposals for a common funding formula will be published early this year and will allow for consultation with schools and other education interests until May, after which the necessary legislative and administrative arrangements will be put in place with a view to implementation by April 2002.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister ensure that any proposals take account not only of post-primary education changes but also of changes to the educational administration set-up?

Mr M McGuinness: We will give serious consideration to all of that, and take all of the points made by Danny Kennedy into account at that time.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

New Maternity Hospital

1. **Ms McWilliams** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the progress that has been made in the provision of the new-build maternity hospital which underpinned the recent consultation on maternity services and to confirm that it is being processed in a timely and effective manner. (AQO 538/00)

3.00 pm

The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Thosaigh Iontaobhas an Ghrúpa Ríoga Ospidéal ag obair ar chás gnó d'ospidéal máithreachais nua ar shuíomh an Ospidéil Ríoga goirid i ndiaidh mo chinnidh in Eanáir 2000. Bhí sé ar intinn ag an iontaobhas a chreachas gnó a sheoladh chuig an Roinn faoi dheireadh mhí Eanáir 2001, ach, i ndiaidh breithiúnas na cúirte mo chinneadh a chur ar leataobh, cuireadh an obair ar fionraí.

Tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh go fóill ar an ghníomhnú is gá a dhéanamh mar gheall ar bhreithiúnas na cúirte.

The Royal Group of Hospitals Trust began work on a business case for a new maternity hospital on the Royal site shortly after my decision in January 2000. The trust had intended to bring forward its outline business case to the Department by the end of January 2001, but, following the court's ruling to set aside my decision, work on it has been suspended. I am still considering what action needs to be taken in light of the court's ruling.

Ms McWilliams: I am concerned that a deadline has not been given for any new maternity hospital. Will the Minister confirm that last month, as a result of the merger between the Jubilee and the Royal Maternity hospitals, on at least three occasions the regional neonatal unit for the whole of Northern Ireland had to be closed to admissions? Will the Minister also confirm that there is serious overcrowding on the Royal Maternity site? There has been a deterioration in hygiene standards, and at least 40 midwives have left the service since the merger of the Jubilee and the Royal Maternity hospitals. Is the Minister as concerned as I am that conditions for the delivery of babies in the Belfast area are now reminiscent of those at the turn of the last century?

Ms de Brún: With reference to the deadline, I am as concerned as any about problems arising from the uncertainty over many years about the location of a new maternity hospital. It has an adverse effect on the morale of the medical and nursing staff involved, and it also has the potential to cause concern to future mothers. I am anxious to make a decision on the way forward as soon as possible. The Member will recognise that when an issue ends up in court those plans will inevitably fall behind schedule, and everyone has to live with that. I have not yet decided how to respond to the court's decision, but whatever the way forward, my Department and I remain committed to providing maternity services of the highest quality.

In relation to the specific references to the maternity services at present, I am confident that the Royal Group of Hospitals is able to maintain, provide and sustain maternity services for the population. If the Minister wishes to write to me with specifics, I will reply to her.

Ms McWilliams: I am not a Minister yet.

Ms de Brún: Sorry. I meant to say "the Member".

Mr McGrady: With reference to the issue of consultation on maternity services, is the Minister aware of the crisis in the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital, which was threatened by closure, presumably by the unilateral action of anaesthetists? Will she ensure that the plan that has been evolved by the Eastern Health Board and the Down Lisburn Trust as of last Friday, for ratification tomorrow, receives her support and particularly her financial support? Will she ensure that there are further discussions regarding the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital to ensure that its in-patients services continue until the Hayes review reports and that all the resources and the services for the mothers in that area be sustained?

Ms de Brún: I am happy to assure the Member that it remains my intention to maintain current services at the Downe Hospital pending the outcome of the Hayes review. I have asked the Down Lisburn Trust and the Eastern Board to do everything possible to maintain maternity services at the Downe Hospital until that time.

The Department will continue in discussions with them, and we will monitor the situation.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. There was widespread media speculation that, on the issue of consultation, the Minister took only two days to consider the matter. Was that the case?

Ms de Brún: In spite of the fact that the consultation period had ended before I became Minister, I made a point of visiting both the Royal Maternity and Jubilee Hospitals and met many of the leading players on both sides. I was closely involved in the decision-making process for many weeks before that and was already well briefed on the important issues. Therefore I can assure the Member that that was not the case.

Shortage of Care Workers (South Antrim)

2. **Mr J Wilson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she is aware of the shortage of care workers in the South Antrim constituency, and to detail how she intends to address the problem.

(AQO 531/00)

Ms de Brún: Tuigtear domh go bhfuil sé ag éirí níos deacra i rith an ama ag Iontaobhas Pobail Homefirst, atá freagrach as soláthar sláinte phobail agus seirbhísí sóisialta i gceantar Aontroma Theas, go leor oibrithe a earcú dá sheirbhísí cúraim bhaile. Tuigim fosta go bhfuil fadhbanna den chineál céanna ag cuid de na soláthraithe cúraim bhaile neamhspleácha, agus de réir cosúlachta tá na fadhbanna seo ann mar gheall ar fhás fostaítheoirí nua in earnáil an mhiondíola agus in earnáil an ríomhthráchtá atá ábalta téarmaí agus coinníollacha fostaíochta níos tarraingtí a thairiscint.

Le cur ar a chumas dul san iomaíocht sa mhargadh fostaíochta deacair seo, tá Iontaobhas Homefirst i ndiaidh tabhairt faoi athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar a sholáthar cúraim bhaile, lena n-áirítear socrúithe, agus téarmaí agus coinníollacha fostaíochta na foirme cúraim bhaile

I understand that the Homefirst Community Trust, which is responsible for the provision of community health and social services in the south Antrim area, is experiencing increasing difficulty in recruiting sufficient staff for its home care services. I also understand that similar problems are being experienced by some independent home care providers. The difficulties appear to result from the growth of new employers in the retail and e-commerce service sectors, who are able to offer more attractive terms and conditions of employment.

To enable it to compete in this difficult employment market, the Homefirst Community Trust has embarked on a review of its home care provision, including the arrangements, terms and conditions for the employment of home care staff. Where there are specific problems in relation to the availability of care workers, the trust makes every effort to resolve these or to provide alternative

arrangements for care that are acceptable to the individuals and families concerned.

Mr J Wilson: I am thankful to the Minister, particularly for the part of her answer where she admitted that all is not well in my constituency with regard to care workers. Does the Minister agree that stability is the key issue with regard to home care? In order to achieve this, continuity of personnel and consistency of time are vital, as it is infinitely preferable for a family or individual to have care provided by the same person or persons, in order that a degree of trust and efficiency can be established. Will the Minister assure me that measures are being taken to address the problem of lack of availability of care workers in the late evening and early morning to provide care in accordance with patients' needs? Disabled patients are being put to bed as early as 6.30 pm and remain in bed until 9.30 am, or later, the following day.

Ms de Brún: I have already outlined the measures that the trust is taking. I absolutely agree with the Member on the question of stability. The best situation is when there is continuity of the care worker that the person is familiar with. That is the situation that I expect the trusts to be trying to achieve, where possible, within the resources available to them, and under the conditions that they are faced with.

Residential and Nursing Homes

3. **Ms Armitage** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to ensure that the reduction of independent sector residential and nursing home providers in Great Britain is not repeated in Northern Ireland. (AQO 532/00)

Ms de Brún: Tá ról tábhachtach le himirt ag an earnáil neamhspleách i gcóiríocht chónaithe agus tí altranaís a sholáthar anseo agus leanfaidh mo Roinn agus na boird agus iontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta de bheith ag obair i bpáirtíocht leis an earnáil neamhspleách le seirbhísí fóirsteanacha a chur ar fáil.

Anuraidh rinne meitheal oibre feidhmeannach ó mo Roinn agus ó na boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta measúnú ar an mhaoiniú do thithe cónaithe agus altranaís de chuid na hearnála neamhspleáiche. Mhol an grúpa sin a lán beart ar aontaigh an tAire faoi Rialú Díreach ag an am sin, George Howarth, le linn don Tionól bheith ar fionraí, leo, agus ar iarradh ar na boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta iad a chur i bhfeidhm i Mí na Bealtaine na bliana seo chuaigh thart.

The independent sector has an important role to play in the provision of residential and nursing home accommodation here. My Department and the health and social services boards and trusts will continue to work in partnership with the independent sector to provide appropriate services. Last year a working group of officials from my Department and the health and social services boards

carried out a review of funding for residential and nursing homes in the independent sector. That group made a number of recommendations for action, which were approved by the former direct rule Health Minister, George Howarth, during suspension and which health and social services boards were asked to implement last May.

It was recommended that fees paid to independent sector providers of nursing and residential care beds should not be tied to the income support rate but should be reviewed annually in the light of prevailing circumstances and priorities. It was also recommended that boards and trusts consider waiting lists for places in nursing and residential care homes and that, where appropriate, more places be purchased in independent sector care homes to raise occupancy levels. It was further recommended that boards and trusts consider whether block contracts could be offered to homes to give providers a more secure income stream, and that boards and trusts consider setting fee structures to encourage and reward quality. Boards and trusts are now working to implement those recommendations.

Ms Armitage: It is interesting to learn that you have a number of ongoing commitments. I am concerned that by the time you have all those goals in place, those homes will already have closed. You are aware of the problem of keeping patients in hospitals, where the cost of accommodating someone is two or three times greater than the cost of accommodating him in a nursing home. I am always informed that these two budgets must never be mixed. Will the Minister comment on this? At present, we do not have enough homes for children. It is very possible that elderly people will be affected by similar problems. I do not want to see that happen.

We both know — it is obvious when one looks around the Chamber — that people are living longer and they will continue to do so. I was not looking at anyone in particular. I am sure that you will agree that we must make plans now, rather than wait until it is too late.

I thank you for your answer, but perhaps you could follow it up by stating when the reviews will take place. It is to be hoped that by the time they do take place the homes will not have closed, and we will not have left it too late, as in the past.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling the Minister to respond, I remind Members to address their remarks through the Chair.

Ms Armitage: I was just trying to be friendly.

Ms de Brún: I thank the Member for her friendly start to the new year.

I pointed out that a working group of officials had carried out a review, and that the recommendations were approved last year during suspension by the former Health Minister, George Howarth. The boards and trusts are now working to implement the recommendations of that review.

In response to the question about how budgets are used, I point to the way in which planning to cope with winter pressures was taken forward to make best use of the available resources and the integrated nature of our service. I have made it clear that I expect the health and social services boards and trusts to look at every available option for dealing with winter pressures. In that instance, the boards' plans for addressing waiting lists included the use of beds in nursing homes to facilitate the discharge from hospitals of patients who required a limited period of recuperative care before returning home.

Obviously, the details of contracting arrangements between boards and trusts and independent providers is a matter for local decision. There is nothing to prevent boards and trusts from providing this overview of their services, where it is possible. Ms Armitage expressed concerns about trends which she had noted in England. While I am aware that there have been some bed losses in the independent sector here, the most recent figures available show that, although the number of nursing home beds has been reduced by 320, the number of residential care beds has increased by 277. Boards and trusts are working on the specific recommendations of the review, which was endorsed by George Howarth last year.

3.15 pm

Ms Hanna: Can the Minister tell me what consideration has been given to the need for increased resources for the elderly — specifically to bridge the gap between discharge from hospital and return to the community when they need rehabilitation and extra care? Currently, we do not have such resources. I am sure the Minister is aware that for those who are fortunate enough to get a place in a nursing or residential home, the rehabilitation element is often minimal.

Ms de Brún: As with other areas of community care, this is a subject to which my Department has been giving some thought. I have made it clear in recent statements that there has been some difficulty with a large number and a wide range of services. There have been years of underfunding, and we are now trying to rectify that, but it cannot all be done in one year. However, this is an area to which we are giving specific consideration, and I am well aware of the particular concerns that the Member has raised. In looking at the allocations which we can make, we will take those points on board.

Mr McCarthy: The recommendations of the recent Royal Commission on the provision of residential and nursing care for senior citizens were adopted by the Government just last week. Can the Minister assure the House that these will be introduced in full in Northern Ireland?

Ms de Brún: I appreciate the concerns raised by both Mr McCarthy and Ms Hanna. When considering my response to the report of the Royal Commission on long-term care, I will be looking at ways in which we can help to meet the needs and reduce the uncertainty and distress of older people. That matter is still under consideration.

Hospital Trusts: Finance (Specific Projects)

4. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps she is taking to ensure that money given to hospital trusts for specific projects is being spent on the projects for which it was intended. (AQO 547/00)

Ms de Brún: Éilíonn mo Roinn tuairiscí ar chaiteachas míosúil na bpríomhthionscadal forbartha otharlainne uilig. Ina theanta sin, cuirtear grúpaí monatóireachta tionscadail, faoi chathaoirleacht stiúrthóra sa Roinn agus le príomhfheidhmeannaigh ón iontaobhas iomchuí agus ón bhord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta atá ag coimisiúnú an tionscadail ag freastal orthu, ar bun do gach scéim le dul chun cinn agus le caiteachas a choinneáil faoi athbhreithniú.

Caithfidh tuairiscí ráithiúla ar dhul chun cinn agus ar chaiteachas i gcoinne an chostais aontaithe agus an chláir ama a sheoladh chuig an Roinn mar a tharlaíonn de ghnáth i gcás tionscadal caipitil uilig eile ina bhfuil an costas os cionn £250,000.

Dearbhaíonn na bearta seo domh go bhfuil na hacmhainní caipitil a ceadáíodh do scéimeanna ar leith á n-úsáid mar is ceart.

My Department requires monthly expenditure reports for all major hospital development projects. In addition, project monitoring groups chaired at director level in the Department and attended by the chief executives of the relevant trust and commissioning health and social services board are set up for each scheme to keep progress and expenditure under review. Quarterly reports on progress and expenditure against the agreed costs and timetable for a project are required to be sent to the Department in the case of all capital projects where the cost is above £250,000. I am satisfied that these measures provide me with the necessary assurances that capital resources approved for specific schemes are being properly used.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for that response, in so far as it related to capital projects. I also remind her of my concern, which she has supported in the past, that acute hospital services tend to be regarded as sacred cows with the result that, at times of financial pressures, childcare and mental health and community care all lose out. The Minister has agreed that there is a problem with that. For example, I refer to the answer she gave to Patricia Lewsley recently on the issue of money diverted from mental health to acute services in Down Lisburn Trust. When recurrent expenditure is being considered, is it not necessary to ensure that we put in place the same checks which exist for capital expenditure?

Ms de Brún: The checks to be put in place will need to be somewhat different. There are a number of ways in which I ensure that moneys are actually spent on targeted areas. One way is to have specific allocations ring-fenced

to particular areas. This method has been used in the past, but there are difficulties, particularly when the number of areas to which ring-fencing is applied is increased. Another way is to approve boards' annual spending plans, which will have to identify how any additional resources allocated to them next year are to be applied. Finally, throughout the year we monitor the actual use of resources through the use of the accountability process.

As happened with pay awards in 1999, issues sometimes arise which mean that we have to re-examine initial spending plans if other areas of spending come in significantly higher than was planned for. It is essential that we have enough flexibility to deal with such matters, if and when they arise. Discretion is needed to allow hospital trusts to respond to local pressures on the ground. But, as I have outlined, there are methods I intend to use to indicate the strength of our determination that money allocated to specific areas of the services should in fact be spent on those areas. I will pursue this issue throughout 2001.

Mr Hussey: Part of my question has already been answered, and I am glad that the supplementary from Mr Ford highlighted the position on revenue expenditure and more specifically the deflection of revenue expenditure from an intended target that a particular hospital trust had made a bid for. How far are hospital trusts allowed to deviate before a board will say that enough is enough or before the Department will say that enough is enough?

Ms de Brún: It is not so much a question of how far they will deviate as whether or not a coherent reason is given for the deviation and if there is a rationale behind the proposed decision or any plan for future rectification. For example, in the case of the question put by Ms Lewsley, the board explained why, when faced with a particular problem, it had to divert funds. The board has put forward a coherent plan for returning those funds. We must ensure that it is understood that the plans, priorities and reasons put forward for funding are those to which people should adhere where at all possible.

Where there is difficulty, and a decision is made to deviate, there should be a coherent explanation and plans put in place to ensure that a specific area of service does not suffer and, particularly, does not continue to suffer.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that the present powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General are inadequate for the scrutiny of health trust accounts, and will she support demands by the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee that the powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General be extended to ensure that the money she allocates for specific projects is in fact spent on those projects?

Ms de Brún: The powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General are not specifically within my remit, and at this point I do not wish to make a comment on them.

District/Community Nurses: Mileage Allowances

5. **Rev Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health regarding payments on mileage allowances for district/community nurses. (AQO 541/00)

Ms de Brún: Mar a mhínigh mé don Teachta i mo litir den 20 Nollaig, ní gá domh cainteanna a bheith agam leis an Státrúnaí Sláinte. Cuireadh na méaduithe ar shocraigh sé orthu ón 1 Iúil 2000 don fhoireann sa SNS i bhfeidhm ar fhoireann SSSP ón dáta céanna.

As I explained to the Member in my letter of 20 December 2000, it is not necessary for me to have discussions with the Secretary of State for Health. The increases agreed by him, from 1 July 2000 for staff in the National Health Service, have been applied to all health and personal social services staff from the same date.

Rev Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for her reply. I am sure she is aware that mileage allowances for community nurses in rural areas of England and Wales were increased with effect from 1 July 2000. Given that many community nurses in Northern Ireland work in rural environments, and given the increases in the cost of motor fuel in recent years, will she indicate when allowances were last increased in Northern Ireland?

Ms de Brún: As I have said, the allowances agreed by the Whitley Council automatically apply to staff who remain on centrally agreed terms and conditions here. Any time that there has been a change it has automatically been applied here also. Under the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 1999, trusts are free to set their own terms and conditions of service for staff employed on trust contracts. Those terms and conditions may include mileage allowances, annual leave entitlements, or payments that differ from those agreed centrally by the Whitley Council or the National Joint Council. Where trusts have exercised their right to determine their mileage rates for staff, like all terms and conditions, those are agreed with staff organisations locally. I hope that that answers the Member's question.

Mental Health Services: Resources

6. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the discussions she has had with health and social services trusts concerning the allocation of resources to mental health services in Northern Ireland. (AQO 533/00)

Ms de Brún: Ní hé an cleachtas é plé a dhéanamh le hiontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta aonair faoi leithroinnt acmhainní do na seirbhísí meabhairshláinte. Bhí tuairimí na gcoimisinéirí san áireamh sa tairiscint ar

acmhainní breise a cuireadh faoi bhráid na Roinne Airgeadais agus Pearsanra sa bhabhta caiteachais anuraidh.

The Department does not engage with individual health and social services trusts about the allocation of resources to mental health services. The views of commissioners informed of the bid for additional resources were submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel in last year's spending round. Additional resources were secured in the Budget, which should help to meet the cost of drugs and at least 10 additional in-patient beds for child and adolescent psychiatry. Subject to overall resource commitments, additional resources should also provide for some further long-term placements in the community.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for her reply. Is she aware of the projections from the World Health Organisation that indicate quite clearly that mental ill health will continue to increase substantively? Given that the National Health Service in Northern Ireland, as far as we can see, is inadequate in that area, will the Minister not reconsider her answer and consult with the various people on the ground who are administering the mental ill-health provisions in Northern Ireland? That would ensure adequate and meaningful funding, which would lead to adequate and meaningful health provisions. Groups such as Action Mental Health in Northern Ireland could then execute proper therapeutic and care programmes tailored for the different requirements in various areas of Northern Ireland rather than the general approach through the commissioners to whom she has referred.

Ms de Brún: I believe — as do the health and social services boards — in local provision and in the need to improve mental health services in their areas. They are also aware of the need to develop the services and to act in partnership with trusts and voluntary organisations to make the most of the resources available to them. The Member will be aware that the question of resources and the availability of resources applies not only to me but also to my Colleague who will take questions next and to other Members of the Executive. There are competing priorities that the Executive have to decide upon. However, the effects of previous underfunding cannot be addressed overnight. I will continue to argue the case for additional resources so that boards and trusts can continue to improve the services they deliver.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

European Structural Funds

3.30 pm

1. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what progress is being made on the design and management of the European progress funds. (AQO 555/00)

5. **Mr A Doherty** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the progress made on the finalisation of the EU structural funds. (AQO 558/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I will take questions 1 and 5 together.

The Northern Ireland Community Support Framework (CSF) was formally approved by the European Commission in December 2000. The CSF will be implemented through the transitional Objective 1 and Peace II programmes which are at advanced negotiation stage. The draft programmes have also entered the Commission's own inter-service consultation process. Community initiative proposals have also been submitted separately for negotiation with the Commission over the next five months. The three monitoring committees for the CSF, the Peace II and transitional Objective 1 programmes have been appointed, and preliminary meetings of all three were held before Christmas.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he let the House know his thinking on the INTERREG programme? How does he envisage that the local authority cross-border networks could be used to facilitate delivery in conjunction with social partners?

Mr Durkan: As I said, proposals for the INTERREG III programme have been submitted to the Commission. Those proposals were agreed by the North/South Ministerial Council when it last met in special EU programme sectoral format, and have been approved by the Executive. We are working to ensure the admissibility of those proposals, and we intend to have approximately five months in which to continue negotiations with the Commission. Last week, I met the cross-border council groups, and I am aware of their interest in INTERREG III. At that meeting it was agreed that an action team would be established, which would include representatives of those cross-border networks. The team would include officials from both the Department of Finance and Personnel in the North and the Department of Finance in the South. It would be chaired by the Special EU Programmes Body with a view to it's giving a report to the North/South Ministerial Council when it meets in sectoral format in March.

Mr A Doherty: I thank the Minister for the element of his answer which covered question 5. The special support programme for peace and reconciliation will have an important role to play in the change in funding arrangements. Will the local devolved delivery mechanisms have a role to play under the Peace II funding? Will these local partnerships be a continuation of the existing district partnerships?

Mr Durkan: The Executive Committee have agreed that Peace II should be delivered by a similar mix of delivery mechanisms as was used in the previous programme. There will be a tendering process for intermediary funding bodies to operate under the new programme,

and local partnership arrangements will operate in each of the 26 district council areas. These would necessitate a closer working relationship between the existing district partnerships and district councils, involving Government Departments and statutory agencies which also work locally. The aim is to develop, at a local level, structures which are sustainable beyond Peace II.

Public Procurement

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the progress made on the review of public procurement. (AQO 556/00)

Mr Durkan: Improving public procurement is an important commitment in the draft Programme for Government. Following a decision taken by the Executive Committee on 23 November 2000, a small implementation team is being established to take forward the findings and recommendations of a review undertaken prior to devolution. It is planned that the first meeting of the team will take place in February after its membership has been finalised. Further proposals which take account of the equality dimension will be brought forward by June 2001.

Mr Dallat: Will the Minister give an indication as to the level of devolution dividend which can be expected from such a review?

Mr Durkan: The findings of the initial review conducted prior to devolution indicated that if we were to set similar targets to those set for Departments in Great Britain we would achieve public procurement savings of £30 million out of a budget of £1 billion.

Such significant savings would fall to the devolved Administration to administer and direct, according to some of our own spending priorities. As we know, there are many pressing priorities being pursued by Departments and Committees in this Assembly. The more efficient we can make our procurement procedures and the more value for money we can get, then the more we can allocate to other public service needs.

Mr Maskey: Are there any mechanisms that can be employed against organisations who default in the various equality or fair employment legislation so they might not be able to avail of public procurement contracts?

Mr Durkan: Public procurement rules are guided not just by our priorities and concerns but by EU regulations also. Therefore, we try to ensure full conformity with EU regulations.

As regards the implementation team that I referred to, we are making provision to ensure that membership of that team will include people with particular expertise on equality matters. The potential for procurement arrangements to impact on equality is already recognised in various Departments' equality schemes and in the

Programme for Government. We will address the impact assessment of any policy as we map out the way ahead in pursuing the implementation of the key recommendations from the procurement review.

Regional Rate

3. **Mr Close** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what representations he has had from district councils on the issue of the regional rate.

(AQO 545/00)

Mr Durkan: Prior to the suspension of devolution in February 2000 I received letters from Ards and Fermanagh District Councils about the then proposed increases in the regional rates for 2000-01. Since devolution was restored at the end of May 2000 I have received further correspondence from both councils, in addition to letters from Coleraine and Newry and Mourne District Councils about the regional rate increases agreed for 2001-02. Fermanagh District Council has also proposed the separation of the regional and district rates.

Mr Close: I thank the Minister for his reply and take this opportunity of wishing him a happy and prosperous New Year — something that many traders in Northern Ireland will not have, unfortunately.

Will he comment on the recent report by the Small Business Federation, 'Barriers to Survival and Growth in UK Small Firms', which demonstrated that among small traders there was over 90% dissatisfaction with the level of business rates? Will he agree with me that if he continues to go down the path of imposing a further 8% increase in the regional rate in this year and in the following two years, he will achieve 100% dissatisfaction among small traders?

Mr Durkan: First, for small businesses it is the increase in the regional rate for non-domestic properties that is relevant. The projection is 6.6% for next year, and in the indicative budget figures we produced in December for the further two years the projection is 5.5%. We will not be in a position to settle the final figures for next year for a few weeks yet, when we will have the aggregate net annual valuation total for Northern Ireland. I have indicated previously that if the figures show that we can raise a similar amount of money with a lower increase then the Executive will want to give positive consideration to that.

The Executive do recognise the important contribution of small businesses and, along with the various Departments, will want to support small businesses. That in turn means that the Executive, and their various Departments, need the money that rates revenue provides.

As regards the concerns expressed about current rate levels and whether or not the distribution is equitable, that is precisely why the revaluation for non-domestic properties is taking place. The aim is not to try and raise more money

from the rates; it is about trying to make sure that there is an equitable distribution of the rates burden. The revaluation will apply to the non-domestic sector.

Also, the Executive are bringing forward, as part of the Programme for Government, a more fundamental review of rating policy.

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister agree that the majority of local councillors has been very much against the 8% regional rate increase? Is the Minister aware that party representatives from those councils that he mentioned — including some of his own colleagues in the SDLP and those from the Ulster Unionist Party — voiced clearly and loudly their complete opposition alongside the DUP and the other parties who voiced their opposition in the Assembly? Does he therefore feel that his proposals are truly representative of the business life and of the people of the Province?

Mr Durkan: The recommendations relating to rate increases for next year, which have now been approved by the Assembly, are there as a result of our spending plans. If we had spending plans, that involved spending less money on fewer services, then, in turn, we could afford to go for a lower rate increase.

We recognise the strong concern that people feel, whether they are domestic ratepayers or non-domestic ratepayers. That is one of the reasons why we want to pursue the review of rating policy. That will be aimed at looking at the fairness of the rates burden not just in the non-domestic sector but in the domestic sector as well. We recognise that the rating system as it stands is not entirely popular and that, from many perspectives, it is not particularly satisfactory, but it is the one means of raising additional revenues beyond the one that the Treasury allocates us. We are trying to improve the fairness and the sense of the rating system. I hope that all Members of the House will support the Executive in their efforts to that end.

Civil Servants

4. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the proportion of civil servants relative to the population of working age in Northern Ireland. (AQO 540/00)

Mr Durkan: The proportion of civil servants relative to the population of working age in Northern Ireland is 2.8%.

Mr Hussey: Given that particular figure and given figures that I received from the Minister in a written answer, the Minister will be aware that the percentage figure in West Tyrone is 1.8%. In fact, in one part of West Tyrone — the Strabane District Council area — it is 0.7%. Does the Minister not agree that it is long past time that the redistribution of Civil Service jobs throughout Northern Ireland was undertaken?

Mr Durkan: The number of civil servants employed in an area relates to the business needs of Departments. However, in line with commitments that have been made in the draft Programme for Government and in the context of an accommodation review, I intend to examine the scope for decentralisation of Civil Service jobs. The current target for completion of the review is June 2001.

“Gap Funding”

6. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any discussions he has held with his ministerial colleagues and the European Union concerning the allocation of further “gap funding” in order to sustain projects; and if he will make a statement. (AQO 535/00)

Mr Durkan: The Executive fully recognises the difficulties that some projects may have in sustaining their activities until new EU programme funding comes on stream. This issue was considered by Ministers attending the Executive meeting on 16 November 2000. As part of the October monitoring round, a further £3.6 million “gap funding” provision was announced, bringing the total in the 2000-01 financial year to approximately £9 million.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his reply. I am sure he is aware, as I am, of the growing concern within community groups and the intermediary funding bodies about the continuing delays of the tendering process for applicants for the delivery of future services within the European programme. In fact, it is going to impinge greatly on the sustainability not just of the projects but of the very bodies themselves. Can the Minister indicate if there are any further measures which he might consider, such as reintroducing further funding to smoothe over that gap and, it is hoped, to hasten the implementation of the new programmes?

Mr Durkan: The Executive is keeping this problem under review. We are aware of the concerns that exist in the local groups, the partnerships and the intermediary funding bodies. I met the intermediary funding bodies shortly before Christmas.

3.45 pm

We also need to address the fact that a significant proportion of the Peace I moneys has still to be spent. Although all the Peace I funding has been allocated, not all of it has been drawn down. Approaching 30% remains to be spent, and it must be spent by 31 December of this year. We want to address that problem and the problem of “gap funding”, as it is called. Of course, we have to be careful that any decisions do not run afoul of our own provisions and commitments, and the European Commission’s requirements, by pre-empting the proper allocation and bidding process that will be in place for the Peace II programme. To date, the Executive have proved by their responses in the monitoring rounds that they are trying to respond to this need.

We are also seeking a better method of tracing the different problems as they affect different programmes. For instance, we are aware that there are different end dates for different measures. That affects some of the same groups, and it obviously makes their management challenge all the more difficult. We want to look at all those problems to see if we can resolve them without giving rise to others.

Senior Civil Service Review

7. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what is the current state of the Senior Civil Service review. (AQO 561/00)

Mr Durkan: The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister were consulted on proposals for the composition of the review team. These have been agreed, and I am pleased to announce that Sir Herman Ousley has agreed to chair the review team. Other nominations to the review team from my ministerial Colleagues are currently being contacted as to their availability. When responses are received, I will bring proposals back to the Executive Committee before making a public statement on the review arrangements and terms of reference.

Ms Lewsley: Is it possible to tease out what the review's terms of reference will be?

Mr Durkan: The proposed terms of reference for the review have been cast relatively broadly to maximise the opportunity that the review provides. The review represents a chance to address not only the practical ways of speedily enhancing the representation of under-represented groups, but also to consider the efficiency of procedures against the business needs of Ministers and officials in a devolved Administration.

It also provides an opportunity to consider the roles of Ministers, civil servants and the Civil Service commissioners, and other issues such as perceived obstacles to participation. An announcement on the review's full terms of reference will be made in due course.

Review of Public Service Accommodation

8. **Dr Hendron** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail when the review of accommodation will start. (AQO 557/00)

Mr Durkan: A firm of specialist property consultants has recently been engaged to update the database of Government office accommodation that was compiled two years ago. That review has been completed and the report is to hand. It validates many of our initial thoughts on condition and overcrowding, and it identifies the level of need. We are now in a position to move to the main stage of the exercise. The process of tendering for the strategy review will start shortly, and we will move to appoint consultants thereafter.

Dr Hendron: Will the Minister consider relocating some local Civil Service jobs to areas of high social need in the Belfast region?

Mr Durkan: In the past, when asked to address the issue of accommodation and decentralisation, I have been at pains to avoid answers that pre-empted possible outcomes for specific locations. I will do the same on this occasion. Clearly, I accept that new TSN is one of the important factors that must be taken into account in a review of this nature. We will look at the whole of Northern Ireland from that point of view and the other considerations that we have listed — not least the business needs of the Departments, but also regional development strategy and equality considerations.

Mr Weir: I will resist the temptation to appeal for jobs to remain in North Down. Instead, I will ask the Minister what guidelines will be given by his Department in terms of the criteria that will be used by this review group in assessing how best to allocate Civil Service jobs.

Mr Durkan: This is a review of accommodation strategy, so we need to look at whether we have a sustainable accommodation strategy or whether we accept what we have inherited and make do beyond that.

In this sort of review we want to examine the existing estate and accommodation portfolio and future needs. In that context, we will want to look at the opportunities for redistributing Civil Service jobs on the basis of decentralisation. That will be one aspect of the strategy review. We need to start on the basis of the actual service and business needs of civil servants, Departments and this Assembly. We also need to take account of the wide range of factors I indicated in my last answer.

Mr Dodds: Churchill House is, among other things, the headquarters of the Department of Social Development. In view of the plans for that part of Belfast, Victoria Square, and the development plans that I had the honour to announce when I was the Minister, is priority being given to the need to relocate that Department's headquarters?

Mr Durkan: The issue is current, and the accommodation implications of the proposed development of Victoria Square will be considered in the forthcoming accommodation strategy review; as they should be, given that the issue is so significant.

ASSEMBLY:

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

The following motion stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr McGrady:

That Mrs Annie Courtney shall replace Mr John Fee on the Committee for Education.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr McGrady.

Mr McGrady: Not moved.

ASSEMBLY:

COMMITTEE OF THE CENTRE

Resolved:

That Mrs Annie Courtney shall replace Mr P J Bradley on the Committee of the Centre. — *[Mr McGrady.]*

ASSEMBLY:

**ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND
INVESTMENT COMMITTEE**

The following motion stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr McGrady:

That Mr John Fee shall replace Mrs Patricia Lewsley on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr McGrady.

Mr McGrady: Not moved.

ASSEMBLY:

**FINANCE AND PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE**

Resolved:

That Mrs Patricia Lewsley shall replace Mr Donovan McClelland on the Committee for Finance and Personnel. — *[Mr McGrady.]*

ASSEMBLY:

**REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT
COMMITTEE**

Resolved:

That Mr George Savage shall replace the Rt Hon John Taylor MP on the Committee for Regional Development. — *[Mr J Wilson.]*

**ADOPTION
(INTERCOUNTRY ASPECTS) BILL**

Committee Stage (Period Extension)

The Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee (Dr Hendron): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(2) be extended to 6 April 2001 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Bill (NIA 8/00).

The Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee welcomes the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Bill, which will implement in Northern Ireland the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption.

Members must appreciate that an extension of the Committee Stage is necessary in order to allow the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee sufficient time to give due consideration to the important issues raised in the Bill while at the same time considering other current issues. Although I am seeking an extension until 6 April 2001, it is hoped that the Committee will be in a position to bring its report to the Assembly at an earlier date. I ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(2) be extended to 6 April 2001 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Bill (NIA 8/00).

**WEIGHTS AND MEASURES
(AMENDMENT) BILL**

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that Royal Assent for the Weights and Measures (Amendment) Bill has been signified. The Bill became law on 20 December 2000.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I have clarification on the timing of the matters that have just taken place on the Floor? I understood — but this is subject to your clarification — that if Question Time were to finish before the appointed time of 4:00 pm, the House would adjourn until 4:00 pm and then the business would continue. This has happened on other occasions. I would like your clarification on what is correct procedure when Question Time ends early.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If Question Time finishes early the practice has been to continue with the business in order to save time. However, I am in the hands of the House in respect of this issue. If Members feel strongly about it, we will look at it in the future.

Motion made:

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

TROUBLES VICTIMS (NORTH ANTRIM)

Mr Paisley Jnr: I tabled this Adjournment motion subject because it is essential that victims be accorded a recognised place in the process so that Members can discuss their needs and adequately reflect what victims and victims' groups require. I am concerned that victims have been written out of the political process, and it is essential that they be given a voice.

The best way to do that is to examine it on a constituency basis. Many points may be raised, but there are issues that must be raised in relation to each constituency. That is why I have tabled this motion with particular reference to my constituency.

4.00 pm

In the New Year's Honours list, Const Billy O'Flaherty was awarded an MBE. He is one of the most deserving recipients of that award, and I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate him. While it is a most fitting award, it is little to receive in return for what he lost in a cowardly IRA attack on 11 July 1989 on the Antrim coast. Constable O'Flaherty lost his arm and leg when the car he was travelling in was targeted by a roadside bomb. In spite of his horrific injuries, Constable O'Flaherty was the lucky one. Another RUC officer, Alexander Bell, lost his life in the same attack.

In total, three young men were targeted by the bomb trap on a scenic stretch of the Antrim coast road that July day. It was roundly condemned at the time not only by members of the DUP, but also by members of the SDLP. The spokesman for that area, Mr Sean Farren, who is now a Minister, condemned it in very verbose terms. However, I wish that his condemnation had been consistent, because today that same Member is partly responsible for ensuring that the people who carried out that attack are included in this Government.

When we reflect on the consequences of people's actions, we are right to point out the inconsistencies that have appeared in people's agendas. The reality is that people ought to have condemned that attack, but their condemnation should have been carried through and consistent to ensure that the people who carried out that attack are not one day accorded a privileged place in the Government of Northern Ireland.

Today they are the forgotten victims of the troubles, largely because of where they were attacked and why they were attacked. For that reason, the timely reminder and recognition of their sacrifice in the New Year's Honours list is important. However, it fails to record the lives that have been destroyed, the effect on families and the difficulties experienced by families in North Antrim coping with disability perpetrated during the troubles. Those are the real costs of the troubles.

Often the number of murders in a particular area diverts us from the real message. Whether it be an atrocity in places such as Kingsmill or Omagh, where 10 people were killed, or the attack that claimed the life of Alexander Bell in the constituency of North Antrim, the effect on families is identical. North Antrim might be thought to have escaped the worst of the troubles. Statistically that argument may be made, but it cannot be sustained when you see the individual grief and the individual effects on those who have been terrorised.

North Antrim, like every area, lived and continues to live in fear of the gunmen. At the time of the murder of Mr Bell, the view was articulated that the ambush demonstrated the power of the IRA to strike at will and to strike fear at will in any part of the Province. Over the past 30 years, 42 people have been murdered in the constituency of North Antrim. In the past 10 years in North Antrim, 352 people have been injured, according to RUC statistics, and 11 people have been murdered by paramilitaries. That is an appalling indictment at a time when we are told that ceasefires have been in place and when we are in the midst of a so-called peace process.

While big atrocities such as Kingsmill, Omagh, Darkley and Tullyvallen are burnt into the collective minds of people in the Province, the thousands of individual victims who were murdered in most callous ways have, for many people, become faceless, nameless statistics. Who among us will remember Miss Elizabeth McAuley, who was killed by an IRA bomb outside her flat in Main Street, Ballymoney on 13 April 1972, or Yvonne Dunlop, a mother of three young children, who was burnt to death in an IRA firebomb attack on a clothes shop in Bridge Street, Ballymena, in October 1976, or, more recently, the murder of the three Quinn brothers in Ballymoney in my own constituency.

Who will remember those grievous attacks? That is the human face of the troubles, and one that has largely been forgotten. To forget is human.

In recognition of this, we in civilized society have taken time and formed traditions to remember the dead. The fallen of the wars are remembered each November, while 1 July has become the day when we contemplate the tragic and terrible loss at the Somme.

It is in such a spirit that I have tabled this issue for debate today, for it is my contention that in the process of appeasing and including gunmen in the Government of Northern Ireland, their victims have been forgotten. I believe that this is not because of the natural dimming of our memories, but more because of a dynamic policy at the heart of Government to neglect the victims. To remember the victims demands justice, and it is quite clear from the process that we are in that victims do not receive justice. They receive it neither financially, nor in recognition and respect. That directly affects people in my

own constituency who have been murdered, as well as their families, some of whom I have mentioned.

To properly remember the victims of the troubles, we must practically help and listen to them. Towards the end of this debate, I hope to put forward some ideas on how we can practically improve their lot. I do not believe that cold marble statues do much to reach the real core of the problem. As I speak to victims in my constituency, it becomes abundantly clear that the best memorial to their loved ones would be to remove the gunmen from Government. However, that appears to be far from occurring.

Today, we have the ludicrous farce of an agreement that purports to establish a human rights agenda, yet includes, at the heart of Government, those who have been most responsible for the abuse of human rights. The apologists for those organisations sit opposite me in this Chamber. Victims of terror have delivered their damning indictment of this agreement and have concluded that there should be no terrorists in this Government. Unfortunately, such heartfelt pleas fall on deaf ears, because those who have suffered in silence appear to be condemned to continue to suffer in silence. They should not be ignored. They should be given a voice and have their position articulated fairly.

The core of the problem is that in order to really deal with victims, especially in my own constituency, there must be justice. For many groups and individuals, this should be the priority. However, the vast majority of murders remain unsolved, and while in many cases the widows and orphans know who is responsible, those people remain free. The Omagh victims, as we know, are far from satisfied, and many other victims of major atrocities have not been satisfied in terms of justice. In the case of some of the murder victims in my own constituency, people have never been made amenable to the law. With that appalling gap, people are right to ask where the justice is in this society that has failed them.

The agreement has not helped to heal those problems, yet it was supposed to. In fact, it has disgraced the sacrifice of victims and failed them. Not only does it not give justice, it also destroys the very concept of the rule of law by freeing those people who destroyed the peace in the first instance, who wreaked injustice, leaving victims in their wake.

It is important to compare the treatment of ex-prisoners' groups with that of victims' groups, because that allows us to analyse how fairly people are being treated. Whenever we look at it in this way, it shows us something of the political world that we live in. One of the clearest indicators of what is fundamentally wrong with this process is the treatment of these innocent victims. Their isolation and agony is in stark contrast to people who are involved in what are commonly known as ex-prisoners' groups. Their apologists and ex-prisoners receive considerably more, yet those who have suffered the most receive the least.

To a large extent, this motion was prompted by my colleague Mr Dodds, and I am glad that he is present for the debate. The Minister of Finance and Personnel admitted, in answer to a question from Mr Dodds, that £4.5 million of European Union Peace money and £1.5 million of Northern Ireland Government money have been thrown at ex-prisoners groups. When we compare that with allocations to victims' groups, we find that they received only a third of that amount.

The allocations from Government funds came from taxes paid by ordinary decent folk from throughout Northern Ireland who expect to see their taxes spent on hospitals and schools, and not used to keep murderers in the luxury to which they have grown accustomed. Many of us in the Assembly have fought for increases to pensions and winter fuel payments, for better benefits for the weakest in society and for relief for students, who represent the future. It is galling to see money wasted on people who are quite clearly the destroyers of yesterday. I am sure that Sinn Féin/IRA could provide their prisoners' groups with resources from Irish America, but they want the British Government to pay for those groups.

Few homes in my constituency have not been touched by terror, and many families continue to live under the shadow of the gun. During the troubles the paramilitaries funded themselves through racketeering, drugs and an array of criminal activity. Now they can relax, knowing that the Government will continue to extort money from people while saying "Well, you do not want to go back to the bad old days, do you?" All the time, victims tell me that they still live in the bad old days and that the bad old days have never left them. Thousands of people in Northern Ireland continue to live in fear. This Christmas, many homes had an empty space at the table for fathers or sons who never returned. Today, those victims are marginalised, while the Government pursue their so-called inclusive society. It seems that the gunmen are more important to the Government; the victims are left out.

The Government and all those who signed up to this process made the decision that terrorists were more important than democrats or victims. Today we see the fruits of that policy. The research that I have done in my own constituency shows that the sum of £6 million that I mentioned is the tip of the iceberg. It does not include money channelled through the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, district partnership boards and other Government-linked intermediary funding bodies.

The biggest offender is the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust. In one instance, it gave £14,000 to a fly-fishing course for prisoners in the Maze and a further £8,000 for a follow-up course. It would be worth seeing how that amount was justified on the application form. Creative accounting reaches new levels in such applications.

The views put forward by the leaders of the groups concern me. An extract from 'An Phoblacht' was sent to me — obviously, I attach a health warning — in which Avila Kilmurray, Director of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, says

"politically motivated ex-prisoners of war are at the forefront and actively continuing their struggle with their clear commitments to community development".

That concerns me, because it affects victims in my constituency. Victims' groups do not receive such recognition. Many people feel that the agencies established by the Government do not engage in the same way with victims' groups or allow them to channel their resources, energies and commitment in the same way that ex-prisoners are encouraged to do.

Under the European peace and reconciliation programme, victims and ex-prisoners were to be treated equally. However, it comes as no surprise to find that the funding body that saw fit to throw money at ex-prisoners is the same one that froze funding for one victims' group, after several members of its committee were, in the natural course of events, replaced. Only when a NIVT-funded office in my constituency was turned into an arms dump and people caught there red-handed were the funders forced to freeze hundreds of thousands of pounds that had been earmarked for that organisation.

4.15 pm

Such double standards are operating at all levels in the peace process as once again Unionists are being treated like second class citizens. Those who give their all in the fight to preserve democracy, law and order must not be treated like this any longer. Society owes them a great debt and today we, in the Assembly, must address the issue of how to repay those who have given so much and lost so much.

Like many of the issues attached to the troubles in Northern Ireland, the victims issue is an emotional and highly charged one. It is also a complex issue, and it is important not to take advantage of it for any of those reasons. I am startled by the way organisations treat victims groups compared with how they treat ex-prisoners groups. There is certainly a view that if you are an ex-prisoner group you will get considerably more from the Government, and be treated considerably better. That perception — real or imaginary — is there, and it has got to be addressed by the Government directly. It has to be addressed, whether by the Northern Ireland Office in the issues that concern it with regard to European funding, or by the Northern Ireland Executive in the issues that directly concern it and through the funding channels directly available to it.

Many of those involved have been active for decades, doing much of the same work on a voluntary basis. Victims groups are self-help groups that aim to give a voice to those who feel forgotten and excluded. Yet they are being quite clearly ignored.

Current events in our country have opened many wounds, and many victims hoped that those wounds had healed. The pain of seeing their loved ones' killers walking free, and their fear for the future, has encouraged many victims to speak out. I am not the only representative who regularly receives mail from constituents who are concerned about the way that they, as victims, have been treated.

The establishment of support groups and packages costs money. In North Antrim I would argue that no provision is being made. If no provision is being made in my constituency — where, as I have said, 11 people have been murdered in the past 10 years, where more than 300 specific troubles-related injuries have taken place and where 42 people have been murdered in the past 30 years — what provision exists in constituencies where there might be slightly fewer victims, or in those where there are considerably more? How much of a disparity actually exists? It is essential that we learn a lesson on how to treat people fairly, especially if they are victims.

Another complaint I receive regularly from victims concerns the amount of money being spent on the education, training, leisure and recreation facilities for prisoners and ex-prisoners compared to the amount spent on similar facilities for victims. Victims receive very little. Indeed, they receive no special treatment in this regard. Yet they would tell me that they see the people who perpetrated the crimes against them being given a considerable amount of resources and latitude by the Government.

The Inmate Activities Branch is responsible for the education and training budget of prisoners. Even the most cursory glance at the branch's figures reveals that £450,000 is needed to pay for full-time teachers. Overall, the education of prisoners has cost taxpayers £818,000. At that level, since the start of the troubles, it is possible that £24 million has been allocated for that. Twenty-four million pounds is a lot of money over that period of time. Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, in his recent report, said that £26 million had been allocated to compensate victims. That works out at less than £8,000 per victim — a grotesque amount. The £24 million used for the education of prisoners — when extrapolated — results in considerably more for each prisoner.

A constituent of mine whose husband was murdered withdrew one daughter from university and actively discouraged another daughter from going there because she could not afford that luxury for her family. Yet her husband's killer took advantage of the education system and graduated with honours while in HMP Maze.

When families see that and write to you about it, that must provoke you to act. One of my constituents had lost so much that she had to discourage her daughter from going on to third-level education. This woman later

discovered that her husband's killer benefited greatly from the money that is pumped into the prison regime.

I am not saying that prisoners do not have rights — they do — but there must be balance in the system, and that balance is currently askew.

At present, victims are still meeting in their homes, because they do not have enough money to hire premises. In my constituency, there is the ludicrous situation where one ex-prisoners group office became an arms dump, despite the fact that victims were crying out for an office where they and their friends could go to seek help. The money is never available to realise that dream, as it is squandered on many ex-prisoners groups.

A clear disparity that is, frankly, disgusting has developed, one that has been fostered by a policy created by this Government and perpetuated by this Executive. Paramilitary experience and support structures have given the ex-prisoners a head start, and victims groups are struggling to make this up. The expectation that some funding would result in the same product for both victims groups and ex-prisoners groups is, in my view, misplaced. Victims have neither the experience nor the capacity to develop as quickly as the latter. This disparity must be addressed by the funders in the forthcoming round of funding. While prisoners have been included, I believe that victims have been excluded.

The perception that my area has not suffered has led to further exclusion and suffering of those on the periphery that have, in fact, suffered most. There may not be as strong a sense of shared suffering as there would be in an area such as South Armagh, where victims will feel lonely and isolated, but when the wakes and the funerals are over, when the press interest after some atrocity has died down, people are left to grieve alone with their loss. For decades that burden has been carried alone or with the help of very few members of the family.

Many families in my constituency have suffered terrible practical and financial loss. They may have lost the breadwinner — the largest wage earner; they may have lost an heir; younger members of the family may have been forced to go out to work rather than finish their education. There have been funeral costs, the settlement of any outstanding debt, fathers who have had to raise families alone, people who were injured in attacks and were unable to work again, people who suffered mental ill-health due to the effects of the atrocity they were caught up in, businesses destroyed and jobs lost. There have been intimidation, racketeering and boycotting, and all of these issues have taken their toll on the business community.

According to the comprehensive lists compiled by the RUC, 42 people have been murdered in my constituency. However, I fear that the real figure may be considerably higher. Some RUC men from that area who were stationed elsewhere and murdered elsewhere have been

listed as having lived in the area where they were stationed.

For example, few know that Robert Millar, the second RUC officer murdered, and the first member of the security forces murdered in South Armagh, was from Ahoghill. He was killed along with Samuel Donaldson on 12 August 1970. Robert was only 26 years old and just out of the forces training depot. Many others were brought up in the area, and their relatives still live there today.

A Member who sat on one of the previous Assemblies here, Mr Edgar Graham, whose death on 7 December 1983 at Queen's University is commemorated on the memorial on the wall just outside this Chamber, was born in Randalstown and educated at Ballymena Academy.

Finally, the statistics never fully list the thousands that were injured or, indeed, affected as a result of the violence. Those who assume that North Antrim has escaped the worst of the troubles will find it shocking to learn that in the past decade, at a time when a peace process was said to be in operation, there were 11 deaths as a result of the security situation, and 352 injuries occurred. When this is broken down it is quite shocking.

In Ballymena subdivision, two people were murdered, and 150 were injured. There were 32 shooting incidents and 10 bombs.

In Ballymoney, seven people were murdered, 133 people were injured, 29 were caught up in shooting incidents, and 16 were caught up in bombs. Part of the rural hinterland of my constituency is carried by the subdivision based in Lame. Two people were murdered in that subdivision, and there were 69 injuries, 15 shooting incidents and 24 bombs. That is to say nothing of some of the more recent attacks.

This does not show the entire toll of suffering of the injured and those forced to leave the area or to escape. Many people, Mr Deputy Speaker, as you will know from your work in other fields, were maimed or disabled in attacks and have never been able to work again. The financial and social strain placed upon families has been immense and, in the absence of statutory help from the health and social services, families have literally been destroyed. Predominantly Unionist areas became prime targets for the IRA's economic war and, as a result, towns such as Ballymena suffered multiple bombs, which led to the loss of millions of pounds of stock and trade. I believe that it was only the natural resilience, work ethic and closeness of the community that allowed those towns to rebuild and restart their activities.

What can be done? That is a fair question. Throughout the troubles, the compensation paid to victims has been an insult. As an Assembly, we must ensure that a full and fair review of the whole area of compensation for victims is carried out. The review of the criminal injuries compensation, conducted by Sir Kenneth Bloomfield,

made 64 recommendations. While, with our help, this will improve the system in the future, there must be recognition that the system has failed past victims. Each case must be reviewed and proper compensation paid to families and the injured. Today many still struggle with loss or disability and, although for many it is too late, we must ensure that it is not too little. In the absence of justice, the least that we can do is give something back to the victims of violence.

The first issue that must be resolved, therefore, is to investigate past criminal injury compensation. That compensation was, in most cases, responsible for adding insult to injury. In the light of the recent award to a Member who received a few stitches in his head because he was hit by an RUC baton, I received a letter from a constituent. The constituent indicated that Mr Kelly of IRA/Sinn Féin had received £9,000. She, however, lost her UDR husband in a gun attack in the 1970s, and she was left to raise five children. What do Members think she was paid? She was paid less than £7,000 in compensation.

People will see that that in no way extrapolates to a fair amount of payment. Indeed, many have argued that payments to Republicans are a policy of appeasement — literally to buy off gunmen. When one divides the £26 million paid out on the death of victims by the number of victims, it averages out at approximately £8,000 for each victim in Northern Ireland. That is considerably less than the amounts many people receive for minor criminal injuries. The insult is palpable and is there for everyone to see.

Over the last 30 years this has engendered a sense of isolation, especially in my area, as victims are forced to rebuild their lives unaided. They represent a minority of the population, and the statutory care for them from the health and social services has been negligible. The impact of the troubles may have been statistically greater in other areas, but doctors in those areas would have treated more than one victim of the troubles and, therefore, could put together specific care packages. That has never been the case in North Antrim, and the symptoms of stress and other disorders have not been recognised. Help, therefore, has not been provided.

Consequently, "victimhood" has actually increased in areas where the numerical impact of the troubles is not seen as being as great as in other areas. The peace process further accelerated this exclusion, because victims had little incentive to participate. The benefits that persuaded ex-prisoners' groups to accept it, far outweighed the great losses faced by victims. With the erosion of the rule of law through prisoner releases, the destruction of our defences through the Patten Report and the idea of demilitarisation — and with security sources telling of ex-prisoners returning to their murder gangs, or even joining dissident groups — it is not difficult to see why victims have a problem with the agreement. As those

who have suffered most from the violence, the victims want peace, probably more than anyone else could even imagine — but they simply ask what price they have to pay for that peace.

4.30 pm

If there is to be peace, there must be justice, and without truth there can be no justice. To that end, and in the hope of peace, we must dedicate ourselves to the promotion of the truth.

In conjunction with the review of compensation, I propose some specific measures. The Government could act to the direct benefit of victims. Victims' groups have conducted independent needs analyses to establish what programmes and projects need to be implemented to meet their real needs and to enable them to make progress in their grief. The following areas have been identified as essential in helping with the recognition and reconciliation process.

First, centres should be created to provide training and education facilities, medical counselling and trauma facilities, specifically designed for those who have suffered as a result of terrorist violence. These should be safe environments where victims can deal with the past and plan for the future positively and with a sense of security and community. It has been impossible for many groups to obtain funds to acquire such buildings and offices, despite the essential quality services they hope to provide for those who have been socially excluded for a considerable time.

Secondly, training projects and programmes should be set up to help with the regeneration of areas most affected by violence and to promote the social inclusion of those who have been deprived of educational and employment opportunities because of their suffering. In many cases families lost their only financial provider in the atrocities, and the need has been identified to provide adequate employment-related training to allow other family members to fulfil this role — I refer particularly to widows.

Thirdly, we need to target training programmes and projects for males in the 25-plus age bracket and for females who wish to return to work if an opportunity to do so arises.

Fourthly, we need programmes and projects to help with employment and income generation to enhance opportunities for those whose prospects have been stifled by the effects of terrorism. It has been emphasised that there is a need for adequate IT training facilities to prepare victims for employment in the growing IT sector. In this age of increased social and business dependence on telecommunications, e-commerce and e-business, it is important that adequate training be provided for this group.

There is a clear need to provide sufficient training and employment support for young people in areas where terrorism has prevailed. A need has been identified to provide opportunities for young victims to channel their energies into positive projects and activities. An integrated and inclusive society should be promoted by capacity-building projects, empowering victims' groups and local communities to play a more active role in the development of their communities.

A key area has been recognised through needs analysis — the urgency of a human rights centre. This needs to be established in order to conduct research and training and to raise awareness in this specialised field, which is currently ignored by many of the so-called existing human rights groups. I seek parity of treatment in the allocation of funding. Capital funding should be set aside specifically for victims in each constituency to fund the establishment of support groups, the acquisition of suitable premises, the employment of appropriate staff and the foundation of sustainable projects to help those who have suffered. This will ensure that projects which reflect and implement good practice and added value are achievable. Plans and strategies to ensure sustainability are of central importance.

Victims' groups that are already in place in my constituency, some of which have received support from the Government, do their best, but they are not given the appropriate resources to meet a growing agenda that victims present them with.

Any criteria must ensure that funding for victims benefits those who are victimised as a result of paramilitary terrorism and that funding for victims reflects good practice and value for money. Funding should be for projects which are victim-led and have a high degree of user involvement in decision-making; demonstrate accountability and consultation openness; involve active networking partnerships with other victims' groups locally, regionally, nationally and internationally; encourage self-development, positive motivation and confidence building in order to promote social development, social inclusion and economic regeneration for people who feel isolated and excluded from society; work towards achieving sustainability; and have a clear and realistic exit strategy from the special support programme for peace and reconciliation into mainstream funding.

There is a need for firm direction. The firm direction on this issue has to be Government-led, as the resources that are required are immense and the demands are great. If we do not take this action, it will say something about what we really feel about the victims in Northern Ireland. In my own constituency it grieves me that so little has been done when so much has been asked for. It may not be asked for in the most articulate way, but it is asked for in a way which is covered in the tears of those who are grief-stricken and in a way that demands a response from the Government.

I hope that the Government pick up the challenge and decide that it is about time that the victims were recognised, even if that means pointing the finger at the structure that is now in place, which we call the institution of government here in Northern Ireland. If we do not reward, adequately respect and adequately demonstrate a genuine consideration for the victims of Northern Ireland, we do not deserve to be called a civilised society. We have only paid lip-service to the notion of civilised society if that is the case.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I feel somewhat nauseated listening to Ian Paisley Jnr lecturing us about violence and its effects. He is a member of a party which, from its inception in the early 1960s in this part of Ireland, created victims of violence, sent young men — young Loyalists, young Protestants — on the foot of its sectarian propaganda and its rampage against the Nationalist community —

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As the Member well knows, discussions in another place indicated that this debate was specifically about payments to victims' groups and to ex-prisoners, and the effect that that has on a particular constituency. I hope that this debate, because of the ramifications involved, will not be allowed to degenerate into a party-kicking exercise on the issue of criminal violence in Northern Ireland. I had the opportunity to do that. I did not take that opportunity. I specifically targeted my comments at direct victim atrocities in my constituency, and I hope that that is allowed to continue, otherwise this will degenerate into a filthy, muckraking exercise by Sinn Féin.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We should address ourselves to the subject. Please keep to the subject.

Mr J Kelly: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thought I was keeping to the subject, in line with Ian Paisley Jnr, who, for the past half-hour, has been regaling us with comments about Sinn Féin/IRA, and so on. I am merely making the point that it is somewhat nauseating to listen to that kind of hypocrisy coming from that quarter and somewhat difficult to keep one's patience.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Do your best.

Mr J Kelly: I will indeed do my best, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I agree that the victims of violence should be compensated, but the underlying principle is, and should be, that we give equal value to the suffering of all victims. There is not a hierarchy of victims. There is not a hierarchy of victimhood. All people have suffered. Prisoners are victims of the past 30 years every bit as much as those who have suffered by losing their lives in the past 30 years.

He cannot put those who have gone to prison — for whatever reason — to one side. He cannot put aside those from the Loyalist side of the community who have

been encouraged by DUP rhetoric and Paisleyism to take up weapons and to murder people from another community. That has happened and those are facts. Those people are as much victims as those who have lost their lives. They are victims of the last 30 years, and they are entitled to rehabilitation — if one wants to use that word — by education or some other means. If they get a degree, so much the better. Is it not better that people come out of prison with a degree than come out as poorly educated as when they went in?

Should we not be applauding the fact that there are people in our society who are attempting to assist ex-prisoners? Many Loyalist ex-prisoners went to prison because of the rhetoric that came from the DUP and Paisleyism. They are the Coopeys of this world, who were encouraged to murder. That is why they went to prison. The underlying principle should be that all victims should be treated equally. We should not create a hierarchy of victimhood.

Mr Paisley Jnr talks about North Antrim. We can talk about North Antrim — about William Strathearn and others who were murdered in North Antrim, some by the security forces. Others were murdered by serving members of the security forces. For example, those who murdered young Peter McBride were rewarded by being inducted back into the Army. There cannot, and must not, be a hierarchy of victimhood. It is difficult to listen to people from that side of Unionism. By their rhetoric, they have encouraged others to engage in violence over the years, sending many young Loyalists not only to prison but, in some circumstances, to their death.

I have listened to Ian Paisley Jnr talk for the last half hour about memorials and about what ought to be done and what could be done. The best memorial to the victims of the last 30 years ought to be support for our present institutions. Support for the Good Friday Agreement is the best memorial we can offer to all victims of violence, whether they are ex-prisoners, or are still in prison. By encouraging the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, we considerably lessen the chances that other young men and women will become victims of violence. On that note, Ian Paisley Jnr has not uttered a single word about the effects of the current ethnic cleansing in Larne.

Mr Boyd: Not one reference has been made to North Antrim. I submitted a request to speak, and I checked to make sure that the debate was being focused entirely on North Antrim. As Mr Paisley Jnr said, he did not refer to any other than North Antrim victims, and you should make sure that this person is called out of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to make another point. We have determined to take one hour for the debate and we must allow ten minutes for the Minister's reply. Mr Kelly, please confine your statements to North Antrim.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Member should be reminded that Larne is not in my constituency, which is why I did not refer to it. Part of the Larne subdivision covers the rural part of my constituency. The Larne situation, intolerable though it may be, is not part of this motion. That point should be made clear.

4.45 pm

Mr J Kelly: A LeasCheann Comhairle, Mr Paisley Jnr was very wide-ranging in his comments about North Belfast — Mr Gerry Kelly, for example — which is not part of the debate that he is engaging in.

As I said at the outset, there is no hierarchy of victims. Sinn Féin has supported compensation for victims, but that compensation must be based on equality and the fact that there is no hierarchy of victimhood. People from both sides of this community have suffered over the last 30 years, a leasCheann Comhairle. My final words are that we should give equal value to the suffering of all victims. Thank you, a leasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Gibson: I am surprised that the number of victims in North Antrim is 47. As Mr Paisley Jnr said, most people think of it as an area that has been remote from terrorism. If I compare it with West Tyrone, some of the lessons that we have learned will be of use to you in North Antrim and may develop this argument further. We have 97 direct victims. That does not include the Omagh bomb victims or groups such as those killed at Ballygawley Road, Teebane and Knocknamoe. Those on the almost vacant Benches opposite must surely have been proud of their killing prowess. North Antrim may not have the graveyards and tombstones that exist in every one of our churches and halls. That is a tribute to the violent sectarian activity of the IRA.

What has been demonstrated, and this is not just a lesson for North Antrim, is that not only have they been sidelined as an issue, but also rural spread has been a difficulty. Probably because of proximity and contact — and Mr Paisley Jnr quite rightly pointed this out — the conurbation areas and the prisoner groups could be highly organised. No matter how highly one organises it, £6 million to prisoners does not compare to less than £100,000 to the Voice organisation in West Tyrone that deals with those victims. In actual fact, of those 97 deadly acts, I should say that two were not performed by the IRA. There has to be accountability for the rural isolation.

I would also make one other plea about something that arrived in the mail on Saturday morning. It is alleged that £14 million is to be set aside for RUC victims. In one very poignant case a wife, before she received her compensation, died of a broken heart within a year. The eldest of the family, who had to bring up his brothers and sisters, has been told that he is not a victim and will get nothing out of that £14 million. I ask the two junior Ministers to bear in mind that every member of such a family is a victim.

The first political murder by the IRA was that of Senator Barnhill on the shores of Lough Foyle. The first RUC victim, murdered on the Shankill Road, was from Newtownstewart, in my constituency. The first UDR victim was also from that constituency. I can show you one graveyard with 24 victims' tombstones. That is the tribute that those brave men have earned for themselves.

I want to say to the people of North Antrim that three decades of deep-seated psychological deficits have got to be restored. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done, not just in North Antrim, but throughout Northern Ireland. The lessons of West Tyrone are just part of that pattern that needs to be put together.

I am hoping there will be a response from the junior Ministers that will be an encouragement, rather than the report I got on Saturday evening at that RUC victims' meeting. That was an insult to the families that had made such an effort.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): My Colleague Mr Nesbitt and I welcome today's debate. The Administration fully endorse the sentiments of the Good Friday Agreement on the need to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence.

I was reminded very forcefully that we have suffered many forms of violence in our community: prejudices, violent words and violent actions. They have all contributed to the obscenity that was visited upon this community in the last 30 years.

To end all that to bring about a peaceful and normal society, and a process of reconciliation, the Administration attach the highest priority to dealing with victims' needs positively.

We welcome the opportunity to hear Members' views on that. However, to suggest, as Mr Paisley did in introducing this debate, that there is a dynamic policy at the heart of Government — those are his words — to neglect victims is simply absurd. Such hyperbole is not conducive to rational debate and does not assist the cause of victims or their case.

The actions contained in the Programme for Government demonstrate the Administration's commitment to dealing with victims' issues, as does the setting up of the Victims' Unit. We recognise the need for concerted, co-ordinated effort across Departments, over a number of years, as well as the need for close co-operation with the Northern Ireland Office.

We are determined to ensure that practical help and support is made available to all victims in an equitable, inclusive basis, according to their needs. I assure John Kelly that parity in this regard is central to the approach of the Administration to the question of victims.

The Victims Unit, which I have referred to, aims to co-ordinate activities and raise awareness of victims' issues across the devolved Administration. In line with the

Bloomfield Report, the first priority in providing greater recognition for victims is to assure them of better social, economic, medical, and other practical support. The vast majority of those areas are now the responsibility of the devolved Administration, and we take very seriously our responsibilities to ensure that victims get the best possible service in those areas that the Administration can provide.

The interdepartmental working group on victims has been reconstituted. The terms of reference have been agreed and work is progressing on developing a cross-departmental strategy, on which there will be wide consultation with victims and with victims' groups. We would welcome Members encouraging victims' groups in their constituencies to contact the Administration so that their views can be taken on board.

A rolling programme of visits to victims' units across Northern Ireland is well under way. This forms part of a publicity strategy, which includes plans to develop a web site, printed materials and relevant workshops. The unit has established a help-desk function to respond to specific cases directed to it by elected representatives such as Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Gibson, Mr J Kelly and other Members who have spoken here and victims' groups. The Victims Liaison Unit has also been involved in a Social Security Agency project that is examining how to improve services to victims as well as in the development of capacity building programmes, which, as Mr Paisley Jnr and Mr Gibson quite rightly pointed out, are so essential. Certain groups have not had the experience or time, unlike others, to develop the skills necessary to access funding and deal with the administration. Capacity building is therefore very important.

Two programmes have been started — one in Cookstown and one in Armagh — and the initial feedback on those capacity building programmes has been positive. It is also important to build capacity awareness among policy makers themselves, and a separate programme has been designed for that purpose. The programme will begin with a major conference at the end of January, which I hope all the MLAs, who have been invited, will attend. The conference will be followed by four one-day seminars. It is planned that participants from programmes for victims and policy makers will come together later in the year.

A positive relationship has developed at ministerial level, with regular meetings taking place between the Northern Ireland Office and the devolved Administration here. It is supplemented by almost daily contact, regular meetings at official level and joint work on initiatives such as capacity building. The visits carried out by the Victims Liaison Unit are helping to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each unit, and that will be supplemented in the near future by a mailshot to all victims' groups setting out which unit is responsible for which area. It is important to continue to work closely with the Northern Ireland Office to ensure that gaps in services do not appear. We are committed to doing that.

The Victims Liaison Unit is finalising plans to allocate the funding granted to it by the Executive — £200,000 from the October monitoring round, with a further bid for £120,000 from the December monitoring round. Spending options are being carefully evaluated, and since the funding is, relatively speaking, quite modest, it is important that it be used as efficiently as possible.

Decisions have yet to be finalised; therefore, I cannot give details on what direction spending will take. However, in broad terms, it is anticipated that the funding will be directed towards health projects by assisting the four trauma advisory panels, the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund and research into the needs of victims. Mr Paisley Jnr made reference to the need to talk to victims, to set up a mechanism to assess victims' needs and to hear from them what their needs are. We are well aware of that, and researching victims' needs is likely to be assisted by funding from the moneys available.

It is likely that funding available from the Peace II programme will be much more substantial. That will provide the Department with considerable resources to engage in a much broader range of activities. However, negotiations are still ongoing, so I cannot provide details on the final arrangements that will be made.

I will refer to several points that I want to deal with specifically. Mr Paisley Jnr, for instance, raised questions about individual allocations from the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT) from the core funding available to it. Those questions really need to be directed towards the Northern Ireland Office, because the NIVT operates on moneys allocated to it by the NIO and not by the devolved Administration.

5.00 pm

Obviously, I deplore the incident mentioned by Mr Paisley Jnr of arms being found in an office which was partly financed by the funds referred to. However, the devolved Administration have had neither involvement nor input into decisions made under the core funding scheme. In the period leading up to October 2000, grants totalling almost £74,000 were made to a group in North Antrim and, in addition, grants of almost £1 million have been made to regional organisations, one of which operates in North Antrim.

Mr Paisley Jnr referred to educational provision for prisoners, one of whom he said had been able to complete a degree. In fact, many prisoners have been able to do this. He compared that provision with the situation of a family, a victim of violence, in which one of the children had to discontinue education because of the family's lack of resources. That is a matter of great regret. However, families whose income falls below a certain level can avoid paying fees for third-level education, and they have access to basic levels of maintenance grant support. Indeed, the Memorial Fund has provided educational

bursaries for cases just like that, in which families have found themselves in such a position.

Criminal injuries are a matter for the NIO, not for the devolved Administration. In providing practical assistance to victims of violence and their families, the Memorial Fund has allocated grants for respite care, in suitable cases, for needy families.

In the past the NIO has made a direct allocation of £6.25 million for victims, in addition to the mainstream

funding being sought. Victims' organisations that have received this funding are not excluded from seeking money from other sources and particularly from the Peace Fund, which will come on-stream in due course.

Those are the major issues to which Members referred. If I have omitted to deal with any point raised, I will be glad, on notification by the Member concerned, to respond in writing.

Adjourned at 5.03 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 16 January 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the last sitting before Christmas, the hon Member for North Down, Mr McCartney, left his seat, came to this side of the Chamber and was involved in an altercation with my Colleague Mr Close and me. At the time, and on a point of order, I said that I had been assaulted, but I did not realise that a point of order could not be taken during a Division.

I wish to inform you and the Assembly, since there has been a degree of interest, that shortly after the incident Mr McCartney apologized to me for his behaviour. I have accepted the apology in the spirit in which it was offered, and I consider the issue closed. I realise that it would have been proper to raise this in Mr. McCartney's presence, but he was only in the Chamber for a few minutes yesterday, and I did not want the matter to hang on any longer than this.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Member for clarifying the matter. I did not see the altercation though I understand that there was something of the kind. I am glad that in the rosy glow of the Christmas period the matter has been so amicably resolved between the two Members.

Let us hope that if peace has broken out in that context, it is a presage of greater things to come.

SKILL SHORTAGE

Mr O'Connor: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to take immediate steps to address the problem of skill shortage in Northern Ireland, particularly in the field of health and social services.

I thank the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment and the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for being here. The purpose of the motion is to stimulate debate on the situation that exists. It is about looking forward to the future and developing a strategic plan to ensure that the public and private sectors will have their needs met by the training and employment that we provide so that we will be in a much better position to encourage inward investment and safeguard the jobs that already exist in Northern Ireland. I made particular reference to health and social services in the title of my motion, and I know that some of the skill areas that I want to touch upon are not directly the responsibility of the Minister. However, it is something into which the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment has an input, along with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

I have been informed by my local health trust that there is a chronic shortage of speech and occupational therapists. People who have suffered strokes wait over a year to see an occupational therapist. We have been told that money is available to employ them, but there is a shortage of such staff due to the limited number of university places for occupational therapists. There is also a limited number of university places available for speech therapists, approximately 20 to 25 places each year. The waiting list arises because a large percentage of the people who are trained are women. They enter the profession, but when they have children they sometimes wish to job-share. According to the Homefirst Community Trust, they are statistically more likely to work part time when they have families. That should be facilitated in whatever way possible, but there must be a strategic approach to deal with the matter. In the Homefirst Community Trust area there are 100 health visitors, and only one is male. We could do more to promote these occupations as valuable and worthwhile to encourage more men to join them.

I want to move on to the needs of industry. On 15 December 2000, the Minister announced the introduction of access bursaries and the abolition of tuition fees in certain skilled areas such as the software, engineering, electronics, manufacturing and hospitality industries. That is an innovative approach, and it is only the beginning. In future, we would like to encourage people to become involved in areas in which we have identified shortages. I do not see the point of continually training the same number of people as in previous years. We need to focus

that training in areas in which it is most needed. We need to identify where our industry wants to be in five, 10 and 15 years' time and plan to produce the graduates and other qualified people whom we need. Academic qualifications are important, but vocational qualifications are equally so.

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

We are talking about building new houses. Thousands of new homes are needed each year, and it is important that we have skilled craftsmen available to build them. We are talking about projects such as new railways, and, again, we must have the skilled craftsmen capable of carrying out those infrastructure improvements that we want in Northern Ireland.

To build a better and fairer society for everybody here, we must try to improve access for people who live in areas of social and economic need. We need to get more people coming forward from areas of high unemployment to ensure that the entire Northern Ireland economy becomes prosperous, rather than just areas such as east Antrim, west Tyrone, and south Down. To do that we need to focus on working with other Departments in the Administration. However, that will only happen if we have a workforce that is highly skilled academically, and, through the further education colleges, vocationally. I welcome the measures already taken by the Minister in that regard.

I am sure that Members will wish to touch on many other issues, and I will be glad to listen to them. I again thank the Minister for the measures that he introduced on 15 December. That was a first step, but it is not the end of the road. We need to adopt a more holistic approach to ensure that it is not just Government Departments and the public sector that have their needs met in future. Our industries must have their needs met too so that they can expand, employ and help Northern Ireland to become a more prosperous place for us all to live in.

The Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee (Dr Birnie): First of all, there is the general issue of skills shortages, to which Mr O'Connor rightly referred. I will comment on that first because it lies entirely within the responsibility of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Training and Employment.

The departmental Committee welcomes the efforts that are being made in that area, particularly by the Training and Employment Agency. These include the setting up of the skills task force in recent years and, more recently, the creation of the priority skills unit in the Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre (NIERC). These are designed to pinpoint areas in the economy in which, as Mr O'Connor said, there may be a deficiency in skills.

10.45 am

Northern Ireland needs to be aware — and I think the Training and Employment Agency shows awareness of

this — that there are various international models that show how we could work out what gaps exist between the types of labour skills being demanded and the types being supplied. One such model is associated with the Netherlands economy and another with the Belgian economy. Northern Ireland, as a small regional economy, should pay careful attention to international best practice. I am agnostic on which international model on the identification of skills gaps should be used in this case. We must continue to review the evidence.

The Committee has an ongoing inquiry relating to this area, which, in part, the motion refers to. It is our intention to bring a report to the Assembly in due course. We have already received over 90 written submissions from a range of private and public bodies on training for industry, which indicates the importance of the subject and the level of interest that there is. At the moment, the Committee is taking evidence from representatives from business organisations, private employers, the community education sector, further education, higher education and other relevant groups.

At this stage, it is not possible for me, as Chairperson, to report on the findings of the Committee. Much is being uncovered which is of interest, and we hope to report later this year. I suspect that the commentator John Simpson was correct when he argued in the 'Belfast Telegraph' recently that if we define IT skills broadly, there is a shortage of skills in that area.

I would like to make three points on a related matter. First, there is clear evidence of an underprovision of basic skills. A reputable international survey suggests that about one in five adults in Northern Ireland — this is sadly a personal and economic tragedy and scandal — is found in the lowest category of literacy skills. The common test often used is the ability to read the instructions on a medicine bottle. Clearly, that could literally be a matter of life and death.

Sadly, because of past failings in education, around 20% of the Northern Ireland population have not been adequately schooled to read such relatively basic text. In that context — and the Committee has previously made this submission to the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment and to the Minister of Finance and personnel — we were disappointed with the relatively small increase for basic adult education in the recent Budget. We would like to see further resources given there, perhaps through the medium of the Executive programme funds.

Secondly, there is the matter of skill shortages in general. The Northern Ireland economy increasingly demands high, specialist and sophisticated skills. This demand coexists with an increase in the level of so-called economic inactivity — persons who have completely withdrawn from the labour market for a variety of reasons. We also continue to have too many pockets of long-term unem-

ployment, and all that is notwithstanding the undoubted achievement in the economy in lowering the average level of unemployment.

Thirdly, given changes in the labour market, family life and in the working and structure of the economy, the provision of training needs to be increasingly flexible — hence the emphasis on life-long learning, something which I am sure that the Committee entirely welcomes.

Many Members will agree that there is, perhaps, a problem with the way in which the motion has been worded. With the exception of a limited number of undergraduate courses at the University of Ulster that relate to some health service occupations, the provision of skills for the health sector is the responsibility of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Therefore, although I agree with the sentiments behind the motion, the wording should have reflected that fact.

There is evidence of insufficient labour supply in some parts of the health sector. Figures suggest a shortfall of up to 800 nurses and a need for more occupational therapists, GPs and senior specialists. I want to make two points about the provision of skilled health workers. First, for the UK as a whole, statistics suggest that the number of health personnel — be they doctors or nurses — per capita is low compared to the number in most other Western societies. Even if we were to fill the current gaps in the system, it could be argued that there would still be insufficient provision for health care, especially preventive care. That raises broader questions, which go beyond the scope of the debate and the remit of the Department and relate to the level of funding for health care and the methodologies used. Can we continue to rely simply on tax-based health care provision, or should we consider other models from Europe and the Western World? It is a controversial issue, which goes beyond the powers of the Assembly.

We talk about shortages of health personnel, but that may be only a convenient shorthand term to describe what is happening. The problem is not so much one of supplying trained medical staff from universities and colleges, but of retaining those graduates, particularly in hospitals in outlying parts of the Province. No doubt, other Members will give examples of particular hospitals.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee (Mr Carrick): The Committee is grateful to Mr O'Connor for tabling the motion and focusing the House's attention on the subject.

The underlying sentiment in the motion is that finding the correct approach to training for industry is of fundamental importance. On that depend our well-being and prosperity, and it is critical to a successful and healthy economy. It is vital that Northern Ireland be able to compete globally. A direct correlation between labour

supply and demand is critical to the success of the economy.

The Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee has considered how training and education can measure up to the needs of industry. The Committee has taken evidence from business, education, training and church interests, from community and voluntary groups and from commentators in that field. They have told us that we need skills urgently. The emphasis is on "urgent". Speed is of the essence.

We have received evidence of problems with basic skills, including transferable skills, and finding and retaining skilled workers. That evidence has already been placed before the Committee. That is not to deny either the obvious strengths of our education and training systems or the innate ability of our people. However, we do have a tradition of exporting skills, which means that almost everywhere you look throughout the world, in whatever sector, people from Northern Ireland are contributing at all levels and in the forefront of medical, technical and social advances. In the past, that outflow of people resulted, in part, from the troubles. We all hope that in the future more of our young people will prefer to remain in Northern Ireland to study, work and bring up their families.

The export of skills does not indicate an oversupply of skills here. Locally, there are both perceptions and well-documented evidence of skills shortages, including transferable and specialist skills.

With regard to basic skills, the Training and Employment Agency reported in 1997 that one fifth of the 9,000 or so young people who entered Jobskills — the main vocational training programme — required training in basic literacy and numeracy. That is astounding, if not appalling. The correlation between the lack of basic skills and unemployment is well documented, as is the linkage with people at risk of social exclusion or involved in antisocial behaviour. Such low levels of literacy and numeracy among our young people must be a cause for concern to us all.

How can we work towards ensuring that our young people do not get trapped in a spiral of low expectations, underachievement and exclusion? Is the quality of jobs on offer adequate to give people a decent standard of living, job satisfaction and self-pride, things to which everyone aspires?

We cannot be complacent because of the current record low levels of unemployment and the increases in the rate of productivity. Northern Ireland's productivity continues to be lower than that in the rest of the United Kingdom, despite recent increases in the rate of growth. It is questionable whether skill deficiencies have any significant affect on our firms' productivity.

11.00 am

However, skill shortages add to the pressures on business. In a recent CBI survey, almost one in three firms said that their current workers lacked advanced IT or software skills, and 17% reported a lack of necessary managerial skills. While these skills can often be provided through a combination of workplace training and education, most businesses will look to the established education and training providers to foster the skills that they need.

I was disappointed to learn that, compared to the rest of the UK, small businesses in Northern Ireland recorded higher than average levels of dissatisfaction with the availability of suitable labour and the relevance of available training courses. In a recent independent survey conducted for the Federation of Small Businesses in Northern Ireland, only 17% were satisfied with the relevance of locally available training courses, while 50% were dissatisfied. While fewer than 30% of the respondents were satisfied with the levels of literacy and numeracy in the workforce, almost 40% were dissatisfied.

I set that against the strong evidence heard by the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee from the colleges of further and higher education about their desire to work with employers to provide the right skills at the right time. Clearly, something has gone amiss. The Committee also heard evidence from the skills task force, which has identified an agenda of urgent actions to address immediate skills shortages in priority areas. We are keen to support its determination to be proactive, to target resources more effectively and to pre-empt mismatch between skills supply and demand.

That requires a co-ordinated approach across Government. For example, it means that we need to be satisfied with the curricular approach to basic skills, including communication skills, teamworking and other transferable skills, which prepare people to make a contribution to the workplace. It also means that we need to target the areas of adult education already referred to by Dr Birnie — both basic education and progression — so that those who are not fulfilling their potential are supported and encouraged. Equally, it means looking at both individual and group incentives, so that a co-ordinated approach to full employment is adopted and followed.

Much more could be said, but I want to bring my remarks to a close. The Committee will report on this at a later stage. I reiterate the determination of the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to report to the Assembly on the contribution of education and training to meeting the skills needs of industry. There is much important work in this area for the Assembly to pursue, and we welcome the opportunity given to us by Mr O'Connor to flag up these issues.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and thank Mr O'Connor

for bringing it to the Assembly. It is an important matter that needs our attention and that of the Minister.

A recent small business survey found that there was 55% dissatisfaction with the availability of suitable labour, 39% with literacy, 38% with numeracy and 50% with the non-availability of relevant training courses. We need a strategic plan that takes account of the current labour force, looks at unemployment patterns and long-term unemployment and provides for future economic objectives.

The whole area is complex and not something that one would expect either the Minister of Health Social Services and Public Safety, or the Minister of Higher and Further Education Training and Employment, to address with immediacy, but it must be addressed in the longer term.

A recent CBI survey of May 2000 on human resources found that 23% of firms faced problems finding craft and skilled employees such as carpenters, mechanics and electricians. Higher electronics are the trendy skills — I think that the term is “sexy”. However, carpenters, bricklayers, and electricians are also critical to the future development of the economy, and those skills require close attention. For example, a man in a small firm, working with perhaps two other employees, finds it difficult to take on an apprentice on a day-release basis. When a young fellow of 18 is taken on to serve his time as a carpenter, an electrician or a brickie, within 18 months he will be doing a tradesman’s job but not getting a tradesman’s wages. That is the economic situation. Therefore we need to look closely at the traditional skills of carpenters, bricklayers and electricians.

The survey also showed that 20% of firms find it difficult to recruit sales and marketing employees. That is another area that we need to address. Eighteen per cent reported problems with finding managers and senior administrative staff, with 16% unable to recruit IT staff. Those figures came from the CBI in 2000. It is fine to become fixated on information and communications technology (ICT), but we must pay attention to other areas of work as well.

Supermarkets employ young people who do not have any transferable skills or knowledge and are perhaps the lowest paid in the economy. We must address those problems too.

The situation in the Health Service is more complex. The commitment of staff in a massively underfunded health care system must be applauded, but auxiliaries and nurses are not paid enough. The lure of trendy jobs in the media or ICT is draining many further and higher education students away from medicine and nursing.

There is also the problem of the constant, negative reporting, fuelled by many Members. That does not make the Health Service an attractive workplace. It is kept functioning by the hard work and commitment of

staff, and the simple truth is that the chronic underfunding and lack of clear planning and decisiveness by successive British Ministers have had a massive detrimental effect on it.

The latest figures show that between the trusts and the private sector there is a shortage of some 600 to 800 nurses. With regard to doctors, in 1998 Dr Brian Patterson reported that in 1993 there were 120 applicants to fill 45 vocational training posts, while in 1997 there were only 40 applicants for the same number of posts. That is an indication of the decline in the Health Service.

Mr O'Connor's motion raised the problem of a skill shortage. We know that, with regard to nursing, it is critical. Nurses are being drafted in from the Far East to fill the vacancies in a country where nursing was once considered one of the prime vocations for young women and, increasingly, young men.

There is also the question of nursing degrees and the extra training required. Nursing has become more complex, and many health establishments are looking for young women and men with a nursing degree. Completing the four-year course can be difficult for young people, and the Minister should address that.

We have only one burns surgeon in this part of Ireland. Recently, we faced a crisis in that sector, because that man was about to leave. It is intolerable that we have only one person to look after a burns department, and that problem too must be addressed. We all know from our daily constituency work that there is a waiting time of up to six months for people wishing to see an occupational therapist. Old people are waiting for six months to get heating or treatment, because of the lack of occupational therapists. The shortage of medical laboratory staff and scientific officers, likewise due to the running down of the Health Service over the past 30 years, should also be addressed urgently.

There is evidence of massive skills shortages in the health sector. Perhaps it is unfair to lump it all on to the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, but I must raise the issue. The Minister should get together with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to address the issue of skills shortages. The Minister has attempted to address the issues, but I urge him to take more cognizance of the matters that have been raised this morning.

The Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee (Dr Hendron): I congratulate Mr O'Connor on bringing the motion before us today. We have a massive skills shortage, particularly in the Health Service, and Members will not be surprised if I confine my remarks to that.

The Health Service faces two major problems. The first is the gross underfunding of recent years. Indeed, the Prime Minister last July accepted that the percentage

of gross domestic product spent on the Health Service in the UK is lower than that spent in most developed European countries. The second point — and it has been made by many Members and recently forcefully by Ken Maginnis — is that the Assembly and the Executive should look at the organisation of the Health Service. Plans are afoot for that, and the sooner the better. The whole system, Department, trusts and boards, must be examined.

Figures from the Department show that, last year, there was a shortage of 300 to 400 nurses in the trusts and a similar shortage in the independent sector. I did think that the figures would be even higher than that. Newly qualified nurses are offered attractive pay and benefits packages abroad. Can we blame them for taking up those offers?

11.15 am

However, some initiative has been taken. Nurses have been recruited from Australia and the Philippines, some of whom have been placed in the Royal Victoria Hospital and the Ulster Hospital. Many of these nurses are skilled — and that is what this is all about — but in one case a young cardiac surgery nurse from the United States did not know how to take a patient's blood pressure when she was asked by a surgical registrar to do so. That is not a criticism of the nurse, but her training was very narrow and confined to a particular area — that task had not been part of that training. Obviously, there is a problem.

In September 2000, the Department commissioned an additional 300 student nurse training places for the following three years. That was commendable, but we will need many more nurses. A few years ago there were seven nurse training schools in Northern Ireland which operated not just in the Royal Victoria Hospital but in other hospitals, including Belfast City Hospital and the Mater Hospital. Most of these schools have been done away with. Sometimes I long for the return of matron, who looked after the whole hospital. Complaints are made today about dirt and dust in hospitals. But I am straying from the substance of the motion, so I will return to main issue.

The universities have developed two return-to-nursing courses with the aim of encouraging former nurses, who left the profession to rear their families, back to nursing. The Department is to launch a major initiative to co-ordinate workforce planning and development across the various disciplines.

Each nurse possesses particular skills. For example, a nurse caring for the elderly requires skills that are vastly different from those needed by a nurse in an intensive care unit or a cardiac surgery unit. They are all specialists in their fields. Elderly patients must be cared for in the most appropriate environment. Following, for example, an acute chest infection or a stroke, many elderly people need a stage of recovery away from the frantic pace of an acute hospital ward. They need a system of care tailored to their needs. As a result, skilled nurses and other

skilled staff are needed to look after them. The elderly require a mix of services, ranging from short-stay or long-stay rehabilitation to respite care.

There is also the question of orthopaedic nurses. Some months ago, a group of orthopaedic surgeons spoke to the Health Committee following the death of a patient who had been transferred from Craigavon Area Hospital to the Royal Victoria Hospital. The orthopaedic surgeons said that although there was a shortage of orthopaedic surgeons and operating theatre space, the greatest problem was a shortage of appropriately trained nurses, a problem in almost every department in the Health Service.

I referred to cardiac surgery when talking about the case of the American nurse. However, the nurses who work in that department are highly specialised. Mr Coulter recently proposed a motion on community nursing. That type of nursing is a skill in itself, and there is a messy shortage of staff there. We had a major debate on community nursing, so I will not repeat the points that I made then.

There is also a massive shortage of skilled doctors. Mr John Kelly spoke about Khalid Khan. I was directly involved in that matter, and, on the matter of skilled jobs, his case is relevant.

Dr Khalid Khan resigned from the post of locum heading the burns unit in the Royal. He headed the burns unit yet was only an locum, and he had been a locum for about two years. He applied for a job in England and was about to go there. It was not he who went to the media to get something done. It was the people in Omagh who suffered from the terrible ravages of the bomb there. Donna Marie McGullion and her father Malachy Keyes led the campaign and involved politicians. My colleague Joe Byrne took a lead in that, and Oliver Gibson was very supportive as well.

Political pressure was applied. The people concerned came to Stormont and met some of us. They also met the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Discussions were held with the Royal Victoria Hospital, with the deputy chief executive, Dr Ian Carson, and eventually with Dr Khan himself. The job was not only re-advertised, but the job description was rewritten. Dr Khan told me that his job had been to deal with the huge waiting list for treatment for burns and scalds. There is no way in which one man could do that, and Mr Khan has a wife and two children. An appointment is being made to a complementary post, but that was achieved by political pressure.

Mr J Kelly: I was not making a criticism of Dr Khan. My point was that we should not be dependent on one person to fill such a sensitive post. There really ought to be a number of people there. We cannot have a situation in which anaesthetists and heart surgeons can hold the rest of the Health Service to ransom. That is the fault of

the training regime and the lack of skills rather than of an individual.

Dr Hendron: I totally accept what Mr Kelly has said. I was not being critical of that point at all. Without political pressure, Dr Khan would still be there, trying in a lonely way to give support to the people of Omagh and treat the ravages of the bomb. That skills shortage also affected women with breast cancer who needed breast reconstruction. They too looked to Khalid Khan for help and were here at Stormont as well.

I just want to make one point about job skills in cardiac surgery. People are being sent to Britain and elsewhere for by-pass surgery, and I appreciate that there is a review of that. I also appreciate that the Minister of Higher and Further Education is not responsible at all for these matters. I want to put one question to him on that, however. It was well known for some months beforehand that a brilliant cardiac surgeon, Mr Hugh O'Kane, was retiring, yet a review of cardiac surgery was being set up. As everybody knew that he was retiring long before, why was his job not advertised well in advance?

There is a big shortage in primary care and of general practitioners. However, as there is a paper on primary care in the pipeline, I will not go into that now. I have already made reference to the orthopaedic nurses, and there is of course a shortage of orthopaedic surgeons. Apparently some years ago one orthopaedic surgeon did the lot — every joint, bone, et cetera. Nowadays, however, it is argued that if you are an expert on the knee joint, for example, you are not an expert on the ankle joint.

I move on to occupational therapists — the young ladies who do a fantastic job across the North of Ireland. There is a massive shortage there as well, though there has been a slight increase in numbers in the last two years. Nevertheless, there is something very wrong when a woman or man of 75 or 80 years of age has to wait a year for somebody to make an assessment when maybe all that is needed is an extra banister on the stairs. I do not want to belittle occupational therapists, but there is something wrong with the system. However, that issue is being examined.

There has been a wide-ranging review of pathology, and some medical laboratory scientific officers have been at Stormont in the past 12 months — young men and women who are highly qualified. Some Members, including myself, were recently invited to the Royal Victoria Hospital, where we met laboratory personnel from haematology and pathology. These people have honours degrees and tremendous expertise, yet they are being paid peanuts. There is something very wrong there.

Health visitors have special skills, but there is also a massive shortage in this area. The same goes for midwives and social workers — if we were to go into the question of social workers and the shortage there, where would we finish?

My final point is in connection with human resources management. I have already stated that the Executive and the Assembly will have to look at the Department, the boards and the trusts. In making an assessment of skills shortages, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety currently receives a central download from the human resources management system each trust and board headquarters and agency of health and personal social services.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Hendron, I ask you to bring your remarks to a close.

Dr Hendron: Quarterly, the director of information systems extracts data from each site, which is then amalgamated and sent electronically to the Department. Although the human resources management system has been developed, there has been little or no guidance from the Department about standardisation of codes, so an accurate assessment of shortages cannot be made.

I thank Danny O'Connor for moving the motion. I know that Members will give every support they can to the young men and women working in the Health Service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: A substantial number of people wish to speak. We need to leave time for Mr O'Connor and the Minister to wind up, and I do not want to limit the debate. I ask Members to bear that in mind.

Ms Morrice: I understand the position, and I will be brief.

There is a terrible irony in the skills shortages here. It is a matter of concern that they extend to many different sectors. Many efforts over many years have gone into securing jobs and inward investment — bums on seats, if you like. However, that is of no value at all if young people and the unemployed do not have the skills to enable them to do those jobs.

It is commendable that we have managed to cut unemployment by half in 15 years. When I started work in the BBC business unit in 1987, unemployment was running at about 14% or 15%. Now it is down to 6%. That is excellent, but there is no doubt that there are skills shortages of considerable proportions, which can only get worse before they get better unless we move very fast. The reason we find ourselves in this situation is simple — a lack of strategic planning, a lack of vision. When we simply create jobs, the focus is on short-termism. Creating jobs is grand, but of little value if we do not have the skills to enable the posts to be filled.

I appreciate the point made by Mr Carrick about the need to create jobs that are relevant to the workforce, and a workforce that is relevant to the jobs. Such a correlation between labour supply and labour demand is important to our economic future.

11.30 am

I am grateful to Members for raising the matter of education. That is hugely important — the 20% figure that we have been given of working adults who are unable to read the instructions on a medicine bottle is totally unacceptable and must be addressed. However, that is a responsibility of Departments other than the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment.

Focusing now on the Health Service, we are aware of the publicity surrounding the recruitment of Filipino nurses. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is probably best placed to talk about a lack of skills. It said in its submission to the draft Programme for Government

“Despite 100 new training places for nurses created this year, and for the next three years, the RCN believes that this is still not sufficient to address the real and severe nurse shortages gripping the Northern Ireland Health Service.”

It went on to say that 250 more training places for nurses need to be created each year to address those shortages, which the RCN said were caused by a reduction in such places throughout the 1990s.

I wish to draw Members' attention, and possibly that of Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to the fact that only 39 nurses — and Dr Hendron referred to this — completed the return to professional practice course last year. Is that because they received no remuneration, in spite of working around 100 hours per week? This is about the value we place on Health Service staff.

Attracting young women and, taking Mr O'Connor's point, young men to the nursing profession is not just about training. It is about ensuring that we value, through pay and respect, the work they do. It is about giving nurses equity with other health professionals and, as the RCN rightly suggested, placing them at the core of improving the health of our people. It is important that that be the way forward.

The Khalid Khan case, which I mentioned, as did Mr J Kelly and Dr Hendron, exposes the skills shortage, the unavailability of highly skilled people like Dr Khan and the lack of equipment. This also concerns the burns unit — I am sure we are all glad that Dr Khan was able to stay.

Other professions have been mentioned — occupational therapists, medical laboratory staff, et cetera. I am disappointed that I have not heard of proper research in those areas. Dr Birnie mentioned the priority skills unit that is being set up. We welcome that important news, but it is vital that research begins soon so that we can know exactly what skills are missing to enable us to fill the gaps.

In conclusion, if we want to achieve greatness in the new Northern Ireland, we badly need to prove that we are worthy of it.

Mr McFarland: There is a danger of the motion's falling between two stools. I have particular remarks to make about the NHS, and I hope that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will hear them. There is clearly a shortage of staff in the NHS. Medical staff are leaving, and there are chronic shortages in some disciplines. That leads to overwork and disillusionment for those remaining, and so the cycle begins again. There is uncertainty about the future of primary care and acute hospitals — both these issues are currently the subjects of studies — which has led to a loss of confidence. We need to sort out the NHS now. The system needs to be reorganised and settled down.

There is a shortage of nurses. Some are leaving, but, perhaps more seriously, fewer are joining. I was speaking recently to a former very senior nurse. She is retired, but she visits schools. She recently visited a sixth form to talk about nursing. Out of that entire sixth form only two students were interested, and she believes that only one of the two will actually go on to nurse. That is worrying. There seems to be a culture in Northern Ireland that regards nursing as no longer an attractive profession. Perhaps that is not surprising given the view that nurses are not paid enough.

The recent short-term solutions have been to import nurses from Australia and the Philippines and to encourage nurses back into the profession. I recently met a lady who trained in the Royal Victoria Hospital but spent her entire nursing life in America. She returned here to retire but was persuaded back into nursing. She is having an absolute ball, back at the Royal, having completed her retraining course. That solution can only be short-term.

I am concerned too that the Department may not know how many trained nurses there are here. Lots of ladies train but leave to have families. I wonder whether a record is kept of all trained nurses and doctors so that they can be contacted, given the shortage, to see if they are interested in returning.

I am also worried that the Department may not have a proper human resources department with the necessary expertise. Some of the shortages may be attributed to slightly daft reasons. Dr Hendron touched on the subject of occupational therapists. That is an interesting area. Some elderly people, or those who live on their own or in Housing Executive property, need handles to help them get up in the toilet or bathroom or move outside, and the only people qualified to decide where these handles should go are occupational therapists. The skilled tradesmen who fit these handles and rails — presumably they do such jobs and know where to put them — are not allowed to do this work for health and safety reasons. If someone fell, the tradesmen would end up in court. That

is daft. Hundreds of people need such measures fitted, but there are insufficient occupational therapists to make the necessary visits. That leads to the perception of a chronic shortage of occupational therapists.

If someone were to come up with a design based, for example, on the height of the patient, that could determine the point above a bath at which a handle should be placed, thus enabling tradesmen to fit them, would there be this perception of an enormous shortage of occupational therapists? It seems crazy that no one can be bothered to find a solution to that. We prefer to disappoint and inconvenience hundreds of elderly people rather than try to find a practical solution to the problem. The Department needs a proper personnel branch to develop solutions for recruiting, training and retaining staff.

Finally, I will move to the general skills shortage. Businessmen tell of the abilities of potential staff and their enormous skills shortage — some cannot add and others cannot write for toffee. Universities say that they have to run courses for their first year students — to retrain them. Shorts has set up a department to deal with that. Clearly there is a problem with providing these necessary skills.

I ask the Minister to get together with his Colleagues in the Departments of Education and Enterprise, Trade and Investment to produce a common training system or curriculum that will give employers staff with the right skills to the right standard. Until we do that, we will have a skills shortage.

I support the motion.

Mrs I Robinson: The motion speaks of the skill shortage in the Health Service and calls on the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to take steps to address the problem. However, the skill shortage is due to other factors in the Health Service. I agree with Dr Birnie that the motion could have been broadened to include action that the Minister of Health needs to take urgently.

First, there is the contributing factor of getting enrolled nurses to become registered nurses. There are over 400 enrolled nurses here. If the majority were to become registered, it would make a big impact on the skills shortage. We need to find out why they do not want to do that and with what emoluments they can be encouraged. Is it the lack of reward, the undervaluing of the service or the cost of conversion courses? We must find out why we have so many enrolled nurses who remain so.

Secondly, there is another hidden factor — staff bullying by seniors. The money paid out to those who have taken claims against trusts is an indication of the number of skilled staff, including nurses, leaving the service. A recent meeting in Lisburn for staff being bullied in the Health Service attracted over 200 people. The situation is so bad that a support group has been set up. While we

do not know the exact numbers that have left because of bullying, we will get a better indication when we know what money is being paid out— a factor that I am currently pursuing with the Minister of Health.

Thirdly, some 1,500 staff took early retirement in the last three years. Technically, each year 500 skilled staff take early retirement and are lost to the service. To cover for that loss and to make up the shortfall we would have to recruit twice that number. Failure to do so has worsened the situation. Perhaps the Health Service should operate the same policy as applies in education, where school governors only look at an application for early retirement if it will have no impact on the service given to pupils and if a suitable replacement can be found. Can this not be done in the Health Service?

11.45 am

A written answer on 7 December 2000 showed that more than 8,000 staff are on long-term sick leave. How many of these account for the skills shortage? I doubt if anyone knows. However, if that matter were tackled, it would reduce the numbers of skilled staff needed.

Finally, there is the bad decision making that demoralises staff, causing them to leave and go elsewhere. Take the decision to close the Jubilee and transfer maternity services to the Royal.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the closing of the Jubilee and the transfer to the Royal really relevant to this debate?

Mrs I Robinson: With the greatest of respect, it is. To date, some 40 staff have quit, which is very relevant, and time after time, services have had to close. Senior staff have even gone to other countries, taking a pay cut at the same time, because they have been so demoralised by the bad decisions continually being made.

That serious issue must be addressed if we are to retain the skilled staff that are so essential. It is evident to all that there are a number of problems in the Health Service, which, if tackled, would reduce the skill shortage and, thereby, the need for overseas recruitment.

I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are four more Members who have indicated a wish to speak. If those Members could limit themselves to five minutes each, we should be able to get through everyone.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. It would be remiss of me not to say that it is unfortunate that the debate should be used to attack the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That is what seems to be happening. Constant negative reporting, fuelled by many in the House, does not help to make the Health Service attractive to work in, yet it only functions because of the staff's hard-working commitment. The truth is that chronic

under-funding, a lack of planning and successive British absentee Ministers have had a detrimental effect on it.

I want to broaden the debate and concentrate on employment and skilled workers generally. I would like the Minister to ensure that business competition is not hobbled by a lack of people with the right skills. We have to reach out to the disaffected and socially disadvantaged and persuade them that learning is not a burden, and they must have the means to learn. We must build on what has succeeded in post-16 education and training and create a scheme that is even better. We must set up a learning and skills council as a non- departmental public body that will work with employers of all sizes to assess their current and future skills needs and fund effective training that is open to as many as possible. Small businesses especially need help with training. Many firms require a skilled workforce to enable them to move into new product areas and provide new opportunities.

The learning and skills council should seek to break down the barriers that have stopped people undertaking training that would put them on the right path to a job. Barriers exist for all kinds of reasons, including religious discrimination, age, disability and gender. The learning and skills council must ensure that it funds training to suit people's needs. Colleges and training providers should find innovative ways of getting training to those who want it. Making a decision to update skills or change career should not mean that people have to disrupt the rest of their lives to get the right training.

The learning and skills council should take over from the training and enterprise councils and organise training locally. Council members should be drawn from local areas, and a percentage should be employers who are best placed to know what skills are and will be needed locally.

Councils should have about £100 million to spend on training, much of which would lead to qualifications, though some would not. Some training might help people keep up to date with changes in technology, while other training might assist those who missed out on formal education earlier in life and improve their chances in the job market. Other training would help people to make more of themselves and realise their potential as individuals.

The aim of the council should be to bring thousands of people back to learning. It should work over a large area by identifying colleges or training providers and encouraging them to work together instead of competing. That would make the most of public money and ensure that no effort was wasted.

Planning co-ordination should reduce the limited training provision caused by rapid technological change. It is unrealistic to continue investing in specialist equipment, such as printing, when an employer's premises could be used as a centre of excellence to train trainers in the

latest technologies. Councils can recognise local needs and provide specialist courses through in-house training.

The point of the learning and skills council is to bring more people into learning for longer and to raise standards. It would bring a new and sharper focus to the way training is funded, help build strong businesses and communities and assist individuals to play an active part in securing economic success.

Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Beggs: I am pleased that Mr O'Connor has raised this important matter. I wish to concentrate on the shortages in the health and social services sector as they relate to experiences in my constituency.

First, there have been unduly long waiting lists for occupational therapy services. Assessments for some of my constituents have taken 12 to 18 months. I acknowledge that there has been some additional investment in occupational therapy, but there has also been additional responsibility — for example, for wheelchair assessment and allocation — which is absorbing some of that investment.

Occupational therapy assessment can affect the quality of life of the infirm, elderly and disabled. Many home improvements await assessments — whether it be for handrails, showers or heating upgrades. Those adaptations enable constituents to live longer in their homes and, thus, reduce the cost to the community care budget that would be incurred if they were to go into residential care.

My constituents have also made me aware of the pressures on specialist speech and language therapy in schools and the patchy provision of speech therapy for those seeking treatment. One constituent had his speech therapy interrupted for eight months because his therapist was ill and there was difficulty with recruiting a replacement. I quote from a letter that I received from a health trust:

"Our experience over the past year is that we have had to advertise posts a number of times before filling them and that the number of applicants applying for posts is very small. In some instances there are no applicants for posts."

I have raised that with the Minister responsible and understand that a review group was to report at the end of last year. I do not know whether the Professions Allied to Medicine (PAMs) group has yet met.

Finally, I turn to the shortages in the nursing profession — a number of Members have mentioned this — which are limiting the quality of health care that can be provided. In the early 1990s, we exported nurses. We trained many able students; we did not have sufficient vacancies; and nurses were forced to leave.

Nursing training was reduced from over 800 to about 400 — a huge drop. It was crazy to reduce the training so dramatically, and now we have shortages. During that period there have been technological changes that require

more intensive nursing. Also, demographic changes have resulted in a more elderly population that requires additional community care services.

There seems to be a variety of estimates of the current number of nursing vacancies. In answer to a question that I asked last year, the Minister estimated 141 vacancies. The Assembly's research department estimates that the trusts and boards have some 300 to 400 vacancies. In the independent sector there are a further 300 to 400 vacancies. There is a big question mark about the quality of information in the Department. I welcome the fact that 100 additional nurses are now to be trained each year, but there is considerable doubt about whether that will be enough.

I have one constituent who sought from an early age to become a nurse. Her qualifications would meet the requirements of the nursing boards in Scotland, but she was not successful in Northern Ireland. Higher qualifications are required here. We are now exporting students for training in other parts of the United Kingdom, when the demand is here. There is mismanagement in the Department.

12.00

In addition, in answer to a question the Minister said that 107 work permits have been issued here for nurses from outside the European Union. That mismanagement is a result of the existing structure. There is a central Department, but I do not know what it does. It does not deliver services. We need one authority to be responsible for training nurses with flexibility in its budget to enable it to deliver what is needed. Linking the delivery of services to a central health authority is part of the solution.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate Mr O'Connor on tabling the motion. As the Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee said, an inquiry into skills training and needs in the public and private sector industries is ongoing. Ninety organisations have indicated that they want to make submissions. Sadly, however, only one private sector employer has agreed to submit material to the inquiry. The remainder are in the public sector. That is an indication of our enterprise deficit. However, the Committee is trying to get more private sector employers to give it their opinions.

The motion refers to the skills shortages in Northern Ireland in general and in the Health Service in particular. It is a result of the mismatch between supply and demand in the labour market, and that is a challenge for us all. There is a particular challenge with the long-term unemployed, central to whom are the 20% of people who lack basic numeracy and literacy skills. That must be tackled, and I hope that the Minister will be able to do something about it over the next two to three years.

People who live in large urban housing estates and have endured long-term unemployment do not have any hope. We must give them hope with skills training that will enable them to compete.

There is also the shortage of skilled personnel in the Health Service. I agree with Dr Hendron that, in the past, seven hospitals provided nursing training. I am not sure about the merits of centralising all such training in universities. I lectured in further education and saw many aspiring nurses do a pre-nursing course before their hospital training. University training may be desirable, though, for higher skills.

Mr McFarland said that a survey of sixth formers at a secondary school showed that only two people were interested in nursing. I agree. It is no longer the attractive option it once was, and it is more difficult to get into. Nowadays, one has to be a high-flying academic to get into nursing. However, nursing is mainly about caring. Very often people who study nursing do not need such high-level academic entry qualifications. Many students go on to do the Advanced GVNQ in health and social care, which is not the proper route for people who want to be nurses.

Mr J Kelly: I am sure the Member is not suggesting that nurses have lower academic qualifications than other professionals. Nursing is a critical area that touches on life or death.

Mr Deputy Speaker: May I remind Mr Byrne that if he gives way his time will be limited.

Mr Byrne: Yes, but I was being sensitive to the Member's interests. I do not think that my comments indicate that I am in favour of lesser qualifications for nurses. In the past when nurses were trained in hospitals more people wanted to enter the profession. Fewer people are now entering it, and there is a shortage of 800 nurses here. As Mr Beggs said, we are importing trained nurses, while in the past we exported them.

Also, when we had matrons, there was a leadership role for nurses. Nurses feel demoralised. Ward managers are largely in charge of their responsibilities, and many of them find that difficult to cope with. That can be tackled if there is co-ordination between the Department of Health and the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, and I hope that that will happen.

Lastly, when the Committee concludes its inquiry we will have a clearer picture of the skills gap in general and, I hope, in the Health Service in particular.

Mr R Hutchinson: I support the motion, but it is rather unfortunate that its wording seems to point the finger at the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment. I am sure that was not intentional. Lest Dr Farren think I have made a new year resolution to give him an easy ride, he need not panic. He will not get an easy ride. Both Dr Farren and the

Committee have taken this seriously and are doing an excellent job trying to rectify the imbalances in this area.

In spite of the disturbing fact that little research evidence supports the apparent shortage of staff and expertise in some hospital trusts, significant recent examples confirm that the standard of service being offered by the trusts is considerably burdened. We read horrific stories in newspapers, and constituents tell us about the difficulties that they encounter. It appears that meeting current needs from the indigenous market is no longer an option. Instead of recruiting from inside Northern Ireland, which has an unacceptable level of unemployment — trusts, as Dr Hendron said, have had to travel.

I felt as if I was back in church on Sunday morning, because every time my clergyman says "And finally," I know that he will go on for another 45 minutes. Dr Hendron said that a few times this morning, and I was panicking lest none of us would get a chance to speak.

However, I agree with what he said about bringing nurses from the Philippines and Australia to remedy our shortages. Although there is no research to prove it, evidence suggests that there are not even enough agency nurses. Can the Minister of Health explain why research into skills shortages here is so inadequate? Establishing the extent of her Department's need would be a useful first step towards dealing with the dire situation. How does she intend to address the surprising lack of research?

The problem is not restricted to nursing. Leading practitioners and medical laboratory staff are also in the spotlight over their frustration with a system that has consistently underfunded acute medical needs. Members will recall our debate a few months ago on laboratory technicians. They feel under pressure, and their needs are not being adequately met. Indeed, the difficulty is less the responsibility of Dr Farren than of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who seems to be less than eager to put it right. There is a logjam, and the Health Minister needs to acknowledge her responsibility to sort the situation out. Can she assure the House that she has done more than simply adopt the policies of her predecessors? What significant steps has she taken to answer the complaints of patients, practitioners and nursing and technical medical staff about the chronic underfunding?

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is not here, because the debate is a matter for the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment. Should the Member be able to attack the Health Minister so vociferously? She is not present to defend herself in a debate, which, ostensibly, does not concern her Department.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I accept Mr J Kelly's point. Several Members have strayed from the subject of the

debate, and it is inappropriate to direct questions to a Minister who is not in the Chamber.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The motion specifically mentions health and social services.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I take the Member's point, but given the time limits, we should allow Mr R Hutchinson to continue.

Mr R Hutchinson: I am delighted to have stirred up such debate. We have a sophisticated society, but how confident can patients be in a Health Service that is struggling to meet its needs, particularly its staffing needs? One is often left feeling that Minister de Brún's Health Service is in urgent need of a radical cure.

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): I welcome the debate, and I have listened to all the contributions with considerable interest. It is important that Members reflect concern about matters such as the skills needs of our economy.

Most Members who dealt with the part of the motion that refers to the Health Service accept that those matters do not lie within my sphere of responsibility. I am sure that my Colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will take note of the comments made in respect of her responsibilities and respond to Members accordingly.

There is, of course, a degree of overlap on a small number of Health Service related issues. In our universities and, to some extent, in our colleges of further and higher education provision is made for the professional needs of the Health Service. Members need to appreciate that the provision of places on such courses is, by and large, a matter for negotiation between the institutions concerned, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the trusts and the health boards.

12.15 pm

Therefore it is only in a limited way that I have even indirect responsibility. It is up to the universities and the colleges, in the context of those negotiations, to determine the level of provision that is made for places on their degree and other courses. I respond to the debate from the more general perspective that is suggested in the opening part of the motion.

I was particularly pleased to note the comments of the Chairperson of the Committee who reminded Members that the Committee is now engaged in an extensive study of the skills needs of our economy. Obviously, from the range of responses received and from some of the submissions already made, there is great interest in the Committee's work. I look forward to its report.

I want to make some general points which are pertinent to addressing the skills needs of our economy.

My first point, to which some Members have referred, is that we are operating in a labour market that is much more positive and challenging than it was a decade ago, or perhaps even five years ago. With unemployment at the low level of approximately 6%, and employment at a record high, we have a tighter labour market. Certain skills are in high demand, and pressures, of a kind not previously experienced, are being felt across a number of sectors.

Members will appreciate — and this has also been referred to — that people who were trained here in various occupations have left Northern Ireland. That has had consequences for the Health Service, and we are attempting to attract specialists from overseas, from very distant lands, to make up the deficits.

Our labour market is not isolated, and our situation is very open. There is considerable mobility in the Health Service and the construction industry, with whose representatives I have been in regular contact over recent months. They point to the highly attractive rates of remuneration and job opportunities available south of the border, factors that are drawing many away who have skills that are needed by the construction industry. We are working hard to make up the deficits thereby created.

We also see these problems in the information and communications technology area and others. These pressures are not simply a result of our economic successes in recent years. Pressures are also from without — whether south of the border, across the Irish Sea, or globally. Members will appreciate that the information and communications technology sector is operating in a labour market which, globally, is experiencing considerable skills shortages. We therefore need to undertake more detailed planning to enable us meet the skills needs of our economy and ensure that all its sectors are provided with sufficient workers with the highest possible level of technical and professional skills.

Some Members suggested that there is an absence of strategic planning. That is far from the truth. A considerable degree of strategic planning is constantly under way in my Department, and that is reflected in the Programme for Government, as those who have read and studied it know.

We have a well-endowed education and training infrastructure to meet the challenges, which many Members frequently acknowledge. A report published last month by the Northern Ireland Economic Council, written by Prof Michael Best, a world-renowned researcher and commentator on economic planning from the University of Massachusetts, states

"Northern Ireland's educational system offers a basis for competitive advantage with considerable potential. Few regions in the world of the size of Northern Ireland have the range of university level disciplines in engineering and science-related areas, particularly in information technology."

Elsewhere in his report, Prof Best refers to the size of the information technology programmes at the University of Ulster and Queen's University as being "particularly impressive". He describes them as

"a magnet for information technology companies given the global shortage of skills in this area. The opportunities for industrial policy are considerable."

Later in his report, Prof Best points to the considerable potential of our further education colleges to help to meet the skills needs of our economy.

Members will appreciate that the professor's report is not simply a list of compliments. He makes criticisms but also recommends plans to meet our skills needs. I agree with some of his criticisms, some of which have been voiced here this morning. However, action is being taken in response to almost all of the points, and I remind Members of some of the initiatives that are underway.

We are not yet achieving 100% success, but any objective assessment would conclude that we are making considerable headway in the drive to meet our skill needs. The major focus of my Department, since its establishment, has been on avoiding skills shortages. I have taken steps to ensure that the vocational education and training system is focussed on and addresses industry's needs.

These measures include placing greater emphasis on researching the labour market. One Member said that there is no evidence of any such research, but a considerable amount has been completed, and reported on, in recent years. I invite Members who may not be familiar with my Department's annual bulletin to examine its wide-ranging set of research reports on many aspects of our labour market. That negates any suggestion that there is an absence of detailed research into the labour market here.

I have increased the number of places in higher and further education, particularly in vocational areas of employment growth. The number of modern apprenticeships, for example, now stands at more than 3,000, and it is increasing. Many of these include apprenticeships for the construction industry. The areas in the higher and further education sectors, such as information and communications technologies, electronic and software engineering, manufacturing engineering, tourism and catering are all receiving particular attention to the extent that the number of places available to students has increased significantly. In my recent proposals for new forms of financial support for students, I have identified key areas requiring special attention. My objective is to give those from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds access to further and higher education.

Increasing access to education and training for all through New Deal programmes, the bridge-to-employment initiatives, the promotion of individual learning accounts and the opening of a considerable number of

"learnirect" centres across Northern Ireland is further evidence that the strategy to meet skills needs is being implemented. Indeed, most Members are now familiar with the phrase "life-long learning", which encapsulates many of those initiatives. Only yesterday, I attended an event organised by the Educational Guidance Service for Adults to publicise adult learners' week, which, although not its only initiative, will devote particular attention to the basic skills needs of many adults.

I sympathise with the remarks made about that problem by many Members. It causes me a great deal of concern. The programme will receive all the resources that we can make available. The Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee and other Members reflected a degree of concern over the budgetary allocations required to deal with that. I am working hard to ensure that additional allocations will be made available from the Executive programme funds.

The strategic report detailing how we should address the need for basic skills, literacy and numeracy was published shortly before Christmas by the basic skills unit. It is a detailed report, and I trust that the resources needed to implement its recommendations will be made available. Members may recall that the "Back to Your Future" campaign was launched recently in conjunction with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to attract highly skilled and experienced people back to Northern Ireland. Companies have been pleased with the numbers who have logged on to the web site.

12.30 pm

Members might be interested to know that there have been over 2,000 hits on the web site. Sixteen companies advertised job vacancies, and in a short time 150 applications were attracted. A considerable degree of satisfaction is being expressed. It is a small initiative, designed to attract people from Northern Ireland currently working abroad to return and make their future here.

Other initiatives either directly or indirectly involving my Department address skills needs. One of those is the interdepartmental working group on employability. A Member referred to the needs of those who leave school with minimal qualifications, who are at the margins, as it were, of society and at risk from whatever appeal there is in crime, drugs and so on. Reports on their condition and circumstances are among the reasons for that committee's establishment. In that context, we will address the barriers experienced to becoming employed and engaging in training programmes. We hope, as a result, to be much more effective in directing our training resources.

I wish to draw Members' attention to another initiative that is more directly the responsibility of the Minister of Education, though my Department is represented. A committee, chaired by Prof Sean Fulton, has been set up to look at careers guidance. Mr O'Connor and others referred to the urgent need for effective careers information

and guidance in schools and further education establishments to give young people the best possible information, guidance and direction on the opportunities available.

Specific points were raised that I want to address. Reference was made to the report from the Federation of Small Businesses, which has just come to my desk. That identified a number of skills needs and deficits. The small business sector is probably under a lot of pressure as a result of expansion in some of our major enterprises, and its needs should be addressed in particular. I draw Members' attention to the fact that, with the University for Industry's support for adult training, small business and its training needs are receiving help from the courses being set up by the learn direct centres across Northern Ireland. Members can play an important role by encouraging more adults to take out individual learning accounts, which will enable them to avail of the training and education opportunities.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, I remind you of the time constraint.

Dr Farren: I am about to draw my remarks to a close.

I could refer to other initiatives, but those that I have mentioned should show Members that there is a multifaceted strategy because the issues to be addressed are wide-ranging and multifaceted. There is no single answer to the skills needs of our economy. A range of initiatives is being taken, many in a way that indicates the growing partnership between employers, trade unions and the training and educational institutions. We should pay tribute to all those involved in the Departments, the agencies and the institutions. We may not have got it all right, but we are clearly determined that we will get it right.

Mr O'Connor: I accept that the wording of my motion means that it may fall between two stools. I had no intention of criticising Dr Farren or Ms de Brún. I merely wanted to open up debate on the subject as a result of needs identified by Mr R Hutchinson and Mr Beggs, who have received the same types of complaint as I have about one-year-long waiting lists for occupational therapy and children waiting 18 months for treatment for dyspraxia, which is not considered a priority. We talk about adult learning, but we cannot address the basic learning needs of young people because of the lack of facilities.

The motion might have been worded more clearly, but it was worded in response to constituency needs. I had spoken to various health trusts and was advised that while funds were available, trained people were not. I tabled the motion as a result of that information.

A much wider picture has emerged, however, given that various Members, starting with Dr Birnie, have referred to adult education. Mr Carrick elaborated on the point, stating that 20% of people starting on Jobskills, about 1,800 people, lack basic numeracy and literacy skills. We must address that. We have a multifaceted approach, strategic thinking and planning, but we still have

unemployed people. We are bringing in people to do jobs that unemployed people here have not been trained to do. That may be an oversimplification of the problem because we do accept movement in the labour market. As Dr Hendron said, nurses come here from the Philippines while, as Mr Beggs said, people leave our shores to go to Scotland to nurse.

A hard core of unemployed people must be affected by our actions if we are to target social need. As the Minister acknowledged, young people are those most likely to be influenced by crime or drugs, and I am glad that he is aware of that.

Mr Carrick also touched on the export of skills. We do not want to create a brain drain; we want people to stay and help us become more prosperous. We do not want our best people to go somewhere else. That is why it is important to focus on training for the jobs that are here and need to be safeguarded. In an ideal world, everybody would like everyone to be working and earning £1,000 a week, but then we would have to bring in people from other countries to do some of the more labour-intensive tasks.

Ms Morrice mentioned a lack of vision, saying that in the past there was job creation without thought of sustainability. There were quick fixes by previous Ministers who threw a few jobs at a sector, thinking that if it were to collapse in a couple of years, no real harm would be done because a new Government would be in place and it would be somebody else's problem. We want to create a sustainable economy here that can develop and make people much more prosperous.

Mr John Kelly said that 55% of small businesses are unhappy with the availability of skilled labour, such as bricklayers, joiners, carpenters, plumbers and so on. These people are important. If we are going to have a factory that employs 200 people in the IT industry, we need people to build the factory in the first place. People seem to be obsessed with IT, thinking that everything is going to be about computers, but factories and houses will always have to be built.

People can earn big money by going to Dublin or elsewhere, so we have to ensure that we create the type of economy in which they can earn that sort of money here.

Mr McFarland mentioned alternative solutions. He suggested that time could be managed better by the simple implementation of certain aides-mémoires to people carrying out occupational therapy work. The purpose of the debate was to try to throw out a lot of new ideas and to ensure that people could listen to what others were saying and get some degree of focus on what is needed.

Mrs Robinson spoke about staff bullying. It is horrific that so many people attended a meeting on that. I have heard of people being bullied at work, but I did not realise that it was happening on such a horrendous scale. If we

have 500 early retirements in addition to normal age retirements each year, there is clearly a great need to recruit, not just to tread water but to remedy the deficits that Mr J Kelly and Mr M Murphy mentioned and which we saw so much of in the past.

Mr Murphy also made an important point about identifying and targeting local training needs. The training for people in Fermanagh might be geared towards hospitality, whereas in east or north Antrim it might be geared towards hospitality and tourism, and in other areas to construction or IT.

12.45 pm

That is an important point. We want to achieve local input, and local democracy is supposed to do that, yet Mr Beggs highlighted the 107 work permits that were granted to nurses from countries outside the EU, including the Philippines.

According to weekend television reports, hospital trusts in the United Kingdom have been bringing in nurses from Africa who carry the HIV virus. There are potential dangers in bringing in staff from Third-World countries. I do not wish to appear xenophobic, but we need to examine how our staff are trained.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you bring your remarks to a close.

Mr O'Connor: I am almost finished.

Dr Hendron spoke about nurses and mentioned Dr Khan, whose case has been well rehearsed.

Dr Byrne touched on one of the most relevant issues, which is the need to give hope to those who do not seem to have any optimism and who lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. He also mentioned training schools for nurses, which, in the past, were part of hospitals rather than universities. In the past, there were state enrolled nurses (SEN) and state registered nurses (SRN) — this seemed to work well. But now we have a shortage of nurses. There is no reason for SRNs not going to university or for SENs not taking part in nurse training programmes.

I welcome the Minister's announcement of special attention for adult learners and additional money from the Executive programme funds to address some of the problems mentioned this morning.

I thank Members for their attentiveness and you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your patience with me.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to take immediate steps to address the problem of skill shortage in Northern Ireland, particularly in the field of health and social services.

The sitting was suspended at 12.47 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): A Cheann Comhairle, should we send a search party for the Member who is to move the motion?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do apologise.

Mr M McGuinness: It is not exactly the Rottweiler snapping at the heels of the Minister. Silence is golden. I am worried about Mr Wilson.

Mrs E Bell: There is no show without Punch.

Mr M McGuinness: I am very concerned about him.

Mrs E Bell: I rushed back here.

Mr McElduff: I know. I did not want to miss anything either. It is most unusual.

Mr M McGuinness: We need ten for a quorum.

Mr Tierney: Mr Deputy Speaker, what is the procedure now?

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is highly discourteous. It is the first time in the two years of the Assembly's life that this has happened. Since Mr Wilson, who is to move the motion, is not here, I will suspend the sitting.

The sitting was suspended at 2.05 pm and resumed at 2.18 pm (Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry for the delay. If I had called the motion in the absence of the Member who is to move it, it would have fallen at once, and that would have meant the cancellation of all this afternoon's business.

Mr C Murphy: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mr S Wilson has treated the House with contempt by not being here at the appointed time. The Business Committee allocated two hours for the debate to be followed by a debate on the homeless, which has also been allocated two hours, and the Adjournment. Can you rule on whether Mr Wilson's motion, given that he did not have the decency to be here to move it when he should have been, will get the full two hours? Will the other debates go ahead as scheduled on the timetable?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have a great deal of sympathy for your point, Mr Murphy. I hope the debate can be concluded at the scheduled time. I will decide if I can extend it closer to the time.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In doing that, are we setting a precedent for further occurrences like this when a Member is late? Are we to have a laissez-faire attitude to those who do not turn up on time to move motions in their name? Are we setting a precedent?

Mr P Robinson: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Was the precedent not set when a Sinn Féin/IRA Minister did not bother to come to the Assembly in time? These people did not get up to whinge then.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Surely we would all like to proceed with the business. The decision on whether a precedent is being set can await further study by the relevant Committee.

Mr Tierney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The business was suspended on the day mentioned by Mr P Robinson. The SDLP would favour suspending the business completely on this occasion given what has happened. You say that we can go ahead because the business was not called earlier. I am tempted to propose that business be suspended, albeit that I have not heard the reason for the delay. If the reason is good enough, I will be prepared to accept it. I know that, on returning, we were in favour of suspension. However, I am prepared to wait and hear the reason or excuse for the delay.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will now make the resumed sitting legal by asking the Clerk to read the motion.

Mr J Kelly: On a further point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I ask again if we are setting a precedent.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The answer is no.

SCHOOLS: CAPITAL SPENDING

Mr S Wilson: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Education to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of the capital spending budget between the various school systems in Northern Ireland.

First, Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise to you and to the House for not being present at the appointed time to move the motion. I accept that it was my responsibility to be here then. Unfortunately, because of engagements in another capacity and traffic delays, which I had not anticipated, I arrived here three or four minutes late. I do not blame any particular Minister for that. I did not come by public transport. Nevertheless, the state of the roads and the traffic congestion in Belfast are such that the House needs to address the problem, and I hope that it will do so.

I can understand why Sinn Féin, one of whose Ministers had the misfortune of not turning up here on time for a debate, would wish to have the issue pushed aside. The reason I asked for —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The motion has been called. You are the proposer, and you have not yet referred to it. Will you kindly get on with the debate.

Mr S Wilson: Had I not apologised I would have been accused of treating the House with contempt. I wanted to spend a moment or two doing that.

The motion is timely because the Minister of Education will, in the next three or four weeks, be making an announcement on capital spending for schools. It will be his second opportunity to allocate substantial sums of money — £72 million last year and £93 million in this year's budget for capital spending. In certain parties of the Assembly, and outside among the general public, there was great disquiet last year when the schools capital programme was announced. Comments were made in the House. The Minister had been informed by members of the Education Committee that they expected fairness, and after the announcement, and especially in the sector of the school system that caters for the Protestant section of the population, there was great anger at the blatant and raw sectarian way in which the Minister had allocated his spending.

Of course, it was presented with all the spin that one expects in modern politics. The Minister talked about the great boost from the largest ever amount of money for the capital building programme, across all sectors, primary, secondary, grammar, special, integrated, and to all the different education providers.

Then one looked at the £72 million and at how it was to be allocated to the different sectors. Even at an initial glance, the figures gave cause for concern: £27·7 million of the £72 million was for the controlled sector, the sector that caters mostly for the Protestant population. For the

sector that caters mostly for the Roman Catholic population, there was £40.3 million—an imbalance of 55% to 38%.

That was bad enough. However, when one took away the Minister's flannel and fancy accounting footwork, there was the startling picture of an imbalance of three to one against the sector that caters for the Protestant population: the Minister included in his announcement £6.7 million for Regent House Grammar School in Newtownards in spite of the fact that on 11 May 1998 the then Education Minister, Mr Worthington, had already announced that £6.7 million would be spent on Regent House. So, to pad the figures out, the Minister announced something again that had been said more than a year before.

If that was not enough, we then had the matter of Antrim Grammar School—oddly enough, this was the only such instance of this—where £7.7 million was to be spent. But one had to read the small print of the Minister's statement to find that he never intended to spend that money. The project was to be started when money became available, and it was not anticipated that it would become available in the financial year for which the announcement was made, and, indeed, it did not. When that total of £14.4 million was deducted, the amount of money left for the education sector that caters for the Protestant population was only £13.3 million. The ratio was three to one.

2.30 pm

Of course, it could be argued—and this would have been a reasonable defence—that the spending was meant to reflect not the balance of pupils but the projects that had been suggested or the state of the schools in each sector. No one would have found that unfair. I do not care if money is spent on a school that caters mainly for Catholics or on one that caters mainly for Protestants if it can be justified by the fact that one sector is well provided for and the state of its school buildings is fine while pupils in the other sector are being taught in sub-standard conditions. No one would object to that.

However, when one looks at the figures upon which the Minister based his decision—the new starts which it was possible to announce—one sees no such imbalance. Over the six years for which I could obtain figures, the number of schools that required money spent on them, whether they catered mainly for Catholics or mainly for Protestants, was roughly even. There may have been a slight difference in favour of schools catering mainly for Catholics, but it was only one or two percentage points. Therefore it cannot be argued that this was based on the state of buildings in the various sectors.

I will not dig up the Minister's past record because time is short—which is partly my fault. However, we have a Minister who has been on record at least five times discussing the discrimination against Nationalists and Republicans which he believes occurred in the past. I

believe that there is only one interpretation possible from the figures available on the one capital-spending decision that he has made. Whatever perceptions and grievances he and his party hold, he is abusing his position as Minister. He is taking money which should be allocated fairly and skewing it towards one side of the community, and no amount of fancy financial rope-trickery will hide that blatant imbalance.

One of the reasons for moving the motion before any decision is made is to enable me to use the Assembly to put down a marker for the Minister that this must not continue. With the Education Committee, Mr Kennedy and others, I have listened to pleas from schools in the maintained, controlled, voluntary, special and integrated sectors that people are being educated in poor conditions right across the board—no sector has a monopoly. The Minister must not be allowed to spend public money, allocated in good faith by the Assembly, in a way that is biased towards one sector. The facts are here, and no doubt the Minister will treat them in a cavalier manner, as he has in the past. Facts do not seem important to him, but the Assembly cannot ignore them, and it is important that the marker be set.

I could refer to individual schools, but I do not want to do so. The Education Committee has been careful not to lobby on behalf of individual schools, and we have told representatives, who have presented their cases to us, that we want to get a general picture of the state of school buildings. I am not lobbying on behalf of schools in my constituency—this is not a plea on their part. I am, however, saying that money should be allocated fairly.

The budget for the Department of Education should not be used in a cavalier manner by a Minister with a narrow, political, sectarian agenda. The confines of the debate do not allow me to refer to other ways in which preference has been shown to those who fit into the Minister's agenda. The figures speak for themselves. They are on public record and available in the Library and in Education Committee papers.

It is an important matter. We need more capital spending to improve the stock of schools, and many of us who have heard reports on and seen pictures of some of the buildings in which children are being educated have been appalled. Extensive capital spending on schools is needed, but it must be done in an equitable manner and not to redress imbalances that the Minister perceives to exist. He even believes his propaganda that only one section of the population suffers from disadvantage.

We are aware of how unaccountable Ministers can be, taking decisions that are at odds with the Committees appointed to scrutinise them and at odds with the view of the majority of Members. The imbalance in capital spending this year may be exactly the same. Given his record, that is likely to be so. But let the Assembly say on that matter of concern that it expects the Minister to

live up to his pledge to deal with these issues fairly. Many would disregard the word of the Minister because he has broken it on so many occasions, but we should at least hold him accountable.

Mr Deputy Speaker: In view of the importance of the subject, I will allow the debate to continue for two hours, in spite of the small problem at the beginning. The Minister will have 20 minutes for his winding-up speech, and Mr Wilson will have 10 minutes for his. Other Members who wish to speak will have eight minutes.

The Chairperson of the Education Committee (Mr Kennedy): I am grateful for the opportunity for this important debate and accept Mr Wilson's contrite apology.

I will address the Assembly as Chairperson of the Education Committee and as the Ulster Unionist spokesperson on education. I will attempt to keep within the time constraints.

The Education Committee is concerned about the condition of the school estate. The Committee has received from parents' action groups, teachers, principals and student bodies numerous representations on the dreadful condition of many schools in the primary and non-primary sectors. The problems that we face concern outdated and inappropriate accommodation that does not meet modern educational needs and a lack of space. A large number of school buildings are crumbling. They have rotting window frames, inadequate fire exits and fire door protection and electrical faults. These are health and safety matters that illustrate the urgent need for a substantial increase in the funds for major capital projects.

A recent Department of Education general inspection report indicated that in one primary school deficiencies in school buildings are having a serious detrimental effect on children's learning. Almost every Member will have seen the appalling conditions that exist. Such conditions are bound to have an effect on student and teacher morale and, therefore, a serious impact on education itself. The Education Committee finds the situation unacceptable and would like it to be addressed immediately.

Over the years, capital projects have been seriously neglected and underfunded, and urgent action needs to be taken. The Committee believes that investment in the capital building programme must be a high priority for the Executive and the Assembly. It would eliminate the major deficiencies and help to provide a modern and appropriate learning environment for children in the twenty-first century here.

The Education Committee will be meeting the Minister and his officials next week to review the capital programme for the incoming year. Undoubtedly, a number of high priority cases will be competing for places and, with limited resources available, hard decisions will have to be made.

It is imperative that equality and fairness be evident in the allocations that we make. To assist the process the

Education Committee believes that the criteria used in making capital spending decisions should be widely known and understood and that they should be clear, open and transparent.

The Committee received a range of views from education boards officials during its investigations. However, it is not totally clear on the method used for the final allocation of capital building money. A comprehensive and cohesive strategy is needed to address the appalling situation.

2.45 pm

As the Ulster Unionist spokesperson on education I want to express profound concern at the apparent imbalance in capital funding allocated to the controlled school sector in recent years. An analysis of the last five years highlights a marked disparity between the controlled and maintained sectors. That is totally unacceptable and must be addressed.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is here today. His recent announcement on Strabane seems to pre-empt the review of the transfer procedure and the capital building programme. Apparently an announcement affecting education in Strabane has been made but has not yet been funded. When a Minister tells the people of Strabane, or anywhere else, that they are to get a new school that will involve capital expenditure, the money should be available for that. It seems improper for the Minister to have made that announcement short of consultation with the area boards and the Education Committee. I hope that he will address that when he speaks later.

There is an urgent need for capital funding in all sectors. Consideration must be given in each to the allocation of funding on an equitable basis. Given the Minister's political background, it is incumbent upon him to ensure that the controlled sector does not perceive itself to be undervalued or underfunded.

Ms Lewsley: A number of issues to do with the allocation of capital funding need to be addressed, one of which is the categorising of schools that apply for capital funding. Schools are put into three categories, and those in category one receive priority. However, the majority of schools are in category two.

One of the criteria used by the Department when deciding which schools get capital funding concerns matters such as mobile classrooms. The Minister may give priority to schools whose classrooms have been destroyed or damaged by vandalism or whatever. As Sammy Wilson said, many of us can pick out schools in our constituencies that should get priority, but some schools were vandalised 25 years ago, and it has not been possible to use that accommodation since. Such schools have been housed in mobile classrooms for 25 years. Why were they not prioritised? Why did they have to wait until last year to get capital funding?

Some children are being educated in schools that are over 130 years old. Are those schools not priority cases? We talk about best practice and value for money, but these cannot be achieved with heating or maintenance in a building that is over 130 years old.

We need to ensure that social disadvantage is addressed and that targeting social need resources are directed towards schools most in need of capital. Unlike other Members, I regard it as well known that conditions in a large number of Catholic schools have been allowed to deteriorate dreadfully, with a high dependence on temporary mobile classrooms. Clearly, there needs to be equity in the system.

In the interests of the equity that has been talked about today, we cannot just advocate a 50:50 split for funding. We need a proportionate allocation that reflects the state of schools, the health and safety of children and social disadvantage. We need an open and transparent system to assess educational needs and target genuine need. I ask the Minister if his Department has adequately assessed need and the schools estate. Does his Department have a benchmark for capital expenditure? How effective is the private finance initiative? Does it deliver what it is meant to and give value for money?

As I have said often, there is not enough funding, particularly for children with special needs. With the development of the local management of schools, specialised posts have disappeared, and special needs are being dealt with in the classrooms. Funding is only available for statemented children.

How much reasonable adjustment has been made in the Budget to increase accessibility? If mobile classrooms are in use in a school, are they accessible to children with disabilities? I am not just talking about access through the front door of a school, but about access to all of a building and its facilities.

There is a great need for strategic planning with all partners in education, because many of them are practitioners in the field. Who is better placed to give an opinion? There also needs to be an acceleration of the process of agreeing options, schedules of accommodation and economic appraisals.

Finally, I mention the Government's policy on rural proofing. I hope that the Minister can assure us that he will use that policy when he is making his final decisions. It is the responsibility of everyone in the Chamber to strive for an equitable education system that is accessible to every child.

I support the motion.

Mr McElduff: Cuirim fáilte roimh an rún seo, agus de réir mo bharúla is ábhar fíorthábhach é ar fad. Ba mhaith liom rud amháin a chur san áireamh, agus is é an fhirinne nach raibh rudaí cothrom sa tsochaí ó thaobh cúrsaí oideachais de. Is é mo bharúil go dtosaíonn an turas chun na cothromaíochta sa lá inniu.

I welcome the motion. It helps the Assembly to concentrate on the important matter of the Education Department's school building programme. Let us face it: many of our schools have serious accommodation problems. There is a great need across all sectors. No sector is excluded. A major commitment and investment are required to improve the overall condition of the schools by replacing sub-standard accommodation. It is needed where classrooms are undersized and overcrowded; where they are old and poorly maintained; where serious physical and structural deficiencies are posing health and safety risks; where inadequate physical education is provided; and where the very delivery of the school curriculum is inhibited, or narrowed, because children are not being taught in a safe, warm, dry and stimulating environment. If we are going to do a good job here, we should act in the interests of all our schoolchildren. That should concern us more than anything with respect to education.

On first reading the motion, one could be forgiven for believing that Mr Wilson has seen the light and is espousing the equality agenda, the removal of sectarian discrimination and the redressing of the historic funding imbalances and differentials that have disadvantaged particular education sectors. For example, the Catholic maintained sector, which was deemed to be underfunded by £200 million in 1983, did not receive 100% funding until 1993 — a mere eight years ago.

On first reading, I thought we were going to hear some enlightened commitment to the principles of equality from that most unusual of sources, Mr Sammy Wilson. However, it appears that my hopes were ill-founded. Mr Wilson evidently has different ideas. He has set out to take the debate out of context and wilfully ignore the experience of Catholics in education since partition and the inception of the six-county state. It happened in jobs and housing, and it happened in education as well.

Our experience has been one of systematic structural discrimination, and there is much work to be done to create a level playing field, redress the balance and bring about equality for every citizen in the Six Counties and their children. Because I, with some foundation, doubted Mr Wilson's intentions, I attempted to table an amendment before 9.30 am in the form of an addendum. It came as some surprise to me that the Business Committee, or the Speaker, disallowed my amendment, despite my meeting the clear deadline for tabling amendments of one hour before the start of business. It is a matter of some regret. My amendment would simply have added the following words:

"This should be based on educational need and taking account of the historical differential in capital funding between the maintained and controlled sectors."

It is important to get the historic perspective right to inform ourselves of the present and to acknowledge that there is an historical legacy. There is a much greater

backlog in the Catholic maintained sector, which is playing catch-up, than in some other sectors. All of that was dealt with in the Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights (SACHR) report compiled by Prof Tony Gallagher in the 1980s, which led to the journey to equality in that respect. Catholic parishioners were long forced to pay for their children's educational facilities while other sectors enjoyed 100% funding all along. That is why many of our schools do not have the elaborate playing fields that other schools enjoy.

The journey to equality does not begin today on a blank sheet —

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: No.

Things were not equal in the past, and that must be addressed. I support the calls for funding to be allocated on the basis of educational need, using a clear, open and transparent method and adhering absolutely to objective criteria. It is understandable that individual schools feel disappointed when they are not accepted on the programme. We also need to appreciate that various schemes are at various stages of design and planning. How many schemes are ready to go? That is a relevant question.

We can all quote figures. In the last five or six years Michael Ancram, I think, spent £23 million in one year on the school building programme. Three or four years later Mr McGuinness spent £72 million. It is reasonable to anticipate that the Minister will act in a fair manner with respect to this.

3.00 pm

In conclusion A LeasCheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom rud éigin a rá faoi Phádraig Mac Piarais. One of the leading educationalists of last century was Pádraig Pearse. In 1905 he said

"Take up the Irish question whatever way you want and you end up at the question of education."

Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs E Bell: I support the motion in principle. All Members should take upon themselves a personal duty to ensure a fair distribution of the capital spending budget between the various school systems. I support that. However, as other Members have said, there will always be concerns, disappointments and sometimes even relief when the annual announcement of the education capital building programme is made. It is right that we should monitor such announcements closely and watch where allocations are made.

We would all like to see local schools being given the necessary resources to improve or replace their buildings. In my constituency of North Down I have, with colleagues past and present, been engaged in a campaign that has lasted more than 20 years to have Glenlola Collegiate

school estate improved. I was delighted and relieved when moneys were allocated to that last year.

We also have in the area Clifton Special School, which originally opened its doors to 55 severely mentally and physically handicapped pupils. Now, more than 20 years later, around 120 children are being educated in rooms and facilities that would be considered totally unacceptable in any other school, never mind in a school that is specifically for the severely handicapped. Pupils and staff put up with inconveniences daily, but still the school boasts a fine record. The Minister visited that school last October. He was shocked at what he saw, but he was also impressed by how well the staff and pupils cope. I would like that project, which, as I said, has been promised for many years, to have been part of last year's programme. However, I am hopeful that it will be in the 2001 programme.

As others have said, the procedures for inclusion in the capital building programme are long and complicated, but each sector and geographical area must be considered before final decisions are made. The timetable for all major capital schemes is protracted and will always involve consultation at various levels to ensure equity. Economic appraisals, development proposals and tender procedures all take time. Work by the Department on each project is intensive and has as its basic principle — and this is written in every board memorandum — that school needs must be met insofar as is possible.

I make these comments to show that it is possible to ensure at all stages that a fair capital spending programme can be drawn up by all involved. The allocation of new starts 2000-01 is as follows: maintained schools get 32.2% of the total, which is just over £23 million; voluntary schools 27%, or £19.4 million; controlled schools — which Mr S Wilson is quite rightly worried about — 35%, or £25.3 million; integrated schools 2%, or £1.4 million; and special schools 3.8%, or £2.8 million.

If we are talking about equity, we need to look carefully at integrated, special and Irish-medium schools. Integrated education, people will argue, is a small part of the education sector. I wonder why. If all education were integrated, we would not be worrying today about sectarian headcounts.

Last year's allocation was the largest we have had, and I hope that that will be a permanent feature of local administration. I am sure the Education Committee will do its best to ensure that distribution of resources is fair.

Obviously, parents have the right to choose the schools to which their children go. We must consider that when looking at the distribution of capital funding as well as at the condition of the buildings.

There must be a review of the process and of the timetable in particular. Can we do anything to ensure that it is expedited in some way to prevent waits of 20 years or

more? Any new procedures ought to ensure that the terms of the motion are honoured. The Education Committee will play its part in that. Members must ensure that distribution is fair and free from sectarianism.

Mr B Hutchinson: I declare an interest. In my capacity as a Belfast city councillor, I am a member of the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) and have been part of decisions made on capital spending.

I am somewhat surprised by the debate. I assumed that Members would take up sectarian positions. There is always an argument between Sinn Féin and the SDLP about who the real Republicans are and who the real Nationalists are. I was surprised to see that Sinn Féin deliberately missed out the private finance initiative. That party claims to be socialist, so PFI should be the first thing on its agenda. However, there is no mention of it, even though it is a major part of the capital spending plan.

The Minister must adhere to certain criteria. Mr Danny Kennedy said in a recent article in the 'Belfast Telegraph' that he could not make a statement and then ignore what he had said. However, if I, as a member of the BELB, thought that the Minister had ignored criteria that would have put one of our schools to the top, there would be an argument with the Department of Education about that. In the Minister's defence — people may wonder why I would defend him — the criteria have been well scrutinised. There are many sectors in the Department of Education, and we may need to look at that.

This is not about sectarian politics; it is about educational need. It does not matter whether a child is Chinese, Protestant or Catholic. All are entitled to an education. Mr Kennedy raised a valid point. SDLP Members talk about attacks on Catholic schools; Protestant schools have been attacked as well. Irrespective of whether a school is in need of repair or replacement, there is a morale problem among the teachers and pupils in such a school. That is a big problem. We must spend money to ensure that teachers do not work and children are not taught in such impossible conditions. We must ensure that educational need is met, and the criteria will help us to do that. The criteria should not be concerned with whether a school is Protestant, Catholic or integrated; they should be concerned only with the educational needs of children and how they can help their teachers to perform.

Mr Wilson's motion is rather paradoxical. We all agree with what he is saying, but we all know that the system cannot, in one sense, be "equitable". If there are five Catholic schools that need attention before Protestant schools, or vice versa, that is the need that should be dealt with.

We cannot say "We should take a Protestant school today and then a Catholic school" and leave four other schools that may be in more need of attention, so there is a bit of a paradox. At the same time I sympathise with Sammy Wilson's motion. How do we get this right?

How do we ensure that someone does not run with his or her agenda? There are mechanisms in place to prevent that. The boards, while they continue — and how long they continue is an argument for another day when we may have more money — should scrutinise what happens, and we need to look at that too.

A number of points have been made, but the important one is that we act according to educational need, and I am not sure that we can ever get the Protestant/Catholic balance right.

People need to wake up to PFI. Private finance can be attracted to the Malone Road or Bangor, but attracting it to the Shankill or the Falls or any other working-class area is almost impossible.

Ms Morrice: I want to focus on an area that has not been mentioned enough in the debate, and that is integrated education. My Colleagues Eileen Bell, Billy Hutchinson and others did refer to it, and that is vital. This is about using increased money to satisfy parental demand. There has been talk about parents sending children to schools of their choice. Parents who want their children to go to integrated schools do not always have that choice, because there are not enough integrated schools in Northern Ireland to give it to them. Applications for places often have to be turned down.

That sector needs support. It is often said that the integrated sector is perceived as getting more than traditional sectors, a myth that I want to explode at the outset. Mr McElduff mentioned catching up. If we are talking about catching up, we are talking integrated education. That is what the integrated schools are doing — playing catch-up. We have only to compare the statistics for the various schools systems over the last 50 years — not the last 10 years or the last five years, but the last 50 years. Remember that the first integrated school, Lagan College, was set up less than 20 years ago, in 1981. There is a desperate need for vastly increased funding for the integrated sector in order to ensure what Mr Wilson describes as "a fair and equitable distribution of the capital spending budget".

Another myth that I want to dispel is the claim that the integrated sector gets more than its fair share of the cake. We have 45 integrated schools. Thirty-one were set up from scratch by parents. When the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 came in, giving equity to integrated education, 10 integrated schools already existed. Two of those, Windmill Primary School, set up in 1988, and Omagh Primary School, in 1990, have had only mobile classrooms since their inception.

I will not go into detail on this, because my Colleagues have covered it. We should focus on the need to educate Catholic and Protestant children together, which is stressed in the Good Friday Agreement and is hugely important for mutual respect and understanding. Children go to separate schools at the age of four and do not meet a child

of another religion until they start work or third-level education.

3.15 pm

I want to underline the need for integrated teacher training, the only area of third-level education that is segregated. We must move away from the past, with the old headcounts of Catholics and Protestants, and into a new future in which children of all religions learn to respect each other.

The position of the Women's Coalition is that capital spending must take account of targeting social need and the historical imbalance due to the non-funding of sectors such as integrated education. We also have reservations about any major new capital expenditure, in any sector, before the review of post-primary education is complete.

Mr Gallagher: There is much sub-standard accommodation in the schools estate that affects Protestants and Catholics, and any plea for a fair distribution of resources will be taken seriously by everyone.

Mr Wilson spoke of the seriousness of the matter. It reminded me of the situation a few years ago. For many years, as everyone knows, Catholic schools had to put up 35% funding, then 15%. Eventually, the last Tory Education Minister gave Catholic schools 100% funding. There was one dissenting voice on that move: that of Mr Sammy Wilson, the proposer of today's motion. I am glad that he now takes a wider view. For the sake of improving all our schools, that wider view is needed.

Children are being educated in schools that resemble nineteenth-century institutions. Our priority must be to put an end to that situation; that would be to be really fair. If there are five such schools in the controlled sector and one in the maintained sector, or vice versa, we should tackle the problems in all six right away. Then we can have a serious debate about the equitable distribution of funding.

Like Mr Wilson, the Chairperson of the Education Committee referred to apparent unfairness. I shall listen to what is said. However, I have not heard any outcry from the education and library boards, who are responsible for prioritising capital projects in the controlled sector, about unfairness in the system. Perhaps, others have heard it. If so, we should listen to what they say and tackle the problem.

The PFI was rightly raised. It is not just the Department of Education; other Departments seem to be all for it. There is a great buzz about PFI. We are following other countries, not least England, but England is now pulling back from PFI arrangements because serious questions have arisen. Our Department of Education has not had a wide enough, or serious enough, debate about the implications for schools. They talk about entering into 25-year arrangements with private developers who

will provide premises and collect rent. However, we have to look at the situation at year 15 and year 20.

Has the Department put controls in place that will ensure that, at the end of the agreement period, buildings will be in good condition and will have been value for money? It is all very well to tackle the problem in that way, but many working in education are not convinced that we have looked seriously enough at it. Many are worried about the advantages that appear to lie with the private developers under PFI. Developers will be able to choose the best projects. What will be left over? How will small schools, which have many of the most serious problems with accommodation, fare under PFI? We have had no debate on that, and I ask the Minister to note these concerns.

We have already seen ripples around the development of PFI initiatives in Northern Ireland. They are a knock-on from problems that have surfaced in England where developers have had very imaginative ideas for developing property in close proximity to schools. This is not about filling stations — most pupils do not have cars — it is about developers providing attractions which will persuade children to part with some of their money, perhaps even their lunch money. This is an important issue.

I hope that PFI will help to alleviate the problem, but I hope that we take on board the cautionary notes coming from elsewhere and do not store up problems for ourselves further down the road.

Mr Poots: I intend to speak for people who do not seem to have much of a voice nowadays — namely, the low-to-middle income families in the Province.

We hear a lot about targeting social need and those on the lowest incomes. Many resources have been geared towards helping such people. However, there is another group of people who are employed on low incomes. One partner may have a part-time job. They may own a house, but it may be cheaper to own than to rent a house. It may be cheaper to buy a mid-terrace or small semi-detached house. They may own a car, but it may be five or six years old and not worth very much.

If such people live in a rural community, they do not have public transport. They are often forgotten about because they do not fit into a particular set of criteria — the targeting social need criteria. Their children can go to school and be educated, occasionally in conditions little better than a dump. I hesitate to use the word, but on some occasions they are little better than a dump.

In my area there is a triangle that consists of mostly privately owned houses. Nevertheless, many of the people living there could not be classified as wealthy. In that area, in Moira, the school is full. The area has a good new school, and that is fine.

In Maghaberry, they have a school that was built for 100 children but cannot take any more as 215 children are presently enrolled. Last year 46 children applied to enter P1, but only 30 could be accepted. There is planning permission for 300 new houses to be built, yet children have to go to schools outside the area. In Hillsborough, the school is full. It has 14 classes and only four permanent classrooms.

If every boy were to use the outside toilet during break, each would have just 15 seconds. That is happening in the leafy, affluent Hillsborough area. While many of the parents of these children may be affluent, others are not. Nevertheless, they are all entitled to be educated in good conditions.

The area between is also important. Children are being taken from the area in which they live and to other areas because there are not enough schools there. There has been a proposal to amalgamate three schools in the west Hillsborough area — the Maze Primary School, St James's Primary School and St John's Primary School. In addition, Hillsborough Primary School needs 21-classroom accommodation, while Maghaberry Primary School needs at least three additional classrooms, although there is an apparent need for it to become a 14-classroom school. The Maze Primary School was built in 1870. Only one of the school's classrooms is not undersized, and storage space is at such a premium that they have to use the toilets. There is no vehicular access to the school, and parents have to park on the road when leaving children off. One child was knocked down last year.

There is a similar situation at St James's Primary School — children are being taught in composite classes. Again, the toilets are located outside, and classrooms are undersized. In addition, the damp-proofing course has not been successful, so you can smell damp, which is also evident in the finish of the wall. St John's Primary School, which was built in 1853, also has temporary accommodation. One part of the school is in such disrepair that it can be only used for storage, and there are also outside toilets. There are no physical education facilities in any of these schools, and pupils have to travel to council facilities in buses because of that.

There is a growing population in those areas, and the need for proper educational resources must be addressed. I get a little weary of hearing about the problems of inner-city areas. There are great problems there, but there are also major problems in rural areas that I want to highlight because children are being educated in substandard conditions. They do not live in a TSN area, but why should they be deprived of decent educational resources because their parents do not fit into the TSN category?

Mr McHugh: Go raibh mait agat. The motion is, in some ways, welcome. It is aimed at a difficult question which we must address from two directions. It is

positive in that the proponent is engaging with the Minister and asking him to ensure that there is equitable distribution of the budget and capital spending.

The motion gives us a welcome opportunity to discuss linked issues, which are all important — some more so than others. The Minister will ensure that fairness in capital spending. An objective of my party and, I am sure, of the Minister is to strive towards equality, especially in the education system. One of our themes is the need to cherish all our children equally. The end goal is to achieve an equal society, and that was made possible by the Good Friday Agreement.

Young people must be made part of that process. They must have access to skills training, which will allow them to gain proper, adequately-paid jobs rather than the low-paid work which many had to put up with in the past. They must feel included in society. Fair employment is needed on all levels. Young people must feel that education will lead to their being treated equitably when it is finished.

3.30 pm

Personal development is an area that will probably need more spending in the years ahead. Education will also face changes, and preparing people through peace and reconciliation to deal with each other will put demands on the budget. These factors have a direct impact on capital spending.

As my Colleague Mr McElduff and others have said, a rebalancing of the past is an important theme that pervades the entire process. The education debate, and specifically capital spending from the point of view of Mr Sammy Wilson, must be decided in the context of how educational needs were dealt with in the past. The educational achievements of Nationalists over the last 30 years and before were nothing short of phenomenal, given the obstacles to education that were for so long put in their paths. Over the past 80 years in particular, the regime here was anything but forward-looking from the point of view of trying to prepare everybody, on an equal basis, for the future. In that time of one-party rule, underfunding was practised to establish control. Those mindsets from history may still exist now.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Member not accept that the 1944 Butler Education Act, which was extended to Northern Ireland by the Stormont Parliament, enabled all classes of people here to get a higher standard of education? The crucial factor in education throughout that period was the insistence of the Roman Catholic Church on total responsibility for the education of its children — an insistence that remains in spite of the fact that its schools now receive 100% funding. Does the Member accept that contention?

Mr McHugh: While that was indeed enacted the fact that it was certainly not endorsed or fully implemented by

the Government of the time had an effect, on the end result, which amounted to more of the same. Things changed because of pressures from society. It was more that than anything else that brought any change in how education was funded or the Government were forced to direct their funds. We faced a system in which there was gerrymandering and a skewing of resources to a large degree to one side of the community at all levels by the Government. A lack of jobs and proper housing, discrimination and injustice had an effect on the education system and on how people viewed it.

Integrated and Irish-medium systems of education were ignored, and that imbalance must be redressed. That is why Irish-medium education was mentioned in the Good Friday Agreement and why funding has to go towards it. An earlier contributor made the argument for integrated education.

The capital allowed for by the present budget is insufficient, given the backdrop that I have described. The Blair Government, who purport to back education so much, have not been prepared to back the post-conflict situation and put schools here on a par with those in Britain.

There are serious accommodation problems in many schools that need to be addressed. Continually bad conditions in schools adversely affect the morale of teachers and pupils, who are trying to achieve high standards. They do not have the right tools, and this serious situation must be resolved.

PFI's must be discussed by the Education Committee and the Assembly. People are concerned that they seem to be being almost pushed down our throats as the only way of delivering a capital programmes for schools. We must have control and ensure that we do not lose it or long-fought-for assets.

The delivery of the programme is important. What we do now will have a major impact on our children's futures, and everything must be done to meet everyone's needs on an equal basis. Past difficulties have to be redressed, but we must also work towards the competitive market and educate our students to face the world and all its problems.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness):
A LeasCheann Comhairle. I was pleased —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am so sorry. I overlooked the fact that there was one more Member who wished to speak.

Mr Gibson: Mr Deputy Speaker, I thought I had escaped - *[Laughter]*.

When listening to Ms Morrice I remembered attending a national school on a first floor. The principal and his family lived on the ground floor. That could have been called a high school or college of technology. Older generations in rural areas attended mixed schools, and my father would declare that mixed schools were great because you learned exactly what the opposition was like from childhood.

First, I would like to deal with Catholic underfunding. When representatives from the integrated sector came to lobby the Committee they produced a document that referred to Bishop Boyle of 1830. When I pointed out that he had been an Establishment placement, they were shocked. I reminded them of Cardinal Connell who declared 150 years ago that there should be Catholic education in Catholic schools by Catholic teachers. In 1922, Lord Londonderry wrote to Cardinal O'Donnell on education. The cardinal replied: "Dear Sir, We have our own education system." People say that they want their own ethos — and they are entitled to that — but they want someone else to pay for it.

Because of the poor quality of education that was being delivered, the Northern Ireland Government, in spite of constant barraging, felt compelled to move from 65% grant aid up to almost 100% grant aid. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools has raised the standard of Catholic education and is to be congratulated. The funding figures that are available for the past five years do prove a glaring point. In 1995-96, of a total of £60.5 million, £7.7 million went to the controlled sector. In 1996-97, of a total of £47.2 million, the controlled sector received £16.9 million.

In the year that was mentioned, 1997-98, the sum was as low as £23 million, of which £4.9 million went to the controlled sector. Three years ago, in 1998-99, it received £3.8 million out of £32 million. The final sum announced in 1999-2000 by Tony Worthington was £67 million, of which the controlled sector got £16.7 million. When Mr McElduff from my constituency hailed the announcement of £72 million this time last year as a great success, I examined the figures and found that £14.4 million of that figure had already been announced by Worthington, reducing the figure to £57 million — more than £10 million less than was announced by Worthington. Someone should get the right, or we shall be writing "Learn to count" on the bottom of that report. These facts explain the skewing of the figures.

My stance is not anti-Catholic nor anti-Catholic school. Rather, the skewing of figures against the majority sector has been so great recently that the Unionist community feels that it does not count. It feels that there has been an attack on its ethos. Unionist people consider education a treasured asset and feel that their very being is under attack, and not just because of 30 years of physical violence and the blowing up and destruction of their property. They perceive this to be the case, particularly given last year's announcements and the perception continues to be perpetuated: out of the supposed £72 million, which is not an accurate figure, the controlled schools received less than £25 million. Everything was going to be transparent and open with the new beginning. It is so visible that even the stupidest person can see that that was not so much phoney accountancy as "ropy adding", as Sammy Wilson called it.

One of the other areas I mentioned was the clamour by the mediocre. Everyone wants the best education he can get. We know that there is a difficulty over the amount of money, but I would like to have heard of something being done to redress the backlog worth at least £1 billion. At least £500 million is needed for new building and £500 million for urgent repairs. If we agree that that must be dealt with, let us look at the American system, which is not always good, not always great. We are talking about provision, and surely public and private partnerships could give us some help here.

Irrespective of the fears expressed by Mr B Hutchinson and others, I dearly want private finance initiatives in rural areas because I speak, as Mr Poots has spoken, for rural schools. I speak for schools all over west Tyrone, which are small and old and where all pupils use outside toilets that would horrify the urbanites. That is a fact of life in rural areas. I would like to see us, with public-private partnership, being able to cluster schools into a contractual package that could lead to the provision we need.

3.45 pm

I fear you will remind me, Mr Deputy Speaker, that my eight minutes are up. I can make my other points quickly. There is a perception in my community that must be dealt with. The people whom I represent feel that there is such a skewing away from the controlled sector that they are being ignored and their voice counts for nothing. I want that noted this afternoon.

Mr M McGuinness: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas Cheann Comhairle. I am glad that the debate has taken place. It was in doubt earlier. Many people will remember Mr S Wilson saying some time ago that he intended to be like a Rottweiler at the heel of the Minister. The Rottweiler was 15 minutes late. I thought I would have to send out a search party for him and had visions of him coming up the steps on all fours, with his tongue hanging out. However, his speech turned out to be more of a yelp than an attack.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to both the motion and the points raised. I also welcome the opportunity to put it on record that fairness and equity are key principles in my approach to education issues. I can confirm that the capital budget of the Department of Education is not determined on a religious or sectoral basis. Resources are directed to priority educational need, in whatever sector.

The largest part of the capital budget is directed to major capital work across all sectors, but substantial funds enable education and library boards to undertake minor capital work in controlled schools. Funds are available to meet boards' responsibilities for furnishing and equipping controlled and maintained schools, school transport and accommodation. My Department also grant-aids approved

expenditure on minor capital work in voluntary and grant-maintained integrated schools.

As I have said before, I am committed to improving the schools estate, but the number of major projects competing for a place in the capital programme far exceeds my available resources. Each year's school building programme is directed towards new schools, rationalisation, the replacement of substandard accommodation and ensuring that pupils and teachers have a proper learning environment. The available resources are directed to the highest priorities, based on educational need. It is important for people to understand that.

I also wish to comment on statements about imbalances in how capital funds are allocated. I refute any suggestion of inequality in those allocations, which are based solely on educational need. In any one year the allocation may favour one sector or another. However, Members should note that since 1990-91 the capital programme has been spread over 50 controlled schools, 43 maintained schools, 18 voluntary grammar schools, three Irish-medium schools and six integrated schools.

Contrary to popular belief, no decisions have yet been taken on next year's capital programme. I will be meeting the Education Committee next week, and I hope to announce the programme once I have heard and considered its views. The criteria for determining the programme will include educational priority, planning readiness, estimated costs, affordability and, not least, the capital resources available. The key factor is educational need, which is informed from a number of sources, principal of which is the capital planning list, which contains over 100 projects in categories one to three.

The criteria for each are clear. Category one provides for additional schools on identified sites or extensions to existing schools where there is clear evidence of insufficient places to accommodate pupils at suitable schools in a defined area. Category two provides for rationalisation proposals, which replace substandard accommodation and are essential to effect the rationalisation. Category three provides for schools that suffer significantly as a result of several serious accommodation inadequacies.

Projects in category one, which are sufficiently advanced in planning, have first priority for available resources, followed by projects in categories two and three. There are 108 projects in categories one to three on the planning list, representing 57 primary and post-primary schools in the voluntary sector — Catholic maintained, voluntary grammar and Irish-medium. There are 36 primary and post-primary projects in the controlled sector, representing 11 special and four grant-maintained integrated schools.

In drawing up the initial planning list, my Department consults with the education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and individual school authorities. The Department subsequently consults

the boards and the council representing the majority of schools on the planning list about their capital priorities. I consider that to be an important step since both have a specific statutory responsibility in their respective sectors.

Within the Department, advice is also sought from the education and training inspectorate and the Department's professional advisers about the relative educational needs of the competing priorities. Projects competing for a place on the conventional procurement programme must also be sufficiently advanced in design planning to be considered for a place on the programme.

The availability of resources is obviously the determining factor in the number that can be included in any year's programme. However, the present backlog of school building projects, which currently amounts to some £500 million, cannot be addressed by conventional procurement methods alone.

I am looking at the possibility of addressing some of that backlog through the private finance initiative. I understand the concerns and the reservations that people have expressed about that. To go down that route would obviously mean the conventional school building programme being complemented by the selective use of PFI in appropriate cases, to permit greater progress in meeting accommodation needs across the schools estate than would otherwise be the case. I hope that that information gives Members a better understanding of the allocation of my Department's capital budget and the difficulties that it faces in trying to meet the needs of all schools.

I cannot deal with all points raised but I will deal with one or two. Mr Wilson mentioned Regent House. The original announcement was made under the Chancellor's announcement, which assumed income from the sale of land — Scrabo High School and Belfast port. Neither of those transactions took place so no income was received, and money had to be found from elsewhere in the budget.

With regard to the point raised by Mr Kennedy on the situation at Strabane, I will clarify the position and, I hope, clear up the misunderstanding and confusion, which prompted an article in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. My decision to approve the development proposal for the amalgamation of Convent Grammar School, Our Lady of Mercy High School and St Colman's High School to form a new school was taken under the statutory provisions of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. A development proposal must be published where a new school is to be established or where significant changes are proposed to existing schools. It gives interested parties an opportunity to voice any objections before a decision on the proposal is reached. Far from undermining the mechanism in place, I was fulfilling my statutory responsibilities in that case.

The development proposal for the amalgamation of the three schools should not be confused with the

Department's capital programme, which I announce annually. Only after a development proposal is approved and an economic appraisal undertaken can a building project can be considered under the capital programme. So, if the development proposal had not been approved, or if its approval had been delayed, the project could not have been considered for the capital programme and would have come to a standstill. The Strabane project will be considered alongside other priorities for a place in the capital programme, in the light of the resources available. However, no decisions have been taken about the make-up of the next capital programme. People will have to await the outcome of all of that.

Mr Kennedy made an important point. For many decades we have had neglect and underfunding in education. We can see that in the state of the schools estate. It is difficult to deal with all these matters against the background of the heavy backlog of work that needs to be done.

Ms Lewsley referred to PFI, TSN and social deprivation. The Department assesses all these matters and the state of the schools estate, and I hope that my statement to the House has cleared up the Department's and my approach to all this. There are too many mobile classrooms, but these are all a result of the underfunding and neglect that we have had for many years.

The Department has been involved in pathfinder projects, but PFI is at a fledgling stage. We have attempted to use our limited resources in the best way possible. My officials are tough negotiators, and under no circumstances will they use public money on schemes that will make fat cats fatter.

An example of that is the collapse of the recent Classroom 2000 negotiations where, clearly, we decided that the deal on offer was unacceptable. Some hard and tough negotiations took place during the course of that. Our people stood their ground, and in the end we did not go for the proposed deal.

With regard to rural schools, I agree with Ms Lewsley about the importance of ensuring that they are treated with equality and fairness.

Mrs Bell raised Clifton Special School, and there are other special schools. That is something close to my heart. I have visited that school and a number of others, and I am very much taken by the need to support the teachers, parents and pupils. Ultimately, judgement will be made on the Assembly and the Executive, and we will be judged on how we treat the most disadvantaged people. I am conscious of my responsibilities with regard to those very special children.

People know where I stand on integrated education. I have a duty and responsibility as Minister to encourage and facilitate parents who choose integrated education for their children, and I intend to support those people the whole way down the line. Ms Morrice reiterated the

point about integrated education. It is vital that my Department co-operates with NICIE to ensure that we deal with the demand of parents. Certainly when people come forward with robust proposals, we will support them. A good example of that recently is our lowering of the viability criteria, which makes it possible for such schools to start up more easily. We are making progress on that.

Mr Gallagher made an important point when he said that there are no criticisms coming from the education and library boards. That needs to be taken on board by people who come to the House and make totally erroneous claims about unfairness or injustice with the distribution of capital resources.

4.00 pm

There was a great contrast between Mr Sammy Wilson's speech, which was completely over the top, totally wrong and unjustified, and that made by Mr Edwin Poots, which was positive and constructive. It contained no hint whatsoever of criticism of any bias against one section of the community or the other. He dealt with the important issue of rural schools and said that there are people who feel that officials in the Department are anxious to deal with their concerns — whatever they may be.

Mr Poots mentioned three schools in the Hillsborough area that date back to the mid-1800s — Maze Primary School, St James's Primary School and St John's Primary School. Yesterday afternoon I met with a cross-party delegation of Members from that area to discuss the proposed amalgamation of the three schools. They will have high priority in the next capital programme. Mr Poots's speech was constructive, and that is the way forward, folks. The best way for DUP Members to represent their constituents' concerns, or perceived concerns, is to talk to me about them.

Under no circumstances will I preside over a Department that attempts to treat any child unjustly, be he from the Shankill Road, Portadown, Hillsborough, Coalisland, Maghera or Derry city. That is the past. I want to move on in a new spirit of friendship with everybody, including Sammy Wilson and the DUP, and try to build the new future that the vast majority of children and parents crave. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr S Wilson: Mr Deputy Speaker, the Minister and his party said that they welcomed the debate, yet at the start they protested and hoped that you would rule it out of order because of my late arrival. That probably said more about their real intentions than their words did. Of course, Sinn Féin is good with words. I was almost in tears during the final, impassioned plea from the Minister: "Please come and talk to me. I want to be your friend." His party cannot be friends with people from his own community. It goes around bashing them every night, yet he entreats us and says that he wants to be our friend.

I heard what he said about fairness and treating people with justice. We hear that from Sinn Féin on everything. It says that it wants the guns out of politics, yet holds onto its arms caches for dear life. It says that it wants justice, yet bashes people in Nationalist areas every night. We hear the weasel words "We want the funds distributed fairly", but do not judge it by its words; judge it by its actions.

The Minister, despite attempts to do so at the end of his speech, was not able to deny that he padded last year's figures to disguise the fact that one education sector was treated three times better than another sector. That sector just happens to be the one used by the community that I represent.

While the Minister tried to keep up the impression of wanting to be fair, he could not convey that message to the lieutenants sitting behind him. Barry McElduff and Gerry McHugh talked about the injustices of the past. Note the words: "The difficulties of the past have to be redressed." The implication is that spending allocations must be skewed towards one sector, and justification for that is spurious.

Oliver Gibson gave the figures for the last five years. There is no historical imbalance. The non-100% capital funding in the past is not unique. Republicans feel they must whinge about discrimination — it is almost obligatory. The voluntary sector chose to be independent and paid the same penalty. It did not get 100% funding. The big, bad Unionists did not discriminate against poor, downtrodden Nationalists. There was a price for independence, and it was paid by all sectors that chose that route. So let us dispense with the nonsense that is trotted out ad nauseam by people who ignore the historical facts.

On PFI the Minister and his lieutenants have not got their stories straight again. I sometimes wonder just where the lieutenants operate. Gerry McHugh was concerned because Billy Hutchinson taunted him about his socialist credentials. Mr McHugh said that Sinn Féin was concerned about PFI and that we need to debate the matter. Clearly he did not realise that that is actually what we are talking about — perhaps we should have used Irish. I do not know.

We did discuss PFI in the Committee. We had a presentation with plenty of documentation from officials. Furthermore, we responded to the Minister on PFI. I did not notice any dissent from Sinn Féin — its members agreed that PFI should be used in certain circumstances. Now Gerry McHugh is wringing his hands and saying that we need a debate on that because Billy Hutchinson taunted him.

If there is a £500 million backlog, we must look at innovative ways of dealing with it. PFI may not suit certain areas, but it does suit other areas. It is important that we do not rely simply on public funding to deal with that, and the Department is right to look at the possibility of using private finance to help.

I had no doubt that Eileen Bell, a zealot on this, and Jane Morrice would use the debate to promote integrated education saying that as people are queuing up to get into such schools we should spend money on them. By that definition, we should be throwing money at nearly every grammar school because people are queuing to get into them, and hundreds of children are being turned away every year. We should certainly not be spending money on integrated schools when there is under-capacity in the existing system, whether in maintained or controlled schools. It is madness to spend money on an alternative system when plenty of places are available in state or maintained schools.

I accused the Minister of fancy financial rope tricks, and it seems once again that he is trying to mislead or direct attention away from the imbalance. He talked about the number of controlled schools that had benefited from spending on capital projects. He is correct inasmuch as last year more controlled schools than maintained schools benefited from capital expenditure. However, when two controlled schools are given £700,000, two are given £1.2 million and another is given £1.3 million, you can make the figures tell whatever story you wish.

Eleven schools in the sector that caters for Protestants benefited from capital spending compared with six schools in the sector that caters for Catholics. However, £13.3 million was spent on the former while £40.3 million was spent on the latter. The Minister can use whatever fancy footwork he wants to, but there was an imbalance.

Tommy Gallagher said that we must look at the state of school buildings. I am happy to do that. Figures for schemes that were introduced and are now in contention were made available to Tommy Gallagher and me. For the last six years there was not much difference between the two sectors, but there are massive differences with capital spending. I am happy for the issue to be judged on that basis.

The problem exists because we have a Minister who reflects the views of the lieutenants who sit behind him. He wants to redress the perceived problems of the past, and that is why there is an imbalance in his spending. That is why the Assembly should be demanding fairness and equity.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Education to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of the capital spending budget between the various school systems in Northern Ireland.

STUDENT DEBT

Mr J Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to address urgently the critical state of student debt.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I assure the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment that I did not table the motion to wind him up, as someone has suggested to me. I feel strongly, as I am sure the Minister does, about this, and I congratulate him on his recent efforts to meet with those who are at the cutting edge of the hardship being caused.

Students ought to be the beneficiaries of our education system and not victims of it. Unfortunately, the present system of a debt-burdened educational process is making victims of our student body. Education is as much a part of our infrastructure as roads, rail, transport, housing and the other physical manifestations. The absence of people who are educated in the arts and the sciences diminishes our physical infrastructure, however grandiose that infrastructure may be.

4.15 pm

Education is as fundamental to the good order of our society as the family unit, so the arguments against tuition fees are as strong today as they ever were. Tuition fees are wrong. They do not raise extra funds for higher education, and the Government's current tuition fee regime represents the thin edge of the wedge, which may eventually lead to the introduction of top-up fees and full-cost fees. Student hardship is a harsh reality that has been consistently ignored by successive Governments. The discretionary award has been reduced from £6 million in 1997-98 to £3.3 million in 1999-2000, thus creating major hardship for students wishing to take up second-chance courses and vocational postgraduate qualifications.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Student unions are campaigning for a system of funding that will give students enough money to live on while they study without the need to resort to additional debt, low-paid jobs and further parental assistance. We do not have a properly funded education system, and students and parents are being made to suffer rather than being enhanced by it. The NUS/USI (National Union of Students/ Union of Students in Ireland) has clear ideas about the guiding objectives for the future delivery of student support. Any review of student funding must be tested against these objectives as they are the features that NUS/USI believe should be central to any funding regime. A new system should alleviate student hardship through maintenance and benefit support, increase and widen access to further and higher education, bridge the inequalities between funding for further and higher education,

ensure equitable funding for both part-time and full-time study and enhance the quality of education on offer.

Those are laudable objectives that any society should aspire to. With regard to student hardship, the NUS/USI student income and expenditure survey of 1998 found that 20% of a sample of students in Northern Ireland owed more than £4,000 to the Student Loans Company. Students in further education only receive on average £656 a year in grants, student loans and parental contributions, yet they have an annual expenditure of approximately £3,000, a shortfall of £2,344 a year.

Average student debt is increasing. The Barclays Bank student debt survey 1998 revealed that graduates expect to have an average debt of £4,497. The findings showed that the cost of attending university has increased by 103% since 1994, while graduate salaries have increased by just 17%.

The NUS student hardship survey of 1999 found that 73.3% of full-time undergraduates, 71.4% of part-time undergraduates and 76.6% of postgraduates were in debt. In addition, mature students have substantially more debt than other students. Student hardship is forcing increasing numbers of students to withdraw from their courses and damaging the quality of academic life. A survey commissioned by the NUS and the GMB trade union in October 1995 found that 40% of students worked on average between 12.5 and 20 hours a week during term time. Two thirds of those students said that such employment affected their studies - 30% missed lectures and 20% failed to submit coursework due to the pressures imposed by part-time employment.

A follow-up survey specific to the North of Ireland was carried out by the NUS/USI students' centre in 1998. Was it found that 60% of students relied on part-time work, working an average of 17.7 hours a week. This adds to the difficulties of students attempting to pay their way through university.

Students in the North of Ireland, particularly mature students, are more vulnerable to the increased cost of higher education. Mature students, particularly working-class men, are discouraged from entering higher education by tuition fees. According to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) September 1999 figures, applications from mature students aged between 21 and 24 were 3.4% lower than the previous year, with a drop of 6.6% in students aged 25 or over.

In the North of Ireland, the proportion of mature students in higher education has always been much lower than in Great Britain. In 1997-98, mature students comprised only 18% of the student population, while the equivalent figure in England and the rest of Ireland was 28%.

Research evidence from Profs Cormack, Gallagher and Osborne of the Centre for Research on Higher Education at Queen's University confirmed that the

participation rate of Northern Ireland students is more sensitive to financial issues than for students from Great Britain because of the social class profile of the student population here. They argue that the recent changes to the system of student financial support could have a more detrimental impact on the participation rates of our students.

The majority of the public and local politicians opposed the introduction of tuition fees, and there is substantial public support for the campaign against them. The study 'Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland: the Fourth Report' by Breen, Devine and Robinson (1995) found that among a sample of the public, 79% believed that the Government should pay tuition fees, with only 17% saying that students should contribute. The vast majority of local politicians, MPs and councils opposed the introduction of tuition fees. The Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue also strongly condemned the proposals.

Government and education experts recognise the need for adequate funding for students. The Dearing Report on higher education says

"We are concerned however, that the combined value of the grant and state student loan together should not fall behind a level adequate to meet students' necessary expenditure."

In its manifesto document 'Lifelong Learning' the Labour Party says that one of the priorities for lifelong learning must be to tackle student hardship. During the debate on the Teaching and Higher Education Bill on 8 June 1998, David Blunkett assured MPs

"We are talking about ensuring that students have the money at the point when they need it, and that they repay it when they can afford to do so ... We are talking about a provision to ensure that no one is in hardship at university."

More recently, the Cubie Report said

"We have no doubt that the student or parental contribution to tuition fees in full-time higher education should be abolished for Scottish students ... We are clear, as we have listened to Scotland, that the present arrangements are broadly discredited, add to anxieties about debt and create undue anomalies."

The loss of social security benefits for students increases hardship. For a student under 25 years of age, financial support amounts to a maximum loan of £3,635 a year, or £69.90 a week. State benefits for a person of the same age are: income support of £41.35 a week and housing benefit of £45 a week, a total of £86.35. Students under 25 receive an additional £16.45 a week if on income support and housing benefit, or £855.40 a year. That is more than they would get if they were not students.

The issue is the cost of participating in education. Health care, books, periodicals, special equipment, art materials, computer software, examinations, stationery, photocopying, travel and miscellaneous costs add up to a heavy debt for students and their families. If a son or daughter comes home from university and says that he or she needs this or that, it is very difficult to deny it.

Young people are not just furthering their education; they are giving an added dimension to society.

Most parents believe in, and lobby for, free education because education is a cornerstone of society. Education enhances society and puts more, or as much, into it as those who have an education get out of it.

In the chronology of events on student financial support we go back to 1947, mentioned in the last debate. How many people of my age who had free education would not have had a second or third-level education but for the Education (Northern Ireland) Act 1947? I have to ask, as parents and the public ask, about where the money comes from. If my generation, and the generation that many in the House belong to, were able to have free education, why can the children of this generation not? Why should we disadvantage this generation by taking away from them the advantages we had?

If education is as fundamental to society as the family unit, the burden of debt ought to be removed in so far as possible from children and young people and from parents who cannot afford to keep them. How many young people drop out of third-level education because they cannot cope with the debt? How many young people do not go into third-level education because they are afraid of debt?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr J Kelly: I am going to finish now.

Most of the legislation that deprived the education system of the finance it needed was enacted in the late 1970s and the 1980s by a Thatcherite Government. We should be able, taking upon ourselves the power if need be, to reverse all those changes that have disadvantaged students and burdened them, their parents and society at large with debt.

4.30 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker: Given the number of Members who have asked to speak and the time that has been allowed for this debate, which is 90 minutes, I ask Members to keep their contributions below seven minutes. The Minister will have 15 minutes, and the winding-up speech will be given 10 minutes.

The Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee (Dr Birnie): This is an important matter. Some of the points that will emerge this afternoon were considered at length in the debate on the Committee's report last November. Members were also able to raise issues during the Budget debates.

Nevertheless, there have been interesting developments on student debt recently. The motion refers to student debt rather than to the other, albeit related, issue of tuition fees. Two particularly important pieces of evidence have been released, one in December 2000 and the other earlier

this month. The Callender and Kemp study, commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment, indicates that in 1998-99 the average net level of debt for students across the United Kingdom lay between £1,500 and £5,000 — the actual amounts varying with the background and circumstances of the individual student. Those figures could be worse, given the removal of the maintenance grants since then, although we do not know for sure. However, we must bear that in mind during today's debate.

Secondly, there is an ongoing inquiry by the House of Commons Education Select Committee. Its investigations seem to indicate that the existence of student debt, or at least the perception or fear of it, is a significant deterrent to students, particularly those from a low-income background. Hence we see an obstacle to achieving the wider access to higher and further education that we desire.

The House of Commons is also indicating — and we should pay special attention to this — that the impact of debt is leading to an increase in drop-out rates in UK higher education institutions. Again it seems that students coming from lower-income or disadvantaged backgrounds are hardest hit. It is undesirable, socially iniquitous and a waste of the valuable and limited resources within higher education if students drop out once they are in the system and fail to complete their degrees or other courses.

What then can be done? Towards the end of last year the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment produced a package of proposals to deal with these problems. The Committee believes that these proposals represent a contribution on the behalf of students from lower-income backgrounds and would, if implemented, act as a deterrent against their dropping out.

We placed great emphasis on expanding the number of student places in the Province partly because some potential students would prefer to stay here than move to Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland or further afield. It is cheaper for them to stay in Northern Ireland than move away from home.

Then, in December, the Minister announced his proposals for this broad area. On behalf of the Committee, I welcome them as a start in dealing with some of the more serious problems that relate to student support and widening social access to further and higher education. In due course, more detail will be required on his reformed package. This will include the level of the reintroduced maintenance grants or bursaries. It will also detail how the means-testing system will operate in respect of such support and what the interaction will be between student support and the wider social security system — a UK-wide issue that the interdepartmental working group is working on. Given the Minister's proposals, how will selective assistance, particularly for further education students, for

areas of skills shortages operate? Furthermore, how will it operate given the commitment to equity and social need?

We need adequate implementation of the package of proposals that we first heard about in mid-December. That will involve the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment working in close conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel. Indeed, in the medium to long term, it will involve the entire Executive because the indications in December suggested that a substantial amount of the additional funding required will come through the mechanism of Executive programme funds. I endorse the sentiments of the motion.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee (Mr Carrick): The subject of the motion is topical and of immense relevance to the student body and their families.

The Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment welcomed the Minister's recent announcement on student finance in so far as it goes. We have still to learn the details of the proposals and the impact they will have on student debt. We await those details from the Department.

There is overwhelming evidence that debt in the student population has now reached unprecedented levels. Survey after survey has shown this, and the Chairperson referred to the most recent survey carried out on behalf of the Department for Education and Employment by Callender and Kemp.

Personal interviews with 2,800 students representing full-time and part-time undergraduates throughout the United Kingdom confirmed that more students owed much larger sums of money to a broader range of creditors last year than they did three years ago. The report concluded that almost 90% of students face financial difficulties. By the end of the 1998-99 academic year, full-time students anticipated owing three times as much as students in 1995-96 — just three years earlier and prior to the introduction of the student loan scheme.

Regrettably, higher and further education has become associated with debt. Surely there is not one Member who has not been told by constituents, or indeed family members or friends, that they may not be able to afford to send their children to university because of the lack of financial support. Many families are guilt-ridden because of their inability to support their children through education without recourse to student loans. Callender reported that 35% of students surveyed had to pay the full £1,000 parental contribution towards their fees themselves.

The Callender Report also highlighted an increase in overall borrowing by students, including borrowing from financial institutions and on credit cards, often at rates of interest that can only be described as usurious. Whichever figures you rely on, on graduation our young people face

a wall of debt, repayable at a time when they may be considering marriage, buying a house or starting a family.

Debt can have a corrosive influence on family life. It does not impact solely on an individual student; there are major implications for the whole family. For many, servicing debt is the first call on family resources. Once a cycle of debt is entered into, it requires considerable skill to manage it and break the cycle of ever-increasing borrowing. All financial institutions realise this. Financial behaviour learnt at an early age lasts through life. That is why credit card companies and banks target students.

The old adage "Neither a borrower nor a lender be" was once considered good advice to pass on to children. Today's students seem far more attuned to the idea of credit than were previous generations. In many cases they do so without fully realising their responsibility to discharge that debt, which will be done from a position of weakness when many will be entering into domestic and financial commitments associated with adult life.

I cannot advocate this as a good development, and many share my concerns. It is wrong to launch students into the world of work with an albatross of debt around their necks. The Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment report on student finance shows the balance between what is affordable and our desire to enable everyone to have access to lifelong learning. We deliberately sought assurances that resources would be ring-fenced for student finance, having identified the fear of debt and the wall of debt to be tackled. The Committee will support the Minister's new proposals if they will clearly have an impact on removing the fear of debt and reducing its level. Members would like to have provided more generous support for students, but there is a limit on the funds allocated to Northern Ireland and many other groups who also need help.

Finally, we must aim to change the perception that a degree is the only route to well-paid employment and job satisfaction. People can become trapped in a cycle of debt because of problems with literacy, numeracy and a lack of basic skills. They have low expectations, and they are constrained to low-paid employment with no hope of breaking out of the cycle.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member will draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Carrick: We must continue to invest in our most valuable resource — human capital.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate and to reiterate my party's commitment to addressing the issue of student debt. As someone who has spent 30 years in the teaching profession at different levels, both here and in the Republic, I attach a great deal of importance to the needs of students. In the short time that the Minister has been in office, there has been

broad support for what he has been able to do, given the competing needs for a finite budget.

4.45 pm

I invite the Minister to reaffirm that he will continue to treat this issue as a priority. I also ask him to return to the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment at an early date to discuss further his proposals of 15 December. Dr Farren acknowledged then that living costs are a key issue for students in third-level education and that those living costs cannot be addressed without looking at the needs of the most disadvantaged people — those on low incomes.

The announcement on 15 December gave rise to broad agreement from the vice-chancellors of the two universities that the £65 million package would result in a fairer and more stable community through inclusion. The Students' Union president at Queen's University, Mr Paul Callaghan, said that the package would take nearly three out of every five students out of fee-paying. Mr Callaghan went on to welcome the assistance for mature students and the streamlining of procedures for student loans.

I hope that the Minister can reaffirm his commitment to do everything possible to address student debt because that is a priority for the Assembly Committee. The issue of student support set a precedent for the way in which important business is dealt with by the Assembly and has shown the importance of having local, accountable and responsible institutions. The concept of consensus government is innovative, and there will inevitably be criticisms. That in itself is no bad thing.

However, we cannot have the luxury of power to make demands without the responsibility that goes with that power. The Executive agreed the package of £65 million of new money for students in need. It targets social need, and nobody would disagree with that. The package addresses debt by reintroducing grants and introducing specific measures such as childcare grants and selective fee remission. No one could argue with those measures, and I ask the Minister to pledge his continued support to keep this issue a priority. The students' unions have highlighted the need to increase and widen access to further and higher education. That has been done.

I ask the Minister to say what additional places will be available in the universities so that fewer students have to travel abroad for education.

Prof Paddy Murphy, Director of the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education, has welcomed the abolition of fees for full-time further education students in key skills. He has predicted that the increased spending on further education will assist strategic planning for higher education places for selected industries, and we are all agreed that these are key to Northern Ireland's economic growth.

Since 1984, there has been a consistent attack on the assistance given to students. In 1997, when Labour had its landslide victory, we all hoped for improvements, but within two months the Dearing Report was published, recommending that graduates contribute to their fees. Since then other draconian measures have been taken to which my party and I are fundamentally opposed.

The Assembly has enabled a locally elected Minister to begin to address issues that have caused students great hardship. He has been able to include groups that have been ignored in the past and to target social need. The battle will continue. The SDLP has a long and proud record of forming and advocating policies to equip young people with the highest standards of education and training. These are the most powerful weapons available to address injustices of the past.

This motion enables the Minister to reaffirm his commitment to these ideals, and for that reason I support it.

Mr Neeson: Perhaps I should declare an interest in that I have a son and daughter at university. However, I recognise the sensitivity of the issue and how important it is to many young people. Third-level education is a human right. As we move into the new society and the new economic environment, people must be able to develop their potential. That is why this is such an important issue.

I agree with Mervyn Carrick about not simply talking about degree education. Further education must develop to meet the needs of the new society we are creating. There is a danger of creating an elite in education because impossible impediments are being placed on low-income families.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is that students have been working part-time, not necessarily just since the introduction of fees. When I was at university, I worked part-time. However, there is now a greater onus on young people to take part-time jobs, sometimes working very unsocial hours. This often deprives them of time to study for the courses they are following. The Assembly should also consider the sorts of jobs they are taking. They are low-paid jobs, which enables many employers to employ people at very low wages.

My Colleague, Eileen Bell, has often referred to the Cubie Report, which should be studied closely by the Minister and his Department. It is not a free handout. It has its implications. Cubie concluded

“We are not persuaded that a principle of free education should apply in all circumstances. Indeed, fairness suggests that those who gain from higher education should make an appropriate and timely contribution in respect of the benefits gained.”

That is why the Scottish Parliament abolished tuition fees and instituted a graduate endowment. Fees are collected from graduates once they earn over £25,000. It is not a handout altogether.

While I welcomed the Minister's announcement before Christmas, he did not go far enough. He has restored maintenance grants to students from low-income families, but much more can be done. Those from the poorest sections of society must be helped; and that is acknowledged by everyone here today. However, Cubie and his committee found that up-front tuition fees and the loan structure work against access for those very people who also have a traditional aversion to debt. The system dissuades them from even considering further education. We do too little to help those from lower and middle-income groups, while not demanding enough from those in the highest income groups.

Furthermore, we should bear in mind all the other costs that are involved with being a student. Those from rural areas have high transport cost or have to pay for rented accommodation, which is sometimes of a very low standard. Is this the sort of environment that we want for our students here? Scotland has taken the lead and has shown that it can afford it. This Assembly can afford it as well.

Huge gaps still exist in the postgraduate provision and the funding for mature students. The Minister appreciates the importance of this sector, given the university environment that he comes from. Career development loans are available to students from Northern Ireland who are doing certain courses in Great Britain, but such loans are not available to those studying here. How can we defend that?

We must move away from loans to finance higher education to a system more closely linked to the income of students. We must expand provision for postgraduate students, mature students, part-time students and those from non-traditional student backgrounds. This must be done imaginatively, not by simply allowing more students to acquire larger debts. The present system here benefits few, other than the banks. I am pleased that Mr John Kelly has raised this issue, and Alliance will be supporting the motion.

Ms McWilliams: First, I will reiterate the type of financial package recommended by the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee. Over many weeks, it carried out research based on the Cubie model and international comparisons. One of the key issues in the discussion was tuition fees. It was pleasing to note that the Minister's report said that there will be a 2% increase in the number of people who do not have to pay fees here. Given the lower income levels in Northern Ireland, this will improve the situation. Approximately 50% of students are exempt from tuition fees compared to about 45% elsewhere. Nonetheless, it is of major concern that 50% of students are still excluded.

There is no point in referring to the 1960s; let us simply refer to the 1990s. Today, 50% of students are paying

fees. They did not have to do so earlier in the 1990s, and this is contributing to the problem of student debt. We tackled this issue, and the Minister was critical of the recommendations, because they would not have helped students from Northern Ireland who are living in Scotland or elsewhere. I reiterate the point that at the British-Irish Council there is an attempt to convince the devolved regions to make changes that will apply to students throughout the devolved regions.

Let us make this a priority for any future education agenda. Let us not have entirely different recommendations for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. If the system remains as it is, students will face complications, no matter where they go. One of the major problems with the system is that it has become more complex, not less so, despite our attempts to simplify it.

Part of the problem of debt is the amount of information that a student has to take on board. As Mr Neeson pointed out, increasingly parents have children attending different universities in different countries under different systems. There is an increasing problem of debt, depending on where a student is based. That is why we also recommended a one-stop advice shop.

Taxation consultants have shown how out of date the Inland Revenue recommendations are — they go back to before 1997, before tuition fees were introduced. The consultants recommend that urgent action be taken to update that information. That will involve action by the Minister and action in the areas of social security and taxation. We need to co-ordinate these systems.

5.00 pm

The report states that millions and millions of pounds are left over because, in certain circumstances, money has not been paid back to students. Students who moved from full-time to part-time employment or to summer employment, who did not know that they should not have been paying tax in the first place, or whose PAYE contributions were not paid back to them after they were forced to pay them, have all lost out through the tax system. That has increased the complexity of this problem.

Then there is the social security system. I note that the authors of the recent report of the Social Security Advisory Committee to the Government share our disappointment that their recommendations have not been adopted. Those recommendations focus on intercalated students who move from full-time to part-time study; on those who may be entitled to jobseeker's allowance and some form of income support; and on single parents who have children over 16. Having stipulated the parts of the system that let students down, they recommend introducing regulations to deal with the problem.

Time and time again the Committee has to deal with the regulations, because the legislation is so complex and did not get them right at the start. The legislation can

never be right, because the situation is ever-changing. We constantly have to pass regulations to deal with anomalies and ambiguities in the legislation. Indeed, within less than a year we have had to pass a number of regulations to deal with students who have fallen through the gaps. Also, the NUS/USI has asked us not to pass one regulation that relates to social security because it would simply worsen student debt.

As a representative for South Belfast, where most students live, I am absolutely appalled at their living conditions in this new century. Anyone who pays us a visit will also note that while two children died awful deaths by fire on Sunday morning, so too did a student last year who was living in such poor accommodation, with such poor furniture, that the fire spread very quickly and death occurred.

Until we give students a reasonable income, landlords will have no reason to improve their properties. Appalling rents make for appalling standards in which students have to live, and this affects the whole community. I can bear witness to the deterioration of the university community in recent years.

I also want a response on the childcare issue. The Minister made proposals about childcare allowances, but he did not give us any details. This issue faces many students who are parents — they have to pay large sums of money to have their children taken care of, and they cannot afford to do so.

Finally, I would like an equality impact statement on the decision that only those in key skill areas will get particular privilege. Many of those areas do not cross the gender barrier. I would be very concerned about humanities and arts in academic institutions if we concentrate exemptions on hard subjects only.

Mr Byrne: I am grateful to all who have contributed to the debate. I want to support the motion and reiterate that this is a big problem for many students, whether studying at home, in Britain or in the Republic.

Many contributors have referred to the fact that student debt has been increasing for years. I contend that over the last 10 years that increase has been significant. Within the last four to five years, we have seen a particularly sharp rise because of the up-front tuition fees. Over the last three to four years, the mandatory maintenance awards have been abolished and the discretionary awards substantially cut.

However, I welcome the Minister's commitment to tackling the problem. The package of measures that he announced on 15 December was a good attempt to address many of the issues. The greatest problem has been limited finance. I have lectured in further education for 20 years and have encouraged many people to go on to higher education. I would like to see more resources being directed towards student support. However, that

budget is finite. Fewer people will be paying fees, which I welcome, but I would like to see no students paying any fees for any further or higher education course.

Student accommodation is a big problem in places such as south Belfast, Jordanstown and Derry. I agree with other Members that students are living in absolutely atrocious conditions and paying very high rents. The health and safety of some of their houses is also an issue. I would like to see some form of social housing for students with minimum-quality standards and co-ordination between the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment and the Department for Social Development. Parents and students would like to see that too. Queen's University has student houses, but only a limited number. Many landlords are ripping students off, and that is adding to their hardship.

Students are dropping out of higher education courses because of their worries over debt. I take phone calls from students at universities in Britain about their hardship. I encouraged those students to go to Britain. They could not get into university here because of the higher entrance qualifications.

That leads to my second point. I welcome the Minister's commitment to increasing the number of higher education places here, but there must be an even greater commitment to providing even more. I would also ask that these places be not concentrated in Belfast and Derry alone. If fewer maintenance grants are to be made available to students, we must provide higher education places for them closer to where they live. More further education colleges should be asked to provide higher education courses throughout Northern Ireland rather than confining them to a few centres alone.

As parents, we all know the pain that some students endure, and many families are faced with debt. I know parents who have two or three children at university, and providing for them is a major problem. It is even more difficult if the students come from an area where there is very little employment and they cannot get summer jobs. An added burden is that they cannot register for social security benefits. Where a student genuinely cannot get a summer or part-time job, it is unjust that he cannot register for social security benefits. Surely in the twenty-first century we should be caring enough to allow such students to be given some money. This adds to family problems and burdens parents who cannot provide for their student son or daughter. It is a terrible dilemma for them.

Lastly, I fully support the motion and hope that over the next year or two the Assembly can address some of its main concerns, particularly the misery that is visited on students and families in debt. The Minister was sensitive when he initiated his package of 15 December 2000, a package that was skewed towards lower-income families and in which TSN factors were addressed.

Mr Hay: This is not the first time I have tried to tackle student finance and poverty. For months, finding a solution to this problem has been uppermost in the minds of members of the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment. The House will agree that high cost and a fear of debt deters people of all ages from entering higher education.

Many families struggle to pay fees and meet living costs, and for mature students with dependants there can be a benefits trap. Over the last five to 10 years, means-tested grants and student loans, for full-time undergraduates in particular, together with the removal of social security benefits, have added to student debt. In fact, 60% of students here now work part-time, some for 17 to 20 hours a week. We can tell from those figures that their studies must be affected.

University figures show that 87% of students face financial hardship of some kind. That is a serious indictment of us as public representatives and parents, and we must try to resolve the problems. However, if we are serious about addressing them, we must look at what is required in third-level education and target the most disadvantaged students. Student debt trebled between 1995-96 and 1998-99, and hardship is widespread across both communities. Neither loses out when it comes to this.

Education is a right. I never want to see a day when it becomes a privilege. That would be totally wrong. More research needs to be done to determine exactly how many students are dropping out of courses for financial reasons. A funding scheme that provides students with enough money to live on while they study, without their needing to incur additional debt, is also required.

Some students are going to financial institutions to try to obtain money, but some are going to loan sharks. As public representatives, we have a moral duty to address this problem, but it will not be easy. We are looking at many years of rising to the challenge and at many years during which successive British Governments did not deal with student finance and poverty. This matter will be raised in the House in the coming months and years. It is uppermost in the minds of those in the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment. Although the Committee has produced a report that is useful not only to ourselves but to the Minister as well, we will revisit the issue in the future.

5.15 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker: This is the first occasion on which the Assembly will hear what can properly be described as a maiden speech. Members will be aware that it is the custom in other places to hear a maiden speech without interruption, a practice I commend to the Assembly. I call Mrs Annie Courtney.

Mrs Courtney: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to address the

Assembly. I also welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate on student debt, coming from an area that has high unemployment and where student numbers are increasing in Magee College and the colleges of further and higher education. This issue affects both communities.

Various surveys have been carried out recently, but the one with which we are all familiar is the student income survey which was published in the 'Financial Times' on 21 December 2000. It said

"1 in 10 students had thought of dropping out of university for financial reasons."

The Government have insisted that the abolition of grants and the introduction of means-tested tuition fees have not deterred the disadvantaged from further education. The report, which examined the period 1998-99, was commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment. The president of the National Union of Students said that the student expenditure survey was a

"damning indictment of the Government's funding system."

The chief executive of Universities UK said the group is

"likely to use evidence of debt to justify a new bursaries and scholarships system."

The report found that at the end of 1999, the debt of a full-time student was £2473; £777 more than three years before. For a lone parent, the figure was £4747. This is how students are suffering.

The Minister's announcement of an extra £65 million to overhaul student finance was warmly welcomed, particularly in key skill areas, which, traditionally, have been the poor relations of education. This represents a significant switch of emphasis towards funding education for selective economic development rather than the traditional broad academic approach. This is welcome, given the Minister's intention to increase higher education places again in 2002-03. It targets those most in need, promotes social inclusion and gives greater access to disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

The raising of the student fee contribution threshold from £17,800 to £20,000 means that nearly three out of five students in higher education will not pay any fees. A further fifth will pay only partial fees. The further introduction of means-tested access bursaries will help those most in need. Considerable investment is now being made in third-level students, and the Minister has made it clear that last month's package is only a start. He is committed to improving the position of students further as resources permit.

I thank Members for their attention and support the motion.

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): I have listened to the debate with considerable interest and have no difficulty in supporting the motion. Members know that

the issue is of deep concern and interest to me. I have devoted much time to addressing the matter as effectively and fairly as possible. I have approached the issue bearing in mind the twin social principles of the Good Friday Agreement — targeting social need and equality of opportunity in further and higher education, training and employment, for which I am responsible.

On 15 December 2000 I outlined to the Assembly Committee my proposals for changes to the student support arrangements, and followed this up with a public announcement. I hope that I left Committee members, Assembly Members and the public in no doubt of my determination to address student financial support in as positive and comprehensive a way possible in our present circumstances.

The package I announced will give more than £60 million to student financial support over the next three years above that which is currently provided. I acknowledge the positive comments that many Members, if not most, have made, notwithstanding the fact that many would like me to have gone further. I wanted to go much further, but we do work with limited resources.

On 18 December 2000 my Colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, reinforced my announcement in his Budget speech. He made it clear that my proposals have the full support of my Executive Colleagues. He said that funding was being provided through additions to my budget for 2001-02 and through Executive programme funds for future years. Details of the proposals are subject to further evaluation by the Department of Finance and Personnel and others, notably the Equality Commission, before a final announcement can be made. I indicated that to the Committee, and the Minister of Finance and Personnel did likewise in his Budget statement.

I hope that the Committee will take time to deliberate on my proposals and discuss them with me — I was invited by the Chairperson to return to the Committee and have agreed to do so — before coming to the Assembly with its considered response. Today's debate, to which many members of the Committee have contributed, is not the end of the matter, though the broad direction of my proposals is clear.

My proposals have been fully endorsed by the Executive. They address the need to target additional support to those who need it most, which many Members have emphasised. The Committee, while still concerned about my intention on fees, has welcomed many of these proposals, and many are in line with the recommendations in the Committee's report.

The further evaluation of my proposals is now under way, and I hope very soon to set out the details for consultation under the Department's equality scheme. Reference was made to the need to demonstrate how the proposals meet equality requirements. I will be only too pleased to do so. As Members of the Assembly, and in

particular members of the Committee, know, the Equality Commission itself has to cast its rigorous eye over the proposals before they are finally endorsed.

I now want to address the substance of the issues before us this afternoon. I recognised on taking office that student support arrangements were in need of review, and initiating that review was among the first public commitments I made. If I recall correctly, I did so within two weeks of taking office.

It was not an issue on which I needed prompting to decide that action was needed. It has been a priority for me and will continue to be. Some, not in this Chamber and not always in Northern Ireland, have argued that against a rising level of student participation in higher education — an increase which this year was at 5% over the preceding year — there was no need to look at this matter. I rejected that argument. My direct knowledge of the situation and my reading of the reports on the matter made it clear to me that there was an urgent need to address the question.

Mr J Kelly chose student debt as a centrepiece for the debate, and in so doing he reinforced two key aspects of my proposals. First, living costs is the really important issue for students in higher and further education. It is important in addressing that to look at the needs of the most disadvantaged, those on lowest incomes or those whose parents or those supporting them have lower incomes than average.

My proposals directly address those two important issues. However, loans have made an important contribution to student support since 1990 when the major expansion of higher education was in full swing, and they are likely to continue to be a vital element in student support for many years. The Executive, like the Executive in Scotland and the London Government, could not afford a support system without a loans element. Indeed, the Assembly Committee itself has endorsed a loan system as a key feature of its proposals for the future.

If implemented, the Committee's proposals would increase rather than reduce the debt faced by graduates. Through the recommendation that graduates repay the student fee contribution as well as any loan obligations they have incurred during the course of their studies, virtually all graduates would face a greater repayment requirement than at present. This requirement would also be greater than that which will pertain under the proposals I have announced. Under the Committee's recommendations, even students who are presently exempt from a fee contribution would have to contribute to the graduate endowment fund. Let us remember that the existing loan system is highly subsidised by taxpayers.

5.30 pm

Student loans represent an investment of £90 million a year. In present circumstances the Executive could not

afford to change this without severely damaging other services such as health, transport and school education. As Members who are calling for the abolition of the loans also supported the Budget proposals passed here several weeks ago, perhaps they would tell me and the Executive where the additional funding should come from. If it should come from my Department's budget, I need to be told which services to curtail — services to the unemployed, university places, research, training programmes or what? We must recognise the constraints within which we operate. Indeed, outside my Department, what other services might be affected by the need to find funds on such a substantial scale?

Furthermore, it is important to appreciate that the current loans offer a reasonable deal to students. Loans are not repaid until a graduate is in employment and earning a minimum of £10,000 per year. They are repaid at a zero rate of interest, and annually no more than 9% of income is taken in repayment. Some 75% of students now take out a loan, and the average amount is £3,200. I remind Members that the private rate of return to those with a degree is 20% above those without a degree. That figure is widely acknowledged in research literature on this issue. Sir Ron Dearing, Mr Andrew Cubie and many other commentators in education agree — and the Committee itself accepts the principle — that those who benefit most from higher education should contribute to their living costs while studying.

Abolishing Government supported provision for student loans, as some suggest, would not be a progressive move. In their absence, students would undoubtedly have recourse to loans from commercial institutions on much less favourable terms than those available from the Student Loans Company. In such circumstances, student debt would be considerably increased instead of reduced.

The review has been a complex exercise with a competing range of approaches to explore and evaluate. In the past, policy was to maintain parity with England and Wales, but the review also had to consider the Cubie Report and the Scottish Executive's response. Further changes are underway in England and are also likely in Wales.

The review focused on several broad objectives. I will briefly outline the main provisions on higher education, the subject of today's motion. Raising the contribution threshold from £17,000 to £20,000 means that over 50% of students will not contribute to fees, while a further 20% will contribute only partially. Fewer than 30% will make the full contribution, which is just over £1,000 a year.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

A childcare grant to assist mature students on low incomes will be introduced. Means-tested bursaries and other access measures to widen access to full-time higher education to those from lower socio-economic groups will also be introduced. The minimum loan available to

students whose parents or spouses have residual incomes of over £46,000 a year will be constrained to enable resources to be redirected and targeted on assistance for students from lower-income families.

I hope to introduce learning accounts for certain part-time courses to encourage lifelong learning and greater participation in part-time vocational higher education. The introduction of such accounts may meet the concerns expressed by one of the contributors about the absence of career development loans.

More domestic places from 2002-03 will be provided, and they will, in part, be used to increase participation from lower socio-economic groups and address skills shortages. The Educational Guidance Service for Adults will be asked to provide a service to mature higher education students in co-operation with their representatives, and my officials will work with the education and library boards and student representatives to develop material for advising potential students on finance.

Madam Deputy Speaker — Mr Speaker, sorry. I did not notice that you had slipped into the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: I am relieved that that is the reason for the Member's reference.

Dr Farren: Mr Speaker, perhaps you did not hear, though I trust that others did, the rationale, in so far as I could offer it in the short time available to me, of my proposals and their general direction and content.

Today's debate has helped to maintain a considerable level of interest in this issue, on which there is wide concern. My proposals mark a beginning and show that our devolved institutions can, and will, make a difference. I trust, as we take this debate forward in the Committee and the Assembly, and with representatives of educational institutions and students, that we will through that dialogue ensure that we maximise the level of support, and make it as efficient, effective, fair and equitable as possible to all who want to involve themselves in further and higher education at whatever level.

Mr J Kelly: A Cheann Comhairle, in moving this motion I was driven by the notion that we, elected Members, have an obligation to address issues that are critical to the citizens who elected us. Health and education are two critical issues in our emerging democracy, and it is difficult to distinguish between them.

I am delighted that the Minister attended, but somewhat disappointed by his unwillingness to address many issues that were raised by Members. In many ways he misrepresented the Committee. At the core of our report, agreed across the Committee, is the notion of, and belief in, the abolition of student fees and the concept of an education system free from debt. Despite our differences, that was at the core of what the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment wanted.

The Committee may — and I am sure that it will — go into that issue with the Minister in greater detail.

I shall not delay proceedings; they have already been delayed today. I thank the members of the Committee who contributed to the debate, particularly the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson. It is important that Members use the Assembly for the reasons for which they were elected and discuss matters that affect those who elected them; if we have done that today, we have not wasted time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to address urgently the critical state of student debt.

HOMELESSNESS

Mr O'Neill: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to make greater provision for people presenting themselves as homeless during this time of the year and to outline his plans to deal with the increasing numbers of homeless people throughout the year.

I am sure Members are aware that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Durkan, secured £30,000 to be administered by the Minister for Social Development, Mr Morrow, to help reduce the plight of the homeless over Christmas. I congratulate both Ministers on securing that funding and administering it so rapidly. That was not an act of tokenism; it was a recognition of a serious and pressing problem.

Throughout the festive period everyone speaks of the season of goodwill. By supporting the motion unanimously, we will continue that goodwill towards the homeless, and homelessness is a serious and growing problem. Despite the imaginative schemes and hard work done by a range of groups and voluntary bodies, despite good leadership and practice by the Housing Executive and despite additional funding, homelessness has risen by 17.6% in the past five years and continues to grow.

A cursory look at the urgent waiting list of the Housing Executive shows that about 11,000 families are waiting to be housed, and perhaps as many as 100,000 people are awaiting adequate accommodation. Those figures are based on details of officially registered homeless people, and an even greater number of people present themselves as homeless. There has been criticism that the standards for admission to the homeless lists are too severe. In addition, there is evidence that many other homeless people, especially young people, do not even present themselves. The application process is often cited as a hurdle.

We must have controls to avoid abuses of the system, and there is well-documented evidence of abuse. However, if the controls are too strict and contribute to the escalating problem, the Department should re-examine the matter.

5.45 pm

There are several dimensions to the problem. First, there are those who are homeless, who are on the Housing Executive's waiting list, and who have no family or friendship network of support. One of the worst growing aspects of this is the lone, or separated, parent with young children who has to be placed in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. In south Down the general practice is for such people to leave their premises after breakfast and walk the streets of the town until bedtime. The misery of such a situation is unacceptable. It is a problem for the Department for Social Development,

and it could be ameliorated simply by more suitable housing and temporary accommodation.

Homelessness among young people is another dimension to the problem. There are two main reasons. First, there can be a family breakdown or some form of abuse. Financial or serious internal conflict can drive a young person from the family home. Such young people are among the most vulnerable, and guidance is essential to help them avoid a pattern of living that becomes self-destructive. In value-for-money terms, a little spending now could mean future savings in health, law and order and other areas.

The second area involves young people leaving care, and this compounds the homeless problem. There are several serious problems here. First, there is insufficient support and preparation for young people before they are cast adrift from care. Secondly, young people leave care a year before they are eligible for a Housing Executive tenancy or housing benefits. They are simply unable to get a tenancy. At that stage the Housing Executive requires a guarantor. Can you imagine how difficult that is for such a young person? Often, social services act — but not always. It is a situation of great concern.

In addition to the difficulties faced by these young people, coming out of care and trying to manage alone is a major challenge. It is difficult for those with no knowledge of the effects of institutionalisation to envisage the extent of that challenge. The problems range from personal hygiene to financial and tenancy management. Such young people should not have to cope on their own. This is where the problem crosses from the Department for Social Development to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The levels of support are very poor.

The situation is even more pronounced among those who have had mental or institutionalised disorders and who are now in the community as a result of the last Government's community care policies. Community care is an excellent idea and is approved by practitioners at all levels. However, it is an expensive option, and attempts to introduce it on the cheap lead to disaster. Many of those so released are now among the most difficult homeless cases. Clearly, this is not just a social problem; there is a great need for health and social services to help housing specialists, who are, after all, only housing specialists. There are many examples of dedicated, hard-working social workers who are simply overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of their work, and I know many examples of breakdown, staff shortages and totally inadequate, and in some cases non-existent, funding.

I am glad that Mr Morrow is here this afternoon, for he is the prime mover in this. I appeal to him to liaise with his Colleague in Health, Social Services and Public Safety no matter how difficult he may find that to ensure that there is a greater standard of support for people in

these situations. However, even that will not deal with the whole problem. There are people with whom, for a wide variety of reasons, other agencies find it too challenging to deal. Some positive and substantial efforts have been made to ensure that some of their needs have been addressed, but not enough.

Some of the Christmas funding went to help outreach projects offering the most basic support to those who are termed "the roofless". We must ensure that these projects are getting the support they need, because the alternative is to leave people to die in the streets. This is what is happening. Some people may be shocked by these figures. Many can see the problem for themselves when they see people begging in Dublin. In London, the problem manifests itself in what are called "cardboard cities", but here it is a hidden problem. Many bodies are working tirelessly to combat it, but people are still falling through a system that appears to be flawed. How else could the problem have escalated as it has?

This is a particularly poignant time of year to address this issue. For those who were lucky enough to be with their families over Christmas and are now looking forward to starting the new year, it is easy to forget those who do not have the simplest of necessities, such as somewhere they can call home. After the right to life, the right to a home must be a very close second, and there is a huge amount to do to tackle this growing trend. We need to re-examine the application process and ensure that in an attempt to stop abuse, individuals are not being prevented from getting the service they need.

Suitable housing must be provided, and to prevent even more people from becoming homeless, more adequate temporary accommodation must be made available, and temporary accommodation must mean just that — a stopgap home, not an inadequate substitute.

We need more support for young people leaving care, personal support and the ability to rent accommodation. Some very successful stepping-stone projects have been run in the past. They provided a home for young people in similar situations. It was the young peoples responsibility to take care of the home with some supervision, and that prepared them for living alone. A study some years ago showed that 35% of hostel dwellers were suffering from mental health problems, some of which ranged from middle to severe in degree. We need to examine the issue of community care, establish where it has been failing us and put it right.

I urge Members to support my call for adequate provision to be made to ensure that everyone has somewhere to live, surely a basic right. We made a start with the money at Christmas. We made a difference, but we can make an even greater difference. We must do better so that the blight of homelessness and the way in which that points to an uncaring society does not become the norm.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion moved by Mr O'Neill on a matter that concerns most of us. When you live in an affluent society and in an area where you do not see people sleeping in the streets, you tend to think that there is not a problem. However, when you have an advice centre and are in touch with constituents, you see where the problems are. There are very clear problems with homelessness, and I am glad to have this opportunity to make some points to which the Minister may be able to respond.

It is not just homelessness that is the issue, but the hopelessness of homelessness. It is people who have nowhere to go, no homes and no family. Those are the people we are trying to help, and this is our opportunity to do something. In the last couple of years, we have seen the impact of homelessness and the desperation of those who have nowhere to go and who may sleep in a cardboard box, on a park bench or in the open. However, when we try, as elected representatives, to get them accommodation, we find a problem with housing associations and the Housing Executive. Some who present themselves to the Housing Executive have nowhere to go. Most are single, many have health or addiction problems, many have no money and all are vulnerable and desperate for help. The one thing that has had an impact upon me is that desperation. We must focus on the problem and do something quickly.

There is no age limit on homelessness. The homeless can be elderly, middle-aged or, more often, young. When they go to the Housing Executive to be pointed, many find that they have no points. The circumstances can be desperate. Often it is younger people, 16 to 17 year-olds and those up to 25, who have lived at home and fallen out with their parents who have nowhere to go. They are desperate and alone, with no one to help. A society should be judged by its attitude to people who are vulnerable. If we want a society that helps such people, we have to look at what we are doing as elected representatives.

Some of those people do not meet the criteria needed for points for the housing list. We know what happens now — they have nowhere to go. Will the Minister say what steps his Department is going to take to enable such people to qualify for housing?

We need to address the concerns of many and ensure that the homeless get accommodation. Adequate, satisfactory alternative accommodation must be offered to those in need. I have heard of such people being offered hostel accommodation, which has turned out to be “hostile” accommodation. They were moved to certain areas and had to move out because of intimidation.

6.00 pm

If they cannot get hostel accommodation in their area, they are moved to places outside it, such as Downpatrick, Larne or Limavady. That is how far some people from the Ards and Strangford areas have had to go to

get accommodation. They were moved right out and into areas where they did not feel happy. Already vulnerable and worried about what was happening, they found themselves in areas where, sometimes, their political viewpoints were at odds with those of the locals.

We want to look at the alternative accommodation that is offered. We have to ensure that people are, by and large, housed in hostels in their areas to ensure that they do not have these problems. I ask the Minister to look at that as well, because it seems, certainly in the area that I come from, that hostel accommodation is not always available and people find themselves in areas where they do not want to be.

I also ask the Minister to respond on the problem of homeless people with young children. They move from school to school while their parents try to find accommodation. It is an unsettled time for the family and very unsettling for the children. It should be possible to provide accommodation within their areas or in areas where they intend to go to give consistency in their education. That is particularly worrying for parents and elected representatives, and I ask that that matter also be taken on board.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member, and all subsequent Members, to speak for not more than seven minutes because of the number of Members who also wish to speak.

Mr Shannon: My apologies, Mr Speaker. I did not realise that there was a time limit.

In conclusion, there should be co-ordination between all the Departments and bodies to address the homelessness problem. We have all received figures from the Simon Community showing a 5% decrease in the problem. Can the Minister confirm that this decrease in the past year will not lead to complacency and that he will ensure that the downward trend, if there is one, continues?

Mr Davis: Members receive a variety of information on a regular basis. Some is interesting, and some is serious, but this little brochure from the Simon Community really spells out what homelessness means. It states

“Our home is very important to all of us. It gives shelter and warmth. A home is somewhere that provides us with independence. It is somewhere where we can feel safe and secure. It gives us privacy when we want to be alone. It allows us to open the door to family and friends when we want to enjoy their company. Our home provides us with stability so that we can fulfil ourselves in work, hobbies and relationships. It gives us a place within our community and a sense of belonging. To be without a home is to be vulnerable both physically and emotionally ... It is easy to think that people become homeless through their own fault or because they can not be bothered to put in the effort to change their situation. Listening to people who are homeless reveals quite a different story.”

It goes on to give the heartbreaking stories of three different people.

Homelessness blights many lives. It is right that this problem be highlighted in the Assembly and that we should attempt to mitigate its effects. I congratulate Mr O'Neill for moving the motion. I am pleased to see the Minister for Social Development taking note of the sentiments being expressed.

At one time it was fashionable for to speak of the "deserving poor" and the "undeserving poor". I am glad that such attitudes are disappearing, though some parts of society still have a considerable way to go. In dealing with homelessness, we do not nowadays differentiate between those who have contributed to their situation and those who, through no fault of their own, have ended up with problems.

As we try to alleviate the problem and assist people to find a suitable home rather than leave them to live rough, we should pay tribute to the Housing Executive for the positive steps that it has taken to house those in categories A1 and A2 with urgent needs. The Housing Executive is at the sharp end of the problem and, with a limited budget, can do only so much. A more proactive approach to the problem is needed.

People find themselves without a home for different reasons. Young girls become pregnant, leave home and need accommodation in a hurry. Growing numbers of people from all age groups find life difficult and end up sleeping on the streets. The Simon Community brochure shows that 40% are homeless due to disputes with partners, families or friends; 10% of cases are due to eviction or failed tenancies; and 9% were intimidated out of their homes by others. Mr O'Neill also referred to that.

The figures speak for themselves. Some 10,997 households presented as homeless to the Housing Executive. The Simon Community received 4,065 referrals from people seeking accommodation, of whom half were under 25, one quarter were female and one quarter had slept rough. Homelessness crosses the boundaries of age, class, gender and religion. There may also be problems with alcohol or drugs, or, perhaps a young person has outstayed his welcome at home and has been shown the door.

Sheltered accommodation may be available for those with educational difficulties, and there are some excellent schemes. Voluntary agencies such as the Salvation Army and the Simon Community are to be congratulated on the difficult work they do. However, it is up to the Executive and the Assembly to provide the impetus to deal with this growing problem.

The motion is directed at the Minister for Social Development, which is appropriate. However, it is not just his Department that should be involved. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should be involved too. She is responsible for health promotion and social services, which could help here. The Department of Education may also have a role to play. Many factors

lead to homelessness, and some are connected to the education system, which should be more proactive in guiding the young on sexual issues and the misuse of drugs and alcohol. We do not need to follow Westminster and appoint a homelessness czar, but we urgently need a co-ordinated approach.

In the Programme for Government, the Executive spoke of a healthy society and social inclusion. We must ensure that those fine sentiments are not simply pious words and lipservice. It will be a step in the right direction if we can alleviate the serious problem of homelessness.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an rún agus tá mé buíoch de Éamonn O'Neill as é a thabhairt os comhair an Tí. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. I support the calls for an interdepartmental approach.

I am often reminded of the pyramid of needs, at the very bottom of which are accommodation, heating and food. There is no universally accepted definition of homelessness ní lia duine ná tuairim ar an ábhar seo. The debate on what constitutes homelessness, and how many people should be described as homeless, has run for years. Homelessness is a relative concept — it ranges from those who do not have a roof over their heads to those who live in insecure or poor, sub-standard accommodation in both urban and rural areas. The question of where on the continuum of housing need to demarcate "homelessness" is a political one, which is somewhat subjective.

The current response to homelessness by the statutory services is legislated for in the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1988. The Order makes the Housing Executive responsible for meeting the housing needs of homeless people as long as each person clears three hurdles — he must be perceived to be vulnerable; he must be in priority need; and he must not be intentionally homeless. In many cases, the Housing Executive places a homeless person in a hostel or temporary accommodation, where he remains until allocated a public-sector tenancy. The time for this allocation varies between areas, depending on the housing demand, and can range from 18 months to two years. The length of the waiting period can have serious health implications for the person caught in the homeless trap.

I do not want to repeat points made earlier, but I want the Assembly to address a number of proposals. I suggest that we allocate resources to increase public-sector housing and provide support for vulnerable public-sector tenants, so that their tenancies are maintained. We should also examine the high cost of rent in hostels and the length of time homeless persons remain there as well as promote the role of the private sector by supporting a percentage of those who are homeless with rent deposit schemes. We should also enhance the role of the private

sector. It could meet the needs of those who are homeless but are not deemed to be priority cases by the Housing Executive. We should examine the reasons for people becoming homeless — in many instances a multitude of issues has affected an individual, resulting in homelessness. Education agencies have an important role to play in preventing this.

A strategic approach is needed to deal with the increasing number of homeless people who come to the Housing Executive each year. The lack of appropriate “move-on” accommodation is one of the major problems, as is the lack of support that would help homeless people keep their tenancies.

The availability of public-sector housing needs to be examined, if we are to address the very serious problems. Homeless people must have rights that are guarded through legislation, and ad hoc or short-term programmes to meet particular needs should be made possible. We must be proactive on homelessness, and — and this was highlighted by Mr Davis — a holistic approach is needed towards the personal experiences of people caught in this trap. No room must be left for inactivity.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs E Bell: Some people in Northern Ireland, maybe even in the Assembly, think that we do not have a problem with homelessness and that this motion is irrelevant, but I congratulate Mr O'Neill for moving it.

Although there is no obvious evidence of people sleeping on the streets, or of cardboard cities as in Dublin or London, this does not mean that they do not. According to organisations that work with the homeless, if people have no accommodation, they end up in places such as cemeteries. This is happening throughout the Province, not just in Belfast, and it is something that should not be allowed.

When legislation on this was eventually passed for Northern Ireland in 1988, coming into force on 1 April 1989, it was based upon the Westminster Act that had been in force for many years. As a result, the Housing (NI) Order 1988 benefited to a certain extent from lessons learned in England, Scotland and Wales over those 12 years, but for a variety of reasons it gave rise to considerable concern among housing experts. The most troubling of these was that, like the earlier Act, the Housing Order still ignored the single largest homeless group — single people, usually young single men.

6.15 pm

Today Government figures show a 5% drop in homelessness during the last 12 months, while the Simon Community, which is faced with the single homeless, who are not recognised as such by the system, report a 4.7% increase during the same period. Lies, damned lies and statistics.

No one should be homeless, forced to sleep rough, sleep in hostels, occupy condemned premises or, worse still, cemeteries. It is alarming that 24% of some 4,000 people slept rough in the two weeks before they approached the Simon Community. People fleeing from intimidation or marital disputes further exacerbates the situation and helps to explain why they are not all seen lying on the streets.

We must ensure that the problem is met head-on. We must help the Ministers of all Departments to achieve this aim. The £30,000 announced by Minister Durkan at Christmas was only the quick application of sticking plaster, and to be honest I do not think that anyone thought it was otherwise.

Consistent financing is essential, but we must provide proper accommodation and solve the other associated problems. We can continue to support the efforts of the Housing Executive, the Simon Community, Shelter (NI) Ltd, the Salvation Army and other organisations to alleviate homelessness.

The current figure of 10,997 homeless reported by the Housing Executive does not take into consideration the proportion of the people who approached the Simon Community. They are not included in the official figures. We must, as a supposedly caring society, face up to our responsibilities. A roof over one's head is the most basic right, surpassing all human rights apart from the rights to life and food.

The young are suffering most given the numbers involved, and that is not surprising since the vast majority do not qualify for inclusion in homelessness statistics. Families must continue to get priority, but that does not justify ignoring the young and leaving them to voluntary organisations. They are human beings like we are with the same human rights, even if some of them have never had a job.

The Programme for Government recognises the need for all Departments to work together with outside organisations to alleviate the problems of vulnerable people. Education, health and job provision are major factors in reducing the number of homeless. Joined-up government is the way forward, and we have acknowledged this many times. I hope that we will put our words into action.

The motion recognises that this problem does not, as Mr O'Neill said, just exist at Christmas. It needs attention throughout the year. I will be interested to hear from the Minister if any plans have been drawn up for the Supporting People initiative, which his Department will be striving to put into action.

I support the motion and hope that the Ministers will do something about it.

Mr Boyd: Regrettably, homelessness is a growing problem, with nearly 12,000 households presenting as

homeless to the Housing Executive annually. Homelessness is particularly poignant at Christmas, but it remains a serious problem throughout the year. Last year, as several Members have said, the charity that takes the lead in tackling homelessness here, the Simon Community, was approached by over 4,000 people for help. Only 1,100 were able to get accommodation. That represented a 4.7% increase on the previous year, so it is wrong to take the Housing Executive's figure of a 5% decrease in isolation.

The most frightening aspect is that the majority of the homeless, 54%, are aged 25 years or under, and almost one quarter reported sleeping rough for up to 14 days before, 23% of whom were female. There is great concern about the increasing number of homeless young people, particularly among 16- and 17-year-olds, and the growing number of teenage parents. About one in 10 of the teenagers living with the Simon Community are parents separated from their children, either voluntarily or against their wishes. This is horrific. In addition, a significant number of teenage women in Simon Community houses are pregnant. People can be without a home for many reasons including family conflict, physical violence, intimidation, relationship breakdown and financial difficulties, including the most vulnerable in society.

People's attitudes to homelessness must be changed. Many perceive the homeless to be middle-aged males with a drink problem, but any one of us could be without a home, given the wrong set of circumstances. Safe and affordable housing is a right. Research by the Simon Community shows that only 4% of the population have any accurate understanding of the facts of homelessness. To many in Northern Ireland it is a problem for London, Manchester and Dublin, but not for Belfast.

We have a shortage of housing that is suitable and affordable for single people and small families seeking to establish themselves or re-establish themselves at the lower income level of the market.

The number of housing reposessions has increased dramatically in recent years. Housing has become an investment opportunity for individuals and companies seeking to make money. The concept of social housing as part of the necessary fabric of society has been predominantly lost.

The numbers sleeping rough are growing significantly. Homelessness is not confined to large cities. Research carried out by the Simon Community shows substantial homelessness in regional areas. Figures from the Simon Community and the Housing Executive show a large increase in the numbers looking for help in Newtownards, Banbridge, Newry, Ballymena, Antrim, Larne, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Londonderry, Magherafelt and Strabane. The most marked increases are in Newry, Ballymena, Antrim, Coleraine and Strabane. Is it possible to get out of the cycle of "No job, no hope, no home"?

The Simon Community and other charities for the homeless help people build the skills necessary for coping with everyday life at home, such as cooking, managing finances and surviving on a low income. However, the proposed changes to housing benefit will have an adverse effect on these support services. The annual budget for the Simon Community in Northern Ireland is about £3.5 million. At present, rent from residents, which in the majority of cases is covered by housing benefit, makes up just under 50% of the Simon Community's total income.

Housing benefit covers the upkeep of accommodation houses and the support services provided by its staff. However, the Government are introducing changes to housing benefit. In future, housing benefit will only cover the upkeep of accommodation houses. Support services will be covered by a new fund called Supporting People. The Simon Community will have to bid for this funding on a project-by-project basis, and it is concerned that the bids from all the agencies will exceed the funding available.

This poses a threat to a vital income source and will have adverse consequences for the accommodation and support services that the Simon Community and other homeless charities provide. I share the Simon Community's grave concerns about this. This is even more worrying given the increase in the number of people seeking accommodation from the organisation.

Homelessness is something that I feel particularly strongly about. During a visit to the Simon Community in Larne a few months ago, I was able to see the essential services that it provides for homeless people throughout the south and east Antrim areas — indeed, throughout Northern Ireland.

Homelessness is a serious problem that needs to be addressed as a priority. There must be adequate investment to improve the housing stock, and particularly vacant properties. People are entitled to housing that fully meets their diverse needs.

The shortage of suitable, affordable and accessible accommodation must be urgently addressed, and an overall improvement in the standard of social housing will have a positive impact on homelessness.

Ms McWilliams: The homeless are not a homogeneous community. They can split into various groups. I want to focus on young people who have been at the centre of much of what we have been talking about.

There are, of course, other important groups, such as older people who become homeless, lone parents, those with mental health problems, travellers, ex-prisoners and, more recently, sex offenders. Because they cannot find a house, they are vulnerable, being shifted from place to place. I will return to that later. I want to deal with the

key issues, the reasons for homelessness among young people.

One of the major problems is family conflict and breakdown — what happens when there is divorce or domestic violence or when a stepfather moves in and a young person cannot relate to him. There are major conflicts and, unfortunately, homelessness can be a consequence. Then we have physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Poverty and anti-social behaviour, with which we are familiar, are important. I am increasingly having to deal with situations in which young people and families are being moved out by paramilitaries, mainly at the point of a gun or at the end of a baseball bat, and into areas such as south Belfast, which is perceived to be mixed. We need an inter-agency community response to let these new residents know that they have responsibilities and rights.

A way should be found to reconcile the community with a group that is known as having been moved from elsewhere. That is at the core of what we are discussing. If we keep moving people from area to area, we increase homelessness. We must get to the root cause with the various agencies. Until the education welfare officer, the Housing Executive, juvenile liaison officers, probation officers and all relevant individuals are round a table together, we are simply dealing with poor residents trying to address each element of bureaucracy in isolation. People get fed up and say that they want the Housing Executive to move this family or individual out by next week — and round and round it goes.

The situation is serious for young people leaving care. I was shocked to learn that within six months, 23% of such young people are homeless. The word “care” may not apply when we consider what happens to them once they move out of the residential accommodation age bracket.

Recently, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety looked at this matter. Statistics tell us that family homelessness may be going down, but homelessness among young people is increasing. It is clear that over half the homeless are in the under-25 age bracket, and the Minister may want to look at the issue with regard to the selection of the age applying to the different groups. For people over 25, certain rules apply for benefits and selection for permanent housing. For people over 18 and under 25 different rules apply, and if they are between 16 and 18 the rules are different again. The system should be reviewed and the procedures for the different age brackets tied up. People should not be passed over just because they move from one age group to another.

I am also concerned about legislative changes, and this is not an issue solely for the Minister for Social Development. We need an inter-agency approach to the New Deal. It is argued that elements of the New Deal

initiative have indirectly created homelessness. A young person moving out of care may not be able or eligible to take up a gateway project. This person is also cut off from jobseeker's allowance because he is not seen as a priority, and that creates homelessness, poverty and, no doubt, some anti-social behaviour. If people are cut off from a chance to earn money, burglaries will result.

6.30 pm

I have experience of working in refuges for people made homeless as a result of domestic violence, and one of the greatest initiatives has been second-stage housing — what is known as aftercare or “move on” accommodation. If refuges and hostels become a permanent solution for those fortunate enough to get a place in temporary accommodation, others needing such temporary help are blocked. A quick throughput of hostel and refuge accommodation should be a priority. Those seeking public-sector housing should immediately be given A1 status, and thus priority, and second-stage housing must be provided, so that people can move out quickly letting others in. We need to address that urgently.

Special health and social care support has already been mentioned by Members who referred to Simon Community projects. We need to give these projects core-funding. People should not have to rattle tin cans outside Woolworths. If the projects work and are good practice, let us fund them. They are run by voluntary organisations. The Simon Community has faced a deficit for three years in a row even though it has brought in most of its money itself. We must continue to support it. An inter-agency approach is required, because it takes more than a roof to tackle homelessness.

Mr Tierney: I support the motion and congratulate my Colleague, Mr O'Neill, for moving it. I also congratulate the Minister for the additional funding of £30,000 over Christmas. Some Members have said that it will not make a dent in the problem, but the additional money is recognition that there is a problem.

My first speech to the House was on the Housing Executive's budget, and a large part of it was devoted to the homeless. I pointed out the problems that the homeless face in my area. Suggestions have been made about how to tackle the different problems that different areas clearly have.

If you present yourself as homeless to the Housing Executive in my area, a number of things happen. If you are a lone parent, for example, you will be put up in temporary accommodation, so long as it is available. In some cases accommodation is not available and people are asked to wait, sometimes for weeks. Homeless people get temporary accommodation, perhaps not immediately, but they are also told that they will be living in that accommodation for over a year, perhaps for a year and a half. People who are homeless in my area with no priority need — and this was touched on by Mr O'Neill

— are told that they will probably be housed in a couple of years' time.

Ms McWilliams rightly said that money is needed for new building so that people with priority get the houses they need. That would free up spaces for the homeless. A number of extra spaces have been made available in the Derry area, and I congratulate the Housing Executive and the voluntary agencies on that. However, it still has not reached the stage where somebody can present himself as homeless and be allocated temporary accommodation on the same day.

These individuals will have to wait until there is new building and people with priority needs can move out of temporary accommodation and let them move in. I heard somebody talking about figures on an annual basis, but you can produce figures on a daily basis. At least one person presents himself as homeless each day, only to find that nothing can be done for him, and that is disgraceful.

Mr O'Neill touched on another valid point. An additional problem for those people who do not have priority needs is that if they are put into hostels, they slip out of the network of agencies that should be there for them. They are left to their own devices. Such people do their best to get out of hostels and into some kind of property, normally in the private sector, which they cannot afford.

Like most Members who have spoken, I agree with the proponent that a number of agencies must get involved, and if we are asking agencies to work with the homeless and solve the problem, our Ministers and Departments should be working together to try to solve it too.

I am glad that the Minister is here. He has spoken to the Committee about this problem. He is concerned about it, as we all are. Most of the contributors to the debate have recognised that this is not a problem for the Minister for Social Development alone. On the contrary, a number of Ministers and Committees should get involved, and I urge them all to do just that.

Mr S Wilson: I am going to obey the normal ruling and not repeat the plethora of points already made, most of which I agree with. I just want to deal with two aspects of homelessness that have not yet been mentioned.

I hope that my first point will not be misinterpreted. We must be careful, as we discuss this matter, that we do not encourage the trend of people declaring themselves homeless. Many are homeless as a result of circumstances absolutely and totally beyond their control; we all sympathise with that.

I am sure every Member doing constituency work has come across the view that the easy way out of a difficult family situation is for the parents to throw the young person out, or for the young person to leave home. I have come across two such instances in the past couple of weeks. As a member of a party that emphasises the importance of families, I say that we must not devise

policies that could make this seem an easy option for young people or their parents.

Ms McWilliams: Does the Member accept that most research carried out by the Council for the Homeless shows that the number making themselves intentionally homeless is minimal while the focus seems to be on the sort of exceptional cases to which he refers? As a result, attention is diverted from the core problem.

Mr S Wilson: I accept that the bulk of cases are as the Member says, and I emphasised that at the start of my speech. I recognise that the majority who present themselves as homeless are genuine cases and that they are homeless due to circumstances beyond their control. I stressed that I wanted to address issues that no other Member had addressed, so I said that policy should not encourage those who might believe that homelessness is an easy way out of a domestic situation that cannot be resolved.

There is an obligation on public bodies to deal with this, and public money must be spent either through support to a number of organisations — and several have been mentioned — or through the provision of housing. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the homeless are young and single, people who by nature tend to be the more mobile members of society. We must also examine the provision of housing through the private sector, which might require less capital and could be an easier route to take.

This could be done in a number of ways, one of which has already been mentioned. Some people could secure private-sector housing if they could afford a deposit. The Minister should examine this. If the only impediment to securing alternative accommodation is a deposit, that should be made available.

Another point, which is especially true in parts of Belfast where private landlords hold a large part of the housing stock, is that they, or the estate agents that look after properties for them, should have access to the homeless list, although care would need to be taken with data protection. They should be able to offer accommodation to homeless young people just as the Housing Executive and others do, and information on available housing offers should be made more accessible to them.

6.45 pm

Many other points that I wished to make have already been made, and I do not want to reiterate them. Those are two aspects that no Members had dealt with to date. I hope that they are not taken out of context, but they are pertinent to the debate and ought to be considered.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. Like many others, I want to look especially at the plight of the increasing number of homeless young people, for whom there is no adequate provision. Some

are young, single people under 25, and some are children whose families are homeless.

Recent figures from the Housing Executive show that in 1999-2000, 824 in the 16-18 age group and 1,690 in the 19-25 age group presented themselves as homeless. These figures give cause for concern but are only the tip of the iceberg. There are many young people who do not present themselves as homeless to the Housing Executive because there is little chance of getting any type of accommodation.

We have already heard that the Simon Community's statistics show that 54% of people approaching it for emergency accommodation are aged 25 or under. Of the total number of referrals, almost 25% said that they had been sleeping rough in the two weeks prior to being referred.

There is particular concern about the increase in homelessness among 16-to-17-year olds, and the most frequent reason given is family conflict, which has already been mentioned. These people are among our most vulnerable, and there is a high incidence of poverty, unemployment, sexual and physical abuse and family breakdown. Many were in care or prison before becoming homeless.

There is no specific agency for dealing with homeless young, single people and no statutory provision for accommodating those in the 16-19 age group. Their needs are not being considered when housing policy is being formulated, and I ask the Minister to take this into account from now on.

Only a limited number of places are available through organisations such as the Simon Community, and demand far outstrips that number. Many have to resort to the private rented sector, but that housing is often overpriced and of poor quality, which has a detrimental effect on their health and development.

Support services to enable such young people to develop and live independently are limited, and they frequently find themselves homeless again, unable to cope with their situation. Often they are underachievers educationally, and their housing conditions only serve to exacerbate the situation. Child poverty is a major issue. Last July, following the comprehensive spending review, Chancellor Gordon Brown said that the Government's aim was to halve and then abolish child poverty. What, if any, initiatives does the Minister's Department intend to take to address child poverty here?

We have no mechanisms to provide decent accommodation for single young people, and one third of them and our children are living in poverty. We have the third-youngest population in the European Union, and our spending per capita on children's services is significantly lower than in England.

Many children experience family breakdown, poverty and homelessness at an early age, and there is a significant link between poverty, ill health and low educational achievement. We need a co-ordinated and concerted effort across all Departments to work alongside and utilise the skills and experience of organisations in the voluntary and community sectors and develop a strategy to deal with child poverty organisations such as like Save the Children, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Barnardos, Child Care NI and the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network.

Young people deserve access to quality accommodation and support that will enable them to live independently, and they deserve access to training and employment. I hope that the children's fund, together with more statutory provision, will help alleviate the situation in the short term and develop preventative solutions to the barriers that young people face to overcoming social disadvantage.

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): I will do my best to address the points that have been made. If I fail to address them all due to time constraints or an oversight, I will deal with them in writing.

Before I deal with the provisions of the motion, some points must be made to put homelessness in context. All Members sympathise with those who do not, for whatever reason, have safe, comfortable and regular accommodation. The Christmas and new year period brings into focus the differences between the homeless and those of us who can enjoy the comfort of our homes and the company of family and friends. I pay tribute to the many organisations that worked over the festive period to help the homeless with accommodation and the other comforts that the rest of us take for granted.

Some Members, particularly Mr O'Neill, rightly acknowledged the additional £30,000 that the Department of Finance and Personnel made available. That relatively small sum was welcomed by a number of organisations. I do not want to take undue credit. The money was supplied by the Department of Finance and Personnel, and my Department was happy to be the conduit for its delivery.

Homelessness can become a reality for people at any time, and I am concerned to ensure that the services provided by the statutory agencies and voluntary sector partners serve the homeless at the first point of need and on an ongoing basis. The Housing Executive has a statutory duty to ensure that accommodation is made available to those who present as homeless and meet the statutory criteria that they are homeless, in priority need and not homeless intentionally.

About 45% of such households meet the criteria, so about 4,500 households are awarded full homelessness status in the common selection scheme, and around 40%, approximately 4,500, of new tenancies are awarded to them. Not all those tenancies are of new properties,

but those that are cost around £20 million a year. That represents significant resources going directly to homeless people.

The Housing Executive's performance is such that 65% of homeless households are allocated secure tenancies within 12 weeks of being accepted as homeless, so they have faster access to social housing than most other groups on the social housing waiting list.

The Housing Executive also supports the voluntary sector's delivering accommodation and other services for the homeless. While that sector's resources come primarily from the housing benefit system, the Housing Executive has been increasing its support, with £1.2 million budgeted for the current year.

The sector is assisted to a lesser extent by health and social services boards and trusts, the Probation Board and charitable sources. Some Members mentioned the cross-cutting nature of the problem, and I assure them that the Department for Social Development is not the only Department involved in this.

Returning for a moment to the assessment process, if the Housing Executive has reason to believe that an applicant is homeless and in priority need, it is required to ensure that accommodation is made available pending enquiries. The term "priority need" includes people with families, young persons at risk of sexual or financial exploitation, single parents and other vulnerable people. Applicants assessed as meeting the statutory homelessness criteria and seeking social housing are added to the common waiting list and attract homelessness status in the common selection scheme for tenancies of Housing Executive and housing association properties. Where the Housing Executive is satisfied that an applicant became homeless intentionally but has a priority need, it is required to ensure that he is accommodated

"for such a period as it considers will give the person a reasonable opportunity of securing accommodation".

Those who do not meet the criteria are owed no duty by the Housing Executive and must make their own arrangements. The Housing Executive will continue to provide advice and direct individuals to other providers. It can accept applicants to the common waiting list, albeit with lower priority than might have been so.

The motion suggests that homelessness is increasing and will continue to do so. Since the mid-1990s there has been an increase in the numbers being accepted as meeting the statutory criteria for homelessness. More recent experience, however, shows that this number is no longer increasing. Rather it is remaining relatively constant.

Members will not be surprised that in the current financial year intimidation is a significant cause of homelessness. Ms McWilliams touched on that. This can distort trends, and the current trend will not necessarily

continue. However, under the current arrangements, any increase in the numbers accepted as homeless will mean an increase in the number of social-housing tenancies awarded to the homeless with a consequent decrease in allocations to other needy groups.

The motion asks about future plans to deal with homelessness. Members will appreciate that addressing this matter needs a partnership effort from the Housing Executive, housing associations and a variety of voluntary sector organisations. The availability of accommodation in the private-rented sector will also play a key part. I can report a number of developments on each of these fronts.

Given that the Housing Executive has been addressing this problem for some 10 years, it is timely to look afresh at how it might be dealt with in future. The Housing Executive is at an advanced stage with developing a strategy for a root-and-branch review of the homelessness problem and possible solutions. The review will examine, among other things, trends, programmes, services, gaps in provision and differences between urban and rural homelessness. It is anticipated that a document will be published by the spring of the coming financial year for the widest possible consultation.

While the strategic review is under way, a number of ongoing plans and programmes deserve mention. The new-build programme delivered by housing associations addresses the permanent accommodation needs of homeless households and delivers temporary accommodation schemes identified by the Housing Executive. In addition, there are special schemes — for example, foyers, which link accommodation to the provision of training and job related services.

7.00 pm

The private-rented sector is also recognized as a valuable source of temporary and permanent accommodation. The Housing Executive only uses private-rented accommodation on a temporary basis and as a last resort, particularly where the number and geographical dispersal of homeless households do not justify the provision of hostels.

However, I wish to reassure Members about the standards of such properties. The Housing Executive does a rigorous assessment to ensure that specific criteria are met before letting them to the homeless.

Members may be aware that the Housing Executive supports a number of rent guarantee schemes to enable homeless people to rent permanent, private-sector accommodation without having to pay the usual deposits. Other schemes of this nature are being considered for other parts of Northern Ireland.

Lastly, the Housing Executive currently provides financial and personal support to a number of research projects being undertaken by groups such as the Simon Community to examine the underlying causes of

homelessness as it affects various groups such as young people leaving care and families with young children. The results of this research will help to inform the planned strategic review. I am sure that we all commend the Housing Executive's proactive approach in this regard.

Before closing, I want to turn again to the additional funding that was made available over Christmas. On that occasion, my Department and the Housing Executive, as I said earlier, merely acted as conduits to ensure that the £30,000 allocated by the Department of Finance and Personnel reached the agencies providing services to the homeless. Undoubtedly, this gesture will have raised expectations for the future, and it would be worthwhile examining if and how those expectations can be met.

Roles, responsibilities, authority and lines of communication have to be addressed, and my officials will discuss these matters with the Department of Finance and Personnel and others as appropriate.

I trust that my comments have served to assure Members that I take homelessness very seriously. As with most other programmes, additional resources would allow an increase in types and levels of service. However, there are other important housing priorities that must be addressed, including unfitness, the needs of the disabled, the elderly, travellers and other vulnerable groups, energy, efficiency, conservation and fuel poverty. I will seek to ensure that resources to deal with homelessness are maximized where possible, given these other competing priorities.

So that future policies, programmes and services for the homeless are as focused and effective as possible, and as a background to future funding decisions, I encourage Members to comment fully when the strategic review is launched, and I am absolutely confident that many Members will do just that.

I now wish to turn to some of the specific issues raised, and one thread seemed to run right through most of the speeches made. Mr O'Neill, Mr Shannon, Mr Boyd and Ms Lewsley voiced their concerns about homelessness among the young. I would like to deal with that.

In the 16-to-25 age group, around 2,500 single people, male and female, presented themselves as homeless last year, 22% of the overall number. Current figures show that, by the end of October 2000, 1,226 young people had presented themselves as homeless, of whom 555 were accepted as such. Changes in society mean that younger people can be at greater risk of becoming homeless, and the review, which I have already mentioned, will address the needs and circumstances of younger people.

It may be out of sequence, but Mr Shannon's point follows from that. He asked about what happens to people who are not accepted as homeless by the Housing Executive. Pending its decisions on statutory homelessness,

applicants are directed to a variety of temporary accommodation. The Housing Executive's homeless advice service contacts appropriate voluntary accommodation providers and arranges referrals. A number of voluntary agencies cater specifically for young people, and the Simon Community deals with those under 18 years of age.

Mr Speaker: We normally, as a rule of thumb, give Ministers 10 minutes per hour of debate, which is about 15 minutes in the context of a 90-minute debate. I know that Members want a response from the Minister, but I must encourage him to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Morrow: Mr Speaker, you have been generous with my time allocation. There were many other questions that I wanted to answer, but I will finish with the point made by Mr O'Neill about homeless people who have mental health problems. That is an important matter, and I would like to take one minute to deal with it.

The Housing Executive supported financially the research to which Mr O'Neill referred. Subsequently, with health and social service trusts, it has been funding a support team to address mental illness among homeless people in Belfast hostels. The strategic review will consider if we need to expand that service.

Mr O'Neill: I want to thank all Members who participated for their very detailed speeches. It was good to see such tremendous support for the motion. It will not be necessary to comment on each speech, as that would only be to cover the same ground again. However, I particularly thank the Minister for what he said.

I welcome the news about the review into homelessness, and I am glad to hear that we may get a report in the spring. I look forward to that. I was making a point about the statistical side of the problem. There was a little doubt — and some Members referred to this — about the statistics and their meaning. I commented on those people who present themselves, and the Minister said that 45% of them are accepted. However, there is considerable criticism about the level of acceptance.

Many people should be described as homeless but, for whatever reason, are not so accredited by the system. The problem is much worse than the statistics show. That explains why the statistics that I was using, and the statistics that some Members referred to, which came from voluntary bodies, showed a different trend to the one that the Minister described as having become static. That is all the more reason for this review to examine how efficient we are at looking at and quantifying the problem.

I know Sammy Wilson was not saying what he might be accused of saying when he talked about being careful in case some people regarded homelessness as an easy option. Monica McWilliams dealt with that well. I assure him that it is not an easy option to be on the streets

or live in a cardboard box. I am sure that he knows that. He was preaching caution, and I accept his comment in that vein.

As I said in my opening remarks, some control is needed because there has been evidence of abuse. As the Minister said, it can be a fast route to getting accommodation. Some unscrupulous people may attempt to use that and thus discredit deserving cases, but if the level of control is holding back genuine cases, that must be changed. I hope that the review, when completed, will give some hope to those people who I believe, as do many others, are missing out.

We could, as an Assembly, continue to knock on the Minister for Social Development's door, which appears to be fairly open, to try to get more movement on this. Most Members talked about the need for cross-departmental work, and I am particularly anxious about a corporate approach to the problem.

More too should be done for social care. While gathering information for today I went to Brunswick House in Belfast. It is a wet centre — perhaps the only one in Northern Ireland — that deals with very challenging people indeed, and I heard of a case that really shocked me. A handicapped woman in a wheelchair had been put out of a private nursing home. This person was not able to change her clothes or use the toilet on her own. She was on the streets of Belfast for two days and nights until people from Brunswick House discovered her and brought her to the attention of the social services. They then had tremendous trouble getting her looked after.

Whatever her personal problems are — and I am sure that they are difficult — what kind of society do we have in which something like that, an indictment of our system, can happen? That was proof to me that we are not doing nearly enough, and I hope that today marks the beginning of a new determination to tackle the problem. I would like to thank you, Mr Speaker, and all Members for their comments.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to make greater provision for people presenting themselves as homeless during this time of the year and to outline his plans to deal with the increasing numbers of homeless people throughout the year.

Motion made:

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

COMMUNITY SECTOR JOB LOSSES (WEST BELFAST)

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat a Chathaoirligh. Given the lateness of the hour, I will try to be brief.

We have had numerous debates about unemployment in a number of constituencies. However, I am trying to draw out the distinctive and unique effect that possible job losses that have been identified in West Belfast are likely to have on the constituency, more so perhaps than a similar or equivalent number of job losses would have in any other area. This was obvious recently in Fermanagh, the shipyard and other areas where impending job losses were quite rightly brought to the public's attention, and people lobbied and campaigned to try to save them.

7.15 pm

The uniqueness of the community sector, in West Belfast in particular, can have a double-whammy effect. There are around 900 jobs there, and that may make it the area's most important employer. It is a double whammy because irrespective of how many of those 900 jobs are lost as a result of European Urban Regeneration gap funding or the new criteria stipulated for the peace money, for example, the Peace II initiative, almost all are in organising crèches, training or other employment initiatives. Most of those jobs themselves provide services.

Over the years many have talked about the good infrastructure in West Belfast. The area is renowned for its effective, vibrant and strong community sector. I pay tribute to those who have worked there and the people from the statutory bodies and other agencies who have worked with them trying to develop the cocktails of funding and create sustainable jobs.

Nevertheless, one of the successes of that infrastructure has been that it has, by default, masked the real difficulties of unemployment. West Belfast, like many other areas, has suffered infrastructure difficulties for years with employment, and I will not go into the legacy of discrimination. It is well documented that there has been no inward investment and few real jobs created in the area for years.

I thank Sir Reg Empey, who has been working with the local MP, among others, on establishing a taskforce to examine unemployment and how employment might be achieved. That is a worthwhile enterprise that he and other Ministers will be dealing with, and I look forward to a positive result from their work. However, this will not deal with the job losses that we expect soon or,

specifically, with the fact that many of the jobs that will be lost help to provide much-needed services.

I hope to explore this issue with the Department for Social Development and, indeed, any other Department. I also hope to get a report commissioned on the impact of these job losses. They do not just affect individuals; they affect the local economy and the important services that they provide.

The Good Friday Agreement promised new economic and urban redevelopment strategies. The Programme for Government detailed how the Departments will develop such strategies, particularly urban regeneration strategies. I will continue to monitor progress on this and seek the extra budgets that will make those promises realisable. The West Belfast area will face a difficult period soon, particularly with European Union gap funding whose new criteria will bring about the loss of many jobs.

I appeal to the Minister for Social Development and his Colleagues to consider a report into the impact of these job losses on the West Belfast area. I am concerned about the number of individual jobs and the services they provide. Important infrastructure has been established over the years on which any future Government strategy could build. An impact assessment of this loss must be carried out.

I want to pay tribute to agencies working with the local people, and I refer not just to those in paid employment who provide a much-needed community service but to the many people, about 3,000, who, we are told, work on a voluntary basis. Most of the paid workers are on short-term contracts and low pay, and very often the posts are part-time. Most of the jobs are subject to renewal or are constantly under threat. Many of the organisations that employ these people spend much time trying to garner a cocktail of funding to keep their own projects alive.

I want to put on record my appeal to the Minister for Social Development and his Colleagues for an impact assessment to be carried out. This is not only a loss of jobs themselves, it is also the loss of a whole array of much-needed services the West Belfast constituency.

I thank Members who are here to take part in the debate and pay tribute to the workers in the west of the city who are highlighting the plight of their jobs and the plight of the valuable services they provide.

Mr Attwood: I acknowledge Alex Maskey's tabling of this subject for debate on the Adjournment. It is timely to consider job losses in the community sector in West Belfast and to comment on that sector's development in the past, at present and in the future. It is also important — and I am sure that all parties will agree on this — to acknowledge that all communities have been immensely resilient and resourceful over the past 30 years. While they do differ, we must acknowledge that that resilience and resourcefulness are shared and that they, not least in West Belfast, have been essential in

ensuring that our civil conflict did not give rise to even more deeply damaging civil disorder. It is a reflection on the communities of which we speak that they have maintained those values in very adverse circumstances.

It is also important to acknowledge that we talk about different levels of community development in different areas of West Belfast. Historically, the communities that Alex Maskey, Joe Hendron and I represent have had a higher level of development, perhaps because of church organisations, sports organisations and the need to organise to meet demands that the state did not meet. Conversely, the Unionist communities of West Belfast have, historically and to a degree, had a different level of development. Put rather simplistically, rightly or wrongly, the communities of the Shankill Road, the Woodvale Road and the Unionist areas of West Belfast believed that the state answered their needs. Partly as a consequence, they did not develop as communities in the way that Nationalist communities of West Belfast developed since partition, and particularly over the past 30 years.

It is unfortunate that Ian Paisley Jnr is not here. On the weekend after the 1994 IRA ceasefire, he and the political parties on the Shankill Road organised "Shankill '94". This gave expression to the fact that while there had not been such a high level of community development as on the Falls Road, the Shankill communities were organising themselves to make demands of the state about economic, social and cultural regeneration. That is developing on the Shankill Road in a healthy and creative way.

As the community sector has developed in West Belfast there has been a loss in one respect, and that is the loss of volunteerism. Volunteerism has existed in Ireland for decades and generations and has to some degree been lost as a more professional community sector has developed. While that has brought about many gains, there have also been losses. It would be helpful and creative for communities if the tradition of volunteerism could be revived.

I want to put the motion in a broader context. One cannot talk about job losses in West Belfast without identifying the level of job opportunities or lack thereof. As it is, over 10% of unemployed people in Northern Ireland live in the constituency of West Belfast, and 17.5% live in North and West Belfast. Male unemployment in West Belfast is three times the average in Northern Ireland, and that is without touching upon the differential between Catholic and Protestant unemployment there.

While the most recent evidence shows some decline in unemployment in the Nationalist wards, it is in the Shankill wards that unemployment is beginning to increase. While Mr Maskey is right to say that there is a large concentration of community jobs in West Belfast, other jobs are needed to bring about regeneration and address the human trauma and tragedy that lie behind the figures I have given. With over 900 people, the community sector

in West Belfast is one of the largest employers and should be judged and developed against demanding criteria.

The first criterion that Mr Maskey mentioned is that valid projects are beginning to suffer from a lack of European peace money. Before Christmas the Minister of Finance and Personnel outlined proposals to deal with what he called “gap funding” — the period between the end of one phase of European funding and the commencement of another. That must be addressed immediately because valid projects throughout West Belfast need to be sustained quickly. I have been in correspondence with Sean Farren, not the Minister, Maurice Morrow, about some of them. I am sure that the Minister and his civil servants are scribbling mightily in order to rebut that point. The added value of those projects to education and training means that they need to be sustained as soon as possible.

Secondly, we need a strategy in West Belfast that is not saturation. There has been a danger in recent years of a saturation of community organisation that is not necessarily consistent with the best strategy for regenerating the area. That is in no way to demean or diminish the individual contributions of community groups, activists and leaders. However, rather than have a saturation of organisations, we need to have strategies to ensure that that large employer in West Belfast makes the maximum impact. We also need a strategy that is not self-serving. If we are calling for open, transparent and accountable Government, the standards we demand of the Government should be no less than those we demand of other agencies, including community sector employers. There is a sense, to a greater or lesser extent, that the community sector is not as open, transparent and accountable as it could be. Cases have given rise to a growing belief that the community sector should uphold the standards that are demanded of Members here and the Government. There should be open, transparent and accountable procedures to ensure that people are satisfied with what community organisations are doing.

7.30 pm

Thirdly, we need a strategy that sets the same standards for all communities, not least those in West Belfast. There is a sense that they look after the needs of their own rather than try to understand that the problems on either side of the peace walls in West Belfast are common problems, such as not having police officers living there, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, unemployment and bad housing.

The liberation of West Belfast will come when a strategy is developed that transcends the peace walls and applies to all communities the standards that we expect for our own. Any strategy to target social need must target all social need. No one community, community representative or community sector should be heard above another. They must all be heard in the same way.

Finally, the community sector is alive and well and bustling in parts of West Belfast and growing throughout West Belfast. It is vibrant and dynamic. It has a critical role in resources, leadership and its impact on the organisation and future development of a community. However, that work must be done in the context of the wider economic and social regeneration that Minister Empey is beginning to address. In that context, the issues raised by the motion will be fully and finally settled.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. I thank Alex Maskey for bringing to our attention job losses in West Belfast as a whole. He did not specify whether he was talking about Nationalist areas or Unionist areas; only Alex Attwood did that. West Belfast includes Twinbrook and Poleglass, which I represent.

The job losses will have a negative impact on West Belfast and further afield. Alex Maskey pointed out that there will be other effects. None of us should be under any illusion about why community structures and groups were set up in areas such as West Belfast. They were set up because councils failed to deliver the services they were supposed to deliver for the communities they claimed to represent.

We all agree that community groups provide a valued service. They have played a big part in the lives of all communities and helped them grow by adopting a bottom-up approach and providing services designed by the people. The lack of mainstream funding has been hidden by European funding which is supposed to be additional but is not. It has replaced mainstream funding, and that is wrong.

We debated a motion on skill shortages earlier. Tomorrow the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety will consider a report on teenage pregnancies and the need to educate young people to enable them to make better judgements. The report points out that rates of teenage parenthood are highest in areas of social deprivation and says that there is a need to target intervention on such areas, working in partnership with local communities. It also says that many community-based programmes receive only short-term funding and that if they are to be successful, they must be properly funded.

We need to look at the greater impact job losses will have in West Belfast. As Mr Maskey said, not only is there an impact on a person who loses his job, but other areas suffer too. Crèche facilities will go, people will find it harder to return to work and after-school clubs will disappear, which will have a negative impact on the children. Women's groups will no longer exist, while welfare advice, advice to the elderly and the homeless, whose problems were mentioned earlier, and youth provision will be things of the past. We need a joined-up approach. We can examine the Peace I and Peace II money.

The Minister is here, and I appreciate his staying for this debate, as he sat through the last one. I thank him for that.

As statistics show, the delay in Peace II money is forcing more job losses. Mr Maskey and Mr Attwood referred to these statistics. We need to lobby for mainstream funding for community groups, workers, projects and running costs. We should develop a proper wage structure to bring employees out of low-paid jobs. We must ensure that there is a real and active commitment to targeting social need and equality. As Mr Maskey said, we need a strategic approach to sustain the community sector, and we should show our appreciation to all there for their vision and commitment to creating change.

Go raibh maith agat.

Dr Hendron: I would like to thank Mr Maskey for initiating this important debate on the Adjournment. I also appreciate the presence of the Minister for Social Development. The Assembly, through the Executive and the Department for Social Development, must secure funding and develop a meaningful strategy for the voluntary and community sector in all areas of need though this debate is specifically about West Belfast, which includes a fair part of the Shankill territory as well as Nationalist West Belfast.

Many of the problems started when the ACE scheme and community workshops were run down. Why is there a crisis in funding jobs? As has been said, it is because there is no effective strategy to account for the community sector. I agree with the West Belfast Economic Forum that the voluntary activity unit in the Department must say exactly what groups will be affected by the rationalisation measures.

Many groups in West Belfast do not get mainstream funding from the Department for Social Development. The community sector should have a greater input into civic, political, social, cultural and economic matters. There is a major problem with gap funding, and bridging funding may be being applied selectively rather than liberally, although I hope, that that is not so. There is concern, and who will have the ability, integrity and authority to sort it out? I am not referring directly to the Minister.

As the then MP for West Belfast I met with Baroness Denton when she was Minister of Economic Development. I told her that in West Belfast, LEDU, the IDB and Making Belfast Work were all doing work, as were community trusts like North and West and that young people were coming to the area to do doctoral theses. There were many activities but no co-ordination. Mr Maskey has asked the Minister to undertake an impact assessment of the job losses. Perhaps the answer lies there.

There has been no co-ordination with jobs over the years, and that includes education, for a number of factors are involved. There is a large percentage of young

people in West Belfast, so if you are talking about jobs you have to consider education. Whether they come from the Falls Road or the Shankill Road, five-year-olds starting school in that constituency are generally at a great disadvantage compared to children from more privileged homes or areas where people have good jobs. It is important to realise that a child's IQ is not just inherited. Of course there are important genetic factors, but a child is also influenced by his home and environment from the moment he is born. Children in areas of social disadvantage are disadvantaged themselves by the age of five, and this has long term effects.

Much reference has been made to the many community efforts, and I will mention two in passing. Meánscoil Feirste almost went under because of the viability of numbers question. The community, the parents, the staff, Fergus O'Hare, the principal, and I were involved at the time. The then Minister, Michael Ancram, turned it down for funding, and it was the Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew, who eventually gave it some support. I can recall the massive battle fought by the community.

Youth at Risk was another important community effort. Funding came from the Government and the European Union. I had some involvement because of my medical work. One could only be impressed by those people who were considered to be dropouts, young people who no one seemed to want and with very low esteem, sandwiched between the security forces and the paramilitaries. The results of the Youth at Risk programme were outstanding. I was emotionally moved when I met many of them later — once at a function in Andersonstown and on another occasion in the Markets area. The programme was stopped, but people like Jimmy Quinn played outstanding roles in it.

Targeting social need is central to the Assembly, and I wonder if community and voluntary groups will have any part in developing proposals for implementing the interdepartmental strategy document. Additionality must underpin the relationship with EU funding bodies, and all dealing with EU funds must be transparent, open for public scrutiny and accountable to the European Commission.

I again congratulate Mr Maskey for bringing this subject to Assembly. My support for the principles is total, and I support his point about impact assessment. Perhaps the Minister will address that.

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): I am aware of the contribution made by the voluntary and community sector in West Belfast and Northern Ireland generally. It provides valuable services and is a significant employer, with a workforce of about 25,000 across the Province. This is an important debate for West Belfast, but it is relevant to all of Northern Ireland, especially to areas of high social need, of which West Belfast is one.

I met with the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) last week, and I have regular contact

with a wide range of other voluntary and community groups, so I am aware of the real concerns in the sector about the impact of changing funding programmes.

7.45 pm

Much funding for the sector is time limited, and we await final agreement on the outcome of the Peace II negotiations. European funding accounts for about one third of the total financial support for the voluntary and community sector in West Belfast, and I suspect that that level of dependence is similar in other parts of Northern Ireland.

While economic renewal is likely to be a priority under the new programme, the detailed parameters of Peace II are not yet agreed. Since the new funding programmes are meant to be finalised, it may be premature to identify any specific impact the changes will have. However, priorities change, and there is no guarantee that projects funded under Peace I will be supported automatically under Peace II. The project managers know this, having been made aware of the time-limited nature of the programme when they applied for funding in the first instance.

There are short-term difficulties and longer-term issues to be addressed too. Since it is taking longer than was envisaged to agree the mechanisms for disbursing Peace II and transitional Objective I programme funding, many valuable community projects face a gap between two funding programmes. My Department anticipated these difficulties and secured £4 million, in two tranches, to assist a wide range of projects and the people employed by them to continue their valuable work until the end of March 2001. This funding was shared with other Departments and funders to protect key projects.

The funding has benefited projects throughout Northern Ireland, including many in West Belfast. The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT) alone processed 29 applications from West Belfast for gap funding and provided almost £185,000 to secure the continuity of 23 posts until the end of March.

The West Belfast team of the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) has tried to maintain the community infrastructure in West Belfast, as other BRO teams have done in other parts of the city. In discussions with applicants, they have said that they will focus support on key organisations and posts. By “key” I mean organisations that provide a co-ordinating or broad service, for instance local forums. Key posts are ones that are central to an operation, such as managers and co-ordinators.

It is expected that these organisations will assist and support other groups that the BRO may not be able to support. I understand that this approach has been well received in West Belfast and that the BRO team has been able to meet, to varying degrees, the majority of requests made. The BRO teams in West Belfast and

elsewhere have also met with other funders and statutory bodies to try to get them to provide support or match a contribution from a team, thus extending the funding period.

There is no complacency on our part about the problem. However, in the longer term the viability of many projects and the jobs they created will depend whether they become sustainable by generating their own income — a difficult, though not impossible, task. It will also depend on their ability to demonstrate their worth to funding bodies and to secure mainstream support for their activities.

Many groups have embarked on imaginative ways of generating finance through delivering services, sub-letting premises, amalgamation with other groups or restructuring. I welcome those moves. This proactive approach towards long-term sustainability by the voluntary and community sector will be a defining factor in the level of protection and development that can be achieved.

Despite this, there may well be further difficulties for some projects after the current gap funding initiatives end — from April 2001. I have asked my officials to review the situation urgently and consider what further action may be necessary. I am convinced of the need to provide continued support for the community and its infrastructure.

Let me say something about core infrastructure. The Department for Social Development is very aware of the importance of having an effective infrastructure to enable effective participation in addressing social need and social disadvantage. For the last round of gap funding we identified a number of criteria for eligibility for support. One was that an applicant group had a strategic role in relation to other groups, and another was the extent of the adverse impact on the community if a project ended. It seems to me that strategic support for the infrastructure is key and likely to inform our thinking on priorities for new EU funding under both the transitional Objective 1 and Peace II programmes.

I want briefly to identify my Department’s longer-term approach to supporting and developing the voluntary and community sector. We have focused on putting in place structures and funding strategies to help support the sector so that it remains strong, vibrant and able to help Government meet their objectives, particularly in areas of greatest social need.

The Department for Social Development’s actions will be driven by the need to ensure that when resources are scarce, they are targeted towards the right organisations in areas of greatest social need so that we achieve the best possible results. It is no secret that I have particular concerns about areas where the community infrastructure is weak. My Department consulted extensively on the Harbison Report, which examined the future funding of the voluntary and community sector. I cannot emphasise

strongly enough the importance that the Department attaches to a more strategic and coherent approach to funding in the longer term. I expect to make an announcement shortly on the district councils' community services programme following the Department's review of that programme.

We are also working to strengthen and cement relationships with the voluntary and community sector right across the Government and in Departments and agencies, and we will continue to conduct our discussions with the sector in an open and constructive manner and in a spirit of partnership through such important vehicles as the Joint Government Voluntary and Community Sector Forum.

Following consultation, and as agreed by the Executive when they endorsed the compact between the Government and the voluntary and community sector in February 2000, the Department is co-ordinating work on a new strategy that will encompass all aspects of government. The result will be a plan setting out actions that Departments will take over the next three years to support the sector.

We are pragmatic and recognise that a substantial part of the sector's contribution will continue to be through volunteering. We want to build lasting change by creating new volunteering opportunities, and not just where volunteering has traditionally been strong. NICVA says that there are over 79,000 volunteers, but despite this huge resource, some face barriers to volunteering that we want removed.

My Department is now implementing the Active Community Initiative action plan. Additional funds have been secured to enhance volunteering opportunities for those who wish to help shape their communities through voluntary action. It is designed to have an impact on areas of disadvantage.

In closing, the future of the voluntary and community sector must be a major concern for all. Its work has made, and will continue to make, a vibrant and dynamic contribution to society. Northern Ireland owes much to it, but we cannot duck the difficulties we face, and I do not want to minimise them. However, my Department is working hard to provide some protection.

All Departments must examine their budgets carefully to see if the programmes delivered through short-term funding can be sustained. The voluntary sector must examine options for rationalisation and collaboration to reduce costs and identify priorities. Shortly, the Joint Government Voluntary and Community Sector Forum, which my Department chairs jointly with the sector, will be working with the sector and the Government to see how these difficulties can be addressed and we can enable the sector to continue to make a dynamic contribution in West Belfast and Northern Ireland generally.

I want to address some of the other points raised during the debate if time is on my side.

Mr Speaker: Time is not on the Minister's side, but those Members who have dutifully stayed on deserve some response. Perhaps the Minister will be as concise as possible.

Mr Morrow: A number of important points were raised by Members. Mr Speaker, I am at the mercy of your ruling. If I am not able to address such points, I will address them in writing to the Members concerned.

One very salient point was raised by Alex Attwood. It concerned the need for a strategy for the community and voluntary sector in West Belfast and elsewhere. Last year my Department, through its Voluntary Activity Unit (VAU), published the Harbison Report on funding.

That report contained important recommendations, which I will headline. A more strategic, co-ordinated approach to funding and the appointment of the Minister for Social Development to champion it were suggested. There was no lack of commitment from me or my Department. The integration of the VAU into an activity community unit was proposed, as were more information sharing between funders, the mapping of voluntary and community sector infrastructure, the establishment of a common database for funding, an integrated approach to development, the consolidation of delivery mechanisms, a task force to consider the diversification of funding and a clear definition of sustainability. It is an important report that I draw to Members' attention.

Sue Ramsey mentioned the failure of councils to support communities. I can confirm that that was reflected in the findings of the review of the district council communities that the Department published. Proposals will be brought forward shortly on the role of councils in this regard. I hope that these comments go some way towards reassuring people that we are neither complacent nor negligent of our duties, and we want to record our appreciation of the voluntary sector, an important part of society.

Dr Hendron asked which groups would be affected by rationalisation. There is no planned process for rationalisation. We have to do all we can to protect the community sector. I understand that the motion specifically refers to West Belfast, but I am referring to the community as a whole.

Mr Speaker, you are looking at me, and I suspect that you are trying to tell me that my time is up. If I have missed any salient points, I will write to the individuals concerned.

Adjourned at 7.59 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 22 January 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY: NEW MEMBER

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Tom Hamilton has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the Strangford constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from the death of Mr Tom Benson.

CONTAMINATED BEEF

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Has the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety or the Minister of Agriculture requested to make a statement today on the issue of contaminated beef in Newry?

Mr Speaker: I have received no indications that a Minister wishes to make a statement, other than those that are on the annunciator. However, as the Member and the House will be aware, Ministers can make requests for statements at relatively short notice.

TRANSPORT

North/South Ministerial Council and British-Irish Council Meetings

Mr Speaker: I have received from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister notice that they wish to make a joint statement on the North/South Ministerial Council and British-Irish Council transport meetings that were held on 19 December 2000.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Mallon): The First Minister and I wish to make a statement to report to the Assembly on the recent transport sectoral meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council, which were held in Belfast on Tuesday, 19 December 2000. The First Minister and I have taken the lead on transport in both councils. It is vital that transport issues be addressed in these two new institutions to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland can reap the greatest possible benefit from sharing knowledge and experience, and from co-operation with our neighbours in the South of Ireland, in Great Britain and the other members of the British-Irish Council.

I will make the report on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, and the First Minister will make the report on the British-Irish Council meeting. This statement has been agreed by Mr Sam Foster, who attended both sectoral meetings, and we make it on his behalf also.

Transport was one of the six areas for enhanced co-operation through existing bodies, North and South, agreed at the inaugural plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council held in Armagh in December 1999. The North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral meeting held on 19 December 2000 was the first meeting in this sectoral format. The Irish Government were represented by Mary O'Rourke TD, Minister for Public Enterprise, and Noel Dempsey TD, Minister for the Environment and Local Government. The First Minister, Mr Foster and I represented the Executive.

The council considered three broad transport issues at the meeting — strategic transport planning, rail safety and road safety. The council noted that there is already substantial co-operation between the relevant Departments and agencies North and South, on a range of strategic transport planning and road and rail safety issues.

With regard to strategic transport planning, the council identified a number of opportunities for co-operation between North and South. These included potential benefits from the exchange of information on the transportation aspect of Northern Ireland's 'Shaping Our Future' document and Ireland's development plan and its proposed national spatial strategy. This exchange of information is important to ensure that each jurisdiction can benefit from the research and analysis that the other has carried out. The council also recognised that there was scope to develop

our major cross-border road, rail and bus services through enhanced co-operation, exchange of information and experience to enable us to have the best possible transport system in place. Further possibilities for co-operation were the implementation of public and private partnership, transport and the development of sustainable transport.

The council discussed rail safety and agreed that there were opportunities for further co-operation between North and South on legislative proposals for railway safety and standards. It also acknowledged that there would be benefits from the exchange of information and experience on railway safety and on specific accidents or incidents. The council agreed that early meetings with officials would be convened to prepare detailed work programmes on strategic transport planning and rail safety for consideration and approval at a future council meeting.

The council also discussed and approved a programme for enhancing North/South co-operation on road safety. The programme will include joint road safety campaigns and consideration of the possibility of joint promotion of road safety educational initiatives. Departments, North and South, will also exchange information on road safety programmes, targets and priorities. They will explore the scope of a common approach with regard to road safety to the mutual recognition of penalty point offences between both jurisdictions. No driver should regard the border as providing the opportunity to escape his or her responsibilities. An early meeting of officials is to be convened to consider the detailed arrangements and timescales for taking this programme forward with a view to reporting back to a future meeting of the council.

The council also dealt with a number of items of business relating to other North/South Ministerial Council sectors. The council appointed Mr John McKinney as the chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body. The council also appointed the members of the board of Tourism Ireland Limited, the newly established North/ South tourism company. The council agreed that the recommended candidate would be acceptable for appointment as chief executive to Waterways Ireland. The name of the candidate will be announced in due course following agreement on salary and conditions of service.

It was agreed that the next North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral meeting would take place in March 2001. A copy of the communiqué issued after the meeting has been placed in the Assembly Library.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): I would like to report on the British-Irish Council meeting. Transport was identified at the first British-Irish Council summit meeting in London in December 1999 as one of the issues for discussion among the Administrations in sectoral format, and it was agreed that the Northern Ireland Executive would take the lead in this area.

As the Deputy First Minister has said, he and I are taking this matter forward because we recognise the benefits to

the people of Northern Ireland from co-operation on transport with other British-Irish Council members.

The first meeting of the British-Irish Council transport sector was held in Belfast on 19 December 2000. The Deputy First Minister, Mr Sam Foster and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive. Her Majesty's Government was represented by Lord Macdonald, Transport Minister at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The Irish Government was represented by Mary O'Rourke, Minister for Public Enterprise, and Noel Dempsey, Minister of the Environment and Local Government. Representatives of the Administrations in Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey also attended.

We had a wide-ranging discussion covering various aspects of transport. It was recognised that transport cannot be viewed as an issue in isolation. Members of the council agreed on the need for an integrated and sustainable approach to transport issues that would take account of the relevant economic, social and environmental context.

The key issues for each of the member Administrations were identified in discussion. It was acknowledged that members placed different emphases on particular issues. For example, the smaller, remote islands are heavily dependent on their sea and air links, while for other Administrations, including ourselves, road and rail development, as well as adequate access to ports and airports, is vital.

The meeting also recognized that consideration of issues such as urban congestion would bring benefits to all and agreed the need to consider the impact of new technologies on transport. All members agreed that road safety is a key issue where the sharing of knowledge and expertise may help to make significant reductions in the unacceptable number of people killed or injured on our roads.

As a first step, the council considered a range of options with a view to identifying those where co-operation among members would be of greatest benefit. The options identified included sharing knowledge and experience in areas such as the development of public and private partnerships and other sources of funding. Co-operation on the development of sustainable transport policies and programmes to improve road and rail safety were also considered. Particular emphasis was placed on the examination of the potential for improved linkages with peripheral regions and on the difficulties in relation to air links with London, where the pressure on slots at Heathrow has limited the access to London from regional airports.

From Northern Ireland's viewpoint, we emphasised the importance to us of improved road links, such as the Heysham to M6 route, and of the potential riverside quay on the Mersey, which would significantly reduce the turnaround time of ships in Liverpool. Development of this infrastructure will greatly assist access from Northern Ireland to Britain and to Europe.

The council agreed that the Northern Ireland Executive would convene an early meeting of senior officials to examine options and prepare detailed recommendations for work in a number of initial priority areas. These priorities will include exchanges of information and experience, particularly in relation to public and private partnerships, including the consideration of a possible mechanism to facilitate such exchanges. They will also address regional air links and the potential for co-operation on road safety and integrated transport. The recommendations will then be submitted to a further British-Irish Council meeting for approval. A copy of the communiqué issued following the meeting has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Dr Birnie: I thank the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for their reports providing evidence of welcome and useful work, for the general good, in transport. I will ask a question about the North/South aspect and then one in relation to the British-Irish Council.

Could the NSMC, in its future sectoral meetings, investigate why, notwithstanding the many millions of pounds of, often European-backed, funding directed to the Belfast-Dublin rail route, the speeds of the trains are still very low by European standards? Intercity speeds of over 100 mph are common, whereas the Belfast-Dublin route of 100 miles still takes over 2 hours.

10.45 am

With respect to the British-Irish Council, I welcome the evidence of work on air links. Could it investigate the frequency — *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Does the Member have a question? The purpose is to ask questions.

Dr Birnie: Yes, there is a question. Could it investigate the frequency, reliability and cost of Irish Sea ferry links?

The First Minister: I take the Member's point regarding the comparison of rail speeds in Europe and in the British Isles. This is a detailed technical question that comes up most clearly when comparing the speeds achieved by Eurostar trains in France to the speeds that can be achieved in England. I think that the question simply relates to technical matters with regard to the track. We can look into that and perhaps get a more detailed answer.

At the British-Irish Council, we looked at the frequency of Irish Sea ferries. It is relevant to the question of obtaining a riverside berth on the Mersey. Obtaining such a berth would result in a reduction in turnaround time of about one-and-a-half hours. That would be quite significant in terms of assisting the frequency of sailings on the Irish Sea.

I should also state that obtaining a riverside berth on the Mersey would be of particular advantage in facilitating access to the rail network that links us, through the Channel Tunnel, to all parts of Europe. This would be of significant benefit to exporters in Northern Ireland as they would not only have a higher frequency of sailings

but could then, through trans-shipment onto rail, link into a network going through the tunnel and addressing any destination in Europe.

The Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee (Mr A Maginness): I welcome the meetings that have taken place and the reports from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Last week we launched a consultation document on the regional transport strategy. A central theme in that document is the importance of quality public transport throughout Northern Ireland. In relation to the detailed transport programmes that are being drawn up between now and the next council meeting, will particular emphasis be put on public transport, in particular the improvement in public transport vis-à-vis the railway network between, for example, Derry and Dublin? Will working parties be set up in relation to those particular areas so that the Assembly can be informed, on a systematic basis, of the work at hand?

The Deputy First Minister: That is a very relevant question, given that transport is a vital lifeline supporting the economic and social fabric of the North of Ireland. That is why the First Minister and I tried to ensure that these sectoral meetings would take place. As the Member is aware, transport affects every part of life here and therefore it is critically important that we try to ensure, as far as possible, that we develop systems that can improve the lot of everyone in Northern Ireland.

In relation to the specific elements of the questions, there was considerable discussion on how the public transport sector would provide the service required — not just in the greater urban areas but throughout the North of Ireland, especially in rural areas. General transport between North and South was also discussed. I can assure the Member that the studies approved at the two sectoral meetings will centre on those issues, not least of which will be the rail factors that he referred to.

Everybody is aware that the Executive recently agreed to the publication of a rail safety Bill, which will provide new safety-focussed legislation on the operation of railways in Northern Ireland. The authorities in the South are also engaged in producing new safety legislation. Cross-border-services legislation facilitated in both jurisdictions needs to be compatible, and we must ensure that it goes forward in parallel.

Mr P Robinson: Can the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister tell the House — in the light of section 23(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and several articles and schedules of Statutory Rule 481 of 1999 — how they propose to give effect in Northern Ireland to any agreement reached on 19 December?

The First Minister: The Member has raised an interesting point. Of course, we expect the Minister for Regional Development to carry out his Pledge of Office. It is

regrettable that he has not done so fully heretofore, but I am sure that he recognises that he is under a duty to do so. The Member will also bear in mind that some of the issues touched on at the BIC relate to work that is done in other jurisdictions.

With regard to North/South and east-west transport links, we are at the terminus. We are particularly interested in developments in the other jurisdictions. Of course, a number of the financial matters that we dealt with fall within the responsibility of other Departments. Matters involving finance and legislation are clearly within the purview of the Executive. But what the Member really should have said was that he is going to encourage his Colleague to carry out his responsibilities and not shirk them.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the North/South Council meeting and British-Irish Council meeting in relation to transport. I think that it is very timely, particularly in light of the First Minister's last comment.

Given the controversy that arose at the weekend over whether Bairbre de Brún would have been nominated by the First Minister for the forthcoming scheduled meeting of the British-Irish Council, I ask the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister whether that meeting was raised at the Executive meeting last Thursday. If so, was the question of Bairbre de Brún's nomination dealt with? The reason why I am asking this, Mr Speaker — and I seek your indulgence — is that we have heard throughout this morning's statement of how important it is to have transport, and other matters relating to the Executive and Assembly, dealt with in both of the institutions. That is even in the first paragraph of the statement. The last part of the First Minister's response to Peter Robinson was that his own Minister should live up to his responsibilities. However, the First Minister is currently failing to do that in respect of the North/South Ministerial Council. It is important —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is aware that questions on statements have to relate to the statement concerned. The Member has, in the course of his question, adverted to another sectoral BIC — reputed BIC — meeting and what may have happened at the Executive Committee. If the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister wish to make a response, I am quite content to call them to do so.

There is no requirement for them to make a response because the matter raised by the Member is tangential to the statement that has been made. They are not prohibited from responding, of course.

Mr Maskey: May I finish my question? It is very basic.

Mr Speaker: Please do so as concisely as possible.

Mr Maskey: Are the statements consistent with the First Minister's refusal to nominate Sinn Féin Ministers to any of these institutions?

The Deputy First Minister: Discussions at Executive level are confidential and the Member will be aware of that. Certainly, he would expect the First Minister and myself to respect that confidentiality in relation to the details of that plenary meeting of the British-Irish Council tomorrow.

The two Governments have taken a decision whereby — because of the ongoing negotiations — that plenary meeting will be postponed until a later date. The two Governments will be making an announcement to that effect this morning.

Mr Neeson: In both statements, reference was made to public/private partnerships in the rail network. What progress has been made in developing public/private partnerships in Northern Ireland? I would remind the First Minister that Richard Branson was paraded before us prior to the vote on the referendum.

As regards the British-Irish Council, were there any discussions concerning improvements of the road from Stranraer to Carlisle?

The First Minister: As regards the latter point, the A75 (Stranraer-Carlisle) was mentioned. In particular, we mentioned that that road now bypasses all towns, except for two small villages, which are to be bypassed at a later date. The Scottish representative was not in a position to make a statement in regard to that matter, however, over the course of the last decade, there has been quite a considerable improvement to the A75. This has considerably reduced the journey time from Stranraer to the M6 at Carlisle.

The issue of public-private partnerships was discussed as it is of considerable interest to us. If we are to tackle transport investment and investment in other matters, we must look closely at public-private partnerships. This has been referred to in the Programme for Government. We have a limited experience of operating public-private partnerships. The experience in England is much greater. The discussion at the British-Irish Council involved ourselves and the Republic of Ireland representatives asking Lord Macdonald to make experience of operating these partnerships available to us, which he has agreed to do. That will enable us to take greater advantage more rapidly of public-private partnerships.

Mr Ervine: Why do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister consider it important to tell us who represents the Irish Government at these affairs, and not tell us who represents Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey? I am not sure if the intention is to elevate the Irish region and diminish all other regions involved in the British-Irish Council. It is important — not simply because one is elevated and one is diminished on my

paper — because Members ought to know the identities of those who they may wish to contact in relation to the subject matter being discussed. If Members are told the makeup of one group, they should be told the makeup in all cases.

The Deputy First Minister: There is no intention to elevate one administration above another. Lest there be any doubt, Lord Macdonald represented the British Government. Mr Phillip Pain, director of the Isle of Man airport, represented the Isle of Man. Jersey was represented by Mr Colin Powell, adviser of air and shipping services, whilst Guernsey was represented by Deputy Michael Torode, vice president for the State of Guernsey transport board. All those details are in the Library, as I said earlier.

11.00 am

The Deputy Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee (Mr McFarland): There has been mention recently in the media of the difficulty of pursuing driving offences from one jurisdiction in another. Did the meeting discuss a system for the transfer of penalty points for driving offences between jurisdictions, east-west or North/South?

The Deputy First Minister rose.

The First Minister: The matter was discussed with great interest, and from our response you can see our eagerness on the issue.

This is a very serious point. The Irish representatives pointed out that a significant percentage of traffic accidents occur in the border region. There are a number of factors in that, but part of the reason is that people, when they cross the border, think that they can take greater risks because they are not going to be liable to penalties in the same way. For that reason, there is a clear need for some correspondence with regard to penalty points imposed in one jurisdiction applying in others. We also discussed the mutual recognition of disqualifications between jurisdictions.

A penalty point scheme was introduced in Northern Ireland in October 1997, and it has to be said that the majority of points imposed are for excessive speed. The Department of the Environment in Northern Ireland and the Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions in London intend this year to bring forward legislative proposals for mutual recognition of penalty point offences between Northern Ireland and GB. That would extend to mutual recognition of disqualifications.

The Republic of Ireland intends to introduce a penalty point system from the end of 2001. There was discussion at NSMC and at BIC of the desirability of mutual recognition between North and South on these matters. Following the introduction of penalty points in the Republic of Ireland, the opportunity will exist to address the practicalities and the need for legislation for mutual

recognition between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

In addition, of course, with the arrangement for mutual recognition between GB and Northern Ireland, there is then the prospect of having mutual recognition of points and disqualification throughout the British Isles. That is appropriate, because the whole of the British Isles is a common travel area. That is a very good reason for having a commonality in relation to road offences so as to protect the safety of other road users.

Mr McMenamin: Are the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister aware of the widespread welcome for Tourism Ireland? Can they outline what functions Tourism Ireland will undertake and when it will assume responsibility for them?

The Deputy First Minister: The new tourism board is actually a very important and crucial part of the arrangements in relation to North/South co-operation and in their implementation. Some time ago, the view was taken that the tourism board should be able to fulfil, on a wide scale, the type of functions that would increase the attraction of the island of Ireland and benefit tourism in the North of Ireland.

That underpinned the setting up of the new tourism board, which is now developing. I believe that it will be able to develop substantially and will deliver according to Northern Ireland's need for a fundamental development of tourism. A new chairman has been appointed. He comes from the North of Ireland and has vast experience in the tourism business. I believe that he will have the confidence of everyone, and I look forward to his contribution.

I assure the Member that this is one of the key areas for development. It is key to the economy. It is key to the development of the industry and it will be pursued vigorously.

Mr Poots: Can the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister explain why they failed to raise the issue of tax on people flying within the United Kingdom at the British-Irish Council meeting? If they did raise the matter it is not in the report.

Can they also indicate when the next meeting of the British-Irish Council is to take place? Is the fact that tomorrow's meeting has been postponed not symptomatic of the crisis in that strand of the Belfast Agreement?

The First Minister: I am sorry that the Member resorted to such phraseology at the end of his question. His premise is completely erroneous. As the Deputy First Minister stated, and as it has been trailed in some newspapers this morning, the British and Irish Governments have decided to postpone the plenary session of the British-Irish Council for a few weeks, because of ongoing political discussions. The view taken by the British and Irish Governments was that to hold a meeting would be a distraction in the

context of those discussions. We hope that those discussions will result in significant progress in the implementation of the agreement. Therefore we see those developments — if they progress as we hope — as being part of the success of the agreement. I look forward to the Member being disappointed on this matter.

As regards airport tax, if his Colleague did his job properly and attended the meetings he could have raised the issue.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I do not normally take points of order during statements. I will call the Member at the end if he has a point of order to make.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In December 1999 it was agreed that transport would be one of the six areas for enhanced co-operation. At that time it was welcomed as an item for discussion because of its impact on the environment and on those involved in transport and in the road and rail infrastructure. Can the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister indicate the reason for the delay in calling a North/South Ministerial Council meeting on transport until a year later?

The Deputy First Minister: This matter is one in which the Member is probably already well informed. There is no secret about the fact that the relevant Minister has consistently refused to participate in sectoral meetings in relation to that area agreed by the Assembly and to which the Pledge of Office applies. A decision then had to be taken on how to proceed, and it was that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister would start the process of involvement in sectoral meetings in relation to transport. In the circumstances, this was the type of approach that would find favour with all who wish to see the crucial issue of transport developed, not just within the Programme for Government but also the programme of relationships with our nearest neighbours — Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Beggs: Will the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister advise if the importance of the trans-European network is recognised by the British-Irish Council? In that context can they advise if there were, or are, plans to discuss the importance of upgrading the east Antrim rail link to Larne or upgrading the A8 road to Larne, to improve safety and reduce congestion? Is it recognised that these routes are important not only for us but for people in the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and the north of England?

The First Minister: We recognise the importance of trans-European networks and, as the Member has mentioned, that they have implications for some road links within Northern Ireland. At the meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council we did not deal with those specific matters. At the NSMC meeting there was a discussion with reference to rail links, although

not specifically the Larne link. Of course, in the context of the British-Irish Council, we are more concerned with the links from Northern Ireland across England to Europe. We therefore did not directly address the question of the A8 or the rail link to Larne. They are extremely important — the A8 in particular — but that discussion did not come up in the context of the British-Irish Council.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the statement particularly in relation to developing stronger North/South co-operation on roads development along the border from Newry to Derry. Can the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister confirm that the Minister for Regional Development did not take part in the North/South Ministerial Council? Can they inform the House in what way the same Minister has been involved in the Programme for Government, particularly in relation to infrastructure and roads development? The Minister said before Christmas that he would be willing to meet the Minister for the Environment and Local Government in the Republic on the question of transport.

Finally, I welcome the appointment of John McKinney as chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body. When will the Omagh office be up and running?

The Deputy First Minister: The answer to the Member's first question is self-explanatory — no, the relevant Minister did not take part in either the North/South Ministerial Council meeting or the British-Irish Council meeting. In relation to his second question, an office of the Special EU Programmes Body was opened in Omagh on 4 September 2000 in temporary premises in the Omagh District Council office. It will relocate to permanent premises shortly. The Omagh office will have overall responsibility for monitoring and promoting the implementation of the common chapter and will also be responsible for managing the cross-border priority of Peace II, including responsibility for grant making. It is a matter for each of the bodies concerned to decide on the premises to occupy, when to occupy them and how to administer them.

Mr R Hutchinson: Was there anything agreed on 19 December 2000 at the North/South Ministerial Council which could not have been agreed by way of normal relations between two countries outside the politically inspired institution?

The First Minister: The Member makes the valid point that, prior to the existence of the North/South Ministerial Council, there were frequent bilateral meetings between Belfast and Dublin, and, indeed, formal agreements on joint operations. I recall, in particular, the joint agreement in relation to the operation of the rail link where, from 1953 for a number of years, a North/South group of civil servants ran the railways. Nobody got worried about North/South institutions and bodies, even though they were exercising executive functions in that context. What we have now in the North/South Ministerial Council is

an opportunity to regularise those links and put them on a coherent basis. The Member is right to say that it could have been done on a bilateral basis, but we think that it is better done on a coherent basis. By asking that question, the Member is drawing attention to the absolute hypocrisy of the Minister who is prepared to engage in North/South activity on a bilateral basis but will not do so on a structured basis. There is no coherence in that position at all.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas agus is maith an rud gur tharla an dá chruinniú thábhachtacha seo roimh an Nollaig. I welcome the fact that meetings happened before Christmas, and I am particularly pleased to note a number of positive developments towards harmonisation nationally. Was the subject of free transport provision for senior citizens in the Six Counties discussed? Has any progress been made on this matter so that senior citizens can begin to benefit from the free transport from which senior citizens in the rest of Ireland have benefited for many years? Was there any specific recognition of the scope to develop the A5-N2 Derry-Dublin road through Strabane, Omagh, Aughnacloy and Monaghan — one of our key transportation corridors?

11.15 am

The Deputy First Minister: I have a more than passing interest in the provision of transport for senior citizens. The issue is included in the Programme for Government, and therefore it is a matter for the Executive and the Assembly. I firmly believe that it should be proceeded with very quickly because its absence is putting people, particularly those living in rural areas, at a disadvantage. Passing reference was made to the matter, but it should be regarded as a matter for the Assembly and the Executive as part of the strategic element of transport development.

On the subject of the Derry to Dublin road, there was a long discussion about two key elements in road development — major trunk roads and smaller roads, which are essential to people's everyday lives. Members will agree, however, that it would be wrong for Executive representatives at these sectoral meetings to focus on specific road links. There have been questions about the Larne link and the Derry to Dublin link. It is essential that all key trunk roads are dealt with efficiently and quickly, and that the lesser roads service is improved to the standard which people in border areas are entitled to expect.

Ms Hanna: I too welcome the statement on transport, planning and safety. Will the Deputy First Minister comment on the success, or otherwise, of the very hard-hitting Christmas and new-year drink/driving campaign? Can he comment on the co-operation and co-ordination between the two jurisdictions on this campaign? Can he also indicate what other measures they can take to reduce the awful death toll on our roads, North and South?

The Deputy First Minister: The measures identified by the First Minister in relation to the penalty points system

are crucial. There has been a large degree of co-operation in the running of the road safety campaign. The anti-drink/driving advertising that was broadcast on television over Christmas made for harrowing viewing, but it was also very effective in that it brought home to everybody exactly what can happen when such an accident takes place.

We will try, through the studies agreed at the sectoral meetings, to develop measures that will ensure that road safety, and the specific element of drink/driving to which the Member referred, is dealt with on a cross-border basis so that there will be no easy passage, North or South, for those who break the law on road safety.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I note that the First Minister has expressed regret that the Minister for Regional Development, in line with his election commitment to oppose North-Southery, did not attend this meeting and will not be attending similar meetings because of the waste of resources involved. Can the First Minister assure the House that his ban on Sinn Féin's attending similar meetings will continue, or is the sanction just the First Minister's being "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."?

The First Minister: The Member's quotation from Shakespeare was, in my view, a little autobiographical on his part — but that is an entirely separate matter. It is inappropriate to describe the meetings that have taken place as a waste of resources. The cost of both sectoral meetings, at which representatives on transport interests from every jurisdiction in the British Isles met in Belfast, was £4,500. The representatives established contacts and shared experiences.

It amounts to extremely good value for money that for so little we have had the opportunity to exchange information and arrange co-operation. I am sure that the measures will save considerable sums of money, benefit transport and save lives. I think that most people will recognise the silliness of the Member's point.

Mr Dallat: We have been told this morning that the members of the board of Tourism Ireland Ltd have been appointed, and the news has quite rightly been welcomed. Are the Ministers satisfied that the board boasts a broad base and can represent all aspects of tourism when developing international marketing strategy?

The Deputy First Minister: The larger the board, the greater the lack of cohesion. In many ways, the level of representation was determined by the agreed size of the board.

Nevertheless, we are generally satisfied that the tourist industry in its widest sense is represented on the board. We are very pleased that those practitioners who have vast experience of dealing with tourism in the most difficult times in Northern Ireland are represented. We are also pleased that the board has been invested with excellent leaders. That is very important.

As the Member well knows, the functions of the board are crucial, and it will move very quickly on the planning, development and delivery of the marketing programmes. As with every other board, and with every other development, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. I have no doubt that if we combine continuing peace with this type of integrated approach to developing tourism, the pudding will include the practical results that we want.

Mr McGrady: I want to ask the First Minister about the British/Irish Council meeting. Will he indicate whether discussions have taken place on the need for a special fund for the modernisation of the road structure in Northern Ireland, or does he intend that they should take place with the ministerial representative from Whitehall?

I ask this question in view of the drastic neglect of the roads infrastructure in Northern Ireland over the past 26 years of direct rule and the cumulative and disastrous effect of underfunding over that period. I envisage a special modernisation fund in the form of a one-off payment to compensate for that underfunding and neglect.

The First Minister: This question of funding is more properly a matter for the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It involves general issues about the structure of the block grant and how it is dispersed. It was not raised directly at the British/Irish Council meeting, but of course the question of the funding of Northern Ireland programmes in general is a matter with which we are very much concerned. It happens that the Deputy First Minister and I will have a meeting with the Chancellor of Exchequer on Wednesday morning. That meeting is directed mainly towards the particular tax problems we have with regard to the fuel cost differential between ourselves and the Republic of Ireland; it is partly a tax issue and partly also a currency issue. We plan to raise some other tax issues with him as well, but we are always conscious of the opportunity on these occasions to raise all issues relating to what is called the Barnett formula.

In raising these issues, we have to bear in mind that public expenditure in Northern Ireland is significantly above the UK average. Underfunding of transport, like underfunding of other areas, is a matter of how decisions have been made in the past with regard to allocations within the Northern Ireland block.

When we deal with expenditure and ask for more, we must bear in mind however that we are being treated extremely generously at the moment. We will still ask for more because we believe that some areas have greater needs, one of which is the need for investment infrastructure. In view of the generous provision of public expenditure in Northern Ireland, we need to proceed diplomatically.

PUBLIC EXPENDITURE: DECEMBER MONITORING

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the outcome of the December monitoring.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the Executive's decisions on the December monitoring round.

At its meeting on 18 January the Executive decided on some reallocations of expenditure for the short time remaining in the current financial year. These reallocations make use of the resources available from changes in Departments' estimated requirements, which became available in the December monitoring round. As I explained in my statement on the October monitoring round, the focus is on changes to estimated requirements and the fine-tuning of allocations rather than on any new advances through policy change or new priorities. The Programme for Government still guides our prioritisation of the allocations, but at this stage of the year the process is based on what is possible and necessary in this financial year.

The December monitoring round completes the process of considering what revisions might be necessary to estimates provision. The process for the passage of the next Appropriation Bill, which addresses the spring supplementary estimates for all Departments, has to begin now. Thus the issues addressed in this monitoring round will be the last which can be reflected in supplementary estimates for this financial year.

Last week the Executive decided that the agreement of the Assembly should be sought to a modification of Standing Orders to ensure that accelerated passage for Appropriation Bills is recognised as routine and essential. Last autumn I discussed this fully with the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and I am very grateful for its having signalled that it would be content for this to happen, subject to appropriate consultation on the public expenditure plans. I acknowledge that this year the extent of involvement and consultation with the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Assembly on the Budget cycle has been constrained. In relation to the spring supplementary estimates, I hope that the details I am providing today and further discussion with the Committee will be helpful to all concerned as background to the next Appropriation Bill, which will be introduced in mid-February. That will draw together all revisions to public expenditure allocations subsequent to the main estimates that we passed in June. Thus it will draw together the June monitoring round, the Agenda for Government, the changes to departmental running costs that were agreed by the Executive in July and the October and December monitoring rounds.

Turning to details of this monitoring round, the amount available for reallocation is £67.7 million. Once again, there are unique reasons for the figure being so high at this stage of the financial year. We did not expect to have a substantial amount, but several factors have yielded substantial resources for reallocation. The amount available through revised estimates of departmental requirements is £35 million, of which some £11 million is from additional receipts, either from fees and charges or from disposals of assets. At this stage of the year minor changes to these items always come from Departments. The amount is increased because the revision in the treatment of rate rebates that provided some additional spending power in 2001-02 and later years, as was explained in the Budget that was laid before the Assembly on 12 December 2000, also applies to 2000-01.

Members will be aware also that because of the suspension last year, the full Budget allocated for the Assembly Commission this time last year will not be needed in this financial year. The Executive recognise the need to consider carefully the need for more office accommodation, which may mean that there will be additional requirements in 2001-02 or later years for the Assembly.

11.30 am

However, when the underspend from the Assembly this year is taken into account, there may not be a need for any net increase in the Assembly's costs, taking the several years together. That position is still highly uncertain, given the need to explore accommodation options for additional Assembly staff. The Executive are happy to work further with the Assembly to ensure that the needs are facilitated and addressed, showing the due regard for economy and effectiveness that the Assembly requires in respect of all public expenditure.

Thus, making use of some of the forecasted underspending from the Assembly's Budget for 2000-01 does not undermine the Assembly Commission's plans: the funding of our needs can be addressed fully in 2001-02, if necessary through the end of year flexibility arrangements.

The £67.7 million available for reallocation comprises Departments' estimated underspending, the revised approach to rate rebates and the amount the Assembly does not directly require for this financial year. The Executive's proposals for the use of these resources take account of the bids from Departments, the need to retain flexibility to address the Assembly's needs and the major question of the Health Service's trusts' deficits.

Departmental bids for additional spending in this financial year amounted to some £50.4 million, excluding the matter of the Health Service's trusts' deficits. Given the substantial amounts available, the Executive have decided to meet a large proportion of those bids, totalling some £39.8 million. It is not surprising that the bids are smaller than would be the case at other stages since only

a few months remain in which to make further spending this year. I will say a little about the additional allocations for each Department.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will receive an additional £2 million, mainly for the fine-tuning of disease compensation payment requirements and the cost of assistance schemes and a science service. For the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, a total of £0.9 million is available for several key aspects of the Department's activities, including museums, the Northern Ireland Millennium Company, sport and other services. While no bids were received from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, its needs in relation to assistance to industry will be kept under review for the remainder of the financial year to ensure that all needs are addressed.

The Department of Education receives £2.6 million, including provision for the Irish-medium trust fund. The Department of Finance and Personnel receives £0.8 million for the fine-tuning of estimates of administrative costs. The Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment receives £0.3 million, again for the fine-tuning of expenditure for European Community initiatives and for the administration of student awards by the education and library boards.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety made a substantially larger bid. Leaving aside the question of the Health Service's trusts' deficits, which I will come to shortly, the Executive have decided to allocate £14.5 million to address a range of needs in the Health Service. That includes £3 million for the fine-tuning of estimates for capital expenditure, £3 million for winter pressures and community care, £1.2 million for pressure on the acute hospitals, and £1.3 million to improve premises used by general practitioners.

An additional £1 million will be made available to the Department of the Environment, including £600,000 for historic buildings grants and an amount for planning compensation. For the Department for Regional Development, it has been necessary to add £5 million to the Budget because of a delay in the disposal of assets by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC). In essence, that is a rephrasing of a receipt, and thus the proposal, as agreed by the Minister for Regional Development, is that the increase now made for 2000-01 should be offset by a corresponding decrease in 2001-02 when additional receipts will be available from that disposal of assets. The changes do not affect the spending power of the Department for Regional Development and, therefore, make good sense as straightforward aspects of financial management. There would be no need for such fine tuning if the asset disposals had been managed as planned at the outset of the year. The Executive hope that that will be the case in the future, so that there is less need for the adjustment of spending allocations.

In addition to that £5 million, further moneys have been allocated to the Department for Regional Development, including £4 million for structural maintenance on the roads, and £1.5 million for equipment and minor works in the Water Service. In total, the proposed additional allocation to the Department for Regional Development is £14 million.

For the Department for Social Development, there is an additional £3.5 million, including £2 million to deal with fuel poverty, a matter that I know to be of concern to Members from all parties. There is also an additional £1 million for the regeneration of housing in north Belfast and £0.5 million to make up for some of the rental income lost by the Housing Executive as a result of the extensive programme of house sales.

Finally, an additional £0.1 million has been allocated to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to meet the costs associated with President Clinton's visit before Christmas.

Largely, the allocations represent the fine tuning of the estimated requirements of Departments. They are routine allocations, moving resources from where they are no longer needed to the emerging pressure points in the Executive's Budget.

The Executive have also considered carefully the difficulties facing the Health Service, which have left an increasing number of health service trusts facing deficits. Financial arrangements in the Health Service still reflect the internal market and include the possibility that individual trusts will have surpluses or deficits that will balance out over several years. Thus, the existence of deficits is not, in itself, a critical difficulty. However, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has indicated that deficits have been increasing materially, which represents a growing problem for the Health Service. The Executive recognise the serious pressure facing the Health Service and the difficulty of finding adequate additional resources for services, mainly caused by the fact that we are not getting sufficient resources from the Barnett formula. The Barnett formula amounts that we receive, when additional funding is provided for the Health Service in England, do not meet our needs proportionately. We will need to take that issue further with the Treasury, as part of our work on the Barnett formula. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has recommended that approach, and the issue has been discussed extensively in this House in the context of next year's Budget.

The Executive are also concerned to ensure that the management of resources provided by the Assembly for the Health Service is consistent with control requirements. That is important to the Assembly as a whole and to the Public Accounts Committee in particular. We must ensure that the problems that face the Health Service are dealt with following the procedures for financial management

and control required by the Assembly. My Department, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will consider the issue of trust deficits in detail in the coming weeks, to ensure that we fully understand the complex financial arrangements and their implications, and to allow appropriate action to be taken.

Substantial resources are available to us, even after we have met a large proportion of the bids from Departments. It is necessary, of course, to consider what additional help we should provide to the Health Service this time. We must also consider the implications of the deficits for future patterns of activity in the Health Service. The Executive have therefore concluded that they are not yet ready to decide exactly how to handle the issue in the remainder of this financial year. Some further details are being investigated to ensure there is a clearer picture. When that has been completed, the Executive will set out its proposed approach to the Assembly.

This monitoring round has provided some significant adjustments to expenditure patterns in this financial year. However, I stress again that these are routine adjustments, mainly driven by revised estimates of requirements, both up and down, across a very wide range of services. This is to be expected at this stage of the year, and I do not want to give the impression that there were significant choices to be made in this monitoring round given the limited scope for change in any action at this late stage of the financial year.

I will be happy to discuss the issues arising further, especially with the Finance and Personnel Committee, so that the background is fully covered as necessary before the spring supplementary estimates are introduced next month. The Executive will also address further the question of health service trust deficits and bring its conclusions to the Assembly as soon as possible.

The Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I thank the Minister for the statement, which at least shows the very healthy state of the Budget, if not of the Health Service. The £67 million recouped for reallocation is a substantial amount of money. It is very prudent of the Minister to be able to recoup that amount for reallocation.

The Minister mentions the issue of the rate rebate revisions in the statement. Can he explain further how that affects the amount of spending that is available for us in this particular end of year monitoring round? Will it leave us in a situation where he can actually reconsider next year's 8% rise in the rates? There has been a substantial amount of underspending in the past year and that amount could be offset against the £12 million that the 8% rise will realise. That rise could then be brought into line with inflation. I know that the Minister will want to do that if possible.

Taking on board the Finance and Personnel Committee's recommendations on the Barnett formula, it is important to know how the Minister proposes to tackle that issue. Maybe he will clarify that for us. We have not been getting a fair allocation under the Barnett formula for spending in the Health Service, in particular, compared with England. We need to achieve equality. Can the Minister clarify that?

Mr Speaker: Before calling the Minister, I want to point out that this is not an opportunity to raise broad questions about the principles of finance in the Northern Ireland Budget. It is an opportunity to ask questions on the December monitoring proposals.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Chairperson for his remarks and questions.

First, we need to build a strong case concerning the Barnett formula and we need to make representation in time for the next spending review.

As the First Minister indicated in response to previous questions, this is a matter not just for myself, as the Minister of Finance and Personnel, but for the Executive as a whole. The representational role of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is going to be key in this particular exercise.

We are trying to build up the type of case that will need to be made. We also need to anticipate the argument that is likely to be made against our case. That is why there are a number of issues that we need to address.

The Chairperson also raised the question of the rate rebate treatment. We covered this in the Budget statement and in the Budget document. There are changes, as approved and agreed by the Treasury, in the treatment of rate rebates, which now come under the departmental expenditure limit (DEL). That has applied this year, and that is why we have additional money available. The rate rebate factor has already been factored into next year's Budget. It would not be appropriate to carry money from this year's rate rebate and set it against next year's Budget. That is not the basis on which we can plan budgets.

Unfortunately, the rate increase that we have indicated looks like being the increase that we are going to have to adopt — subject to some final figures being available. It is simply to meet expenditure planned for next year and subsequent years. Notwithstanding the money that has become available in this monitoring round, nobody has yet said to me that there is money in our spending plans that is not required and could be used to allow a lower rate increase.

11.45 am

Rev Robert Coulter: It has been suggested that trusts have managed to spend more than their budgeted income by delaying the payment of bills to suppliers. If deficits have been financed by trade credit, the latest annual deficits must represent the total deficit. In view of the

annual budgetary arrangements, is it sensible to accumulate the annual deficits over a number of years? What is the total overspend?

Mr Durkan: First, trusts operate under financial arrangements that allow them to run deficits in given years. However, the trusts are required to balance their finances over a period of time, perhaps three to five years. There has been no breach of the financial controls. Obviously, the situation will be different when resource accounting is adopted; deficits will no longer be separate from departmental expenditure limits.

The Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister need to identify any problems suggested by the pattern of the deficits. The Member suggested that some deficits were caused by delaying payment of suppliers' bills. Such issues must be explored in a manner that is sensitive to the pressures that are contributing to the trusts' problems. Financial management and control issues must also be examined.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee (Mr Gallagher): Health trust deficits are a serious and complex matter. I appreciate, therefore, that the issue needs further examination before any conclusive statement can be made. However, the matter is urgent, and the Assembly needs to know that the matters will be addressed within a definite and tight timetable. On behalf of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee, I register with the Minister our concerns and our desire to be fully informed on the background of the problems and on any planned remedial action.

Mr Durkan: I recognise the urgency of the situation, but we must face up to its complexity. The Executive were unable to take conclusive decisions at this stage, without gathering further information. Obviously, we must reach firm conclusions in time to allow us to make decisions about financial allocations in this financial year, if the Executive consider that that is the best way forward.

The current arrangements are complex, and we need a little time to reflect on the most appropriate way forward. I expect that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will ensure that the departmental Committee is kept fully informed about all developments.

Mr Dodds: Did the Minister take any cognisance of the plea made by traders and small businesses to the Assembly last week to reconsider the increase in the regional rate, which is to be almost three times the rate of inflation? When will the Minister and the parties in the Executive that support him take on board the fact that it is scandalous to raise the regional rate by 8%? It is especially scandalous in view of previous commitments made by members of the Minister's own party when they sat on local councils. He can take it from me that

householders, small traders and businesses will draw very little comfort from his statement today in relation to the issue of the regional rate.

The Minister mentioned an overall amount of £67·7 million being made available for reallocation. He said that £35 million came from revised estimates of requirements by Departments. Can he give us some more details on which Departments have given up what amounts of money, rather than just a global sum? He said that of that £35 million, £11 million is additional receipts. Can he confirm that some of those receipts come from the sale of Housing Executive homes? Will he take on board the point that has been made by many Members in the House about the need to address chronic housing need in Northern Ireland, especially in areas like north Belfast? Will he accept that to continue to draw money out of the Department for Social Development's budget in this way, and not to return a proportionate amount, is unacceptable?

Finally, I welcome the Minister's announcement today of £1 million extra funding for the regeneration of housing in north Belfast. I am pleased to have received a letter from the Minister for Social Development, indicating that thus far £4·5 million has been allocated. This extra £1 million will be of enormous assistance and benefit to our work in regenerating run-down areas in north Belfast.

I also welcome the £2 million towards alleviating the problem of fuel poverty. I ask the Minister to continue with the work that he is doing —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has put quite a number of questions to the Minister.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his many questions.

First, on the question of rates, the Member knows that the December monitoring round has nothing to do with the budgeted rate increases for next year. This is an adjustment to this year's allocations, and it does not relate to our revenue needs in terms of allocations for next year or future years. It has nothing to do with the rate increase at this point.

As I have already said, we will be finalising the determination in relation to the rates next year, subject to further figures being available. The Executive have heard, and are alert to, a lot of the concerns, frustrations and misgivings that have been expressed about rate increases. Nevertheless, we have made clear the basis on which the decisions have been taken.

The point has been made about those parties who sit on the Executive and agree with this. Again I say that whenever we were going through the papers on the Budget — and papers were fully circulated, including recommendations on options on rate increases — no Minister of any party specifically opposed the rate increases that were proposed. I want to make that clear again, because the point seems to have been lost.

Concerning where the money has come from, obviously there are some small adjustments. Of the significant amounts, there is some £7 million from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; that basically is money that was being held there in support of possible bids in relation to Harland & Wolff. A further £3 million has come in from house sales. I have never made a secret of the fact that there are significant receipts coming in from house sales. Indeed, I referred to it in my statement. There is £2·5 million in Water Service receipts, £6 million from the old round of EU programmes and £1·4 million from LEDU.

The Member made a point about the Department for Social Development and housing receipts. The Department for Social Development's bids in this monitoring round have been met. There seems to be a suggestion that we should be allocating more than has actually been bid for. As I have said before, we cannot adopt a position that says that receipts automatically lie where they fall, because not all Departments and programmes are in a position to generate receipts.

I am pleased that the Member welcomes the additional money for the north Belfast strategy.

That additional £1 million follows the additional £2 million that was allocated in the revised Budget in December.

Mr Close: Does the Minister agree that in situations such as this it would be advantageous and in the interest of the Assembly if the final figures were brought to the attention of the respective Statutory Committees before they are brought before the Executive? That would enable Members to have an input into the reallocation of those easements. Otherwise the Executive announce figures and almost create a "them and us" situation where they do their thing and the rest of us follow. That is not in the interests of democracy or the Assembly. Will the Minister comment on that?

Paragraph 16 of the Minister's statement states that the allocations are from resources that were "no longer needed". The figures from the October monitoring round and the December monitoring round amount to £143 million — approximately 2% of the overall Budget. Does the Minister agree that that clearly demonstrates that there is an in-built fat content of £143 million in the budgeting mechanisms? In view of that, the £143 million could have been reallocated for future years — for example, 2001-02 — thus keeping the regional rate below inflation. That would assist Northern Ireland's economy by protecting its backbone — the small traders.

It is not sufficient to say that we cannot look to the revenue for future years when we are dealing with reallocations. It is part and parcel of the budgeting exercise, and where there is fat, it is the Assembly's responsibility to ensure that it does not exist in future years.

Mr Durkan: When we say that money is not needed, we do not mean that it is not needed for public expenditure, rather that it is not needed against the budgeted item for this year. It may be because there has been a change in circumstances and the need is not the same, or it may be because there has been a slippage in spending, and the money cannot be spent on that issue in this financial year but can be spent on the same need in future years. Therefore we are not saying that the money is not needed.

The Member's argument suggests that Northern Ireland can afford to have a lower level of public expenditure. With regard to the Barnett formula, most people argue that Northern Ireland needs more public expenditure. That is an argument that the Member and his party have made. However, there now appears to be a suggestion that Northern Ireland can afford less public expenditure.

Adjusting moneys in the monitoring rounds justifies the use of monitoring rounds. Nobody pretends that we get estimates right or that things always go according to plan. Therefore monitoring rounds are used to ensure that we get the best use out of moneys in-year.

This money is needed. Proof of that is in its allocation to pressing needs, needs that, it is hoped, Members will welcome. There are also outstanding needs in the Health Service. Therefore the money is required this year and, as I am sure all Members will agree, we will need more public expenditure next year and in the years beyond.

Ms McWilliams: I agree with Seamus Close. It would be useful if Committees received advance note of the detail of the Minister's statement. However, I welcome the statement. I am concerned about the trusts that are in deficit, and I add my concern to that of Rev Robert Coulter's. Health bodies that are in deficit are: the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust; Altnagelvin Area Hospital; Sperrin Lakeland Trust; Ulster Community and Hospital Health and Social Services Trust; Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust; Causeway Health and Social Services Trust; Homefirst Community Trust; United Hospitals Health and Social Services Trust; Greenpark Healthcare Trust; Belfast City Hospital; Craigavon Area Hospital; and the Royal Group of Hospitals.

What happens to those trusts with regard to penalties? Are there incentives for other trusts not named on the list?

12.00

Will the Minister also tell us where the finance will be found for the very expensive judicial reviews that are being taken by Departments against Departments? Will that finance now have to be found out of the £17.3 million that is not currently allocated?

Mr Durkan: Departments meet legal costs out of their budgets.

On the wider point about trust deficits, I recognise that many people will consider some trusts to be in

significant deficit, while others have stayed within budget and reported surpluses. We need to look at all the issues involved. It is not a case of drawing up blacklists or penalty lists. We need to deal with this problem in all its aspects, which are manifold. We need to look at where pressures on trusts, particularly trusts providing acute services, are giving rise to this problem. We need to look at the wider issues of funding, and we also need to look at the management and control questions. The Executive, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are agreed that we need to approach this from the point of view of accountability for service, care, spending and control. This is not just an accountancy exercise; it is an exercise in accountability for services provided and expenditure managed. It would be premature for me to speculate on any particular issue to do with any particular trust.

Finally, I would like to respond to Mr Close's point about Committees. The Department of Finance and Personnel receives bids from Departments in monitoring rounds. We explore the issues that are involved in those bids with the Departments. We also receive notification of easements of money from Departments that feel that they will not be able to spend what they have been allocated. We manage the process by making recommendations to the Executive, and the Executive make the decisions. It is up to other Departments and Ministers to decide the level of consultation or information exchange they have with their Committees.

Mr Speaker: We have a substantial number of Members who wish to ask questions. I encourage those who are called to be as concise as possible.

Mr McFarland: The Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee has been concerned for some time about the visibility of NHS funds and the fact that there seems to be enormous difficulty in identifying where the funds go when they leave the boards. Why have the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety not been more curious before now as to why a detailed monitoring system has not been in place for identifying the destination of the £2.3 billion that leaves the former Department and goes to the latter? Where does it go, and what is it used for?

Mr Durkan: The budget for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is significant, as has been mentioned in the statement and in response to other questions. There are complex financial arrangements involved, and we now want to review those. The Minister has already said that some aspects of Health Service structures and systems will be looked at. The Department of Finance and Personnel and the economic policy unit in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister want to see more streamlined arrangements, so that it is much easier literally to follow the money.

The move to resource accounting and budgeting is one change in the overall system that should contribute to that. That will have an impact on the Health Service as well as on all other aspects of the public sector. It should also make it easier to trace money, to detect problems as they emerge and to require people to alert us to problems as they emerge.

Regarding the particular pressing points on the current deficits, my officials only became aware of their acuteness in the context of this particular monitoring round. The Executive now recognise that this is an issue which, for a number of reasons, we need to address now. However, we need to address it in light of fuller information on all of the factors, rather than just making a reflex allocation now. There are wider issues, including some of the questions that the Member touched upon, that need to be examined.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasChann Comhairle. I welcome the statement, particularly the allocation of extra funding to health. The fact that the Minister gave seven paragraphs to health is also welcome. On the question of accountability, I refer to page 6 in relation to the Department for Regional Development:

“There would not be a need for these fine tuning changes if the asset disposals were managed as planned at the outset of the year.”

Does this indicate a mismanagement ethos within the Department for Regional Development?

We all welcome monitoring of spends, and I notice £14 million being given to the Department for Regional Development and £14.5 to health. It seems from that that if you are outside the loop, you get much better treatment. In addition, what measures of accountability does the Minister have in place for those who are outside the loop, regarding where they spend their money, how they spend it, and what areas they spend it in?

Mr Durkan: I hope that in future these statements will not be judged on how many paragraphs people get — although it might be easier, particularly for me, to give people paragraphs rather than money. I will bear that in mind. There will be compensating paragraphs for those who are not quite so successful when it comes to bids.

As far as I am concerned, all Departments are in the loop in terms of public expenditure. That is also the position taken by the Department of Finance and Personnel and by the Executive. In agreeing these allocations, the Executive are discharging their responsibility. It is not just for Ministers to have regard for the needs of their own Departments, but also to have regard for the needs of the total public services, including public services administered by the Department for Regional Development and the Department for Social Development.

It is not a matter of people being advantaged by being either inside or outside the loop. That is a mistaken and superficial approach, not unlike the rather crass approach

that Ian Paisley Jnr took earlier when trying to look at it in terms of Nationalist Ministers and Unionist Ministers. We have responded to need. Bids have been made by Departments and we, as an Executive, have responded to those bids as we have seen fit to do in the circumstances.

The point about the £5 million obviously relates to the Hi-Park Centre. It had been anticipated that the transport holding company would sell Hi-Park this year, raising about £5 million. That was the basis on which the Department for Regional Development budget was predicated. Obviously, that has not happened. We do not take that lightly. That £5 million has been made good now on the understanding that it will come back to us in a revision of the Department for Regional Development's budget for asset sales next year. That is working out in those terms precisely because Departments need to uphold the terms and the premises on which their budget has been allocated.

Mr Dallat: On the subject of health trust deficits, I welcome the Minister's indication of a possible role for the Public Accounts Committee. Will he support increased powers for the Comptroller and Auditor General so that health trusts can be brought before the Public Accounts Committee to explain their overspending, their consistent failure to meet targets and their plans to put things right?

Mr Durkan: As I have said, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed. At this stage I think it would be wrong for me to focus on any one aspect of the issues that we need to pick up. The questions that have been raised in relation to audit and the role of the Comptroller and Auditor General are wider questions than pertain with this particular monitoring round.

The Member is aware that in the context, both of the Government Resources and Accounts Bill and of work on the pending audit reorganisation Bill, we are looking at ways of adding to the scope and access of the Comptroller and Auditor General on behalf of the Assembly. However, there is nothing in particular that I can add at this stage in the context of this monitoring round statement.

Mr Poots: I welcome the additional £600,000 for historic buildings grants, as that will lever more money from the heritage lottery fund for Northern Ireland. How much money is being spent on planning compensation? How much money has been set aside for the Irish-medium education trust fund? Given the state of school buildings in the controlled sector, there is a lot of concern in my community that money is being awarded to the Minister's pet projects while schools are falling down around children.

Did the Minister receive a request from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for £120,000 for victims? Would that money not have been better allocated than the £100,000 to the President's last-minute trip over to the Province to try and get some concession for his foreign policy, which has failed everywhere else?

Mr Durkan: I am glad that the Member welcomes the £600,000 for buildings and heritage. As for his specific question on planning compensation, it is £293,000. That is to meet legally binding settlements for planning compensation that could not be met within the existing budget.

Regarding the allocation in the Department of Education, in particular the question of the Irish-medium trust fund, £750,000 is being allocated there. Obviously that is in response to the needs of that particular sector, and those bids, like other bids, have been assessed by the relevant Department and by ourselves. The Executive have seen fit to meet those bids. Bids have also been received in the past, and met, in the context of budget and other monitoring rounds, in relation to other sectors in education and to the wider school estate.

Ms Ramsey: In response to Monica McWilliams's question on trust deficits, the Minister said that it had to be dealt with within the context of financial control and management. I am a bit disappointed that the needs of the people did not come into play there. We need to ensure that the needs of the people come into play because there are different needs across different trusts.

On the issue of the additional money to Departments, the total amount, according to the statement, is £67.7 million, but in the allocation it is £39.7 million. That is a shortfall of £28 million. What will happen to the rest of that money? I am concerned that there is no additional money in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Will this money be used to prop up shipbuilding, as has been done in the past? In total, how much has been given to the regeneration of north Belfast lately?

Go raibh maith agat.

12.15 pm

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for her questions. I made it clear in my statement, and in my responses to questions, that there are a number of issues that need to be addressed regarding trusts. I have talked about being sensitive to the pressures that are facing trusts, particularly those providing acute services. I do not think it is fair for the Member to imply that any exercise that is now being carried out on behalf of the Executive will be blind to the needs that are there. We are taking this exercise forward in ways that will be sensitive, realistic, and responsive — where we can be — to needs, but we also have to regard our own financial control and management requirements. That is a responsibility I have to this Assembly.

I have said that we want to look at all of the issues involved, and that is why we are taking more time on this. I want to reassure the Member and the House generally on that point.

The allocation of £1 million to north Belfast is in addition to the £2 million allocated to the north Belfast

regeneration effort in the revised budget that I announced in December. These two announcements mean a total contribution of £3 million to that strategy.

We have detailed the amount of money available as £67.7 million; we are allocating £40 million. We have said, on behalf of the Executive, that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are going to look into the issue of trust deficits, and we will make recommendations on allocations to the Assembly if that is what the Executive see fit to do. Obviously that is relevant to the money not allocated in today's statement. So too are other possible uses for money allocated into Executive programme funds for future use.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the additional £5 million that has been allocated as a capital grant to railways. Will the Minister further outline exactly what that large amount of money will be spent on? Can he let the House know when each of the Roads Service divisions can expect to hear its additional allocation from the £4 million earmarked for road maintenance? Will the Minister highlight the allocations that have been made in health that reflect expenditure or deficits that have already occurred? Can he further advise what additional money has been targeted on bed blocking and the associated inefficiencies related to this? Will he ensure that a better balance of funding in the health sector will occur in the future?

Mr Durkan: The capital funding for the railways is essentially the money from the Hi-Park Centre. Members are well aware of the case that has been made regarding railway need, not least on the capital side, so this is part of a response to that. The £5 million that I mentioned in response to an earlier question is being allocated to that particular end.

The Department has allocated £4 million towards structural maintenance. Members are aware that there is a significant backlog in structural maintenance, so this is aimed at reducing this problem.

There is also the point of oil-related pressures. Roads Service uses oil-related products, such as asphalt and bitumen, so that puts a particular burden on its budget. Again, this is extra funding to try to mitigate those extra pressures. The Member also touched upon the issue of bed blocking with regard to the health budget. The Minister announced last year, in the context of winter pressures, several significant reviews into the different causes and contributing factors to many of the pressures which manifest themselves, particularly in the winter, but which are not always easily described as merely winter pressures. Those include the issue of bed blocking. We have responded to a number of bids from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and we are giving consideration to the outstanding points in relation to deficits.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the £1 million allocation to the north Belfast housing strategy, which, combined with the £2 million from the last monitoring round, will contribute greatly to the most pressing housing need in all of Northern Ireland. Had it not been for the dilatory and inept manner in which the Minister for Social Development has dealt with this issue — or rather has not dealt with it — and his lack of diligence in highlighting this as an urgent housing need, these topping-up allocations would not be necessary. Does the Minister agree that it is the Minister for Social Development's lack of commitment which has necessitated this matter's being brought to the Assembly today?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his welcoming of the additional money, which means in total a further £3 million to the north Belfast housing strategy. That is not the only money going into the north Belfast regeneration scheme. Other money is going in from the Housing Executive and from the Department for Social Development budget. I hope that these top-ups are not regarded as second-rate money and that they will go as far and be spent as effectively as any other money. A bid has been received from the Department for Social Development, and we have been able to meet it in this context. It would be inappropriate for me to comment any further along the lines that the Member has requested. I find that all Ministers deal with me and my Department in a straightforward manner. I hope that my Department and I deal with them in a straightforward way in return. That applies in this Chamber and anywhere else.

Mr P Robinson: Can the Minister confirm that he considers his Colleague's remarks to be petty, party political rubbish? First of all, how can he attack a Minister who put in a bid for funding, considering it to be urgent, for not taking the matter seriously? Secondly, pursuant to the reply that he gave to Monica McWilliams with regard to the legal cases that Ministers are taking against each other, what is the size of this ministerial wrangling fund that he has? How much does he expect will be spent by Ministers taking each other to court so that we may assess what good could have been done for Northern Ireland if they had not decided to do so?

Can the Minister also indicate, in relation to the regional rate, what degree of fiscal flexibility he has? Is it possible for him to carry money forward from one financial year to the next, considering this is a relatively small amount of money in relation to his overall Budget? That is one possible way for the Minister to reduce the impact that businesses in Northern Ireland will have as a result of his significant hike in the rates.

As has been indicated, about £150 million is reallocated every year. Ten million pounds is all that is required to maintain the regional rate at the level of inflation. Surely the Minister recognises that during the course of the next financial year he will be making statements similar to

today's, and he could very easily have absorbed the regional rate increase by allowing that on this occasion.

Finally, in relation to the Department for Regional Development, he has indicated £5 million pounds for the sale of capital assets. Does he take into account that, for instance, if the Hi-Park Centre is sold, a revenue stream in the region of £800,000 will come from that, which he will additionally have to input in every subsequent year?

Mr Durkan: There are several points. First, I decline the Member's invitation to brand my party colleague's contribution as petty or partisan. Mr Maginness was possibly making the point partly to counterbalance some remarks made in the Chamber by Nigel Dodds that there had previously been impassioned pleas about north Belfast that I had rejected. That was not exactly true, I hasten to add —

Mr Dodds: I did not say that. I was thanking the Minister.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Durkan: I was referring to a previous occasion in the Chamber when the point was made that there had been impassioned pleas.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is a curious problem when we get confused between praise and blame, but perhaps the Minister will continue to respond to the substantial number of questions raised by Mr Robinson.

Mr Durkan: As regards the further points in relation to the regional rate, clearly we can carry money forward from one year to the next. We have already indicated that in relation to Executive Programme Funds and in relation to an amount for health service capital. It can be done.

However, it would not be appropriate for us to carry money forward from one year to the next simply to offset the rate increase. It would not be good budgeting practice to use budgeted money from one year to reduce revenue needs in another year. Had we tried to do that, many in the House would have raised their eyebrows and said that we were trying to duck hard decisions and were taking softer options. We recognise the serious concerns that are felt in relation to the rates in general, and that is why I will shortly be bringing forward details of the review of overall rating policy, which is provided for in the Programme for Government.

Concerning the Hi-Park Centre, again I would point out that what I have announced today is with the agreement of the Minister for Regional Development, so I hope that all the relevant points have been taken into consideration. It is obviously a matter for him to determine. I am not in a position to specify that the assets that might be sold next year by the Department for Regional Development to reflect that £5 million will necessarily be the Hi-Park Centre. The commitment to the sale of assets is there. However, it does not refer to a specific asset. It is a matter for the Minister for Regional Development, and

it would be inappropriate for me to go into any more detail on that point.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister. The benefits of having a local hand and local accountability can be seen in the two monitoring rounds, and there have been some impressive results. We are talking about a very significant amount of money, and it is hard to find any grounds for criticism of the announced allocations.

This should not be taken as a sting in the tail. The Minister has demonstrated considerable interest in the subject, but I was disappointed that there was no reference to the gap funding proposal. It was a very welcome announcement by him on the last occasion.

Community and voluntary sector groups are facing a significant problem in the hiatus between the outgoing and incoming European programmes. That time frame may be more significant than was originally thought.

12.30 pm

Does the Minister agree that there may be an opportunity to extend the scope, the budget and the time frame of that gap funding proposal so as to ensure that there is no significant loss of capacity, experience or jobs in the most vulnerable parts of our society? The Minister has recognised that problem in the past. There is money in reserve — he has not spent all his money — so there is the opportunity to do something about that.

Mr Durkan: With reference to what is not in the statement in terms of gap funding, I recognise the concerns felt by many, not just in this House but across the community. We have met bids in previous monitoring rounds in relation to gap funding, particularly with reference to the peace programme. There was no specific bid for gap funding that was not met in this monitoring round. We cannot meet bids that are not presented.

We are trying to keep the wider issue under review on a number of levels. We have to deal with the fact that a considerable amount of money allocated under Peace I has yet to be spent or drawn down — something like 27% — and that has to be spent by 31 December 2001. We want to look at the problems in that hold-up and consider what can be done to ameliorate the situation. That could, in turn, ease many of the problems that are manifesting themselves as gap funding issues.

The Member touched upon not just the amounts of money but also the dates. Some groups are on different end dates for funding for different measures, which creates difficulties. We want to look at the total picture and will keep it under review. We will be as responsive and effective in the future as we have tried to be in the past.

Dr Birnie: I note that the Minister had £68 million available and he allocated £40 million. What is going to happen to the difference? Is he building up a war chest?

What is that money for? Is it to bankroll financial mismanagement, possibly in the NHS trusts?

Mr Durkan: I have already said that there is £28 million that we are not allocating today. We need to look at the deficits issue. There are a number of matters there, not just relating to financial management, but also to service pressures and unmet need. We need to look at this matter in the round and take a balanced approach, with due regard both to financial management and accountability and to service accountability and meeting need. Those are legitimate concerns of the Assembly and the Executive.

I cannot anticipate what will be allocated to the trusts. The Executive will decide after the three Departments involved have looked at the issues and brought recommendations forward. Money can clearly be used in that area, and I have also said that money can be used and carried over in Executive programme funds. It is not a case of building up a war chest. All the moneys available are declared and open. There are no public moneys hidden, and people will see clearly that our system is geared to ensuring that public expenditure takes place rather than does not take place. We need to do more to ensure that public expenditure takes place according to the authority on which it was given.

Mr O'Connor: Many citizens in Northern Ireland have concerns about performance-related pay and fat-cat bonuses, as identified in the report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, which was published last year. Many people in the Health Service cannot avail of performance-related pay. Can the Minister confirm that work is taking place on these issues? Can he also confirm that those trusts identified this morning — those whose chief executives are getting performance-related pay while the trusts themselves have a deficit — and the whole management culture within them will be investigated?

Mr Durkan: I recognise, as do most people, the wide concern that the public and the House have about the whole issue of performance-related pay for Health Service managers. That issue has been addressed by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in communication with the trusts and in legislation.

We also need to be conscious that in this exercise we are trying to deal with service-related problems as well as with financial management. We want to get the total picture. I hope that the wider exercise that we are conducting will address all issues to do with performance-related pay that impact on trust performance and trust deficit. We are not trying to scapegoat anyone; nor will we come up with a short-term fix. We want to deal with the problem in ways that make sense and work for the Health Service as well as for our financial management processes.

Mr Berry: A lot has been said this morning about trusts' deficits. The Minister has stated that he intends to address further the question of the Health Service trusts'

deficits and to bring his conclusions to the Assembly as soon as possible. I appreciate that this is a very complex issue, but I would like to know if the Minister is going to give us a timetable for dealing with it as soon as possible. Is it going to be a matter of weeks or months? When does he intend actually to do something about it?

Mr Durkan: I do not want to repeat the points I made earlier on the issue in general. On the question of timing, as I indicated in the statement, we clearly need to be able to bring indications forward in time for the spring Supplementary Estimates. We need to table those in mid- February, so it really is a matter of weeks.

Mrs E Bell: I welcome this monitoring round and thank the Minister for it. A number of points have already been covered. I welcome the moneys for children's issues and community care, et cetera. However, I am disappointed that no bid was made, nor moneys allocated, for the purchase of urgently needed library stocks. Can I have a breakdown, perhaps by way of a written reply, of the moneys allocated to the Department of Education for oil? In response to the Minister's comment earlier about budgeting, is it really good budgeting practice to put people out of business with increases in rates?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for her broad welcome. The Department of Education has been allocated £1.8 million for fuel costs. I assume that the Member would like that figure to be broken down by board areas or by school sectors, and we will endeavour to do that. Members may recall from the previous monitoring round that some allocations were made to cover fuel costs, particularly for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. No such allocation was made for the Department of Education, so it has to absorb the cost pressures.

I have already indicated that in a few weeks' time we will be making a final decision on the rates, based on available figures. If those figures allow us to reduce the rates increase in any way, the Executive will look positively at such an option. I am not confident that there will be significant room for manoeuvre in that regard, but I hope that when the figures become available, I will be consulting with the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Mr O'Neill: I also welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the reference to funding allocations for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. I also welcome the view he expressed on poverty allocation — I am very glad to hear that.

The issue of Health Service trusts' deficits has already been well probed. However, will the Minister ensure that those trusts that are not in deficit, those that have surplus funds or that break even, will not be punished for living within their means, regardless of what is seen to take place?

Mr Durkan: Officials will be examining the trusts' figures in detail over the coming weeks. Current estimates

suggest that just under half of the 19 trusts experienced a cumulative deficit, but it must be remembered that every trust, bar one, reported a deficit in 1999-2000. Obviously, we will be eager to ensure that any proposals drawn up will deal with the problem in an even-handed and equitable manner.

Mr Speaker: We have come to the end of the time. Other Members wished to ask questions. Unfortunately, we were not able to get to them.

In that regard, almost all of the Ministers, including Mr Durkan, when asked the same question more than once, are courteous enough to repeat their replies. However, this is not always the best use of time. I will not object if a Minister, when asked a question on the same issue more than once, refers a Member to a reply that he gave earlier. It is another matter if a Member is creative enough to base his question on something closely related, but who frames it in a slightly different way, so that an additional response can be given. I am not suggesting this to enable Ministers to avoid the responsibility to be accountable; rather, I want to ensure that time is properly used.

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like you to rule, now or later in the day, on comments made earlier by Mr Paisley Jnr during the discussion on the statements by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. As I understood it, Mr Paisley Jnr referred to the attendance or non-attendance of Ministers at meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council, in accordance with their party manifestos. Clearly, Ministers attend those institutions by virtue of the Pledge of Office, which legally binds all Ministers. This admission by the DUP that one of its Ministers is in breach of his Pledge of Office, in accordance with the party manifesto, is an important one.

Mr Speaker: It would be difficult to speak with authority on the specific matter to which you refer. In general, you refer, on the one hand, to Members' responsibilities in respect of their manifesto commitments and, on the other hand, to the responsibilities that they may have by virtue of Standing Orders in which the Pledge of Office is mentioned. Obviously, anyone elected to the Assembly has a responsibility to his electorate to uphold his manifesto commitments. However, there are responsibilities in respect of the Assembly that outweigh that. My own position, for example, is a clear case in point. Regardless of any political commitment I may have made to pursue certain matters, it is no longer open to me to follow through these pledges. I have had to forego my involvement in party politics, and it is unlikely that I will be able to return to them in this jurisdiction.

So it is quite clear that certain commitments made when taking office do obviate and overtake manifesto commitments that may have been made.

12.45 pm

Without thorough thought, I could not comment on how far that applies to the matter that the Member raises.

However, in principle, the pledges one gives to the House when taking office have a particularly special place. They also have particular substance and are therefore taken account of in Standing Orders.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If the Member believes that another Member, a Minister or whatever, is in breach of any pledge of office or any other obligation owed to the Assembly, is it not open to him, or to any Member, or to any party, to propose that that matter be dealt with in the Assembly? Seeking direction from the Speaker is not the only method.

Mr Speaker: It seems appropriate to me that Members seek rulings and guidance from the Speaker inside and outside the Chamber. The Member is entirely right about Members being able to move motions or take other action. However, it is always preferable, before an action of that kind is taken, for a matter to be raised by way of — I was going to say a warning shot across the bows, but perhaps not — seeking advice. Sometimes I have to do that with Members to indicate that certain consequences are attached to certain conduct. Of course, whether or not matters are dealt with in that way is not a matter for me.

Mr P Robinson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. This issue of presence at North/South or, indeed, British-Irish Council meetings is not as straightforward as some seem to believe. In fact, the legislation quite clearly provides for circumstances in which it is possible for a Minister to refrain from attending without breaching his pledge.

Mr Speaker: I think that the Member is simply pointing out the advisedness of my own stance, which is to take advice and study a matter before giving a ruling in the Chamber. I will endeavour to do this in response to the point of order raised by Mr Maskey.

Mr Dodds: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. If the Member now wants to put down a motion to exclude the DUP from government, as he clearly will, can you advise him when to submit his motion and how to go about that?

Mr Speaker: I think the Member is well aware of the procedure. He will also know that unless he has sufficient support, motions for exclusion may not even be debated. The Member who asked the question knows that well, but I think we can accept with some confidence that Mr Maskey is familiar with these procedures also. As the Whip of his party, he has had to address them on a number of occasions.

Mr Dodds: We look forward to that debate.

Mr Speaker: Members are becoming a little naughty, and I should not like to facilitate their avoiding their responsibility to consider the legislation about to come before us.

FISHERIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Some Members may not be familiar with our procedures. Members have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the order of consideration, and a grouping list of amendments. Members will see from the grouping list that amendments 1, 2, 3 and 4 will be considered together, followed by amendment 5 and then amendment 6. When I call a Member to move the lead amendment in a group — in this case, amendment 1 out of the group 1 to 4 — he or she, and any subsequent Members, may address that amendment and any other amendments in the group. I hope that Members will take the opportunity to do that, since it is best for us to have a coherent debate. I advise Members that they may return to various questions in a way that is not possible with other motions.

Clause 1 (Regulation of sea-fisheries in or on the foreshore)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I beg to move amendment 1: In clause 1, page 1, line 4, leave out

“or on the foreshore”

and insert

“Northern Ireland inshore waters”.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2 (clause 1): In page 2, line 2, after “offence.” add

“(5) For the purposes of this section —

(a) ‘Northern Ireland inshore waters’ means the area adjacent to the coast of Northern Ireland and to the landward of a limit of 6 miles from the baseline from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured, up to the mean high- water mark of ordinary spring tides; and

(b) ‘sea-fisheries’ includes any fishery within that area.” — *[Ms Rodgers]*

No 3 (clause 2): In page 2, line 13, after “on” insert “or using”. — *[Ms Rodgers]*

No 4 (clause 2): In page 3, line 3, leave out subsection (5). — *[Ms Rodgers]*

Ms Rodgers: It may be helpful for Members if I recap briefly on the purpose of the Bill. The Bill proposes to amend the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 on behalf of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Both Departments have powers under the Act, given the post-devolution split in fisheries functions. Broadly speaking, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has retained responsibility for sea fisheries and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is now responsible for inland fisheries. As the proposed

amendments to the Bill were proposed before devolution, it has been agreed that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will take the lead in bringing one Bill to the Assembly on behalf of the two Departments instead of each Department bringing separate Bills.

Clause 1 proposes to provide the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development with the power to regulate the collection of wild shellfish, which are a natural resource, from the intertidal area and to use fisheries' regulatory powers to conserve and enhance the environment.

Clause 2 proposes to make it an offence to contravene regulations made under these powers and provides authorised officers with the necessary enforcement powers to enable the Department to enforce such regulations.

Clauses 3 to 7 are the responsibility of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Clause 3 proposes to lift the restrictions that prohibit trade in salmon roe taken from fish farms and to allow trade in spawn produced at a fish farm for salmon production for human consumption or for stock enhancement. It also gives powers to the Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) to control the removal of materials such as gravel from river beds.

Clause 4 proposes to streamline the administrative process through dispensing with the requirement for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to obtain agreement from the Department of Finance and Personnel each time it varies the amount it charges for fishing permits for fishing in the public angling estate.

Clause 5 proposes to provide the FCB with powers to issue angling licences at reduced rates to certain classes of person.

Clause 6 proposes to amend the Act to enable the FCB to make by-laws relating to the management and protection of fisheries and to regulate salmon fishing for environmental purposes.

Clause 7 proposes to strengthen the powers of the FCB to reinstate polluted waters and to recover the full costs from the polluter. Reinstatement will include restocking, restoration and enhancement of the fish habitat to its pre-pollution level.

In my comments on amendment 1, I will also be referring to amendments 2, 3 and 4. As originally drafted, the Bill provides the Department with the power to regulate fishing by means of vehicles and equipment in the area between the sea and high water mean median tide.

The use of the term "foreshore" in the Bill will extend the Department's power only to that area between high water mean median tide and low water mean median tide, because the commonly accepted definition of the foreshore refers only to that area. This leaves a potential loophole in that the commonly accepted definition of the term "foreshore" does not cover that part of the intertidal area between low water mean median tide and low astronomical tide. This area is less often, but still regularly,

left uncovered by the movement of tides, and the Department wants to ensure that any regulations made will apply to this area as well as to the foreshore because this area is fertile in wild shellfish.

The purpose of amendments 1 and 2 is to replace the term "foreshore" when used in the Bill with the term "Northern Ireland inshore waters" and to define the term "Northern Ireland inshore waters" as all waters up to high water mean median tide.

Moreover, as a consequence of using the term "Northern Ireland inshore waters" in the Bill, the term "sea-fisheries" is being amended to include any fishery within Northern Ireland inshore waters. This will ensure that any fisheries within Northern Ireland inshore waters are covered by references to sea-fisheries in the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966.

Clause 2 of the Bill, as originally drafted, provides authorised officers with the power to require the attendance of persons in charge of, and any other persons in or on, any vehicle or equipment that is or has been involved in fishing for the purposes of enforcing regulations. However, a person may use a vehicle or equipment that is or has been involved in fishing, but who is not in charge of the vehicle or equipment and who is not in or on the vehicle or equipment. As the Bill stands, an authorised person would have no power to require the attendance of such a person to assist the officer in the performance of his duties, so amendment 3 proposes to extend the enforcement powers of authorised officers in the Bill to provide them with the power to require the attendance of any person using a vehicle or equipment to assist the officer in the performance of his duties.

As a consequence of the removal of the term "foreshore" from the Bill, the redefining of the terms "sea-fish" and "sea-fisheries" to include fish and fisheries in or on the foreshore in the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 is no longer necessary. The Department therefore no longer wishes to redefine the term "sea-fish" and "sea-fishery" to refer to the term 'foreshore' in the Fisheries Act 1966.

A redefinition of the term "sea-fisheries" to take account of the use of the term "Northern Ireland inshore waters" in the Bill is provided for by virtue of amendment 2 on the Marshalled List. Amendment 4 ensures that these terms are not redefined.

These amendments are necessary to enable the Department to regulate the collection of wild shellfish in the entire intertidal area up to high water mean median tide and to ensure that authorised officers have the appropriate powers to enforce any such regulations. I ask the Assembly to approve these amendments to the Bill.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee (Mr Savage): Before addressing the amendments proposed by the Minister, I would like to convey

my appreciation to my Committee colleagues for completing the Committee Stage of the Bill.

The Agriculture and Rural Development Committee dealt with clauses 1, 2 and 9. Clauses 1 and 2 relate to the need to implement measures to protect the foreshore around Northern Ireland from methods of fishing likely to damage the fisheries and the local environment.

The Committee was required to meet on six occasions to complete its work. During its consideration, the Committee received written submissions from six organisations. Subsequently, it took evidence from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the National Trust and the Strangford Lough Management Committee. I would like to thank all the organisations that assisted the Committee for their commitment to this work.

Finally, the Committee had three very helpful meetings with the Department's officials. I am pleased to report that they took on board all of the Committee's concerns and fully explained the technicalities of the Bill. The Department also drafted the amendments agreed with the Committee. I would like to express the Committee's appreciation for the officials' help.

The various amendments tabled by the Minister are largely technical in nature and are necessary to tighten up the Department's original wording. In considering them, my Committee was seeking to ensure that the Bill was competent and would have the effect intended by the Minister. I am pleased to say that the Department accepted points made by the Committee, which are now being implemented.

My Committee agreed that these changes are needed, and I commend them to the Assembly.

Mr Shannon: I would like to ask the Minister a question about amendment 2, which deals with Northern Ireland's inshore waters. Some of the fisheries organisations have told me that they are not happy with the idea of inshore waters being extended six miles from the baseline.

For that reason, perhaps the Minister could indicate to the fishing organisations and myself that any suggested environmental measures will not be detrimental to the fishing organisations operating in that six-mile area. The organisations have said to me that this matter seems to involve more than the foreshore — it is going further out to sea. For some local fishermen, especially those around the edge of the Ards Peninsula in my constituency of Strangford, it could be disadvantageous. I need an assurance from the Minister that the six-mile radius will not disadvantage local fishermen, and that environmentalists will not be able to impose any measures that will adversely affect the work of the fishermen.

1.00 pm

Ms Rodgers : I thought that I would only be answering questions at the end.

Mr Speaker: This is the end. I have no other requests from Members to speak.

Ms Rodgers: That is the good news.

I thank the Member for his question. The definition of Northern Ireland inshore waters closely follows the definition used in Great Britain legislation to provide for similar regulation. It is based on the commonly accepted definition of inshore waters throughout the UK. They are deemed to extend from six miles out from the coast inwards towards the land, up to the mean high-water mark of ordinary spring tides. This very broad area ensures that all parts of the coast that may be exposed by the movement of tides will be subject to regulation. There will be no detrimental effect on those fishing out at sea. The Department already has adequate powers out at sea.

Mr Speaker: Amendment 1 — moved or not moved?

Ms Rodgers: Moved.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment (No 2) made:

In page 2, line 2, after "offence." insert

"(5) For the purposes of this section —

- (a) 'Northern Ireland inshore waters' means the area adjacent to the coast of Northern Ireland and to the landward of a limit of 6 miles from the baseline from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured, up to the mean high-water mark of ordinary spring tides; and
- (b) 'sea-fisheries' includes any fishery within that area." —
[Ms Rodgers]

Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 (Enforcement of regulatory powers in relation to sea-fisheries in or on the foreshore)

Amendment (No 3) made:

In page 2, line 13, after "on" insert "or using". —
[Ms Rodgers]

Amendment (No 4) made:

In page 3, line 3, leave out subsection (5). — [Ms Rodgers]

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3 (Disturbing spawning beds, etc.)

Mr Speaker: We now come to amendment 5, standing in the name of the Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee.

The Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee (Mr O'Neill): I beg to move amendment 5: In page 3, after line 36 add

"(2) For section 208 of the principal Act (saving for right of owner to take materials from streams) substitute —

‘208. Nothing in this Act other than section 48 shall prejudice the right of any owner to take materials from any stream.’.”

The Bill was referred to the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee for consideration on 22 September 2000. We considered clauses 3 to 8, and the Agriculture Committee considered clauses 1, 2 and 9.

Clause 3 will amend section 48 of the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. The major rationale for the existence of section 48 is to protect young and breeding fish. That is why rights of owners are restricted and a number of defences have been added to the section 48 offence. The new subsection, through the words on the marshalled list, will provide another defence for the owner of the stream, allowing a person to take materials from the bed of any river with the consent of the FCB.

If consent has been given, no offence is committed.

In collecting evidence, we spoke to the Ulster Angling Federation (UAF), who, in their written submission to us, raised concerns about section 208 of the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966, which states

“Nothing in this Act shall prejudice the right of any owner to take materials from any stream.”

The UAF suggested its removal from the Act, on the basis that it weakened the effect of clause 3(5) of the Fisheries (Amendment) Bill.

Section 208 overrules section 48 and protects the right of the owner of a stream to remove materials. We sought legal advice on the matter and had correspondence with the Department’s legal section. The advice was that section 208 is a general saving provision in the 1966 Act. It protects the right of any owner to take materials from a stream and states that nothing in the Act shall prejudice that general right. Legal advice was that we should not remove or repeal section 208, as that section affected every other provision in the Act. We were advised to consider amending section 208 to read as follows:

“Nothing in this Act, other than section 48, shall prejudice the right of any owner to take materials from any stream.”

I refer Members to page 159 of the minutes of evidence from Monday 4 December 2000.

The Committee is therefore satisfied that the proposed amendment — adding the words “other than section 48” to section 208 — will ensure that that section 208 does not dilute or negate the effect of clause 3(5) of the Fisheries (Amendment) Bill. I hope that Members will understand our position.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr M McGimpsey): I thank Mr O'Neill and the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee for their hard work during the Committee stage of such a complex and technical Bill. I welcome the amendment that has been put forward by the Committee; it deals with an outstanding problem that otherwise would have to be dealt with by a longer route.

The Committee is acting in line with advice contained in correspondence between my officials and their legal advisers, which was forwarded to it to enable it to arrive at a conclusion on the question of section 208. The Committee has arrived at a sound appreciation of the situation and has acted accordingly.

Section 208 needs to be amended to ensure that clause 3, which, *inter alia*, will require anyone who wishes to extract materials from a river bed to seek the permission of the FCB first, will be more effective. Section 208 is a saving provision that may or may not have some merit in relation to other parts of the 1966 Act; it has no merit in relation to clause 3 and should therefore cease to apply. That will be the effect of the proposed amendment, which has my full support.

Mr Speaker: Amendment 5—moved or not moved?

Mr O'Neill: Moved.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 3, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 4 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 9 (Short title and commencement)

Ms Rodgers: I beg to move amendment 6: In page 4, line 31, leave out subsections (2) and (3).

Clause 9 as originally drafted provides for the Act to come into operation on such day as the Department may appoint by Order. However, the Department now wishes the Act to come into operation as soon as it is made, rather than by appointed day Order, as the latter procedure may delay the coming into operation of the Act. Amendment 6 removes the requirement for an appointed day Order and, by remaining silent on the mechanism for coming into operation, will result in the Act coming into operation as soon as it is made. I therefore ask the Assembly to approve this amendment to the Bill.

Mr Speaker: Amendment 6—moved or not moved?

Ms Rodgers: Moved.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 9, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

The sitting was suspended 1.10 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair) —

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Northern Ireland National Stadium

2.30 pm

1. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consultation he has had on the development of a national stadium for Northern Ireland.

(AQO 568/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): My Department is currently investigating the potential for developing a viable and sustainable scheme for a national sports stadium for Northern Ireland. In 1999 a pre-feasibility study, carried out under the auspices of the Sports Council, concluded that a proposal for a stadium could succeed under certain circumstances.

Subsequently my Department appointed a consultancy firm to undertake a market-sounding exercise to examine the scope of involving the private sector in such a development. This revealed that there was potential for support from the private sector, although a number of crucial issues still remain to be resolved, not least of which is the degree of support in usage to which the key sports would be prepared to commit.

On 25 October 2000 I met with the representatives of the four main sports — soccer, gaelic, rugby and athletics — to discuss the case for a national stadium for Northern Ireland. Each sport is considering its needs and the degree to which it could commit to use such a facility. The position of the four main sports will be important in determining the way forward, but if the project is to proceed, substantial funding will be required, and location and accessibility will be key considerations.

Mr Poots: I thank the Minister for his response and particularly for his final words: “location and accessibility will be key considerations.” I assume that consideration will be given to locating a national stadium in an area outside Belfast. Can the Minister inform the House if he has had any consultation with the developers of the proposed Lagan Park, which the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society may be taking on, with a view to building a national stadium?

Mr McGimpsey: The location will be crucial, and apart from accessibility to all sections of the community, its potential to contribute to the wider objectives of Government must also be borne in mind. We are not yet at the point where we are considering location, and it would be presumptuous of me to start to be prescriptive of where a national stadium — if we decide to go ahead with it, and if the sports organisations decide that they want it — should be.

There are certain criteria that I have tried to indicate, and there is no area that we would be looking to exclude. There are interested parties in Belfast as well as outside Belfast. It is common knowledge that there are areas in the Member’s constituency of Lagan Valley and around Lisburn, and the Lagan Valley Park is also under consideration by developers. However, it would be wrong for me to say more at this time.

Mr McMenamin: On the same theme, can the Minister assure the House that his decision will target social need and will benefit the needs of the people outside the greater Belfast area, in particular, those in the north-west?

Mr McGimpsey: Yes, targeting social need — New TSN — is part of it. We have an action plan for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and this is referred to in another question, which I hope to answer later. It is very much part of the thinking that although TSN is not a spending programme, it is a way of evaluating proposals, policies, and so on. That would be very much part of an evaluation process in terms of location, if and when we get to that point.

Mr McClarty: Will the Minister give me an assurance that should the proposal for a national stadium become a realistic prospect, very considerable consideration would be given to its location in order that this may be used not only to develop our sporting culture but also to help achieve economic regeneration?

Mr McGimpsey: As I said as part of a supplementary answer, the potential to contribute to the wider objectives of Government and regeneration is a key objective of the Government. Therefore, location will be evaluated not least with regard to that objective. The type of development that the Member mentions, combined with the large number of people that would be expected to go to it, would be a major contributor to economic regeneration and development wherever it is constructed — if and when it is constructed. Therefore, the location would be a consideration for the Department and the Assembly.

Motor Racing

2. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the steps he is taking to maximise safety procedures during motor-cycle road racing events in 2001.

(AQO 591/00)

11. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) what progress has been made in improving road racing safety measures and (b) his plans for the development of motor sport in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 566/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission I will take questions 2 and 11 together.

Following the unfortunate sequence of events in the 2000 season, the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland (MCUI)

— the motor-cycle sports governing body — with the support of the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, established a road racing task force in August last year to conduct a review into road racing safety.

The task force presented its findings to me on 20 December and their recommendations will make a significant contribution to road racing safety. The MCUI is currently considering the task force's findings and will debate, and hopefully ratify, the recommendations at its inter-centre conference on 27 January. It would not be appropriate for me — in advance of that — to categorically spell out the range and extent of the actions that will be taken. However, excellent progress is being made, and I will be keen to see many of the recommendations being implemented for the 2001 season.

I recently made £20,000 available to the Sports Council for Northern Ireland to engage a consultant to assess the physical condition of the Province's four existing circuits, and to examine the need, feasibility, and viability of providing a regional motor sports facility. The consultant, International Motor Sports Ltd, has been contracted to undertake the project and the terms of the contract commit them to produce a report on the four short circuits by 8 February 2001 and on the regional motor sport facility by 15 March 2001.

Mr Armstrong: Can the Minister assure me that circuit racing will not be promoted to the disadvantage of many traditional road races like the Cookstown 100, which takes place on a very safe circuit?

Mr McGimpsey: The Motor Cycle Union of Ireland has produced the road race task force report, which contains approximately 67 recommendations. Alongside the type of work that the MCUI undertakes on a regular basis, the task force's report will greatly contribute to increasing safety in all of the circuits.

The Cookstown 100 is the first race of the season and it has a good safety record, not least because the venue was changed from the Sherrygrim circuit — the 6.1 mile circuit — to the new 3.2 mile Orior circuit in 1999. That will contribute to the safety of Cookstown 100. However, it would be premature of me to be prescriptive about the measures that will be taken. It will be a matter for the MCUI, at its meeting later this month, to determine whether or not it adopts the 67 recommendations of the task force. It is hoped that it will and then we will take the next step of attempting to ensure that all of the recommendations are incorporated quickly.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the Minister's statement and I look forward to seeing the proposals being debated.

Is the Minister aware of the public calls being made by the Dunlop family, among others, for a Northern Ireland motor sport centre of excellence? Will he facilitate the study of the cost implications, tourist potential and sporting development of such a facility in the near future?

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland is responsible for promoting sport, but I am aware of the calls for a centre of excellence. It is an excellent idea, but the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland will have a major say in it, as well as the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, which is the funding body for sports. I am aware that the Dunlop family has an interest in this. The suggestion of a centre of excellence is not something that anyone would dream of ruling out. I have no doubt that when the assessments on the four short circuits and the dedicated circuit are completed, the information will be added to the ongoing debate on this matter.

European City of Culture (2008)

3. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline what progress has been made in preparing the bid for Belfast to become the European city of culture in the year 2008. (AQO 573/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Belfast City Council is responsible for pursuing the bid for the "city of culture" designation. In June 2000 it established a capital of culture steering group, and by the end of this month the group will be constituted as an independent company limited by guarantee — Imagine Belfast 2008. It will have 16 directors. The appointment of a chairperson and deputy chairperson is under way and four advisory panels have been formed. The bid is to be submitted by 31 March 2002, and the announcement of a UK shortlist of applicants, which will be designated as centres of culture, will be in autumn 2002. One city from that shortlist will be selected to go forward to the European institutions as the UK's nomination to become European city of culture in 2008.

Mr Neeson: Does the Minister agree that such a designation would not only be of enormous benefit to Belfast — consider what has been achieved in the likes of Glasgow in past years — but also be of major benefit to all the people of Northern Ireland? Therefore it is very important that this be looked upon as a national bid on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland. There should be widespread support for this bid throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr McGimpsey: I truly agree. While it is a designation for a city, and while Belfast City Council takes the lead in this promotion, we are well aware that the designation is 'a city of culture in a region of culture'. The benefits to Belfast and to all of Northern Ireland will be enormous. We only have to look at the experiences in Glasgow and Dublin to see the sort of benefits that can accrue, not least in the bidding process that will give us benefits in prestige and self-esteem. It is important for the Belfast bid to have widespread support because everybody will benefit, including the other towns and cities in the Province. If we are successful, and I sincerely hope we are, it will be very prestigious for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mrs Courtney: Has the Minister decided to shelve the joint city approach, which was the initial proposal?

Mr McGimpsey: I am not aware of a specific joint city approach. This has been ongoing for at least 18 months. I am also a member of Belfast City Council, and it has always been my understanding that one city takes the lead, but the emphasis will be on “Belfast, a city of culture in a region of culture”. It is something that joins everyone together. Presumably Mrs Courtney is speaking from the perspective of her own city. Derry will benefit enormously from the bid. It is not simply for the benefit of Belfast, and it would be wrong to see it purely in Belfast terms. It is ‘a city of culture in a region of culture’.

We are a small country of about 1·6 or 1·7 million people — roughly the size of any normal regional city in Europe that might pick up this type of award. We will all do very well out of this. As Mr Neeson said, it is something that merits widespread support and that we can all get together on.

2.45 pm

Mr Beggs: Has the Minister made any detailed estimate of how many additional visitors could be expected to visit Northern Ireland as a whole, instead of just Belfast, as a result of its being designated city of culture? How many additional visitors would be attracted to our many world-famous assets such as the Glens of Antrim and the Giant’s Causeway, as well as to our fine museums and heritage centres? If more people stay overnight, how much additional tourist revenue would there be?

Mr McGimpsey: We can make a comparison with the last UK city to hold the title, and that was Glasgow in 1990. They experienced a 40% increase in public attendance at theatres, halls, museums and galleries, an 81% increase in the number of tourists visiting arts, events and attractions and generated revenue of between £38 million and £42 million in 1990 terms. Substantial benefits can accrue in respect of tourist visits. Tourist visits to arts events and attractions rose 81% above the level of the last previously measured year. There was also extra employment, estimated at 5,700 man-years, as well as substantial private sector investment. Getting the award is not the only important thing; the bidding process is also valuable, and taking into account the experience of Dublin, Glasgow and other cities, you will attract a seriously increased number of visitors into the area. Being designated a city of culture for all of Europe is a major and prestigious achievement.

Department: Equality and TSN Obligations

4. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline what systems he will put in place to ensure that his Department fulfils its requirements

under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in respect of equality and targeting social need. (AQO 587/00)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has produced an equality scheme, which is currently with the Equality Commission for approval and will, it is to be hoped, be approved in the near future. During the drafting phase it was issued widely for consultation, and it contains a schedule of equality impact assessments which must be completed over the next three years. All of our non- departmental public bodies and associated bodies have produced their own equality schemes, which will be submitted to the Equality Commission for approval.

On New TSN, we have produced an action plan, which will be published alongside all other Departments’ plans in the near future. Where required, our non- departmental public bodies and North/South bodies are in the process of producing their plans, and these will be issued for consultation in the coming weeks. These plans will be monitored on an ongoing basis.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for that reply. Given the imperative of the Good Friday Agreement and the very clear evidence that has emerged recently of the strong potential for economic development within the Irish-language movement, to give one example that falls to his Department, does the Minister intend to discuss plans with the Minister for Social Development or the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for any collaboration on economic development projects involving the Irish language?

Mr McGimpsey: I have said that all Departments will be following the steps that I have laid out regarding equality and new equality schemes such as TSN. I do not currently have any plans for consultation with the Department for Social Development regarding the promotion of the Irish language, but I must point out that my Department has responsibility for language, and it takes that responsibility seriously. My Department has, however, had a degree of success — and I am sure that we will continue to do so — in the promotion of Irish and Ulster-Scots, as well as other languages where they are appropriate. As Members are aware, as a result of the agreement, there is a North/South body that is dedicated specifically to language, particularly Irish and Ulster- Scots. Enquiries of that type need to be directed to that body; I cannot answer on its behalf. It may be that they are having ongoing discussions with the Departments that the Member mentioned.

Dr Birnie: Does the Minister agree that if there is to be a system for targeting social need, there needs to be, in the first place, an adequate means of measuring the need?

Mr McGimpsey: Means of measurement, as a principle, must run throughout Government, including New TSN. We are aware that New TSN is not a spending programme but a theme that runs through existing programmes,

requiring us to redirect or shift funding within those programmes to benefit the most disadvantaged people.

My Department is currently reviewing existing indicators, using information available from various functional areas, to produce targeting information. To date the Government and councils have used the Robson indices as indicators of deprivation. However, we are aware that they are not entirely adequate, and it is generally accepted that they must be superseded. The Government are currently undertaking a further exercise, which is being led by Prof Noble of Oxford University. In relation to targets and indicators, it is important to point out that in my Department's plans for New TSN, we are always looking to establish the requirements for baseline information to identify indicators of social disadvantage. That is a recurrent theme in all of the Department's objectives, and it is probably replicated throughout the Departments.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Minister agree that the party to which the questioner belongs has little interest when it comes to the issue of equality? That is evident from the protests that emanate from that party when there is any expression of Protestant culture in Northern Ireland. Will he join me in condemning the member of Sinn Féin who sought to denigrate the excellent Diversity 21 presentation in the Odyssey centre on 13 January because of the presence of the RUC and the fact that Lambeg drums were being played?

Mr McGimpsey: It would not be prudent, or right, for me to comment specifically, other than to say that the parties, including Sinn Féin, are signed up to the agreement. Equality, which applies to everyone, is part of the agreement. There are no exceptions in our Province and, as I have already indicated, equality covers all sections of the community. No one is excluded from this provision, because no one is exempt from inequality.

Regarding the Diversity 21 "Northern Odyssey", I agreed with Mr Sammy Wilson, when we met that night, that the event was an excellent example of what we can do as a Department, an Assembly and as a country. I thought that we put on a display that demonstrates how we can handle our culture, history and legacy. It illustrates what we would be doing if Belfast were to be European city of culture 2008. There was universal praise — not just from the media critics but from the people who went to it. I can also say that the event was recorded in its entirety, and we hope to broadcast it on television so that everyone can enjoy it, not just those who were there.

I understand that there was a criticism along the lines that there was no hint of the Gaelic language. That is incorrect. The White Rose, an opening anthem sung by the Celtic Divas, was specifically written for the show and performed in Gaelic. There were also pieces of work conducted in Ulster-Scots. The criticism may have resulted from a misunderstanding. I am perhaps charitable enough

to say that the RUC band was an important part of the proceedings. It was there with the Garda Síochána band, and I know that we all enjoyed the performance.

On the reference to the Lambeg drums, one of the most important pieces of work undertaken is that by Roy Arbuckle and his Different Drums ensemble. I find the sounds made with the different drums, and his use of the Lambeg drums, exhilarating and exciting, and I think that the 5,000 people who were there that night would agree.

Football Task Force

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when he expects to receive the report from the Football task force. (AQO 571/00)

10. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the progress made to date by the Football task force. (AQO 565/00)

Mr McGimpsey: With permission, I will answer questions 5 and 10 together.

It will be helpful if I give an update on the progress of the soccer strategy for Northern Ireland since it was announced last October.

Initially, I established an advisory panel to help guide my Department as it takes this initiative forward. In addition, consultants have been appointed to confer with the whole range of interested groups and individuals on the issues facing the game. These include administrators, managers, coaches, players and the media. So far, more than 2,500 people have been consulted.

In addition to this exercise, the Department organised a series of open meetings last week at different venues throughout the Province. These attracted a significant level of interest from football fans, with several hundred people turning out to make their views known. The consultants will be presenting me with a report of their findings in the near future.

The next and vital stage in the process is a conference workshop organised by my Department. It will bring together, for the first time, representatives of all the key interest groups to debate the issues facing soccer and to develop ideas and recommendations for the future. I anticipate that further work will be required after the conference workshop to develop these ideas, but I expect to be in a position to produce a draft strategy document for consultation by the summer.

Mr McCarthy: In view of the gradual demise of Irish league football, does the Minister agree that time is of the essence? Will the recommendations of the task force, if reasonable, be implemented as soon as possible so as to turn around the fortunes of the footballers and their supporters?

Mr McGimpsey: I agree that one of the major problems for football, and one of the challenges it faces, is the

relative demise of senior clubs in the Irish league. I will not rehearse all of the difficulties faced by football, because they are well documented. It is timely that the task force has come about and that, as a result of devolution, my Department and the Assembly are able to address the needs of soccer in Northern Ireland.

Time is of the essence, and much depends on what the draft strategy recommends. I cannot pre-empt that — it is not for me to say what will be in it. But when we get that out for consultation and agreement, the next stage will be to investigate how to implement the proposals. We have managed to find funding for a health and safety programme, which affects soccer as well as other sports. Those are the sort of steps that the House can take, if we have the will to take them.

Mr Hilditch: Does the Minister agree that, since the Taylor Report of the early 1990s, many clubs have been compelled to spend hard-earned money on areas relating to health and safety, therefore depriving the game of resources which could have been used, for instance, on youth development? I appreciate the recent announcements about future improvements to stadiums, but will the Minister consider areas of the game, such as youth development, which have been deprived of much-needed resources?

Mr McGimpsey: While I do not disagree with Mr Hilditch, this issue will be discussed extensively as part of the soccer strategy and at February's conference. Lots of ideas have evolved. We have had a consultation process to examine the issues and problems and to attempt to set the agenda for the conference. Those who have been involved in this will come up with a series of ideas and proposals, in the form of a draft strategy, which will go out for wider consultation. Among the issues to be examined are youth and junior soccer, the treatment of fans, women's soccer and soccer for the disabled. It is not simply about the Irish league, although the league does play an important part.

The Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee (Mr O'Neill): I thank the Minister for his initiative in setting up the task force. The Committee recognises that the consultative arrangements are thorough, but it is concerned that, geographically speaking, the consultation may not be wide enough. Will the Minister look more favourably at ensuring that there are no points of view in any geographical pockets that are ignored in the consultation process? This is an important and valuable exercise, and we want to be as comprehensive about it as possible.

3.00 pm

Mr McGimpsey: Broadly, I agree with Mr O'Neill's sentiments. We are looking for as widespread a consultation as possible. We went out, for example, in the form of a travelling roadshow to consult the general public. We went to Craigavon, Belfast, Omagh, Ballymoney and Londonderry. That was with careful consideration. I am happy to go back and talk to the Department and interested

members of the Committee again and to consider, perhaps, the need for visiting one, two, three or four more venues.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Brucellosis

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans to eradicate brucellosis from Northern Ireland. (AQO 570/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): My Department continues to deal with brucellosis in cattle through a biennial blood-testing programme. Where infection is found, an intensified testing regime is applied around the infected premises, through contiguous to the infected herd — the inner-ring herds — being restricted and tested immediately, and subsequently at four-monthly intervals. Herds in an outer ring — that is, herds contiguous to the inner ring — are tested immediately and at four-monthly intervals. That is the basic testing programme.

However, concerns at the level of brucellosis have led us to take a number of additional measures. First, in the more heavily infected areas — Armagh, Newry and Enniskillen — we have increased the frequency of testing from biennial to annual. Secondly, we are about to undertake a blood sampling programme for cows being slaughtered under the over-30-months scheme and intend to extend a pilot bulk milk sampling programme to all areas of Northern Ireland in the near future. These two measures would help to provide an early indication of infection and point up the need for a full herd test in the herd of origin.

Mr K Robinson: I am delighted to see that, in line with the objective of eradication, the Minister has confirmed that blood tests are currently being taken at the abattoir from culled animals over 30 months old and that spot milk samples are being taken in high-risk areas. Will the Minister confirm whether there is any correlation between high incidence and geographical proximity to the border? Will she assure the House that, should any correlation exist, she will actively pursue this aspect of animal health with her counterparts in the neighbouring state?

Ms Rodgers: I do not have evidence suggesting any such correlation, but I am aware that disease does not recognise borders. I am therefore in consultation with Minister Walsh in the Republic through the North/South Ministerial Council. We have initiated a programme that will lead to joint strategies on animal health on the island of Ireland.

Mr Bradley: Brucellosis is costing the industry dearly. In 1995-96, we had three outbreaks in Northern Ireland. In 1999-2000, 172 herds had reactors. Those figures are

a matter of concern. Does the Minister agree that it would be a good idea to have an all-Ireland disease eradication programme?

Ms Rodgers: The eradication programmes North and South have the same aims. Our approaches to the control of brucellosis are broadly similar. Nevertheless, there is merit in working more closely with our Southern counterparts to our mutual benefit. I am taking this matter forward through the North/South Ministerial Council. While existing co-operation is good, and has been over the years, we have an opportunity through the working group on brucellosis and tuberculosis recently established by the council to put that co-operation on a more formal and structured footing. That will be to the benefit of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department for Agriculture, Food and Rural Development in the Republic in controlling and eradicating brucellosis. That will further benefit the whole industry on the entire island.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has pointed out the particularly high incidence of brucellosis in the Newry and Armagh regions in the last three calendar years. Is she aware of the concerns of farmers in those areas about the uncontrolled movement of British Army personnel, both by foot and by helicopter, to and from farms with herds which have had positive brucellosis testing —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is this a question or a statement? What has it to do with brucellosis?

Mr McNamee: I am sorry. I asked if the Minister was aware of the concerns about the movements to which I referred and of the concerns that such movements may contribute to the spread of brucellosis. Has the Minister or her Department considered any recommendations to address those concerns?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I should rule that question out of order, but the Minister may wish to respond.

Ms Rodgers: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware that those concerns have been raised, but where the disease is present there is always a risk that it can be spread mechanically on footwear. The more important vectors of brucellosis are the movement of infected material, contact between neighbouring herds and the movement of infected materials — aborted fetuses or afterbirth — by birds, dogs, foxes or other wildlife. Nevertheless, Department officials have made the security forces aware of the need to take appropriate precautions when crossing farmland.

Targeting Social Need (Agriculture)

2. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the criteria she takes into consideration when targeting social need within agriculture.
(AQO 589/00)

Ms Rodgers: While the specific criteria applied to the decision-making process may vary according to the nature of the issue under consideration, I assure the Member that all such decisions are taken in the light of objectively based evidence of such criteria as income levels, geographic location and size of holding. The Member should be in no doubt as to my personal commitment to new targeting social need (TSN). I shall endeavour to ensure that, where I have discretion, all the resources at my disposal are deployed with a view to supporting those in the greatest need throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister accept that the most satisfactory method of accurately identifying social need would be based on household income? Will the Minister agree that full-time farmers are more vulnerable than part-time farmers, who are more likely to have a full-time job outside agriculture?

Ms Rodgers: I am aware that there is need throughout the agriculture industry, and there is an overall need. I am, however, aware that the smaller producers face greater difficulties in this situation. Therefore in targeting social need I have to take into consideration their incomes and their needs.

Mr Dallat: Can the Minister give some examples of decisions taken recently involving TSN considerations?

Ms Rodgers: There are several recent examples — for instance, the protection for small producers within the beef special premium (BSP). The removal of the 90-head limit on claims for BSP was agreed collectively by the four UK Agriculture Ministers and will apply from the 2001 scheme year. In doing so, there was concern about the possible adverse effects on small producers if the removal of the limit leads to the UK regional ceiling's being exceeded, with consequent scaling back of producers' claims. It was decided to protect the incomes of smaller-scale producers by exempting those claiming on up to 30 animals per year from any scale back if the national ceiling is exceeded.

Also, the beef national envelope decision means that this money is part of the European Union's Agenda 2000 package of direct support for agriculture. For 2001, Northern Ireland received additional funds of £2.6 million, £1.6 million of which I have allocated to suckler cow producers. Using 60% of the funds as a top-up to the suckler cow premium scheme should benefit those farming enterprises that are generally accepted as being among the most disadvantaged.

Minister: Discussions with Executive Committee

3. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she next plans to meet with the Executive Committee and what issues she wishes to discuss.
AQO 563/00

Ms Rodgers: I will attend the next meeting of the Executive on 25 January 2001 and I am likely to participate in discussions on a wide range of agenda items. I have not submitted papers to my Executive Colleagues for discussion at that particular meeting.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I am disappointed that the Minister does not intend to submit papers about the find of contaminated beef in Newry last week. I urge her to bring before the House and the Executive proposals that would turn the discovery of contaminated German beef to the advantage of the Northern Ireland producer. Does she intend to meet the European Union Commissioner for agriculture, her German counterpart, and Nick Brown to ensure that the Northern Ireland beef export ban is lifted? On the previous occasion on which she spoke, the Minister informed the House that her strategy on low BSE status had had to be shelved until a more appropriate time: surely, now is the appropriate time for decisive action to have the ban on our beef exports lifted.

Ms Rodgers: The incident at Newry is not a matter for my Department; it comes within the remit of the Food Standards Agency, which is an agency of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

I am not convinced that pointing to a breach of the rules by the Germans will be helpful in persuading others that Northern Ireland beef is safe. More relevant will be the evidence of the true incidence of BSE in other member states produced by the tests that they are now compelled to carry out, as well as evidence of the true incidence in Northern Ireland, which will become obvious over the next few months. I assure Members that if those figures are in any way helpful to our case, I will use them to press for a relaxation of the ban.

As I have frequently told the House, I shall make a move to seek a relaxation of the ban when I am certain that the time is right. I shall base my decision on the advice that I receive from the various people in Europe who have just been mentioned, including the relevant Ministers and Commissioner Byrne, whose advice on the matter I have sought in the past. In the meantime, my officials continue to make whatever changes are required to our final proposals to the Commission.

I am totally committed to achieving the relaxation of the ban. It may well be that I can turn the present situation in Europe to our advantage. However, when we do seek to have the ban relaxed, I will be looking for the support of all the other member states. The Member should remember that. Criticising member states that are facing difficulties is not the best way to get their support when we need it.

Mr Fee: There is deep concern about what happened in Newry last week. I ask the Minister to confirm that she not only is interested in protecting the beef industry but also has equal concern for the consumer. Can she give us some more details of the protections that she could

put place to ensure that both the industry and the consumer are kept safe?

3.15 pm

Ms Rodgers: The Department has very strict controls in place to protect the consumer. With regard to this particular incident, the fact that the spinal cord was detected is a clear indication that our controls are working well and that no contaminated food has reached the consumer. The few instances that we have had in Northern Ireland have always proved that our controls work and that the consumer is protected. Consumer protection has to be a priority with all of us. Food safety is certainly a priority with the Executive, and I will be doing everything in my power within my Department to ensure that the controls that we have continue to be in place. I reiterate that, in my view, our controls are as good as any, if not the best, in the whole of Europe. This will be part of our strong argument when we come to make the case for the relaxation of the ban.

The Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): Does the Minister agree that no one in Northern Ireland is in any way responsible for, or has any guilt in relation to, what happened in Newry? Does she agree that this is the sole responsibility of the German authorities who brought this beef in sealed and with a certificate stating — as was given in evidence to my Committee today — that this beef was up to EU standard? When it was opened, it was found that, on three quarters of a beast, the spinal cord had not been dealt with as it ought to have been. Does she not feel that it is her business to take this up with the German Government? If this beef had got into the food chain of Northern Ireland, it could have caused serious difficulty. Does she not realise from reading the English press that the farmers of Northern Ireland have been attacked, the producer has been attacked and the man in charge of the meat has been attacked? Everybody has been attacked, and another black mark has been placed against people in Northern Ireland who are absolutely innocent.

Ms Rodgers: I have some concerns about how this incident has been handled in the media over the past few days. I absolutely agree with the Member that there is no fault whatsoever accruing to anyone in Northern Ireland for what has happened. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has raised this matter with the Germans and with Commissioner Byrne. The Member will be aware that this is a matter for the FSA, not for my Department. The FSA is an agency of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. No-one in Northern Ireland is to blame, and our procedures worked impeccably.

There has been a suggestion that the incident somehow reflects badly on the beef industry. It is not useful to continue to say that. My concern is that if I were to make a statement about it, as I have been called on publicly to do,

it would serve only to prolong what has become a very unwelcome debate. I believe that other member states and the commission will be well aware of where the fault lies for this episode, without my needing to make any further comment on it. As I have already said, it is not a matter for my Department but has been raised with the Germans and Commissioner Byrne by the Food Standards Agency.

Fishing Quotas (Scientific Advice)

4. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the steps she is taking to seek scientific advice so that local fishermen may obtain the best possible quotas in future years.

(AQO 577/00)

Ms Rodgers: The Department's scientists already contribute to the scientific advice on which the European Commission's proposals for total allowable catches and member states' quotas are based. However, I have held a meeting with the scientists, and I pleased to be able to inform the Member that work is under way to explore what scope there may be to alleviate the effects of the cuts imposed on the local fleet at the Fisheries Council meeting in December.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's reply. Our local fishermen are extremely angered by the recent cutbacks in quotas and the threat to many jobs in the fishing industry. In view of this, will the Minister assure the House that scientists from her Department will work with local fishermen to seek to satisfy, as early as possible, the requirements of the EU Commission, especially by allowing prawn fishing while protecting cod stocks?

Ms Rodgers: I am very anxious that we should work with the fishing industry. The scientists will work with the local fleet to ensure that all possible technical measures are put in place to allow the prawn fisheries to go ahead without a by-catch of cod. Last Friday morning I had a meeting with the scientists to keep myself up to date, and I assure the Member that the scientists are very anxious to help the industry. They will be meeting with members of the fishing industry and working in conjunction with them.

Mr McMenamin: Can the Minister report on the outcome of the Fisheries Council meeting that took place in December? What can the Minister do to help the industry?

Ms Rodgers: I was pleased with the success in obtaining the Commission's agreement to a 28% increase in the permitted herring catch as well as a 58% increase for haddock and 33% for plaice. It was, however, disappointing that the Commission went against the advice it received and reduced the nephrops catch by 10%. Overall, we can claim some success against our objectives, but I accept

that the industry does face a very difficult year, and I will be doing all I can to help it.

We did obtain a formal declaration from the Commission that it would revise the tax of those species caught in association with cod or hake, if information provided by the member states indicated that this was appropriate. I am discussing that with my Department's scientists at the moment, and I hope that this will enable the Commission to restore the 10% cut in nephrops imposed by the Fisheries Council.

As part of the cod recovery plan for 2001, we were successful in obtaining our derogation for the Northern Ireland fleet to enable it, under controlled conditions, to demonstrate a clean haddock fishery.

Agrimonetary Compensation

5. **Mrs Carson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will (a) fully support the Ulster Farmers' Union with its campaign to secure the release of all available agrimonetary compensation and (b) outline how she proposes to progress this issue.

(AQO 590/00)

Ms Rodgers: I have always been in favour of paying all available agrimonetary compensation to our hard-pressed farmers, and my position on this has not changed. However, decisions on the issue must be taken at a UK level, requiring agreement between the four UK Agriculture Ministers and the Treasury. Agrimonetary compensation represents one of the very few ways in which we can channel money directly into the hands of producers without breaching the very strict EU state aid rules. I was instrumental in initiating the moves which led to the securing of an additional £8.5 million compensation for Northern Ireland dairy, beef, sheep and arable farmers last year.

I have already written to the British Agriculture Minister, Nick Brown, about the latest tranches of compensation that have now become available for beef, sheep and dairy producers, urging him to approach the Treasury to obtain its agreement to draw down those additional funds. Indeed, as far back as October last year, I raised the issue of agrimonetary compensation at the meeting of the UK's Agriculture Ministers.

In my endeavours, I welcome the support of the Ulster Farmers' Union as well as that of the English and Scottish unions.

Mrs Carson: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive reply. The only worry for farmers is that this money will indeed be discontinued, as it is due to be, in 2001. Will the Minister comment on that?

Ms Rodgers: As the Member is aware, the agrimonetary compensation runs out after three years. Of course, what happens after that will be a matter for negotiation with the European Commission and between the Commission

and the UK Government. In all negotiations between the UK Government and the Commission, the regions of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland contribute. I will be very anxious to ensure that the position of the farmers of Northern Ireland is protected.

Mr Kane: What levels of agrimonetary compensation does the Minister anticipate for Northern Ireland producers?

Ms Rodgers: I trust that the question refers to the next tranche. It will be a number of weeks yet before the EU Commission completes its very complex calculations on this matter. It would be wrong for me to speculate now exactly how much may be made available to Northern Ireland producers; we will have to wait until the Commission produces the exact figures.

There will be a modest compulsory element in the overall total, which represents the third and final tranche of the compensation that was triggered on the establishment of the euro on 1 January 1999. This is payable to beef and sheep producers and will be worth approximately £2.6 million for Northern Ireland. I say approximately, because until the calculations have been made, it is not possible to be exact.

Unless there is a very significant strengthening of the euro during the first half of this year, Northern Ireland arable producers will also qualify for approximately £0.2 million.

Mrs Courtney: I think the Minister has just answered my question. I was going to ask how much money is now available to Northern Ireland farmers under the new tranches and whether any of this will be compulsory.

Ms Rodgers: The allocation I have just referred to represents the compulsory element of the compensation. The rest is what we will all be fighting for.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

River Bann (Portadown): Flood Defences

6. **Mr Carrick** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to provide flood defences along the River Bann in Portadown, and to make a statement. (AQO 564/00)

Ms Rodgers: I am very conscious of local concerns about flood risk from the river Bann and its tributaries at Portadown. A previous proposal for a scheme exhibited for public comment in 1992 did not command comprehensive public support and was postponed when severe resource pressures were imposed on the budget of the then watercourse management division. I am pleased to report that in November last the Rivers Agency initiated an independent study to review the previous proposals and to identify and examine options that had not been considered previously.

The commissioning of consulting engineers will be completed by the end of this month. The study will examine options to provide existing property with the currently accepted standard of flood protection. It will take account of technical advances and flood estimation and will consider methods of integrating proposals with the amenity potential afforded by the river. The study is expected to be completed by the end of 2001 and will include an environmental impact assessment and wide public consultation with a number of interest groups, including Craigavon Borough Council.

Mr Carrick: I thank the Minister for her response and note her remarks about the current survey.

3.30 pm

However, does she agree that in the absence of effective flood control measures the natural development of Portadown is obstructed, natural planning of the town is frustrated and natural economic progress is stunted? Does the Minister also agree that a comprehensive strategic study, together with costings for the entire river basin from the Mournes to Banbridge to Portadown to Coleraine and the associated water levels in Lough Neagh, would bring about informed new engineering solutions to the flooding problems and alleviate the flooding of the agricultural land, particularly around the Birches area of Portadown, and will she facilitate such a study?

Ms Rodgers: I would certainly support the idea of a comprehensive study of an integrated approach to the problem in Portadown. I am aware of the problems in the area and attach high priority to implementing schemes within available resources. The Rivers Agency has to execute an extensive programme within its annual capital budget of approximately £8 million, and an objective methodology has been devised so that projects are prioritised. A current study would release land that is blighted for development, and it is also examining the option of providing existing property with an accepted standard of flood protection.

It is departmental policy not to encourage development on flood plains, although the possibility of a scheme that by nature of its design provides an opportunity for development cannot be discounted. It is extremely important that development is not undertaken on flood plains, so that we are not in danger of having here the scenes of flooding that we saw on our televisions last year in England.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Parliament Buildings: Access (Disabled People)

1. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Assembly Commission to detail any plans it has to take the lead in providing access

to services and facilities for people with disabilities in Parliament Buildings. (AQO 584/00)

Dr O'Hagan (Assembly Commission): I would like to start by setting out the facilities that the Commission has already put in place.

Arrangements can be made for disabled visitors or staff to be set down, collected or to park in the upper east, or upper west, car parks. Parliament Buildings can be accessed from these car parks through doors specifically designed for use by disabled persons. A lift is reserved for use by disabled persons and can be accessed via ramps from either of these car parks.

There are various facilities in Parliament Buildings. For example, specially equipped toilets for disabled persons are available on each floor of the building. In the Assembly Chamber there is one wheelchair space in the viewing Gallery at either side of the Speaker's Chair. A maximum of two blind visitors with their dogs may sit the public Gallery. There is an induction loop to help visitors who have hearing difficulties, and there are appropriate hearing aids throughout the public Galleries. Advance provision can also be made for interpreters to sit in on Assembly proceedings. Disabled visitors in wheelchairs are catered for along the route for tours. Visitors with hearing difficulties who wish to go along the route can be accompanied by their own interpreter.

The Assembly Commission is aware of its responsibilities to ensure that all users of the Building, whether they are able-bodied or have some form of disability, have access to all parts of Parliament Buildings, and over the past two years it has commissioned access audit reports from Disability Action, Guide Dogs for the Blind and the Royal National Institute for the Deaf. A common theme running through all three reports is the need for staff training. The programme of staff training recommended by Guide Dogs for the Blind has already been implemented, and courses in wheelchair awareness and deaf awareness for front-line Assembly staff are ongoing.

The Assembly Commission has recently received a very detailed report from the Construction Service. It brings together the recommendations of the three earlier reports and has produced a series of cost proposals for improving access to and around Parliament Buildings. As a result, the Commission has appointed a health and safety specialist to take forward the report's recommendations.

Ms Lewsley: I thank the member of the Commission for a detailed report. One of the many issues that concern us is access for people with disabilities. There is only one access area at present — at the east wing — and one lift, which has broken down many times over the last number of months. Thankfully, no one with a disability — in particular, a wheelchair user — has needed to use it. However, it is still important to provide front access to the building for those with disabilities. The Assembly Commission also needs to consider that the gift shop is

totally inaccessible for anyone in a wheelchair. The Construction Service's report has been available for a year now. Why has the Commission not yet acted to ensure that its recommendations have been put in place?

Dr O'Hagan: The Member has asked a number of questions. First, everyone accepts that many issues could have been acted on earlier. Part of the problem has been the Assembly's stop-start environment. We have had suspensions, the normal summer recess, as well as a shortage of staff. A specialist is in place who will shortly be bringing detailed proposals to the Commission, which came out of the Construction Service's report. For example, the issue of access by the front door was referred to in detail in the report, and it will be dealt with. The Commission is aware of all its responsibilities in that area under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Indeed, we are aware of all the equality legislation. The Commission will ensure that all initiatives are equality proofed. If current arrangements are not sufficient, members of the Commission are open to consideration and suggestions from Assembly Members. We would welcome that.

Mr McFarland: The Commission will be aware that, despite the House of Commons being even less accessible to disabled people than Parliament Buildings, the authorities at Westminster have succeeded in making it more user-friendly. Given that there are bound to be areas of common interest in legislative buildings, has the Commission considered consulting with the authorities at Westminster on the issue?

Dr O'Hagan: Yes. Indeed, the Commission consults on all issues not only with the authorities at Westminster, but also with the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales and with the Administration in the South of Ireland. Therefore the Commission is certainly open to — I suppose this is about not reinventing the wheel — looking at other areas and taking everything on board.

Parliament Buildings: Union Flag

2. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Assembly Commission if it intends to review its policy of flying the Union flag on Parliament Buildings on designated days.

(AQO 582/00)

Dr O'Hagan: The issue of flags was considered by the Assembly Commission on 20 November 2000, when it was agreed to defer further deliberation until the Commission had received background papers. The Commission intends to return to the flags issue at an early Commission meeting. The members of the Commission realise that the resolution of the flags issue is a very sensitive and complex matter, and while the Commission would prefer to take its direction from the Assembly, it is recognised that the process has failed in that regard. However, the matter is under consideration.

Mr C Murphy: I thank the Commission member for her answer. I agree that it is a sensitive and, at times, vexed issue. Does she agree that the Commission's initial decision to continue to fly the flags before the institutions went live was an interim decision, that it was not intended to be permanent? And does she agree, given the fact that to date no proposals have come forward from the Commission regarding the flying of flags from Parliament Buildings, that the decision has assumed a degree of permanency that needs to be reviewed in the light of human rights and equality legislation? Can the Member assure me that the Commission will consider the interim decision as a matter of urgency?

Dr O'Hagan: First, what is in place at the minute is really custom and practice. That means that the status quo remains until change is agreed by the Assembly or the Commission. As I said, the issue was raised on 20 November 2000. It was agreed to defer it until background papers were provided. It will be raised again at further meetings of the Commission.

Mr Hussey: I commend Mr Murphy's timing of the question, as today is the 200th anniversary of the first sitting of the new Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

Does the Commission member agree that the policy of adhering to custom and practice at Commission level, as she has described it, has been successful? Should it be felt necessary to revisit this issue? The matter should be resolved on the Floor of the Assembly rather than at Commission level, and if it cannot be, custom and practice should continue.

Dr O'Hagan: As I said before, the procedures of custom and practice are in place. The issue is up for discussion by the Commission, and I do not want to pre-empt the Commission's decision. It is an issue that the Commission has considered and will do so again in the future.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is quite ironic, on this occasion, that Members of the House have no other option but to question a person of a party that wants to destroy this flag altogether and which has used its might and main to destroy those who intend to keep the Union flag flying in this part of Her Majesty's dominion.

Has this spokesman the authority to tell us that the Commission does not look on this as a permanent decision, but as an interim one, and that it will be going back to seeking to take down the flag?

Dr O'Hagan: First, I will point out that I am not a man — I am actually a woman. It would be better if the Member looked more closely at that.

I am here to represent the Assembly Commission, and the answer given is on behalf of the Commission. This is an issue that arises periodically in the Commission for

discussion. It came up on 20 November 2000, and it will come up again.

Mr A Maginness: The Commission member has informed the Assembly that this is an interim decision to fly the Union flag, based on custom and practice; that the decision is likely to be reviewed at some future date by the Commission; and that there is no lawful authority for that, statutory or otherwise. The business of the Commission has usually been characterised by efforts to achieve consensus on all issues. In the light of that approach, does the representative agree that the Commission will continue to seek a decision that will attempt to please the vast majority of people in the Chamber on this very vexed and divisive issue?

Dr O'Hagan: The Commission tries to deal with all issues on a consensus basis — even more so when it comes to issues such as flags. All issues will be dealt with in that manner.

Mr Speaker: The question standing in the name of Mr McGrady has been withdrawn and will receive a written response from the Commission. There are no further questions to the Commission.

HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I trust that Members have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments. I draw Members' attention to the corrigendum — a correction to the wording of amendment 6. I will remind Members of this when we come to it.

3.45 pm

We also have a grouping of amendments. I ask Members to refer to that grouping in the debate. Knowing that not all Members have fully participated on a regular basis in Consideration Stages, I simply point out that we take the amendments in turn.

There are four groups. We will debate the amendments referred to in each group. The first debate will be on amendments 1 and 2, the second on amendments 3 and 6, the third on amendment 4, and the fourth on amendment 5.

However, the voting on the amendments will come in the order in which they appear. We will vote on each clause on its own, in the context where there is no amendment, or subsequent to the amendment being voted upon.

No amendments having been tabled to clauses 1 to 20, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group them for the purposes of voting.

Clauses 1 to 20 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 21 (Interpretation of this Part — “residential care home” and “nursing home”)

The Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee (Dr Hendron): I beg to move amendment 1: In page 11, after line 2, leave out subsection (3).

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2 (clause 22): In page 11, line 15, leave out “18” and insert “17”. — *[Dr Hendron]*

The Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee considered the Bill, which covers 19 different issues, over a period of six weeks last November and December. As Members will have read in the Committee's report, many important issues were raised during the deliberations. The Committee was satisfied that these issues had been carefully considered by the Department before the Bill was drafted, with wide consultation having taken place on some and on-going discussions on the detail of others. I am assured that the Committee will be consulted further before these are finalised.

Although they were not part of the Bill, two important issues were raised during deliberations, which are important enough to bring to the attention of the House and to which my amendments relate.

The first covers the ambiguity in the use of the term “residential care”. Whilst appreciating that planning applications are the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, the Committee wishes to highlight that the term appears to have a different legal meaning in planning legislation to that used by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the Registered Homes (Northern Ireland) Order 1992.

On behalf of the Committee, I have written to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister asking for the matter to be discussed by the Executive. If the matter is not resolved, it will have serious implications for those wishing to appeal against planning applications. This morning, I received a reply from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and I will be bringing this up with the Committee on Wednesday.

A prime example is the establishment of Brindley House, a private children's home in county Fermanagh, which obtained planning permission for a residential care home under the Department of Environment's planning regulations. Local residents understood that it was to be a home for the elderly and they were concerned when it turned out to be a children's home. However, it was too late to raise objections.

There is a great need for many more children's homes, as my Committee indicated in our recent report on residential and secure accommodation and local communities must be prepared to accept more children's homes if children in care are to remain in their own areas. However, it is most important that planning applications are clear and do not lead to misunderstandings.

Amendment number 2 refers to the discrepancy in the upper age limit between the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 — which defines a child as a person under the age of 18 years — and the Criminal Justice (Children) (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 — which defines an adult as a person who has attained the age of 17.

The Committee is aware that criminal justice is a reserved matter, but feels very strongly that young people in Northern Ireland, especially those in care, should not be required to attend adult court sessions or be held in adult jails at the age of 17.

I have written to the Secretary of State in my capacity as Committee Chairperson, strongly recommending that he revisits this matter during the ongoing criminal justice review. I seek the support of Assembly Members and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to raise this important issue with the appropriate authorities.

Mr Gallagher: I support the amendments. As the Chairperson said in relation to amendment 2, the

discrepancy is a matter for the Northern Ireland Office. The other ambiguity he referred to concerns two Departments — the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Environment — which have devolved responsibilities and which are adopting different approaches leading to ambiguity about the terms used to describe children's residential homes.

This issue came to light in my own constituency with the case of Brindley House. The planning application for that development came before the local council in the normal way, and it was described as a "residential home". Planning was subsequently approved. Thereafter, it became clear that the development was for a children's residential home, and there was considerable controversy and protest involving residents in the vicinity. Locally elected representatives were called to account and asked why approval had been given without any questions being asked. Most of my colleagues on Fermanagh District Council had assumed that it was residential accommodation for the elderly.

There is an ambiguity, and local people affected see it as a shortcoming in the planning process and as something that requires particular attention. Such applications, when they are submitted, should specifically state the purpose of the development. Everyone understands that there is a need for residential accommodation for children in care, and that it must be provided for somewhere in the local community. However, the co-operation of local people is important, and that is more likely to be forthcoming where there is clarity surrounding the application. Therefore, this amendment is necessary if we are to avoid a repetition of the experience in Fermanagh where local people were, and remain, dissatisfied about the development. The Executive should tidy up this issue because it is a devolved matter for the Administration and the two Departments that I identified.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I want to briefly clear up a wee issue which the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety mentioned.

In case there is any confusion, I want to put on record that the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee is not against the need for residential homes. From the outset, there is a need for consultation with all interested parties. Brindley House has been mentioned. However, I do not think that the issue is about whether that was an elderly people's home or a children's home. The issue is about planning applications and the need to reword them so that residents and elected representatives can be involved from the start in order to avoid confusion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Chathaoirleach agus le baill an Choiste as a mbreithniú cúramach ar an Bhille. Ó thaobh leasú uimhir a haon de, caithfidh an Bille reatha agus an

reachtaíocht seirbhísí sóisialta i gcoitinne grúpaí éagsúla cliant a aithint sa téarmaíocht a úsáidtear. Tá seo riachtanach le cinntiú go bhfuil ár gcreatlach rialacháin fóirsteanach do réimse leathan riachtanas éagsúil. Ní thig liom labhairt ar son na Roinne Comhshaoil, ach samhlaítear domh go bhféadfadh deacrachtaí a bheith ann dá mbeadh an téarmaíocht chéanna in úsáid go forleathan. Tá mé ag dréim le toradh an chomhfhreagrais idir an Cathaoirleach agus an Chéad-Aire agus an LeasChéad-Aire ar an ábhar a fheiceáil.

Ó thaobh leasú uimhir a dó de, is feasach domh gur scríobh an Cathaoirleach chuig an Stát-Rúnaí maidir le sainmhíniú "páiste" i reachtaíocht an dlí choiriúil agus maidir le páistí a choinneáil i bpríosúin aosacha. Aithním na hábhair chúraim a thóg an Coiste agus beidh suim agam cinnte i bhfeagra an Stát-Rúnaí.

I thank the Chairperson and members of the Committee for their careful consideration of the Bill. With regard to amendment No 1, the present Bill and social services legislation generally must recognise different client groups in the terminology used. That is necessary to ensure that our regulatory framework is appropriate to widely differing needs. I cannot speak for the Department of the Environment, but I suspect that there may be difficulties in using the same terminology across the board. I look forward to seeing the outcome of the correspondence between the Speaker and the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the issue.

With regard to amendment No. 2, I am aware that the Chairperson has written to the Secretary of State regarding the definition of "child" in criminal justice legislation and about the holding of children in adult prisons. I recognise the concerns that have been raised by the Committee, and I will be interested to see the response from the Secretary of State.

Dr Hendron: I thank Mr Tommy Gallagher, Ms Sue Ramsey and the Minister for their helpful comments. I put down the amendments on behalf of the Committee in order to highlight the two matters. Therefore I beg leave to withdraw amendment 1.

Mr Speaker: Members who have not so far involved themselves in much consideration of legislation may not be aware of the different reasons for putting down amendments. Members will, of course, put down amendments with the intention of pressing them to agreement or to a Division, to ensure that they are incorporated in the Bill. However, Members may also table probing amendments. That is the case with the current amendment, as has been indicated by the Member's request for leave to withdraw. If a matter cannot be discussed or debated unless there is an amendment to speak to, an amendment will be tabled. A probing discussion will take place, at the end of which the Member begs leave to withdraw. It is, of course, the case that the Member must have leave to withdraw.

There are two amendments in this group. One has been moved by the Member, who has now begged leave to withdraw it; the second has not yet been moved. When we come to the second amendment, Dr Hendron will simply say "Not moved" — I assume that on the basis of what he has just said. Many Members are familiar with legislation, but not everyone is, and we are trying to move forward together.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 21 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 22 (Interpretation of this Part – general)

Mr Speaker: Is amendment 2 moved?

Dr Hendron: Not moved.

Clause 22 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: No amendments to clauses 23 to 38 have been tabled. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group those clauses.

Clauses 23 to 38 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: No amendments to clauses 39 to 43 have been tabled. By leave of the Assembly, I will group those clauses.

Clauses 39 to 43 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 44 (Exercise of powers)

4.00 pm

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim leasuithe uimhir a trí agus a sé.

Ó thaobh leasú uimhir a trí de, ciallaíonn an leasú seo ar alt 44, chomh maith le haisghairm mhír 16(d) Sceideal 3 den Ordú 1991, nárbh fhéidir dúshlán na Roinne a thabhairt ar a cumhachtaí iontaobhais SSS a dhíriú maidir le téarmaí agus coinníollacha dá bhfoireann.

I beg to move amendment 3: In page 30, after line 21, insert

"(3) Paragraph 16 of that Schedule (general powers of HSS trusts) shall be renumbered as sub-paragraph (1) of that paragraph, and

(a) (in that sub-paragraph head (d) (general power to employ staff) shall cease to have effect; and

(b) (after that sub-paragraph there shall be added —

'(2) An HSS trust may employ such staff as it thinks fit.

(3) Subject to any directions given by the Department under paragraph 6, an HSS trust may —

(a) (pay its staff such remuneration and allowances; and

(b) (employ them on such other terms and conditions, as it thinks fit.'."

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

No 6 (schedule 5): In page 59, after line 34, column 2, insert

"In Schedule 3, paragraph 16(d)." — [Ms de Brún]

Ms de Brún: Amendment 3 to clause 44 and the associated repeal of paragraph 16(d) of schedule 3 to the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 remove any possibility of challenge to the Department's powers to direct health and social services trusts on terms and conditions of service for their staff.

It has been recognised for some time that the general powers of direction contained in paragraph 6 of schedule 3 were considerably less robust than had been envisaged. That was because the Department could only direct trusts in matters in which it had already directed boards and agencies. Accordingly, the original formulation of the Bill contained provisions designed to strengthen the departmental power of direction by requiring trusts to comply with any directions given by the Department on the exercise of its functions. That provision, which is significantly more robust than the original, will be retained in the Bill and will enable the Department to direct trusts on such matters as the delivery of ministerial priorities in relation to service provision.

However, doubts persisted that that general power of direction may be susceptible to legal challenge so long as there was an expressed freedom contained in paragraph 16(d) of schedule 3. That enabled trusts to determine their own terms and conditions of service without any further qualification. Accordingly, the amendment now proposed retains the freedom of trusts to employ such staff as they see fit. That will cover areas such as numbers and grades of staff. It also retains the freedom of trusts to develop individual pay schemes or to vary the terms and conditions of service of their staff. However, it makes it clear that in such matters the Department's powers of direction under paragraph 6 take precedence.

It is likely that the new power of direction in relation to terms and conditions of service will be applied in the first instance to the introduction of the new pay and grading system for senior executives, which is currently being developed in conjunction with the NHS confederation.

Ó thaobh leasú uimhir a sé de, tá aisghairm fomhír (d) de mhír 16 Sceideal 3 den Ordú 1991 de bharr an leasaithe ar alt 44(2), an chumhacht le hiontaobhais a dhíriú maidir le híocaíocht. Tá sé de nádúr teicniúil agus ní bhaineann sé le cuspóirí pholasaí an Bhille.

The repeal of sub-paragraph (d) of paragraph 16 of schedule 3 to the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 is consequential on the amendment to clause 44(2) — the power to direct trusts as to remuneration. Amendment No 6 is technical in nature and does not affect the policy aims of the Bill. Molaim leasuithe uimhir a trí agus a sé.

Mr Speaker: Amendment 3 — moved or not moved?

Ms de Brún: Moved.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 44, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 45 to 49 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 50 (Disclosure of information by the Commissioner for Complaints)

Ms de Brún: I beg to move amendment 4: In page 35, leave out lines 19 to 31 and insert

“ ‘1B) Where information is to the effect that any person (“the subject”) is likely to constitute a threat to the health or safety of any other person (“the person at risk”), the Commissioner may disclose that information to any person to whom the Commissioner thinks it should be disclosed in the interests of the health or safety of the person at risk.

(1C) If the Commissioner discloses information as permitted by paragraph (1B) he shall —

- (a) where he knows the identity of the subject, inform the subject —
 - (i) that he has disclosed the information; and
 - (ii) of the identity of any person to whom he has disclosed it; and
- (b) inform the person from whom the information was obtained that he has disclosed it.’ ”

Molaim leasú uimhir a ceathair. Aithníodh an gá leis an leasú seo nuair a bhí an Bille faoi bhreithniú ag an Choiste. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Chathaoirleach agus le baill an Choiste arís as a mbreithniú cúramach ar an Bhille. Ceapadh an leasú seo leis na tosca a shoiléiriú ina bhféadfaidh an Coimisinéir um Ghearáin faisnéis a nochtadh a fuair sé le linn imscrúdú. Ní bhaineann sé le cuspóirí pholasaí an Bhille.

The need for this amendment was identified during the Committee Stage of the Bill, and once again I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Chairperson and the members of the Committee for their careful consideration of the Bill. The amendment is designed to clarify the circumstances in which the Commissioner for Complaints may disclose information obtained by him in the course of an investigation. The information is to the effect that a person is likely to constitute a threat to the health or safety of service users, and the proposed amendment would clarify to whom the information may be disclosed. Provision is also made that if the identity of the person who may represent a danger to health is known, he or she must be told that the information has been disclosed and to whom it has been disclosed. Any subsequent action would be for an employer through normal disciplinary procedures or any person with whom the person is in contract. The amendment does not reflect any change in the policy aims of the Bill. Molaim leasú uimhir a ceathair.

Dr Hendron: I support the amendment to clause 50. While considering the Bill during the Committee Stage members of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee discussed this clause with officials from the Department. Committee members agreed that the words used in the clause were difficult to understand and proposed that they be amended to clarify the meaning behind the clause. The Committee is pleased that the Minister has seen fit to put down the amendment, which we support.

Mr Speaker: Does the Minister wish to respond?

Ms de Brún: I will merely acknowledge that this should make matters considerably clearer. I am glad to hear from the Chairperson, Dr Hendron, that it appears to have clarified matters for him.

Mr Speaker: Amendment 4 — moved or not moved?

Ms de Brún: Moved.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 50, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 51 to 53 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 54 (Public access to meetings of certain bodies)

Ms de Brún: I beg to move amendment 5: In page 36, line 37 after “trust;” insert

“() a Health and Social Services Council;”.

Molaim leasú uimhir a cúig. Aithníodh an gá leis an leasú seo fosta nuair a bhí an Bille faoi bhreithniú ag an Choiste. Chuirfeadh an leasú comhairlí sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta ar liosta na bhforas SSSP a chaithfidh cruinnithe oscailte a thionól. Cuireadh comhairlí ar bun faoin Health and Personal Social Services Order 1991 le leasanna an phobail ina gceantair a ionadú. Is é cleachtas reatha gach comhairle, agus í ag comhlíonadh an tsainchúraim seo, an pobal a ligean isteach chuig a cruinnithe uilig. Chinnteodh an leasú go mbeadh teacht isteach ag an phobal chuig cruinnithe comhairle ar an bhonn reachtúil céanna leis na forais eile. Ní bhaineann sé le cuspóirí pholasaí an Bhille.

The need for this amendment was also identified during the Committee’s Consideration Stage of the Bill. The amendment would add health and social services councils to the list of health and personal social services bodies who must hold open meetings. Councils were set up under the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 to represent the interests of the public in their area. In keeping with this remit it is the current practice of each council to allow public access to all its meetings.

The amendment would ensure that public access to council meetings is on a similar statutory basis to the other bodies. The amendment does not reflect any change in the policy aims of the Bill. Molaim leasú uimhir a cúig.

Dr Hendron: I support the amendment to clause 54. While considering the Bill during the Committee Stage, members of our Committee wondered why the health and social services councils were not included in the list of health and social service bodies covered by the Bill. Members agreed that an amendment to the clause was necessary to rectify the matter. The Committee is pleased that the Minister felt able to put down the amendment, and I thank her for it.

Mr Berry: I will try to be as brief as possible, perhaps even more brief than the Chairperson of the Health Committee. As the Chairperson said, this was one of the matters that I raised in the Committee, and I am glad that this amendment has been put forward. I trust that Members will support it. It is important that health councils are included. At a time when we hear greater calls for accountability in the health service, it is most important that the councils are brought on board. If, as they say, they represent the public's views when decisions are being made about our services, it is most important that each and every one of our Members backs this amendment.

Ms de Brún: I feel that it is important to address the points raised by Committee members, and to ensure that even though health and social service councils do allow public access to all of their meetings at present, such access will now be on the same or similar statutory basis to other bodies.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 54, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 55 to 61 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Schedule 5 (Repeals)

Mr Speaker: An amendment to schedule 5 — number 6 — has already been debated.

Amendment made:

In page 59, after line 34, column 2, insert

“In Schedule 3, paragraph 16(d).” — [Ms de Brún]

Schedule 5, as amended, agreed to.

Long title agreed.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Health and Personal Social Services Bill, which now stands referred to the Speaker.

NEW VALUATION LIST ORDER 2000

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):
I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the New Valuation List Order (Northern Ireland) 2000.

This is a very straightforward Order, containing just one substantive article. Article 2 specifies the financial year ending on 31 March 2003 as the year in which a new valuation list will be issued for rating purposes. The new list will contain updated rateable values applicable to commercial properties throughout Northern Ireland. A few brief remarks about revaluation may provide Members with some background and help to place the Order in its proper context.

4.15 pm

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

The basis on which commercial properties are valued in Northern Ireland, for rating purposes, is the same as that used in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland — the estimated rental value of the property at a fixed point in time. The last revaluation in Northern Ireland was carried out in the mid-1990s, and the new valuation list came into force on 1 April 1997 based on rental values as they existed on 1 April 1995.

Since this list came into effect the level and pattern of those 1995 values has been maintained. This means that an altered property, or a new property coming onto the list for the first time, is assessed on the basis of the value it would have had almost six years ago, reflecting the physical state and economic circumstances of the locality at that time.

However, as we all know, property values have changed over the past six years, and as a result, the valuation list is becoming progressively out of date. Value changes are not confined merely to the effects of inflation over this period but, more importantly, are also caused by social, environmental and economic factors. These have created shifts in the relative values of property today, compared with the pattern of assessments in the current list. These shifts are widespread and exist within and between different classes of property and between one location and another.

The continuing use of rateable values, based on outdated rental values, acts to distort the fair distribution of the rate burden between individual ratepayers — for example, businesses in areas which have experienced relative economic decline since the last revaluation will now be paying too much in rates whereas businesses which have benefited from improved economic conditions in the intervening years will now be paying too little. The decrease in credibility of the list cannot be corrected without a revaluation.

A five-yearly cycle of revaluations has been established in Great Britain in recent years. The currency of the Northern Ireland list will fall further behind those in Great Britain if a local revaluation is not carried out now. After many years the South is also moving towards regular revaluations, which have been accepted as a normal and routine part of any fair and equitable rating system.

A revaluation now in Northern Ireland will deliver greater equity and fairness. It will also greatly reduce instances of the dramatic rate swings which, as Members recall, were an unfortunate feature of the last revaluation, and which resulted in some individuals facing very large rate increases.

I intend that the new valuation list should be issued not later than 31 December next year and come into force on 1 April 2003. The Order we are considering today will enable that to happen, and I commend it to the Assembly.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement. Many business people throughout Northern Ireland will welcome the notice of motion about the New Valuation List Order. About three years ago there was a review of the rating valuations for business premises across Northern Ireland. This review was conducted after a 21-year gap. The result for many retail businesses, particularly in district and regional towns, has been, in many cases, catastrophic.

Some people experienced a doubling of their rates bill — some high street retailers experienced a trebling of their rates bill. Many of them have gone out of business. Many high street businesses, particularly the small independent retailers, felt that the last revaluation worked to their detriment. I agree with the Minister that it was imbalanced. Some retailers benefited, but others, particularly those in the high-street-independent-retailer category, suffered. I welcome the statement, and I urge the Minister and his officials to expedite this matter. It is just a pity that we have to wait until 2003.

I welcome the fact that there will be a five-year revaluation cycle in Northern Ireland similar to that in Great Britain. Many retailers will look forward to that, particularly those in smaller towns.

Mr Shannon: This is a golden opportunity to look at the revaluation of non-domestic properties especially in light of the white paper — the Government's notification document — circulating around the councils. While, ostensibly the paper is only for notification purposes, it is timely in that it focuses attention on the need to reconsider valuations in rural communities throughout the Province. Would the Minister shed some light on that?

I want to highlight the plight and the importance of rural post offices and village shops. The white paper indicates that across the water a 50% reduction in rates is being considered because of the community aspect of some businesses. We should look very seriously at the

needs of post offices and small shops, and the community roles they play in villages in Northern Ireland.

The proposed 8% regional increase has many of those in small shops and post offices carefully considering their futures. For many of them, the increase will be too much to bear and some will probably go to the wall. That will have a direct impact on our rural communities, especially villages that have the post office or the small shop at their centres. They provide a great service to the local community and while they do not make a lot of money — they never will because they do not have sufficient numbers of people — they do provide something that is valuable. We must also look at the fierce competition from the large superstores. Not everyone can travel, and for some people the post office and small shop are an integral part of their lives. The Assembly took a unanimous decision to support rural post offices because Members also believe that there is a tangible benefit for the whole community.

Across the water, people are looking at a 50% rate reduction. I ask the Minister to look seriously at that as an option for post offices and shops thereby breathing life back into villages where problems of increasing overheads press on them. Many look upon the spectre of a regional rate increase as the final nail in the coffin.

As elected representatives — especially those of us who represent country areas such as the Ards Peninsula, where post offices and small shop are an integral part of the community — we need to help our constituents. This is the opportunity to do that, and I ask the Minister to consider a 50% reduction — the same as that proposed across the water. That would represent a shot in the arm and breathe life back into the villages we represent.

Mr Close: If we are going to continue with a rating system then, on principle, revaluation should be as often as humanly practical so as to avoid the type of distortions that resulted from the 21-year gap prior to the last one. If we are going to continue with the rating system — and I understand from the Minister's comments that the whole system would, and should, be subject to an early review — I would question the timing of this revaluation.

If we are to embark on a review of the overall rating system, could those resources be used to restructure the system to provide something more effective? I accept that the purpose of revaluation is to remove distortions and give better equity between properties. Domestic properties were ignored in the last revaluation. Is there not an opportunity here? If we are to continue with rating, why were domestic properties excluded again? The level of distortion will be aggravated because of the 30-year gap since revaluation was last carried out on domestic properties.

I sympathise with Mr Shannon's comments about how we protect the lifeblood of the smaller shopkeeper, rural post offices and so forth throughout Northern Ireland.

I would extend this to our towns and cities. High street retail was one of the sectors that suffered most dramatically from the last revaluation. As has been mentioned, the result was that many premises were vacated. We do not want our towns to turn into ghost towns or huge office blocks. We must do our utmost to encourage people to have a proper retail mix in our towns and city centres; otherwise we may destroy the entire fabric of society in Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, over a number of years we have been slipping towards that. Drive through any of our main provincial towns, say Lisburn, which is the jewel in the crown of Northern Ireland's shopping centres, and what you see are numerous "for let" and "for sale" signs. This is solely due to excessive rents and excessive rates. The offshoot of this is that a proper retail mix is gradually being eroded from our towns and cities.

Over the past five years food stores have suffered the greatest change in their history. We now have the Sainsburys and the Tescos in Northern Ireland. Presumably, they escaped the last dramatic shift. There was no real basis to hang their rentals on, so this time there will be a considerable battle with the large superstores. The impact that this will have on shopping is something that must be seriously considered.

We must try to expedite the rates evaluation. Is it the best way to attract income? We need to eliminate the current distortions, and I question whether rates are the best way to do this.

Mr Savage: Mr Close referred to Lisburn as the premier shopping town, but surely Lurgan and Portadown are in the same category.

Many shops in our towns are lying empty, and empty shops are of no use to towns or to ratepayers. We must try to encourage our shopkeepers. If we burden them with high rates, it becomes impossible for them to exist.

4.30 pm

I represent a rural area, and this has highlighted for me the fact that people in those areas must travel to towns to get what they need. For example, our small post office has closed — it is very difficult for small branches to compete with the bigger post offices in the town that have so many services to offer their customers.

I welcome the statement that there will be a review every five years. That is long overdue.

It worries me that people in rural areas are being deprived of many of the services that are available in towns. I hope that the various authorities will take this point on board.

There are many derelict shops and houses across the country, and this is of grave concern. This is a sore point and a big drawback to any society. I hope that in the coming months and years a rebate will be introduced to encourage

people to renovate derelict properties so that they are fit to be lived in again. Peace has taken its grip on our community, but these areas have endured a good deal of torment and turmoil over the last 10 or 15 years, and due consideration must be given to the houses there.

Mr P Robinson: Any subject matter brought to the House by the Minister of Finance that touches on the issue of rates will get the attention not only of Assembly Members but, more importantly, of a very large section of our community. Few people are not impacted in one way or another by the level of their rates bills. Over recent days the intention to have a substantial increase in the regional rate has brought stories to many of us, particularly from shopkeepers and small businesses. They face very real hardship as a result of what will be small changes to the Northern Ireland Budget overall but which will mark very large changes to their normal business cash flow.

When we talk about reviewing the valuation list, we talk about the potential to put people out of work. I am not sure how the Minister's Colleague managed to summon the view that there is a good-news story here. In reality, as a result of this valuation list review, every one of us will have constituents coming to tell us that their rates have been hiked up very considerably. Of one thing we can be certain — those who benefit as a result of the review will not be coming to tell us about it. We will hear the sad stories in this case, and there are bound to be many.

I want to make a particular case — and not for jewels in the crown. Those who come to the Assembly and tell us how swimmingly things are going in Lisburn, Portadown and Lurgan obviously require less sympathy from the Minister than those of us who talk about substantial difficulties in our constituencies. Therefore the Minister needs to pay some attention to the areas where there is no glitter and very few jewels.

I draw the Minister's attention, in particular, to the difficult task faced by shopkeepers in the periphery of Belfast. They are competing against large stores and businesses in Belfast city centre. Traditional shopping patterns are changing — people are going more often to out-of-town stores to pick up the week's groceries. The corner shop is under great pressure, yet it is a vital part of the vibrancy and integrity of the local community. The Minister should give some guidance to those who will determine the valuation and say that there must be some allowance for those who are trying to keep that part of the retail community alive in these difficult circumstances. If smaller stores are treated in the same way as Marks & Spencer, Sainsburys, Tesco, or Safeway, they will not get a fair deal. The whole community will have cause for regret if small corner stores go out of business, causing that part of the life of our community to die off.

I agree with the Minister that there should be regular reviews. There is case for regular review since this does not, in itself, set the amount that people will pay for

rates — it decides the formula which will determine the apportionment of the overall rates burden that each will eventually pay. However, I agree with Colleagues that there is a good reason for holding a review of the domestic sector.

There have been some occasions when constituents have voiced to me their objections to their rates bill because of a change that has taken place in their area. The valuer, sent out to visit the property, has sometimes concluded that, because of a garage, extension or improvement that was not included on the original valuation, the occupant should be paying a higher rates bill. If this small number of cases is indicative of the situation in the community as a whole, significant changes are required. The rating of domestic properties would be an enormous job to undertake. Businessmen, in particular, will say that they want to have the same degree of scrutiny on all properties on the valuation list, rather than just on the non-domestic properties.

I trust that the Minister will look at all of these points and recognise that there is a case for small businesses, particularly shopkeepers, who have a difficult job to make ends meet in present circumstances.

Mr Durkan: I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. The motion relates to a short statutory rule, but the subject of rates and revaluation always generates great interest among Members, who are constantly alert to the interests of their constituents. I have listened with interest to the points made. They were informative and challenging, and I will try to respond to as many of them as I can.

Mr Byrne said that the need for timely revaluations to avoid the significant gaps and excessive changes that we have seen in the past is a key reason for supporting a revaluation now. It will mean that we will have had a revaluation after six years, rather than five. I believe that we should be moving to regular revaluation on a five-year basis. The Order does not of itself put us onto a five-year revaluation cycle; it is simply about the next revaluation. People might have had wider questions about us pre-empting the rating policy review if we had been committing ourselves fully and deliberately to a five-year cycle now. That is an issue that will obviously come up as part of the wider rating policy review, but I note the thoughts that Members have already expressed in that regard.

Joe Byrne is also correct in saying that the revaluation rates are based on rental values. That is something that people have views on. Many people seem to be questioning the accuracy and adequacy of the last revaluation. Independent appeals mechanisms are available. There is a common recognition that many of the valuations arising from the last revaluation have been overtaken. There have been changes in the retail geography of many towns; there are new players; and the market has changed. As a result, trading practices and customer preferences have

also changed. We recognise that. Again, that is an argument for revaluation rather than against it.

The last time around, transitional arrangements were made when variations emerged on revaluation, and those arrangements reflected the very significant changes that some ratepayers faced. We really do not know the scale of the variations that we are going to face this time. It would be premature to say that there will be a transitional relief scheme. That is something that will need to be reviewed in light of what the revaluation yields.

Jim Shannon raised points that touched, in particular, on businesses in rural areas — especially post offices. He also highlighted the point that provision is being made in Great Britain for 50% rate relief for certain properties and businesses falling into a particular category. This is another area that we want to consider realistically. Legislation was passed before devolution that would provide for such a scheme here. As I indicated in a previous written answer to Sean Neeson — and I referred to it in an answer to Joan Carson as well — work has been done in relation to that legislation. There are issues in relation to defining the relevant areas and the businesses that would qualify. There are still a number of outstanding points, in relation to implementing the legislation, which I want to consider.

Members are aware that I have announced — it is in the Programme for Government — that there will be a wider rating policy review, the details of which I will be bringing forward soon. I am not convinced that it would be fair to simply leave the question of making targeted relief available until the rating policy review, because the rating policy review will itself take some time to bring forward results. I will be considering the matter further to see what we can do in relation to the existing legislative provisions.

Seamus Close raised a number of points. He stressed his belief that if we are going to have rates, and therefore revaluations, those revaluations should be as regular as is practicable. He also raised the point that a general rating review would perhaps be preferable to the revaluation. We are having a wider review of rating policy, but, because it might take a number of years for results and decisions to come through from that review, it would be advisable to proceed with non-domestic revaluation now.

4.45 pm

If people recognise timely revaluation as important, we should not delay it simply because we are having the wider review. It makes sense to proceed with the revaluation and the wider review. The wider review may confirm that we will still have non-domestic rates — just as there was when changes were made to the rates systems elsewhere. For instance, when domestic rates were abolished in the South, non-domestic rates were retained. Equally, across the water, when rates gave way

to the poll tax — quickly followed by the council tax — non- domestic rates were retained.

It would not be appropriate to suspend any move on revaluation until we had the wider review, not least because many Members are saying that current revaluations are out of sync with current rental values and real market factors. If that adjustment is needed, and revaluation needs to take place, then we should not be making excuses to avoid it. If I were delaying revaluation pending the review, more questions would have been raised about that approach than the one we are currently adopting.

Mr Close referred to the impact on the retail sector, particularly by the big multiples that have come here. There has been a significant change in retail geography since the last revaluation, which, again, underpins the case for such a revaluation — a point further reinforced by Mr Peter Robinson.

While not taking issue with those who emphasised the needs of people in small towns and rural areas, this also served to highlight some of what are regarded as urban discrepancies in relation to current valuation patterns. Many small shops and businesses in urban areas, particularly those in the penumbra of the bigger cities, face particular difficulties and challenges. That is why revaluation should be seen as a positive exercise. If people feel that they are suffering under excessive valuations at present, then they should welcome a revaluation.

Mr Robinson said that the point of a revaluation is not to set about increasing the overall yield from rates — that yield is determined by our spending needs. It redistributes the overall rates burden in line with current property values. In that way it is actually a re-balancing exercise. Revaluation should address the imbalances that people tell me are already building up as a result of differential levels of rental growth, and, it is to be hoped, prevent other imbalances arising. The revaluation will come into force on 1 April 2003, and the new rateable values will be based on rental values as at 1 April 2001.

I should point out that in the last revaluation, the overall increase in total value was 630%, with a corresponding reduction in average rate poundage from £2.50 to £0.40. Other things being equal, an average increase in total value of 25% should see average rate poundages falling back to around the £0.40 mark again. I hope that that clarifies for Members that this exercise is not about trying to increase the rate burden overall on small businesses, or anyone else, it is about trying to achieve a more equitable distribution of that rate burden.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the New Valuation List Order (Northern Ireland) 2000.

ASSEMBLY: AD HOC COMMITTEE ON LIFE SENTENCES (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER 2001

Motion made:

That this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the draft Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 laid by the Secretary of State in accordance with section 85 (4)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and to submit a report to the Assembly by 12 March 2001.

Composition:	UUP	2
	SDLP	2
	DUP	2
	SF	2
	Other Parties	2

Quorum: The quorum shall be five

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine. — *[Mr Dodds]*

Mr Roche: The motion is about the appointment of an Ad Hoc Committee to consider a draft Life Sentence Order. The point I simply want to make — perhaps not quite as briefly as the proposer of the motion — is that for someone within the DUP to not merely propose such an Ad Hoc Committee but that such a Committee should include members of Sinn Féin is entirely incongruous. The proposal effectively legitimises the role of a political party inextricably linked to a terrorist organisation in the consideration of a matter of a delicate legality. In the process of doing that, it entirely legitimises the functions of that party within the Assembly by another party. *[Interruption]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms McWilliams: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. First, the Member is not speaking to the motion. Secondly, it is worth noting that it was the Business Committee that decided who should propose this motion. The Member is out of order. If his party had a representative on the Business Committee, he would know that.

Mr Roche: I reject the allegation. We are here to discuss whether or not we should have such a Committee. I am making an argument against it. Even if the Business Committee decided who was going to put forward the motion, we are all free agents in the Assembly. We can say “I am not prepared to put forward that sort of a motion. It is entirely incompatible with the position I have put to my electorate. I am actually opposed to, prepared to face down, and give no legitimacy to, a political organisation fronting a terrorist organisation responsible for high levels of criminality for 30 years.” *[Interruption]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr McDonnell: Is it an order for a Member to persistently attack the proposer of the motion, when he has already been told he is out of order?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member has not been told he is out of order. He is not out of order in his referring to the motion.

Mr Roche: I do not wish to continue the debate. I have made my point. I am quite sure that the deputy leader of that party will no doubt be indulging in a bit of fancy political footwork, in that platform piece in the 'News Letter', to try to persuade his electorate, that this is what he was actually voted to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not in order to refer to newspaper articles and the proposer of the motion in this light.

Mr Dodds: I do not know whether to laugh at what has just preceded or cry at the tragedy that someone — for whom I have a lot of respect, and we agree on many things — puts such efforts into what is really an issue of such triviality. It really beggars belief. When we usually agree on so much, to find him using this tactic really strikes at the lowest level. I urge the Member and his colleagues — whoever or whatever is putting them up to this — to resist and join with us in our efforts to try to speak on behalf of those in the majority of the Unionist community — *[Interruption]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Dodds: I did not interrupt the previous Member, and I hope that I will be given the same courtesy. We presently have the support of, I think, the majority of the Unionist community by reflecting disillusionment in the way in which the Belfast Agreement has been implemented and opposing the agreement itself. I hope that the Members will join with us if what they say is their main objective is, indeed, their main objective. Some of the things that they say and do run counter to that.

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Someone drew your attention to the fact that Mr Roche departed from the issue, and you ruled that that was incorrect. Mr Dodds is well off the mark now. He should remember that he does have a pledge with the electorate — the united Unionist pledge to oppose the Belfast Agreement.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I will pay close attention to Members' remarks.

Mr Dodds: Once again, Cedric has got it wrong. Membership of the House's statutory Committees is also decided on a proportional basis and includes Sinn Féin. Members of Mr Wilson's party sat on that Committee, agreed with that and proposed that. They are being hypocritical by alleging that we agreed something different.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will address his remarks through the Speaker.

Mr Dodds: Madam Deputy Speaker, I am happy to do that.

As has been mentioned, this is a technical motion, which has been agreed by the Business Committee. When we come to examine the issue, we will debate it properly in the House and give our views. Instead of occasionally coming to the House to rail against things, it would be far better if the Member and his party helped the rest of us so that we can actually promote the Unionist cause. *[Interruption]* Because he has been hit hard, the Member continues to interrupt.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Dodds: It would be very helpful if members of the Northern Ireland Unionist Party — *[Interruption]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I will have order in the House. The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Dodds: Clearly, when points that hit home are made, some Members do not like it and cannot take it. The reality is that the Members concerned come into this Assembly. Their remarks about sitting in Committee apply equally to sitting in the Assembly, because members of Sinn Féin / IRA sit in the Chamber. They sit happily here, but for some reason they cannot sit on a Committee. They will explain their own reasons.

However, if they did sit on Committees, including this Committee — *[Interruption]*. I wish the Member would calm down. It is obviously hitting home. If they did that they would help the Unionist cause. He could ensure that there was a strong Unionist majority on those Committees, but his current activities ensure that places on those Committees go by default to Sinn Féin / IRA. He is assisting Sinn Féin / IRA by not taking a seat on the scrutiny Committees. The reality —

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is the same nonsense that the DUP put forward when it took its ministerial positions. It said that if that if it did not take its ministerial positions they would go to Sinn Féin and the SDLP. The same bunkum —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Which Standing Order is the Member referring to?

Mr C Wilson: Mr Dodds knows well the point that I am making with regard to not working the Belfast Agreement.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Dodds, bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Dodds: I am surprised that Mr Wilson could not refer to the relevant Standing Order. He and his party helped to write the Standing Orders on the Committee with Sinn Féin, and they actually proposed that Sinn Féin should be on the statutory Committees. It is a bit strange that he does not know the number. May I — *[Interruption]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will have order in the House. Order.

I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Dodds: I will certainly do that. As I have said, this is a technical motion. We look forward to every Unionist pulling his weight in the Committee and doing the job that he was elected to do, as we have done in our party, and as we have carried out our manifesto commitments.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the draft Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 laid by the Secretary of State in accordance with section 85(4)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and to submit a report to the Assembly by 12 March 2001.

Composition:	UUP	2
	SDLP	2
	DUP	2
	SF	2
	Other Parties	3

Quorum: The quorum shall be five.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine.

Mr S Wilson: Perhaps you could instruct the House on a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. If Members are vociferous about an issue, is it not usual to give expression to that opposition when the Question is put by having a Division? Or are Members just play-acting and whimpering pseudo- opposition?

5.00 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker: Members know very well what the procedure is.

Adjourned at 5.01 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 23 January 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY: VISITING CLERK

Mr Speaker: Members will note that we have a new Clerk at Table today. Mr André Gagnon is Deputy Principal Clerk of the Canadian Parliament, and he is here today to assist with the training of our Clerks. As Members will know, it is traditional, when a senior Clerk visits another Parliament on duty, that he or she is invited to assist at Table. I am delighted to have the help of such a distinguished Commonwealth colleague.

Members: Hear, hear.

PLANNING (COMPENSATION, ETC.) BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the seven clauses of the Bill, followed by the three schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

COUNTRYSIDE AND RIGHTS OF WAY LAW (ASSIS)

Ms Morrice: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to note the enactment of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and calls for equivalent protection to be extended to areas of special scientific interest in Northern Ireland.

In moving the motion, I think it would be worthwhile to explain how this came to be the subject of the debate. It is a perfect example of how the system – the devolved Assembly, the legislative procedure, and the lobbying process — is operating.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

In November last year, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) wrote to its 10,000 members asking them to write to their Assembly Members and voice their concerns about the loss of our rich natural heritage. They are calling on us, as Assembly Members, to do something to update the law in Northern Ireland, which is 15 years out of date.

The RSPB and other environmental groups such as Friends of the Earth, Conservation Volunteers and the World Wildlife Fund, have been working on this issue for some time. They have been campaigning and lobbying to get the law passed because they are concerned about the neglect of the wildlife and habitats in our countryside.

Wildlife, so familiar to us in recent times, is now in steep decline and is in danger of disappearing. I am not exaggerating. Can anyone remember the last time they saw a hare running through the fields? The common corncrake is no longer a regular breeding bird in Northern Ireland. Wetlands, peatlands and bogs are being lost at an alarming rate. The wildlife that depends on those areas, such as the lapwing, the curlew and the oystercatcher, is also being lost. These birds frequented our shores and were a delight to our eyes, but they have declined by 50% over the last dozen years.

We share this small piece of land on the outskirts of the European continent with a wealth of birds, plants, and animals, many of which are quite rare and of international importance. However, I contend that we have not shared it fairly. Inch by inch and acre by acre, modern agriculture and built development are slowly encroaching on our most cherished natural resource. They are eating at its core and leaving behind a sprawling mess of concrete, tarmac and apartment blocks. Is that the legacy we want to leave to our children? I think not. Without proper protection, a walk in our countryside could become a faded sepia-tone memory, like a steam train ride, donkeys on the beach, or blackberry picking.

We still have an awful lot to be proud of. However, the need to protect what is left has never been greater than at the moment. Under the Nature Conservation and

Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, our most important wildlife sites have been designated as areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs).

If you mention ASSIs to the uninitiated, they tend to think of people dressed in moon clothes picking up specimens and looking at them, but scientific interest is actually about botany, habitat, wildlife, birds, bees, plants and flora.

There are approximately 179 designated ASSIs in Northern Ireland. They represent approximately 6% of the countryside. I understand that this is relatively low compared to England and Wales, although perhaps not Scotland. The potential for increasing the number of designated sites in Northern Ireland is huge, because we have so much to be proud of. Designation provides fundamental protection for what are definitely internationally important sites. Strangford Lough and Lough Neagh are two well-known examples.

However, designation alone is not enough. Sites are vulnerable, and, in fact, the greatest threat is neglect. Neglect is a serious problem, but sites are also threatened by the development of land and changes in how land is used. In England and Wales it was recognised that the protection of these sites had to be respected, and following a period of consultation, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 was passed there in November last year.

The motion calls specifically for equivalent measures to be extended to Northern Ireland. This is important, because it would mean that a number of measures, which have not yet managed to make the parliamentary passage across the Irish Sea, will be included. I want to go into some detail of the measures in what is known as the CROW Act (Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000) that we would like to have extended to Northern Ireland.

Nature conservation orders, for example, which were never introduced in Northern Ireland, could be used as emergency measures to stop sites being damaged. Another very important element is third-party damage — damage to the area by outsiders — and I am sure we all know of examples of this.

One very interesting element of the CROW Act is the duty of care. This is about all public bodies — health, education, housing and so on — having a duty of care to regard and respect to ASSIs. It is vital that the Act be introduced here, and greater use should be made of positive management agreements, which is about doing something proactive to protect these sites. It could be anything — and there are certainly a great number of ideas out there — from providing litter bins and dog-litter bins to the protection of flora and fauna.

Another important measure is the ability to manage land outside and adjacent to the designated area, ensuring that it does not harm the site in any way. There is also a

duty to further the conservation of these sites and their biodiversity.

10.45 am

In November this was the message that the RSPB asked its members to relate to their elected representatives. I started receiving letters from my constituents at the beginning of December. I would like to quote from a few of those letters. I will not name the writers, but they are obviously residents of Bangor, Donaghadee and Holywood. One person says

“Since coming here to live 13 years ago, we have both found that Northern Ireland wildlife — particularly its bird population — a constant source of delight. We ask you to press for time to be made in the Assembly’s legislative timetable for a measure which would continue to afford the wildlife here the protection it merits.”

Another person writes

“As one of the Assembly Members for North Down, you will be well aware of the deep concern felt by many people in this area at the creeping development which is eating more and more into the Northern Ireland countryside”

That is a very important point raised by one of my constituents — the erosion of the green belt. Another very interesting point was this:

“Such a measure would not be contentious and would at least show the outside world that politicians on all sides of the Assembly can at least agree on one thing that will benefit all sections of the community. The quality of our countryside is one thing we are all agreed upon and a better protected environment would be a big selling point to the outside firms coming into the area.”

Finally, I have a letter from a former biology teacher at Regent House, Mrs Pat Heatley, who said she used to take secondary school pupils to Ballymacormick Point to look at specimens in the rock pools. The rock pools are now virtually sanded over because the groynes have been misplaced and the sand has built up. Mrs Heatley is very disappointed at what has been happening and is calling for help. These letters speak for themselves and show just how much pressure is on us to do something about the matter.

Not being an expert on the subject, I wrote to the Environment Committee asking them to explore the situation. Eventually — after the Christmas break and with more letters coming in — I decided that the best option would be to put a motion to the Assembly. This is a devolved matter and it is a specific legislative request entirely within the competence of the House. The motion was prepared and sent to the Assembly’s Business Office at the start of last week. Meanwhile, I wrote to my constituents letting them know to watch out for the motion coming to the Floor of the House within four to six weeks. It was a surprise to all of us to learn that within seven days of this motion being put it was introduced and appears at the top of the agenda today.

This is an example of how the system is working. One of my correspondents said simply

"I realise that the recently announced legislative programme for the Assembly will keep MLAs extremely busy. I wish you luck in your part in the normalisation of political life in Northern Ireland."

That is exactly what we are doing today — taking part in the normalisation of political life in Northern Ireland. The system works; long live the system.

Mr Deputy Speaker: After calling the Chairperson of the Environment Committee I shall have to consider how we should spend the rest of the morning in view of the large number of Members who wish to participate in this important debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): I thank Jane Morrice and her Colleague for bringing the motion before the House. The Women's Coalition has no members on my Committee, where the issue is being dealt with. Therefore I am delighted that they have brought the matter to the attention of the House. I will try, in the short time available to me, to inform the House of the progress already made on this important issue by the Committee. The debate is proof that the environment is viewed as an increasingly important topic by the people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives. In the past, many of these important issues seem to have been buried under direct rule. Today we have an opportunity to debate them openly and to demand that action be taken.

The debate will not only highlight problems in the environment, but it will seek to press the Minister and his Department into action. Under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, the Department of the Environment is required to declare as an area of special scientific interest (ASSI) any stretch of land that requires special protection because of its flora, fauna or physical features. However, in practice ASSI declaration is confined to those sites with the highest degree of scientific value. To date, 179 ASSIs have been declared in Northern Ireland. As Jane Morrice said, these cover more than 6% of the total land area of the Province.

Although most ASSIs have remained in good condition following declaration, the Department of the Environment acknowledged to my Committee, in a letter dated 11 December 2000, that there are a number of weaknesses in the present ASSI legislation. It acknowledged that improvements are needed to ensure that sites are adequately protected to satisfy EC Directives and to enable expenditure to be targeted to achieve conservation benefits. Unfortunately, the weaknesses in the legislation have been identified for some considerable time. The fact that we are operating under out-of-date legislation causes us concern, and that situation must change.

I have a reliable report, issued by BirdLife International, which states that many of Northern Ireland's ASSIs have been damaged or neglected. It draws attention to some

key concerns that it has identified — the need for legislation to strengthen the site safeguard system; the need for urgent progress towards the monitoring and management of sites, including restoration; and the need for additional resources to address these issues.

The enactment of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act provides a range of measures that will enhance and protect the sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) in England and Wales. Unfortunately, the Act does not apply to Northern Ireland; it only applies to England and Wales. Therein lie some of the difficulties. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act imposes a statutory duty on public bodies to manage SSSIs in England and Wales to conserve and enhance their value. It gives English Nature and the Countryside Council for Wales the power to impose management schemes on owners of SSSIs. They can enforce them, as opposed to simply preventing damaging operations. There will be more serious and wide-ranging penalties for damaging SSSIs.

Given the CROW Act in England and Wales, the Department of the Environment's stated concern and the recommendation to approve ASSI legislation presented to the Government by a Northern Ireland biodiversity group in October 2000, the Department has informed our Committee that it is considering options to strengthen existing ASSI legislation.

It is unacceptable that we have fallen behind the rest of the UK, and I have no doubt that through the debate we will draw the Minister's attention to the urgent and necessary legislation that is needed. The Minister has said that he wishes to consult widely on any proposal for change in legislation with representatives of farmers, landowners, fish interests, voluntary conservation bodies, recreation and tourist bodies, district councils, et cetera.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCrea, will you be bringing your remarks to an end shortly?

Rev Dr William McCrea: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I ask the Minister not to lengthen the period of consultation. We need to bring our legislation into line with the rest of the UK.

Finally, despite a 14% increase in the Department's overall budget for 2001-02 and a 27% increase for the Environment and Heritage Service, the specific bid for £3.6 million for important work on environmental programmes such as landscape protection and nature conservation was not met in the Budget. I trust that the Minister will press for this need — and the finances necessary to make a difference — to be met by the Administration.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Ms Hanna): I support the motion. Areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs) are of vital importance to us for a number of reasons and deserve stringent legislation to protect them from destruction or neglect.

Northern Ireland is just beginning to develop its potential as a tourist destination. It is important to preserve the natural and environmental resource of our landscape so as to promote a beautiful place to visit. We must see our landscape, habitats and wildlife as assets to tourism and our unspoilt countryside as a marketable resource. For ourselves, it is important to be able to enjoy the unique surroundings that we are lucky enough to have virtually on our doorstep.

An Ulster marketing survey in 1997 showed that 60% of the population regarded the quality of the countryside as one of the most important aspects of the quality of life in Northern Ireland. It is a shame, then, that these ASSIs have been damaged, intentionally or through neglect. We have the opportunity to give these sites the legislative protection they urgently need before irreparable damage is done. Biodiversity can be lost very quickly, and cannot be recreated.

The sites were designated, as has already been said, under 1985 legislation. With the passing of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 across the water, our laws have fallen even further behind. We should be striving to meet EC Directive standards and, where possible, surpass them.

I would like to highlight a few points that are worthy of serious consideration. The management of these sites must involve a range of partnerships — all those who have an interest in the protection of the environment. The Minister of the Environment has said that he will consult widely with farmers' representatives, landowners, recreation and tourism bodies and district councils. I hope that this spirit of partnership will be a common thread through all issues concerning the management of these sites.

I am also concerned that any site's condition should be systematically monitored, so that far more data can be gathered about the sites — particularly for poorly known species. More surveys should be conducted of habitats such as rivers, unimproved grasslands, and the coast.

Finally, it is important that any legislation we introduce has swift and robust enforcement procedures when damage does occur. We need suitable deterrents for those who would recklessly endanger valuable habitats.

11.00 am

Naturally the measures outlined — management of ASSIs, further surveys and data collection, enforcement and legislation — will need greater resources than has previously been the case. I hope that the Minister will heed the concerns expressed inside and outside the Chamber, and will make the protection of our natural heritage a priority for his Department.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The timetable for this debate is roughly two hours, including the speech by the Minister and the winding-up speech by Ms Morrice. Therefore five minutes will be set aside for each of the other 16 Members.

Mrs Carson: I welcome the debate, but I must ask Members not to welcome too effusively the proposals that have been brought forward in the rest of the UK.

I want to paint a little bit of the background to the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which came onto the statute books on 30 November 2000 for England and Wales. The Act was a direct result of Michael Meacher's declaration on 8 March 1999 of new Labour's commitment to give people greater freedom to explore the countryside. Without more precise information to the public this Act could turn out to be a trespasser's charter. The Labour Government are hailing the right to roam as a democratisation of the countryside. However, they have to accept that the rights of the many must not prejudice the rights of the few.

The Countryside Agency in England and the Countryside Council for Wales, which have responsibility for implementing the Act, admit that a massive education programme is required to understand it. The agencies also have what they call "the minor problem of funding". The Countryside and Rights of Way Act includes protection for ASSIs and areas of outstanding natural beauty, with tough penalties for owners or occupiers damaging the sites. Some related problems were resolved during the Act's passage at Westminster. For example, tougher action will be taken against the use of illegal vehicles such as quad bikes in the countryside. That is a problem that is occurring here. Landowners were pleased that they were no longer liable for accidents involving natural land features.

Unfortunately many issues remain unresolved, including the definition and enforcement of trespass, the definition of the terms "moor", "heathland", "down", "mountain" and also the problem of communication about the Act and enforcement of the Act. The issues of wardening and policing the Act remain to be sorted out too, and there is also the big problem of funding.

The Labour Government have been so eager to implement one of their manifesto promises that the Act in GB has become law with incomplete research, misunderstandings and without any thought as to the minutiae of how to make it work. It is not enough for the proposers of the motion — and we are all keen to preserve our countryside — to ask the Minister of the Environment to note parts of the enactment covering ASSIs. Positive management and tougher penalties mentioned in the Act are adequate, but in Northern Ireland we need to ensure that Environment and Heritage Service personnel will be deployed in sufficient numbers to inspect sites on a systematic basis to ensure the protection of these sites. It is no use designating sites without some form of policing and protection.

In Northern Ireland, we have the opportunity to avoid the mistakes that have been made in England and Wales before we put anything on our statute books. I await with interest the Department of the Environment's proposals

and consultation with other bodies. The Assembly can then decide if those proposals are competent for the protection of our areas of outstanding natural beauty and special scientific interest. We can then take the appropriate action to make firm legislation to preserve our threatened sites.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I would like to see the legislation brought up to date. The Countryside and Rights of Way Bill should be given priority in order to bring the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 up to date.

In south Down, you will find the eastern Mourne, Murlough, Carlingford, Rostrevor woods, the Quoile and Strangford. There are many instances of these sites being damaged, or suffering neglect due to the lack of more positive measures for their protection. As they are so important to our present and future enjoyment of wildlife and the environment and for the tourist industry, I urge all Members to support the motion and ask that legislation be brought up to the same standard as that in the rest of Ireland.

The Burren area in County Clare, for example, is recognised worldwide as an area of outstanding natural beauty. The wildlife there — and the whole area — are protected under that Government's legislation.

If one wanders around our very important sites, one can see that wildlife has been reduced to an appalling standard. As the proposer said, the hare has totally disappeared from the scene, together with a lot of other wildlife.

Finally, the old song asked "Where have all the flowers gone?" I ask "Where has all the wildlife gone?" Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr Ford: I support the motion and commend Jane Morrice for bringing it forward. I also commend the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and its members for the extremely effective lobbying operation, which has been carried out on many of us. I knew, from Eileen Bell, how many letters were being sent out in North Down, as I am sure you did also, Mr Deputy Speaker. I can assure Jane Morrice and you that a similar number have been issued to Members in South Antrim. I hope they have received a positive response from the six of us.

It has already been said that we, in Northern Ireland, are dependent on legislation dating from 1985. We are not only 15 years behind; we are rather more than a legislative cycle behind. This is because the 1985 legislation, which applied to us, was already out of date by the standards of the English and Welsh legislation before the introduction of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) last year. There is a serious need to ensure that we update that legislation. I do not care whether Mick Murphy wants the legislation to be to the same standard as the rest of Ireland or if other Members want it to be to the same standard as the rest of the UK. It is

time that Northern Ireland's environment was protected to the highest standards in Europe.

The problems have been well highlighted. I would like to look at the responsibilities of the Department and the opportunities it now has. Prior to devolution, the DOE was the "Department of Everything". That meant that it was the department of polluters like the Roads Service and Water Service, as well as those who policed that pollution. We now have a great opportunity within the new structure because although small in terms of budget and staffing, the Department of the Environment is very significant in terms of its impact on policy across all the other Departments, and on the future of the people and the environment of Northern Ireland.

The Department must take its responsibility seriously and take the lead on, for example, the biodiversity strategy. Related issues include ASSIs, which are the topic of this debate, and planning policies, in relation to which the Department needs to be more proactive on environmental issues. The conservation of individual species is another important issue, and reference was made earlier to the corncrake and the Irish hare. The case of the corncrake is a classic example of a matter on which the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has finally got its act together. The EHS, in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture and organisations such as the RSPB, took action just in time to preside over the last surviving corncrakes on the mainland of Northern Ireland. The number of corncrakes has been reduced to a small population in Donegal with, perhaps, a few survivors on Rathlin Island, if we are lucky.

Members will be astounded, as was the Environment Committee, to learn that, although the Irish hare is a protected species, the EHS still licenses the catching of hares for coursing. Coursing is now "supposedly" welfare friendly — I deliberately enclose the word "supposedly" in quotation marks — and the hares are chased by muzzled greyhounds. The hares are still injured by the hounds and captured in a way that must create a degree of trauma, which casts great doubt over whether they will be able to breed in future, even when released back into the wild. The Department has, so far, failed to explain its position to the Committee, and it must do so.

This year a bizarre situation arose in which hares, which had been caught on Rathlin Island, were not allowed to be released back to the island, because the EHS were not sure which two hares came from Rathlin. Therefore biodiversity on Rathlin Island is suffering because licensing is being permitted by the DOE. The Department should have a clear focus on its duties in the field of biodiversity, but there has been a considerable degree of confusion in its behaviour. Meanwhile, some designated ASSIs are being lost and, in many cases, damaged. In addition, new designations, which were being made quite speedily some years ago, are now taking much longer.

No doubt, the Minister, within his brief prepared by the Civil Service, will have answers to some of these points. He will tell us about the shortage of staff, the need to upgrade the legislation, his hope that there will be movement in the next year or two, and the additional resources, which he has obtained from the Department of Finance and Personnel. Will he do something radical and dynamic — will he tear up that brief? Will he stand up and give us a real commitment to instituting consultation? The papers will soon be ready for consultation. Will he get on with that process and make a commitment that, as soon as the consultation is complete, there will be legislation immediately? Will he go to the Executive and tell them that biodiversity is important and that his Department has to take the lead on that? And will he come back to the Assembly with legislation, rather than a mere promise, at the earliest possible date?

Mr C Wilson: I support most of the comments made by Ms Morrice. I am going to focus specifically on the north Down and Strangford Lough areas. Ms Morrice referred justly to some of the difficulties that exist in her area of north Down. At the recent launch of the 'North Down and Ards Area Consultation Document 2015', a senior planning officer described Strangford Lough and the Ards Peninsula as "the undiscovered jewel". He highlighted the potential for the future development of tourism in the area for those who have not yet discovered the beauty of Strangford Lough. He went on to say that they had to take great care when looking at the future development of the area to avoid killing the goose that laid the golden egg.

11.15 am

When elected Members were invited to comment upon the consultation process I took the opportunity to say that while the goose may be still alive, it has certainly been well plucked and continues to be denuded on a daily basis. The sad fact is that the consultation document for north Down and Ards is really a nonsense. From Portaferry to Donaghadee, from Portaferry to Greyabbey and to Newtownards, and from Comber down to Strangford village itself, wholesale and uncontrolled development is at this moment destroying the beauty of the Strangford area. I see little sense in designating areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs) or areas of outstanding scenic beauty in Northern Ireland at the moment. Despite the current consultation process which allows elected representatives to plan the protection of our environment, disgraceful planning decisions are being made in many areas.

It amounts to wholesale destruction of the environment, under the authority and with the permission of the Department of the Environment's Planning Service. Again, the fact that large housing schemes are currently being approved from Portaferry up the entire length and on both sides of the peninsula makes a nonsense of the consultation process. The single largest development of

any area in Northern Ireland is under way in the village of Ballyhalbert. It will provide 1,300 dwellings.

How are the Department of the Environment's Planning Service and Roads Service going to protect the very delicate nature and balance of the environment in Strangford Lough, if they continue to allow self-certification by builders? This problem is giving rise to the wholesale conversion of caravan parks to large-scale housing developments throughout the Province. This is totally out of kilter with the aims of the consultation process and will destroy any opportunity we have to protect the environment.

This is not a matter of personal interest. I am not saying "We need more housing, but not in my backyard." I want proper thought given to development, and decisions to be taken that will have the least impact on the environment; decisions that will be sustainable.

In addition to our problem of a delicate roads infrastructure which cannot deal with this increase, we face the difficulty of raw sewage being pumped out onto the beaches. Because of the increase in development, sewage is issuing from Donaghadee and towns along that part of the coast and polluting the waters of Strangford Lough and the sea in areas like Greyabbey.

There should be a moratorium on major housing schemes, particularly in the Strangford area, until consultation has taken place and the Planning Service has taken on board the very real concerns of the residents of north Down and the Strangford area.

Mr Douglas: I will support any motion seeking to press for the enhancement and protection of our countryside where many people enjoy leisure time. Where areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs) are properly managed in agreement with landowners, the designation is a very appropriate way in which to manage our natural heritage.

In my constituency of East Londonderry, various areas are designated ASSIs — Magilligan, the Bann estuary, Lough Foyle and Banagher Glen are examples. The Department of the Environment has worked with the landowners in these areas to develop a management plan or to purchase, as appropriate, certain portions of land. These areas are of great importance to wildlife, and none more so than the area nearest to my home, Banagher Glen, which is one of the oldest naturally regenerated woodlands in the whole of Ireland. The site is virtually unusable for farming and is inaccessible.

The designation of Banagher Glen as an ASSI did not impact greatly on the landowners, and they were happy to participate in the scheme. My only proviso concerns access. Over the years the Department of the Environment and other Government agencies have dragged their feet in giving the public access to Banagher Glen. I speak of an area that I know well, and there are probably many other such areas around the Province where the same

applies. Therefore, I ask that before any privately owned land is designated as an ASSI, Government agencies promote, encourage and strengthen these designations.

Are landowners protected if someone proceeds onto their land, which is either a designated ASSI or provides access to an ASSI? If someone is injured, are the landowners or their insurers responsible for any claims? Will the Department of the Environment legislate to ensure that injured persons are covered by the Department or by some authority or scheme? Under any new legislation landowners must be protected from any liability for damages claimed by someone who is injured on their property. Under a management agreement landowners must be adequately compensated for their land, and they should receive proper recompense for loss of income.

We must also have adequate controls on third-party issues relating to damage caused by people who enjoy these ASSIs and who may even police them. Some form of compensation for damage must be written into any proposed legislation.

The questions I have raised must be properly answered before I can give wholehearted support to further legislation to protect ASSIs. I appreciate fully the wealth of plant life and wildlife in these areas, and most of the points made by the proposer are sound and rational. If my points can be adequately addressed, I will welcome such legislation.

Mr J Wilson: Although I will not be able to support the motion, and I will outline my reasons, I support much of the sentiment behind it. I commend the Women's Coalition for tabling the motion for it is time we debated environmental protection and it is time to stop the rot.

We are being invited to consider an Act of Parliament whose application is confined to England and Wales. We can and will make our own decisions on whether we replicate any of it with legislation in Northern Ireland.

I believe firmly that we need to do much more to protect the rural environment and the wildlife habitat, but I also believe that the Countryside and Rights of Way Act should not be cloned for this process.

It is a deeply flawed piece of legislation, and it received a mixed reception in rural areas. It had a stormy passage through Parliament before the Government's urban majority forced it through. One of its main flaws was to put the two rather different and vexed issues of access to the countryside and protection of the countryside together in the same legislation. The framers of the Bill failed to understand how stewardship of the countryside — a largely voluntary and unrewarded activity — works.

Northern Ireland's land ownership structure is different from England's. Moreover, the proportion of cultivated land is higher here, although that could be reduced gradually in a way that could help farmers diversify and

contribute to repairing some of the extensive damage already done to our wildlife habitat.

While the Department of the Environment has guidelines and regulations that appear to protect the natural environment, those are honoured much more in the breach than in the observance. While environmental protection standards in the rest of the UK are undemanding compared with those of many of our European neighbours, the situation is even more lax in Northern Ireland. Visitors to Northern Ireland who have an interest in these matters are frequently appalled by what is permitted.

I was told recently that more planning applications for new single rural dwellings are given in Northern Ireland each year than in the whole of England. If this is true, it is no wonder that our countryside is disappearing so rapidly. With ASSIs, it appears that exceptions are the rule. Environmentally damaging activities occur frequently, with little or no redress.

The Planning Service lives in fear of what appear to be battalions of sharp lawyers retained by developers to bully the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC). The problem stems from a presumption in favour of development. That lies at the heart of the regulations.

If we are serious about protecting our environment then I urge the Minister, as a matter of urgency, to revise the planning regulations so that the balance tilts heavily towards the conservation of wildlife habitat and away from what appears to be almost indiscriminate development.

Tourism is an industry that should have considerable growth potential in Northern Ireland. If we continue in this way there will be no untarnished landscape left for tourists to enjoy.

Members know that I am considerably interested in angling. While improving the habitat for fish in our river system falls outside the scope of the debate, the issue also requires urgent and serious consideration if we are to address environmental issues properly.

Monumentally bad decisions by the Planning Service during direct rule have done serious damage to our countryside. I say "monumentally" because I could show examples of bad planning monuments in the countryside where I live. They are not tourist attractions. A carbon copy of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 will not bring about the change needed. However, change there must be, as the Minister, Mr Foster, knows. I appeal to him not to consider the Countryside and Rights of Way Act as a solution to Northern Ireland's problems and seek to implement it here.

Mr A Doherty: I recommend support for the motion, particularly since it seeks to augment the work already set in motion by the Environment Committee. As the Chairperson said, the Committee has actively engaged with the Department on this matter since November, when I drew attention to concerns expressed by members

of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and others.

Support for the motion should not be taken as criticism of the Department or of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS). Much good work is already being done and if time allowed I could provide some details. However, I am sure the Minister will not miss the opportunity to reassure us of the Department's good intentions.

11.30 am

The motion is timely. The Department has acknowledged that there are a number of weaknesses in the present ASSI legislation, but it has yet to establish a firm, timetabled action plan. In its response to the Environment Committee's initial enquiries, the Department said that it intended to begin the ASSI consultation process "in the near future". The motion may encourage the development of a more precise programme in the very near future.

The motion refers specifically to areas of special scientific interest, but the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 goes much further than that. It is worth reflecting on the intentions and consequences of the Act. In a press release dated 13 June 2000, the UK Environment Minister said

"We want AONBs to be recognised for their national importance and the enjoyment they provide for many visitors. We must also ensure the full involvement of local people, those who live and work in the Areas or manage the land. These measures will improve the conservation and management of AONBs, boosting their role as part of our living countryside. We will continue to ensure that Government funding is available to work alongside local authorities in managing AONBs in partnership."

We should note the reference to the importance of partnership in the development of management. We should also note the promise of Government funding. Mr Meacher referred to the almost threefold increase in funding over three years, from £2.1 million to £5.9 million. Can our Minister give an equivalent guarantee that adequate funding will be available?

The legislation that is necessary to ensure that desired objectives are met must strike a balance between several competing rights and responsibilities. I have the privilege of living in Magilligan on the north coast. It is an area of outstanding natural beauty with a number of coastal and highland ASSIs. I appreciate the need for legislation to protect sensitive habitats and rights of access, and to ensure effective action against anyone who abuses or damages protected areas. However, we must remember that all land will be in public or — more likely — private ownership and that, therefore, legislation must also protect the rights of landowners to proper use of their land.

The farming community has many concerns that require our sympathetic consideration. Some of those concerns were expressed last July in the Ulster Farmers' Union's comprehensive reply to the European Commission on

the subject of environmental liability. Paragraph 23 of its response urged the Commission to

"ensure that the Natura 2000 sites are designated and established prior to the implementation of an environmental liability regime. It would be unacceptable to impose a liability scheme dealing with damage to biodiversity while the sites are still in the process of being proposed and agreed."

I am sure that the Minister will take account of such concerns and that he will agree to take a staged approach to amending legislation to ensure that similar anomalies do not occur. That would be in accord with the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which has "rural proofed" policy, notwithstanding some of the reservations that have been expressed. That point was made by Ewen Cameron, chairman of the Countryside Agency in a speech delivered on 18 January 2000. He warned that both local and central government must take greater account of the needs of rural areas and populations when drawing up policies:

"For too long, the Departments of State have developed their policies and initiatives from the perspective of the majority who live in towns. It is extremely heartening that the Government... is committing itself to encouraging a more inclusive approach. By working together, across the political spectrum, to improve the understanding of rural problems and opportunities, I am certain we can make a long-term difference to those who live and work in the countryside, as well as those who visit."

Mr Wells: I support the motion. We are extremely fortunate to have some of the jewels of United Kingdom wildlife in the Province. Rathlin Island is an outstanding area for its seabird colonies, maritime heathland and high density of nesting birds of prey. Strangford Lough, some of which lies in my own constituency is internationally important for several species of waterfowl, including the brent goose and knot. Of course, no debate would be complete without a mention of west Tyrone and the raised bogs in the Fairy Water area near Omagh. We have some outstanding habitats, and they are in urgent need of protection and conservation.

I was heavily involved in the consultation process on the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and on the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. Indeed, I hold the dubious distinction of having suffered the heaviest defeat ever inflicted at Stormont when I moved an amendment to that legislation, which lost by 56 votes to one. Things are getting better. In those days I was a voice in the wilderness. That is why it is so encouraging today to hear so many people supporting what I was saying 15 to 16 years ago.

What appals me is that the legislation giving the Department power to designate areas of special scientific interest (ASSI) came in 15 years ago, and we have still not completed the designation of all potential ASSIs in Northern Ireland. One hundred and seventy-nine have been designated, but at least another 50 are in the pipeline. I have to ask why it has taken 15 years and we still have not completed the process. There is absolutely no protection for habitats that are not declared ASSIs.

An enormous amount of damage is going on throughout the countryside and it is a worrying situation. I agree with Mr Jim Wilson when he says that we should not automatically duplicate the CROW Bill by simply tweaking it to suit the Northern Ireland situation. If he wants stronger legislation, then I say “Hear, hear” to that. I guarantee that I will be 100% behind even stronger legislation if that is the basis of his opposition.

We must have something on the table urgently. I ask the Minister to unshackle himself from his minders in the Department. I ask him to stand up here today and say “I am taking this matter by the throat, and I am bringing forward this legislation immediately so it can be discussed and debated by this House, the Committee and the general public.” I do not know about other hon Members, but I have received a large number of letters from individuals throughout south Down — from some of the most surprising sources, I must say — who are deeply concerned about this issue and want us to act now. This is one of those measures where we, as an Assembly, can act in unison and come forward with something that all of the public will agree with.

I am deeply concerned that the present legislation is entirely negative in character when it comes to ASSIs. The Department tells individual landowners what they cannot do. There are good reasons for that, but I would like to see much more in the way of positive management agreements — a partnership — between landowners and the Department to protect these outstanding areas. I am also deeply concerned about the amount of third party damage to ASSIs throughout Northern Ireland.

How often have you driven down the roads in Counties Down and Armagh and seen small inter-drumlin wetlands being destroyed as a result of infilling by waste and rubble, and by other materials being dumped in these areas? The reality is that many of these sites do not, in their own right, have sufficient merit to be designated ASSIs, but taken together they are of inestimable importance to wildlife in Northern Ireland. One by one they are being ticked off as builders basically dump rubble and destroy them. That is a sad aspect of what is going on in Northern Ireland at present.

We must also introduce legislation that protects the wider countryside. ASSIs, even if they are all designated, protected and managed, will cover only 7% to 8% of the land surface of Northern Ireland. That still means that approximately 93% is left totally unprotected. We need to introduce policies that will protect the wider countryside. There are many species, such as the Irish hare, which will not be protected simply by the designation of ASSIs.

What would best come out of this debate would be for the Minister to give us a firm commitment on the date when the equivalent legislation to the CROW Bill will be tabled to the Environment Committee. We have

raised this issue many times with the Department, and it has hidden behind words such as “We have plans to introduce”. We want a date, and we want a date this morning. When will the matter come before the Assembly?

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Each of us can testify that this island is remarkably endowed with special conservation areas or areas of special scientific interest. Each of us can also testify to the level of interest. This is becoming a pressing issue. To some extent public opinion is in advance of the opinion of the Department and, thus far, the response of the Minister.

I urge support for the motion. I urge Members to consider the various ways in which we can promote the application of amending or new legislation to bring the Six Counties up to the same standards of protection as those enjoyed by other areas on this island or in Britain itself, or on offer through compliance with European Directives.

The issue is before us, and we must address the culture of complacency and lack of accountability in respect of this matter that has developed over the direct rule period. It has to be welcomed that the Environment Committee, of which I am a member, is already addressing this issue. The Minister will find that very strong representations will be made there. It is not beyond the Committee’s ability to devise its own legislation or its own legislative proposal on the matter.

Either way, it will have to come before the Assembly for action. This situation demands that remedial action be taken urgently. It is not as if experience elsewhere cannot be applied here; it is not as if the templates do not exist; it is a question of resources and of the necessary prioritisation.

There is a precedent of convergence of views and cross-party support. The only Act that the Nationalist Party got through the old Stormont Government was the Wild Birds Protection Act 1931. We should consider that as a very useful and welcome precedent and see what we can do for society today. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr Davis: The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 was controversial when it was debated at Westminster. The Act, which comes into force at the end of this month, changes relationships between landowners and the public and, in particular, those who like to roam on open land.

The situation in Northern Ireland is not identical to that in England and Wales — where the Act applies. Northern Ireland’s land law has evolved in a different way from that in England and Wales. In the early part of the last century, many of the great landed estates in Ireland were broken up, and tenant farmers became the freehold owners of their lands.

Farms in Northern Ireland are mainly small, rural and family-owned. Although many farmers will rent land, this is usually done on an annual basis. In this context, the question of roaming over areas of mountain, moor, heath and down, as the English Act describes, does not apply in Northern Ireland in the same sense as it would in England and Wales.

The term “registered common land” is unknown in Northern Ireland and reflects a time in English history when certain areas were retained for the use of the people, in contrast to the rights of those who occupied the manor house.

At some stage the Assembly may have to examine the right-to-roam situation in Northern Ireland, but at this point I am not aware of any general feeling of public deprivation as regards rights over open land.

11.45 am

In my constituency — Lagan Valley — it is possible to roam in many areas of outstanding beauty. The Lagan Valley regional park is an open area that welcomes the public, and future development of the Lagan corridor will further enhance its amenities. The Belfast hills are an area of high scenic quality. The Dromara hills lie to the south, just outside my constituency. The Mourne Mountains lie further afield. The whole of Northern Ireland is blessed with excellent areas for walking and recreation. The public is reasonably relaxed about the current situation. If demand for a change in the law should grow, we should tread carefully so as not to damage the good relationships that currently exist between those who own the land and those who wish to ramble.

In 1999 the environmental policy division of the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland issued a discussion paper on access to Northern Ireland's countryside. The paper raised a number of questions about the future of access and asked for comments. It pointed out that the Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 placed responsibility for the care and maintenance of countryside access with district councils. Under the Order, councils were permitted to appoint a countryside officer, and many have done so. Many have prepared and are preparing an access strategy or countryside recreation strategy for their area.

In this context, the widest possible consultation should take place before any motion is put to the House to bring forward changes. There are many matters to be resolved. The question of occupiers' liability is of great importance. The right of landlords to have protection for their livestock and crops must be to the forefront, and the possibility of damage to the environment must be monitored.

The second part of the motion refers to Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs). The CROW Act provides for greater protection of these sites to prevent damage, to provide positive management of the sites, and to enhance

their status. In Northern Ireland, the Planning Service is responsible for the treatment of ASSIs. Present controls for ASSIs may be adequate, but the issue should be examined by the Planning Service when a full review of planning takes place.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. My reading of the motion is that it refers to the protection of ASSIs. The speeches made by the proposer and most other Members have been about the protection of ASSIs. Is it in order for the members of one party to talk about a matter which is not the subject of the motion (several of them at great length) — namely, the right to roam and access to the countryside? This is not referred to in the substance of the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I note your point. It might be wise for Members to adhere more strictly to the terms of the motion.

Mr Bradley: Mr Deputy Speaker, I note your previous comment and apologise at the outset. I cannot stick to that, because I will follow the same themes expressed by other Members who have concerns.

First, I want to confirm my full and absolute support for the protection of flora and fauna and the countryside's physical features. However, I have concerns. Only yesterday, it was clearly stated in the House that animal diseases can be spread by pedestrians going from farm to farm. There is every reason to believe that that is a real possibility. Indeed, some farmers are still in the habit of providing disinfectant trays at the entrance to their farms for casual visitors. There is a widespread concern that must be addressed.

I fear that the Assembly is seeking to introduce legislation that will provide more rights to the general public than to landowners themselves. I own a small plot of land in an area of special scientific interest (ASSI). If Members think that they receive a lot of bumf from the Assembly about the Committees that they are on, they should see the correspondence that one receives about ASSIs. There are mountains of rules and regulations.

It has got to the stage where one can hardly look at the land, never mind go onto it. With that in mind, I would just say that the rules should be for everyone. If directives are laid down to protect an ASSI, the restrictions should apply to the landowners and public alike — there should be no difference. I am sure that the Committee and the Minister are fully aware of these points.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Bradley, may I interrupt for a moment. I have taken some advice on answering Mr Ford's point, and I understand that the right of access and the right to roam are included in the Act referred to. It is therefore proper for those matters to be mentioned in the House.

Mr Bradley: I agree with Mrs Carson and Mr Douglas, who referred to the issues of access and trespass.

The Committee and Minister will have to take those matters on board in future — there is no doubt about that.

I often wonder what level of reciprocation those who so energetically promote access to the countryside have in mind. Do they foresee the day when farmers and rural residents will be permitted to walk unchallenged through the gardens and lawns of north Down, for example, to admire the beauty within? We have heard about natural beauty. Is it planned to allow a farmer just to walk through a garden because it has beauty? Is that all part of their intention for the future? My closing words to those who are drawing up the legislation are “Tread carefully.”

Mr Gibson: First of all, I thank the proposer of the motion. Bearing in mind Mr Ford’s warning about ASSIs, I will use the term “special areas of conservation” (SACs), as designated by the European Directive. In June last year the Minister wisely introduced 23 of those, making a total of 43 such designated areas in Northern Ireland.

I have three simple points. First, a number of people have quite rightly highlighted the rights of the current owners of property and, as Mr Wells has pointed out, the negative approach of some of the former Executive legislation. There is now an opportunity to achieve co-operation — for those who own the property and the lands, and those who own the turbary, to join with the Department in a form of eco-management.

It is very important that we now move on from the negative attitudes of 15 to 20 years ago into a new era of assisting those who own the land to form a new partnership in eco-farming, using the environment as a proper resource asset. Not only is it then protected, but it is managed and controlled. Bearing in mind that this is an environmental heritage that is ours to protect, it is not only ours to share but ours to care. Therefore it is very important that the Minister take on board that it is a golden opportunity, as part of the consultation, to make sure that there is a partnership involved, and that it is not negative as in the “Thou shall not”s of the past.

My second point concerns the issue of being able to share with those on the outside who wish to use, view, and enhance their own professional education in, the habitat that we have, with its varieties of fauna and flora. That has to be managed so that there is not abuse. However, we live in an age of litigation — people have become quite skilled at it — so those who own and manage land have got to be protected. That has been a concern in other areas — not just in eco-tourism, but in ordinary tourism where the right of the owner is challenged.

One good measure that was introduced by the Department of Agriculture was community forestry. However, that hit the buffers. Even though many farmers were willing to join and restore the natural forestry that once existed here, it was community forestry and other people had the right of access. Therefore the danger of litigation to the landowners became a threat. That threat

stopped community forestry almost before it began — it was a stillborn idea.

I have heard about the difficulties of concrete jungles and the great haciendas that are being built on the Ards Peninsula. May I refer you to the unspoilt beauty of West Tyrone. It is an objective of the Habitat Directive of Europe that raised bogs be treated as a priority. I advocate that Crannagh Bog, Tully Bog and Tonaghbeg Bog — a group of raised bogs designated as ASSIs — become SACs. I also suggest that the Fairy Water SAC be extended to bring in Lough Envagh, the waterhills around Envagh and Ernasculpath raised bogs.

West Tyrone is rich in raised bogs, but they are now becoming a rare and important asset. The landowners have been careful about that. Bearing in mind that the present landowners have been the best caretakers of much of that rich heritage in the environmental sphere, I, as other Members have done, warn the Minister that the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 is not necessarily the legislation to use. However, I am sure that the Minister and the Department have enough ingenuity to draft legislation that will preserve an excellent heritage that we have every right to be proud of.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We are running short of time, so to give sufficient time to the Minister and the proposer, Ms Morrice, I will call just one more Member. I am sorry to disappoint two or three Members who wanted to speak, but we have run out of time.

Dr Adamson: In appreciation of yesterday’s being as the Chinese New Year, may I say “Dor tse”, which is Cantonese for “Thank you”.

Mr Kennedy: We will take your word for that.

Dr Adamson: You can look it up.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You speak Cantonese as well as your other languages.

Dr Adamson: Yes, a little.

As an Irish peasant born and reared in Conlig, Co Down — near Jane Morrice’s Bangor — I have great pleasure in speaking on the motion from a cultural viewpoint.

The countryside, with its beauty, traditions and lore, was the inspiration of our finest poets — the Ulster Weaver poets of the 1790s and early 1800s, who have given us a unique heritage. They were educated in Latin and Greek and achieved a higher level of culture than any section of the peasantry in western Europe.

They were not merely writing in appreciation of Robert Burns, whom we celebrate this week, but they belong to a tradition which went back to Allan Ramsay and beyond, in Scotland. From my own family came Uncle Ned — Edward Sloan, the bard of Conlig — but the most widely acclaimed of the Ulster poets was James Orr of Ballycarry, which is near the Ulster Unionist Party’s Chief Whip’s residence.

Like my ancestor, Archibald Wilson, James Orr was a radical thinker, patriot, United Irishman, New Light Presbyterian, and a humanist with a penetrating social concern for the poor. He was a contented weaver and a small farmer who never sought social elevation. Until his death, he continued to speak the Braid Scotch that we now know as Ulster-Scots. Archibald, my ancestor, was hanged outside our village for his part in the rebellion. My grandmother said that it served him right for entering politics. However, Orr survived and went on to write great poetry. In 'Rhyming Weavers' my old friend the late John Hewitt described some of Orr's poems as being far beyond the capacity of any of our other rural rhymers. Two of his poems, 'The Penitent' and 'The Irish Cottier's Death and Burial', can undoubtedly be described as major successes of our vernacular literature.

12.00

Mr S Wilson: Is a rural rhymmer one of the rare birds that we were talking about?

Dr Adamson: They are getting rarer now.

The works of Orr provide us with the richest information that we have about social customs, traditions and everyday living in the Ulster countryside. Many of Orr's works are light-hearted and are intended to entertain rather than educate. My favourite is 'The Ode to the Potatoe' — "potatoe" is, of course, spelt with an "e", as it should be, although such spelling ruined a political career in America. The greatest export brought by the Ulster-Scots to America, apart from their music, was the potato. I shall read a couple of verses of his poem:

"Sweet to the badger, aft a lander
At day-light-gaun, thou'rt on the brander,
Brown skin't, an birslet. Nane are fander
To hear thee crisp,
Ere in some neuk, wi' goose and gander
He share the wisp.

The weel-pair't peasants, kempin', set ye;
The weak wee boys, sho'el, weed, an' pat ye;
The auld guid men thy apples get ay
Seedlin's to raise;
An' on sow'n-seeves the lasses grate ye,
To starch their claes."

Such poems form one of the finest records of the beauty of our countryside.

Thomas Beggs, another well-known folk poet, who was born in Glenwirry in 1789, called Orr "the Shakespeare of the plebeian train". Although many of his relatives were poor in material things, they had the rich resource of the countryside to sustain them. We must use every means in our power to nurture and protect that countryside.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have covered a lot of ground, Dr Adamson.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): How can I follow that? The doctor is getting better as he matures. It is good that he has brought some lightness to

what is an important subject. Many Members have put a great deal into our debate, and I welcome that. Indeed, the debate is very timely.

It is funny that there are different perspectives from across the Province. In Fermanagh, ASSIs are not popular at all, and people see them as a further planning obstacle. Opinions differ from one part of the world to the other. With regard to development, I have heard the cynical remark that a developer is someone who seeks a house in the woods, and a conservationist is somebody who has a house in the woods. I welcome the opportunity to outline to the Assembly what my Department has done and what it plans to do with regard to ASSIs. Before doing so, I shall set out the wider context.

As Minister of the Environment, I have as one of my main aims the promotion of a more sustainable way of living in Northern Ireland. Learning to make wiser use of our natural resources, including our countryside and wildlife, is an important part of that. We must try to meet our environmental, social and economic needs without harming the prospects for future generations. As the Executive have recognized, that is one of the keys to a more secure and prosperous future for the community.

We all enjoy the natural heritage that we have here. We all know of the quality of our countryside and the richness of its wildlife. The problem is that it is so easy to take such resources for granted and to underestimate the threats that they face, until it is too late and the damage has been done. I know that many people share my view of the importance of that heritage. For example, last autumn the biodiversity group produced a wide-ranging report on measures that should be taken to protect the variety of species and habitats that we enjoy. Moreover, many public representatives, interest groups and individuals have asked me to look at our legislation on the protection and management of ASSIs.

Several Members have put down Assembly questions on this during the last few months. I have also received a lot of correspondence from interested bodies and members of the public. Let me set out how I and the Executive as a whole are responding to this.

First, I am grateful for the additional resources made available in the recent Budget for work on environmental protection and nature conservation. While a large part of those funds will go on dealing with matters such as pollution control and waste management, wildlife and habitats will also benefit from additional funds from the management of designated sites and from payments to landowners, voluntary bodies and district councils. These will enhance our ability to encourage good conservation management at these sites.

Secondly, we are committed to producing a Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy this year. In that respect the advice of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group is most

important. My officials will continue to take full account of the group's recommendations as it prepares that strategy.

Thirdly, my Department will continue to work closely with other Departments whose responsibilities have an important bearing on the natural environment. One important example is trying to integrate conservation into policies for the countryside and the rural environment.

Fourthly, there are a wide range of policies for which my Department is responsible which are contributing to a healthier countryside for both its people and its wildlife. It is important that we do not see the value of the natural environment only in terms of individual, rare species and small pockets of land which we preserve carefully, with everything in between being up for grabs. Maintaining and improving water quality, running educational programmes in country parks and working with other interested parties to look after major areas such as Strangford Lough and Lough Neagh are all part of this wider approach. In this there will continue to be an important role for protected areas, as is clearly seen by the proposers of this motion and by others who have spoken today.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 applies to England and Wales only. In relation to sites of special scientific interest and the protection of wildlife, the Act's provisions introduce new and enhanced powers to improve the protection and management of SSSIs in England and Wales — for example, the development of management schemes to combat neglect, an increase in penalties for deliberate damage and the ability to order restoration of the damage to SSSIs, the power to refuse consent for damaging activities, and the authority for officials to enter land to monitor sites. These new powers have been considered necessary because it is evident that a significant proportion of SSSIs in England and Wales are in an unfavourable condition. Therefore the new legislation will create conditions in which sites can be more effectively and positively managed. Owners and occupiers will benefit from clearer procedures. They will also have new rights of appeal against the actions of the conservation agencies.

The equivalent sites are known as areas of special scientific interest (ASSI) here. My officials have been telling me that we have been experiencing similar difficulties with our ASSIs. We think that there are weaknesses in the current legislation and that those weaknesses are similar to those in other parts of the United Kingdom. The present legislation does not allow us to take action against persons who are neither owners nor occupiers but who are nevertheless engaged in activities which are damaging to the sites — in other words, third parties. There is also evidence that some sites are deteriorating as a result of inadequate or inappropriate management. We accept that this is very difficult to address within the current legislation.

In some cases, where ASSIs have also been identified as special areas of conservation or special protection areas,

these difficulties are risking infringement of EC Directives. Consequently my officials have been working on a consultation paper on the protection and management of ASSIs. This paper raises a number of issues which I feel are crucially important to the safeguarding of these special places.

I am pleased to be able to announce to the Assembly that I will publish the consultation paper within the next few weeks. I am also considering, separately, if the Wildlife Order should be amended to strengthen the protection of certain species. I believe that the consultation paper on ASSIs will generate a constructive and wide-ranging debate on this important aspect of the conservation of our natural heritage.

Mr Wells: The Minister used the phrase “within the next few weeks”. Can he be more specific and tell us on what date he hopes to table this consultation document for the perusal of the Assembly?

Mr Foster: It is difficult to name an actual date, but I estimate that it will be within the next six weeks.

I am also considering separately whether or not the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 should be amended to strengthen the protection of certain species, as I said. I believe that the consultation paper on areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs) will generate a constructive and wide-ranging debate on this important aspect of the conservation of our natural heritage. I will be particularly looking for comments and responses from organisations representing landowners, farmers, fishermen, industry, environmentalists, recreational pursuits and many others, since I consider that we will achieve much more by working in partnerships.

The potential of partnerships as a way of achieving management is well illustrated by Ballynahone bog at Maghera, which I learnt about in the autumn. We set up a partnership to manage this national nature reserve, involving the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department and the Ulster Wildlife Trust. What pleases me most about this arrangement is the commitment shown to it by the third partner, the locally based Friends of Ballynahone Bog. Having successfully campaigned to save the bog, the Friends are not stepping aside but taking an active role in plans to look after it.

When we have considered the responses to the issues raised during the consultation I will make specific proposals for changes to the legislation and any changes required to current procedures. My objectives throughout this process will be to secure improvements in the procedures for notifying sites; to achieve better protection for sites from development operations which damage the special interests and from deliberate damage; to secure better management of designated sites by both public and private landowners; and to get better value for money from payments to landowners to protect and manage sites by requiring conservation benefits.

A few questions have been raised. I will try to answer some of them.

Dr McCrea referred to the resources of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS). An additional £2.5 million of programme money will be allocated to conservation and biodiversity, the management of designated sites, and meeting our obligations under European Directives. The EHS will also benefit from additional staff to do this work. In the coming year 12 new posts will be created in this area of work alone, and other new posts will be established in the relocated areas of pollution control and waste management.

Assembly Members Carson, Douglas, Wilson and Davis were worried about the provisions in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The consultation that I have announced will not include the access provisions. Responses to the 1999 consultation exercise on access to the countryside pointed up the importance of the issue of occupiers' liability. My Department, in conjunction with the Countryside Access and Activities Network, has commissioned a study into occupiers' liability as it pertains in Northern Ireland. The initial findings of that study will soon be circulated through the publication of a leaflet, and the consultant appointed will be holding two public seminars in the near future. My Department expects that a report on the public response to these findings will be published in June.

Assemblyman Ford was concerned about hare coursing. The regulation of hare coursing is a matter for the Department for Social Development, while permits to take live hares from the wild are issued by my Department. These permits are issued subject to certain conditions. Permission to take the hares must be obtained from the relevant landowners. The permit also requires that the hares be released back into the area from where they were taken. I am advised that there is no strong case for withholding permits on the grounds of conservation.

However, my Department recently published a biodiversity action plan for the Irish hare. This plan was put together with help from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Ulster Wildlife Trust. Although the number of hares has declined markedly in recent years, coursing is not identified in the plan as one of the principal threats to their survival. However, the plan does propose that the legislative protection of the Irish hare should be reviewed, and we will be looking at that over the next year.

Mr Ford: Will the Minister confirm that two hares were taken on Rathlin Island for last autumn's coursing and were not returned to the island, in contravention of the licence under which they were taken? They should be released back into the wild in the same area.

Mr Foster: Somebody reported at one time that 70 hares had been taken from Rathlin Island. I do not know where they got that from. I can confirm that two hares

were taken from Rathlin Island, but as I understand it — and I will confirm it — the two hares were returned. If I am wrong, I will give a written reply. Nevertheless, it is an important issue and I take the point.

12.15 pm

Mr Jim Wilson referred to planning control. He was very concerned about the need for better planning control to protect the countryside. That is a good point. I am determined to look at the implications of that for our planning control system.

Mr Savage: Is the Minister aware that there are fewer houses in the countryside now than there were 25 years ago?

Mr Foster: I am aware that there are concerns in parts of the country about the lack of housing in rural areas. Nevertheless, the number of houses that have been built throughout the countryside largely equates with that in other places. There is concern throughout the farming community about the problem of getting houses in rural areas. I have had that experience in my own county of Fermanagh.

Mr Arthur Doherty referred to European designations. He mentioned the designation of Natura 2000 European sites. These are designations that satisfy the EU Birds and Habitats Directives (79/409/EEC and 92/43/EEC). I am pleased to state that my Department is meeting its obligations under these Directives. Furthermore, sites that are being added to the Natura 2000 network are, in all cases, protected by underpinning ASSI declarations.

I have discussed what my Department is doing or is planning to do but, as with all the main environmental problems, the solution lies not in regulation alone but in actions by all sectors and, indeed, by society as a whole. We must acknowledge the value of the environment to ourselves and to succeeding generations. Each of us, as an individual, never mind whole sectors, can and should make a difference. We must work at it ourselves. All sectors — central and local government, the private and voluntary sectors — need to work together.

As I said in relation to Ballynahone Bog, the most effective initiatives will be those based on partnership between sectors. The work of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group in making its recommendations last year is another excellent example of this. As this debate shows, the interest of Members will continue to help both my officials and myself in developing our policy. Therefore I sincerely hope that everyone — not least this Assembly — will grasp the opportunity provided by the forthcoming consultation to develop the type of partnership approach, including all those involved in the management and use of our natural heritage, that will be so vital to our success. I am looking forward to hearing as wide a range of views as possible from those interested in caring for our natural heritage.

I welcome this debate and am pleased to have participated in it.

Ms Morrice: I thank the Minister for announcing that the consultation will take place within six weeks. Perhaps this debate has been a taster for that consultation. We have heard many interesting and different views from all parties, so it is certainly a forerunner to the consultation that the Minister will be carrying out. I look forward to the immediate enactment of legislation as a result of that consultation.

It may have been an oversight on my part not to outline the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 as it stands. I understood it to be two separate pieces of legislation. The Unionists, and Mr Bradley, were concerned about the right to roam and the issue of access. Mr Douglas also mentioned it. However, those were two separate pieces of legislation, which were put together simply for reasons of parliamentary procedure to get them through. The motion relates solely to the countryside element and to ASSIs. I am talking about equivalent protection. Any legislation that comes through to Northern Ireland will not include that access element. We are not asking for that.

The Committee Chairperson indicated that the Committee is looking at these issues and has been pressing the Minister to move on this. That is very useful to know. Obviously, through a concerted attempt from all of us, we are getting movement on this. He also mentioned the penalties for damaging ASSIs, and that is very important.

It is very appropriate that the Deputy Chairperson and Arthur Doherty mentioned the European context and the need to keep up to European standards, set by EC Directives and European designations. We need to keep up with those Directives and to enhance them. Northern Ireland has a very poor track record in bringing European Directives on-stream. I know from previous experience that Northern Ireland was lagging behind in the introduction of European legislation on environmental policy. We need to move very quickly on that.

Mrs Carson, Jim Wilson and Ivan Davis talked about the right to roam issue. I hope that I have dispelled any fears about that, allowing them to support the motion.

It was excellent that this motion allowed a number of Members to wax lyrical. I mention Mick Murphy from Sinn Féin and Ian Adamson. I am thankful for their contributions, for one side of the House was quoting Pete Seeger's "Where have all the flowers gone?", and the other side quoted every Ulster poet. It is a perfect opportunity — and totally correct — for lyricism to come into this rural rhyming.

Very interestingly, David Ford brought up the issue of hare coursing on Rathlin Island. I have been approached about that subject as well. I thank the Minister for responding to that and for adding his voice to the concerns.

Mr Ford also brought in the whole issue of the confusion in the Department. The Minister is really going to have to get to grips with the Department's roles and responsibilities with regard to roads, planning, protection of the environment, et cetera. As Mr Ford said, there is absolutely no doubt that, while in this Assembly we talk politics most of the time — or the politics of controversy, let us say — our constituents write to us, begging us to talk about issues which probably affect the Minister's Department more than any other Department in this Assembly. I get more questions about matters such as planning, transport and wildlife conservation than about any others. That should impress their importance upon the Minister and the Department.

Cedric Wilson brought up the vitally important issue of planning, and others referred to it — the erosion of the green belt and the areas which are being encroached upon by planning. If I am right, the Minister admits that better planning control is needed. That is certainly welcome, and we look forward to hearing positive, concrete proposals with regard to the very important issue of the consultation process on area plans, et cetera.

Each Member brought up different points on this issue. Mr Douglas talked about the cost of injury (for example, for people traversing these areas), landlord liability and — looking at it from the landlord's point of view — compensation for the land. The consultation process will bring in all elements, and I certainly welcome that.

I hope that I have not missed out any Members in my summing up. Mr McLaughlin and Mr Mick Murphy mentioned the need to ensure that standards of protection are equivalent — not just within the United Kingdom, including England and Wales, but within this island, these islands and Europe in general. That is a very important point.

I appreciated Mr McLaughlin's point relating to the only Act that Nationalists supported.

Mr McLaughlin: Succeeded in passing.

Ms Morrice: Succeeded in passing.

I refer to the Wild Birds Protection Act of 1931. That is also an important point.

Mr Gibson mentioned the fact that this is a golden opportunity. I wholeheartedly agree that the consultation process is a golden opportunity.

I conclude by stating that this debate is a superb example of people power. People, spurred on by the lobbying groups and the non-governmental organisations that protect the environment, wrote to their Assembly Members; those Members acted, and the Minister has given a commitment. That is an excellent example of the system's working speedily, for we are almost there.

Mr Wells is, unfortunately, not in the Chamber, but I appreciated his point about having attempted, some 15

years ago, to table a motion of this type but having no support. I say to Mr Wells that it is marvellous that we have all caught up with him now and are able to support this motion so many years later.

I talked about people power. In this two-hour debate today we have witnessed the normalisation of politics in Northern Ireland. It is not just people power that has worked today, but also bird power.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before putting the Question I remind Members that the mover withdrew references to access and the right to roam.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to note the enactment of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and calls for equivalent protection to be extended to areas of special scientific interest in Northern Ireland.

The sitting was suspended at 12.27 pm.

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

BSE

2.00 pm

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Has the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development asked to make a statement today on the BSE report from the European Union on Northern Ireland?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have no indication from the Minister that she intends to make a statement.

PUNISHMENT BEATINGS

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling Dr Paisley to move the motion, I want to make a comment about timing. At the Business Committee meeting this afternoon it was agreed that there will be no time restriction on either the proposer of the motion or the proposer of the amendment, but, owing to the substantial number of people who have indicated that they wish to speak, the Committee agreed that the time limit for other Members will be five minutes.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with grave concern the contents of the ‘Informal Criminal Justice Systems in Northern Ireland’ report on punishment beatings by paramilitary organisations; deplores and condemns the Government’s inadequate response to the report; and calls on the Government to bring forward measures to ensure those responsible are made amenable to the law.

I very much resent the curtailment of this debate. This is a matter of grave importance. It is a running sore in both communities, and, since we meet on only two days a week, we should surely take as much time as possible to deal with issues with which people are concerned. This is a matter of maiming, killing and crucifying people, and the time has surely come when this Assembly should order its business and remember the strength of the motions that are going before this House and the subjects that they are dealing with. To ask me to deal with this matter in 15 minutes is ridiculous, but to say to my Colleagues that they will get five minutes is absolutely outrageous.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There was no time restriction on yourself or the mover of the amendment. The other Members have five minutes.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: That is even more outrageous to the ordinary people in this Assembly. I will certainly do my best, because I want the Members to have an opportunity to speak, and I would like to hear what they have to say on this subject.

I welcome the report of the Economic and Social Research Council violence research project, but I think that most of the Members have got only the summary of the report. I understand from the Library that my office is the only one that asked for the full report.

Mr McCartney: We asked for the full report but did not get it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: They did not get it. That is terrible. It is a very lengthy report — I have it here in my hand. It is the ‘Economic and Social Research Council End of Award Report’ and gives a background to the whole history of the situation. It is made up of various papers, one of which has as part of its title “See no evil, hear no evil”, which seems to be the attitude of the Secretary of State, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Another paper deals with ‘The “Deserving” Victims of Political Violence: “Punishment” Attacks in Northern

Ireland'. A third is entitled 'Joined-Up Government: A Multi-Agency Response to Violence in Northern Ireland.' It is a very interesting document.

Of course, those who want to keep together the charade of the Government that we have do not want to read the material that is contained here.

Another paper is to do with 'An acceptable Level of Violence', and that is the argument we are being asked to listen to.

Last night I was speaking to a pressman from the BBC — that wonderful institution that we all have to tolerate with Christian love and gratitude for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table, although we all have to pay licence fees to keep those employed there in a good job — and he was saying that there is not as much violence as there used to be.

Tell that to the young man who was crucified. Tell that to the parents who are mourning what has happened to their family. The invaluable documents, ' "An Acceptable Level of Violence" — Community Responses to Crime in Northern Ireland and South Africa' and 'The Return of "Captain Moonlight" — Informal Justice in Northern Ireland', should have been made available by the Library or put in Members' pigeonholes. A good deal of research has been carried out, but this information has not been considered by Members, through no fault of their own, because it was not made available to them.

Mr McCartney: Does the hon Member agree that there seems to be a concerted policy of "dumbing down" any material, research or academic work that points to the Government's policy of turning a blind eye to the excesses of those parties fronting paramilitaries, who are retaining their weapons and who are responsible for this obscenity?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I agree, but I would go further. I am sure my hon Friend will agree that those who support this Government are those who got the mad men out of the jails and released them into the community. These people, who are experts in, and godfathers of, this type of crime, are behind these attacks which are being carried out across the Province. I welcome this report, which gives us vital, detailed information. No Member will be able to refute this report because they have not been able to read it.

Prof Knox did not pull any punches. He had a task to carry out, and he did not tailor the information in any way. He said it like it is, and this House would do well to listen to him. A misguided political agenda has brought this situation about. I would, in fact, go further and describe the political agenda as one which is criminal-supporting. This report exposes the failures of the Belfast Agreement. But, of course, if one dares to expose the failures, there will be just one line on the tongue of the Gentleman opposite and on the tongues of the Gentlemen here: "You are against peace". What an atrocious lie. To make this claim is to tell the mother who objects to her 14-year-old child

being beaten up and tormented in her home that she is "against peace".

I suggest that every Member go to the Library and read the tragic poem contained in the last page of this report:

"Oh mother I am frightened, masked men broke down the door
They ran upstairs and beat your son; he's lying on the floor.
For anti-social behaviour — what can they mean?
Sure my brother he is just a child, he's only turned fourteen.
Don't cry my son; do not fear your broken bones will mend
But cursed is this country where violence knows no end."

That is a cry from the heart to which the Assembly should listen. I see in the amendment which is to be moved that police and those who support the policing arrangements in Northern Ireland are being held responsible. That is the sad and sorry situation we find ourselves in today.

In their Economic and Social Research Council Violence Research Project, Knox and Monaghan expose the folly behind present Government policy, saying

"for the British Government it is easier to 'see no evil, hear no evil' in relation to this violence."

The report states that the parties who negotiated the Belfast Agreement all signed up to the Mitchell principles of peace and democracy. Paragraph 20 of the Mitchell report of 1996 stated

"we join the governments, religious leaders and many others condemning punishment killings and beatings."

And then what do they do? They turn a blind eye to them. A senior officer of the British Army told me the other day that each night the Army makes a log of such events but is told that they will not be published in any press. The figures are logged officially, but without publication. So what the Army has found out about beatings is never reported. We read reports from the RUC, but we never see the Army reports.

These beatings contribute to the fear that those who have used violence to pursue political objectives in the past will do it again in the future. Such attacks have no place in any lawful society, and to ask the people of Northern Ireland to agree to an "acceptable level of violence" is an insult to people living in this part of the United Kingdom. No level of violence is acceptable. It must cease forthwith.

This research paper also reveals why the Government have failed to deal effectively with these attacks. The Government do not want to listen to anyone who criticises and rightly condemns what is happening. As a result, when a politician does criticise he is told "You are just playing politics and that is the party line." When academics take time to research and collate the relevant statistics, they too are criticised. The Deputy First Minister and the First Minister himself made an effort to play this report down.

In his report, Prof Knox criticised the former Secretary of State on a vital point. She maintained that the status of the ceasefires was a judgement she alone had to make — even though the criminals broke the ceasefires and used guns. By way of excuse, I heard one of the Ministers say “Well, we have not had any breach of the ceasefire because the ceasefire is not to do with stabbing — it has to do with shooting.” These criminals have been using their revolvers and their guns now for some time, but that has made no difference. The Secretary of State is not the person to say whether a ceasefire has been broken — the general public witnesses it and can see that it has.

Mr McCartney: Does the hon Member not agree that it is even more despicable for officials of the Northern Ireland Office to dismiss murders such as that of Charles Bennett as matters of internal housekeeping which do not constitute a breach of a ceasefire?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: We have come to a Mafia situation. Mafia chiefs are respected and are told “You are in charge of keeping your house in order, and we can assure you that nothing will be done about it.” That shows that we have come to an all-time low in this country we love.

2.15 pm

The Secretary of State is the sole arbiter on breaches of ceasefires, which means that Loyalists and Republicans can take the actions they do because they know that neither they nor their patronage will come to any harm politically.

Whom did the Prime Minister meet when he was over here last week? He did not meet any of the parties opposed to the agreement, but he did hold talks at Hillsborough. Whom did he talk to? He talked to representatives of the people who are carrying out the genocide on the Shankill Road and other areas. The First Minister saw to it that the leader of the Ulster Democratic Party — I think that is what they call themselves — was in the Forum. So the patronage goes on, and the killings will go on until oxygen is taken away from the terrorists and they can no longer continue with their activities.

My hon Friend Mr McCartney made the point that conceding that paramilitaries can control and brutalise their own communities with a political end in mind is a de facto acceptance by the Government that there is an acceptable level of violence and that these people can take the law into their own hands.

This research is an indictment of the Belfast Agreement. Today we are bringing to the bar of accountability the people who are responsible and those who have given them incentives. The blame rests not only on the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and their supporters but also on their masters and the Secretary of State. They cannot, Pilate-like, wash their hands of this matter. It will not be going away.

What are the facts? The facts are very serious indeed, but, rather than go over the statistics, I want to concentrate

on the increased activity. In the past nine days alone four 15-year-old schoolboys have been attacked by self-appointed punishment squads, both Republican and Loyalist. Over the same period four more teenagers have either been shot or beaten by squads intent on tightening their grip on their turf, just prior to what is envisaged as yet another critical moment for the future of the peace process.

RUC figures for January 2000 show a total of 12 paramilitary punishment beatings and one shooting compared with seven shootings and seven assaults by the middle of last week — and we are not even at the end of January. In 2000, 86 punishment shootings were carried out by Loyalists and 50 by Republicans. During the same 12-month period punishment beatings by Loyalists totalled 72, and those by Republicans 54. A small number of instances involved the new crucifixion shooting, where a victim is shot through both hands and both feet. This type of shooting makes it difficult for a victim to return to normal life as he could have done with the traditional kneecapping punishment. This is the situation we face. This is the situation that the Assembly needs to deal with this afternoon, and there can be no red herrings about policing, because it has nothing to do with policing.

This is to do with those who direct the forces of the law. If they receive reports about what is happening and who is responsible and close their eye to those reports, they are involving the forces of the Crown in wasting public money on investigating crime. When the Secretary of State and public representatives are presented with the crime, they close their eyes. There are also people so intent on boasting up the charade that is the so-called peace process that they are prepared to excuse punishment beatings. They say nothing about them, and when the issue is debated they remain silent.

The Belfast Agreement states that the report and the proposed reform of the RUC will solve nothing in the short term. Let us face up to it. It is not a matter of whether or not you get Patten. We have a Government who will not put down political violence. They want to get the Unionist majority, who are opposed now to the agreement and are rock solid in their opposition to it, to lower the flag and compromise. Mr Ken Maginnis, the spokesperson for the Official Unionist Party, made more concessions. We were told that they never made any concessions, but now he says “We can make no more concessions.” There will be no withdrawal of resistance by the majority of the Unionist people, for they know that if they have this in the green, what will they have in the dry? If this so-called peace process continues, and continues to achieve its aims, we will be plunged into far greater violence. The IRA will come out for the last great shove to push us, in this bicentennial year, out of the Union all together.

Therefore this is a life and death situation. Those who want to colour the situation politically are wrong. We must face up to the fact that this is happening to our people on both sides of the religious divide. Either we have to be

their custodians or guardians, or we should shut up. And I am not prepared to shut up on the issue. It must be exposed. Something has to be done.

I regret that I have gone over the 15 minutes that I tried to keep to. However, I had some preliminary things to say and I have said them, and I tried to say them as quickly as possible so that all who want can take part in the debate. Again, not for myself, for you told me, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I could speak for the whole two hours — not that I would think of doing such a dreadful thing. If I were a Back-Bencher, however, I would resent being only permitted five minutes to discuss matters that have not only disgusted my constituency but have led to the removal of people from their homes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received one amendment, which is published in the Marshalled List.

Ms Gildernew: I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after “organisations” and add

“and calls on the Government to address this issue through the creation of an accountable policing service that has the support of all communities.”

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. To date, the response of both the Government and the community to crime and the damage done to our communities by antisocial elements has been totally inadequate. Punishment beatings do not make communities any safer. They are a response to a lack of effective action from an accountable and acceptable policing service. They are a response to a policing deficit. The University of Ulster’s Economic and Social Research Council report highlights the strong support that there is for alternatives in the absence of a legitimate policing service.

Rising levels of antisocial behaviour in our communities are having a devastating effect. That is fact. In Nationalist and Republican areas the RUC is not dealing with this problem. That is fact. The formal criminal justice system has failed. That is fact. No one can condone punishment beatings. They do not make our community safer. The RUC itself has been engaged in attacks on our communities, and it is also responsible for punishment beatings. As recently as last week five people, including a Sinn Féin councillor, were badly assaulted in West Tyrone. Two weeks ago, my party Colleague Gerry Kelly was awarded substantial damages because a police officer assaulted him. Time and time again, members of the RUC have been found not to be amenable to the law. That was apparent in the recent case of Davy Adams, who was severely beaten by the RUC and awarded substantial damages. No legal action was taken against those in the RUC who were responsible. This is only the tip of the iceberg.

There is a culture of impunity in the RUC. That is another reason why accountability is imperative. The link between RUC inactivity and antisocial behaviour in Nationalist communities is well known, if not widely reported. Nationalists are all too aware that the RUC is

prepared to allow criminals to operate freely in exchange for their acting as informants.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Surely this debate and amendment have been moved on the issue of punishment beatings. I have never seen any evidence to suggest that any of these so-called punishment beatings were carried out by RUC members.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please continue, Ms Gildernew.

Ms Gildernew: The RUC, with all its surveillance, intelligence-gathering equipment, guns and plastic bullets, has had every opportunity to demonstrate that it is able to tackle, and is committed to tackling, crime in Nationalist areas. It has failed to do this. Known criminals are apprehended by the RUC and frequently released without charge. That was the case with those involved in a series of pharmacy robberies in West Belfast. Indeed, antisocial criminals are returned —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Gildernew: No. Indeed, antisocial criminals are returned to cause havoc and pain in Nationalist areas when they are released into our communities. That is due to lenient sentencing, suspended sentences, and the fact that the RUC has intervened on their behalf in exchange for their agreement to work as RUC informers. The RUC agenda in Nationalist communities is all too clear. It wishes to create a network of informers and cause destabilisation.

What can we do to end punishment beatings? We need to create a new police service that is democratically accountable and acceptable to the local community. That is not the RUC. The RUC is not accountable, or acceptable, to Nationalists and Republicans. The RUC is not tackling the spiralling levels of antisocial crime, drug dealing and so-called joyriding. The RUC is encouraging this increase in antisocial crime by its attitude and response to Nationalist and Republican communities. The creation of an accountable policing service, with the support of all communities, is being obstructed. Supporters of progress should recognise that everyone wants to achieve that goal.

It is not merely Republicans, Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the Irish Government and the Catholic Church that need to see progress on this issue. Everyone has a stake in the creation of a new policing service. If we are to stamp out antisocial behaviour, and the responses to it, which do little to improve community safety, then the creation of an accountable and acceptable policing service is necessary. Unfortunately, the Mandelson policing Act has gutted the Patten Report. There is a real need for this deficit to be addressed otherwise we will again be left with a policing deficit.

I would like to pay tribute to those in the community who are working to tackle crime through non-violent means. These people recognise that the RUC and the formal justice system have failed our communities. Restorative

justice projects, such as Community Restorative Justice (CRJ) and others, have demonstrated a real commitment to tackling these problems. Many people are freely giving their time and energy to make their communities safer. They are working to create new alternatives to punishment beatings, the failed formal criminal justice system and the RUC. Sinn Féin totally supports CRJ. We need to see a greater commitment from Government to increase resources for these initiatives.

I ask Members to support the Sinn Féin amendment calling on the Government to address this issue through the creation of an accountable policing service that has the support of all communities. Go raibh maith agat.

2.30 pm

Mr Beggs: I support the motion. Punishment beatings are one of the greatest abuses of human rights in Northern Ireland today. The reality of this barbaric activity can be seen in this week's 'Sunday Times'. The Provisional IRA is reported to have shot a 17-year-old boy for breaking windows. That is the reality of what is happening in our society. I consider the Sinn Féin amendment to be simply a way of continuing to play with words. Unionists want to see actual deeds, not fancy words. I will be opposing the amendment, given its source and objective.

I am also aware of brutal attacks in my own constituency by Loyalists. There is a problem in both communities. Some of these attacks involve baseball bats studded with nails. It is unbelievable what has been happening. These are irreversible human tragedies, leaving many young victims scarred and disabled for life. There is also a huge and unnecessary financial burden on the Health Service. It has enough broken bones on its waiting lists without creating others. The Health Minister, Bairbre de Brún, has refused to provide me with figures on punishment beatings that have been treated by the Health Service, or even to report the number of admissions. There is a huge financial cost, as well as the personal tragedies involved, and that should be reported.

I welcome the fact that the RUC is now providing accurate figures on punishment beatings that have been formally reported to the police. The figures are available on the RUC's web site and can be stood over. It is a shame that in the past this information had to be collated by volunteers and charities. I accept that many people suffering attacks will still not appear on these lists. Some people still do not go to the police, fearing further punishment.

There are worrying trends. In particular I look at the figures starting in 1995, when there were three shootings involved in paramilitary attacks. This has now risen to 115 — 75 by Loyalist groups and 40 by Republican groups. That is not acceptable in any society. At the same time there are still large numbers of brutal paramilitary-style physical attacks and beatings — up until November, 62 by Loyalists and 44 by Republican groups.

What would we be saying if this were happening in some Third-World state or banana republic? This is happening in Northern Ireland today, which is in the Western World and claims to be a Christian, civilised society. It is continuing, and will continue, until Nationalist and some Loyalist groups show leadership in their own communities. When are they going to accept that they too have a responsibility for this outrageous behaviour, as long as they hold back full support for the police? Silence is sometimes encouraging punishment attacks.

Restorative justice has been advocated earlier. It is criticised in this report as often being synonymous with the punishment attacks themselves. Indeed, there has been specific press criticism of the fact that in some areas the former judge of the kangaroo court is now the chief mentor in restorative justice. What people are being offered is "Agree with some community service or we will blow your knees off." That is not real restorative justice. There is a clear correlation between political events and punishment beatings in Northern Ireland — the Knox Report shows this. Restorative justice must be clearly linked to the rule of law if it is to be done properly. It must be linked to the proper criminal justice system. It is not a way to legitimise kangaroo courts or informal administration of justice. The criminal justice system itself must be seen to be effective in dealing with petty crime and antisocial behaviour.

In the context of human rights, punishment beatings breach the right to life, the prohibition on torture, the right to liberty and security and the right to a fair trial — "no punishment beating without trial". Punishment beatings constitute the most significant breach of human rights in Northern Ireland today.

Mr A Maginness: Punishment shootings and beatings are a huge problem for our society. According to calculations, 2,303 people have been shot in punishment attacks since 1973, and 1,626 people have been beaten in such attacks since 1982. These quotes are an under-estimation of the actual figures rather than an accurate record of the number of these attacks — we do have a huge problem.

Dr Ian Paisley has blamed the Good Friday Agreement for punishment attacks, while Ms Gildernew has blamed the RUC. However, in truth, we have an unstable society, in which paramilitaries have grown up and in which they have chosen to exercise political control and to carry out so-called policing of their areas through the medium of punishment attacks. All right-thinking people in the Chamber must condemn this. I am disappointed that some Members who have spoken did not forthrightly condemn these attacks.

The Good Friday Agreement gives us an opportunity to put an end to these attacks once and for all. It does so by providing the right political context in which to provide political stability and a system of government in which there

is respect for both political traditions. Within that stable system, we can attack the very roots of paramilitarism, which have cursed and bedevilled our society.

We have tried, in the context of the Good Friday Agreement, to create a human rights culture, and we will continue to do so. As Mr Beggs said, these attacks offend the European Convention on Human Rights because they contravene the right to life, the prohibition on torture, the right to liberty and security and the right to a fair trial.

The prohibition on torture is not being adhered to, in any way, by paramilitary organisations which continue, through their actions, to torture and degrade ordinary citizens in our society.

This report usefully highlights the whole issue of punishment beatings and shootings. It also criticises the statutory agencies, including the Housing Executive, the Social Security Agency and the Compensation Agency. Those criticisms remain unfounded, but I am certain that the Northern Ireland Executive are prepared to investigate them in a serious and considerate fashion and to respond to them in a fair and just manner.

Therefore we cannot support the latter part of Dr Paisley's motion. While supporting the first part of it, which condemns paramilitary violence and punishment beatings and shootings, we cannot support the implicit criticism of the Northern Ireland Administration, which has not yet responded to the very criticisms highlighted in this report.

I am certain that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Administration and those Ministers who have responsibility for those institutions — such as the Minister for Social Development, who is in charge of the Housing Executive and the Social Security Agency — will attempt to respond to those criticisms.

My party supports the amendment. Of course, a system of policing which is acceptable and accountable to both communities will serve effectively to diminish the level of punishment attacks in our community.

However, it cannot do that by itself. We need a collective commitment by everyone in our society to respect one another's political cultures and, in particular, civil and human rights. We will be unable to deal with this problem if we do not respect those rights. Therefore, while we support the amendment, we do not regard it as being completely able to tackle the problem of punishment attacks.

Mr Boyd: Regrettably, shootings and beatings by paramilitary organisations are a daily occurrence, particularly since the signing of the Belfast Agreement. They are carried out primarily by pro-agreement paramilitaries. On 14 May 1998 the Prime Minister said that the ceasefires were indeed complete and unequivocal and that there would be the dismantling of paramilitary structures actively directing and promoting violence. On 19 November 1999 the Belfast High Court ruled that murders carried out by the Provisional IRA in its own

community did not break its ceasefire, thereby providing a green light for ongoing paramilitary activity. As stated in the Economic and Social Research Council report produced by Prof Colin Knox and Dr Rachel Monaghan,

“The Mitchell principles of ‘democracy and non-violence’, to which all constitutional political parties subscribe, have been compromised in the interests of moving forward politically.”

Paramilitaries have some sort of warped logic, which is, sadly, endorsed by the Government, which says that there is a difference between so-called military operations and the other barbarities that they exact on their communities. It is a terrible indictment on the Government that they are described as having a “See no evil, hear no evil” attitude to paramilitary violence.

The breakdown in law and order is a direct result of the Belfast Agreement and its appeasement of terrorism. Paramilitary organisations have been strengthened by the release of their leading activists, funding of £6 million provided by the European Union and the UK Government and the elevation of their inextricably linked parties into the centre of the political process. Plush new community offices have been provided for ex-prisoners, giving a centre for paramilitaries in the heart of some working-class areas.

Today, paramilitary organisations are structurally and financially stronger than ever. Armed and masked robberies, racketeering and extortion are a daily occurrence. Building contractors, retail shops and businesses, particularly in working-class areas, are literally being held to ransom. There have been 14 armed robberies in the last four weeks in Newtownabbey alone. The latest was at an off-licence in Glengormley last night. Armed robberies have more than doubled in Newtownabbey in the past two years and have increased considerably throughout Northern Ireland.

The Ulster Unionist Party leader, David Trimble, said in his 1998 election manifesto that paramilitary organisations must dismantle, disarm and stop the beatings, and that the Ulster Unionist Party would hold Mr Blair to his promises and would not sit in the Government of Northern Ireland with unreconstructed terrorists. Other parties gave similar commitments, yet we see the election of persons belonging to parties inextricably linked to paramilitary organisations to civic offices in Fermanagh, Belfast, Londonderry, Newtownabbey and elsewhere, with the assistance of votes from other political parties. We need more than just words of condemnation from all democrats.

The report states that paramilitaries set themselves up as the police for their own areas. The ongoing demands from Nationalists for the disbandment of the RUC and the scaling down of policing resources by a weak Government have resulted in the strengthening of the paramilitaries' grip in many communities and the rule of law being compromised. The report says

“Those individuals ‘punished’ by paramilitaries are denied ‘due process’ and the beatings and the shootings meted out are becoming more vicious and prolonged.”

The statistics provided in the report are shocking. On average, there have been 85 so-called punishment shootings and 90 beatings per year since 1973. However, these figures are underestimated by 50%, because many attacks are unreported due to victims’ fears. The report also says that there is no information available on charges brought against the perpetrators. However, detection rates are described as “relatively low”. The figures show a significant increase in beatings and an increasing trend in the numbers of exiles since the so-called ceasefires of 1994. Exiling is a method paramilitaries use to exact their form of justice without the same outcry from the community that beatings and shootings cause.

Most beatings happen to young males who are in their twenties. Twenty-five per cent of those attacked are under 20 years old. Kids as young as 13 and 14 have been attacked.

2.45 pm

One victim named in the report is Ian Price. He was a 13-year-old boy who was singled out from a group of friends by masked men, flung to the ground and beaten with baseball bats studded with nails. He suffered a shattered elbow, broken fingers, deep puncture wounds to his legs, cuts and multiple bruising. After the attack, a gun was put to his head and he was ordered out of the country. He was a 13-year-old boy. Yet, we have those parties that are inextricably linked to paramilitary organisations referring to the rights of children and calling for the appointment of a commissioner for children.

IRA/Sinn Féin have consistently refused to call on the community to assist the police in apprehending those responsible for horrific crimes, even those against their own people — for example, the recent deaths on the Antrim Road, Belfast, of a mother and daughter due to youths in a stolen car.

I support the motion.

Mr B Hutchinson: It ceases to amaze me that some people who have read this report seem to have selective amnesia. They select pieces of the report — not all of it.

We need to end punishment beatings and shootings and we need to find a way forward. Unfortunately, Members have not used this opportunity to discuss how we could do that. We do not have time to wait for a new policing service. It needs to happen now.

As a number of Members have said, we are brutalising our society and our young people. However, this issue needs a society and a community response. There are people who are carrying out so-called antisocial behaviour, but there are also people in the community who are reporting others for such behaviour and asking for something to be done. We need to change attitudes, and we need to

change how we deal with this issue. I would like us to focus on some of the ways forward.

Some Members have said that the solution needs to be connected to the justice system. Of course it does. However, there are already programmes in place that are supported by the police and statutory agencies and which are not about beating young people or anyone else.

This is about trying to find a way forward and about changing attitudes. Attitudes will not be changed overnight — it takes years. All of us will have to suffer what happens until we do change those attitudes. People should not lift a gun or beat others with a baseball bat. We need to find other ways forward. We can all make excuses for why punishment beatings happen, or do not happen, but the only way that we are going to prevent them is by coming up with alternatives.

As regards the report’s accuracy, I have heard Members in the past supporting Vincent McKenna — a bastion of veracity, as we all know — who we found out had fabricated statistics and told us all that people were doing things when they were not. We need to be careful about how these reports are compiled.

We have all seen statistics and we know that there are “lies, damned lies and statistics.”

We need to be careful. It does not matter whether one person or 101 people have been punished in the last 27 years. The point is that it happened. We need to be asking “How do we move into the future? How do we find ways forward?” Those are the questions we need to ask. That is what this is about.

This House is in place to bring change to Northern Ireland. We all want democracy to work whether we are anti-agreement or pro-agreement, and if this House can provide a lead, that is what we must do. I do not make excuses about the RUC. In November 1994 I said that people who have information about those who carried out antisocial behaviour should report it to the RUC. I repeat that today, but we need to ask whether the people in our communities or in society generally want justice or revenge. That is another important question. We need to respond positively and with no violence as regards antisocial behaviour in our communities.

How many Members have constituency offices in which we hear people pleading with us about the behaviour of some people outside their homes? We all report such things to the police and they say that they can do nothing, as those people are not breaking the law. That is the problem. Is this about justice or is it about revenge? Those issues need to be tackled, but that will not be done in four minutes, five minutes or two hours in the Assembly.

I congratulate Dr Ian Paisley for tabling the motion. However, Members need to have a proper debate about punishment beatings. It must be decided whether we make the issue a Committee’s responsibility or form an Ad

Hoc Committee to look at the findings of the research project and examine other matters. Members must be positive. Let us bring forward a report that will tell us how to get out of this mess.

Ms McWilliams: I would like to put the research project into the context of the 20 other research projects that were carried out simultaneously by the Economic and Social Research Council. It initiated large-scale funding throughout the United Kingdom for a variety of projects. The project titles were "Violence" and "Research on Violence". All the research projects concluded that predatory violence is less extensive than violence from people known to the victim. Unfortunately, the research project does not state whether the victims knew the perpetrators.

However, the research project does document the levels of punishment beatings. That had not been done to date, and it is extremely important. I agree with that part of the report, and it is hoped that from now on accident and emergency departments and the Housing Executive will keep a rigorous database — unlike that kept by Vincent McKenna and others in the past. That is a very helpful recommendation.

The research project has not fulfilled its terms of reference regarding the assessment of possible strategies for prevention and reduction. It is not sufficient for a research project to describe what organisations have not done and to suggest that there has been a level of indifference and minimisation. If we are to take this forward we need to flag up a number of things that have happened. That is why, reluctantly, I cannot support the motion.

I do not support the amendment. Sinn Féin Members should know from the research carried out in South Africa by Rachel Monaghan, the co-author of the report with Colin Knox, that reforming the police there did not stop punishment beatings or antisocial behaviour. Therefore, to support the amendment or the motion is insufficient.

The research project is overly critical of a number of organisations that have tried against the odds to put alternative strategies in place. The Probation Board for Northern Ireland has a range of programmes in place to tackle youths offending. Its "Youth at Risk" project in west Belfast, the Short Strand and east Belfast, extended now to north Belfast and Omagh, is working, and Members ought to be supporting that.

The research project states that the issue can only be tackled when community groups sit down in partnership and adopt an inter-agency, integrated approach.

Some Members may think that south Belfast is an affluent area, but it is worth noting that yesterday, for the third time in less than three months, my constituency office was robbed. Before Christmas the office was broken into by a heroin addict; yesterday people coming off the street in broad daylight robbed it. I and others were in the office. Crime among young people is certainly increasing.

The response of my constituency office on these occasions has been to contact the police, and that is the only way forward when dealing with crime. The individual who broke into the office before Christmas was eventually apprehended and brought before the courts. We must continue to make that the process of decent law and order and to follow the systems of justice that exist.

That is not to say that other bodies should not be given more legal powers. The Housing Executive is now looking at what to do about antisocial behaviour. I do not propose that anyone should deal with antisocial behaviour through punishment beatings. I will attempt to take a multi-agency approach, with education and welfare officers, officials from the Housing Executive, probation officers and juvenile liaison officers around the table to establish whether it is young people or particular families in communities who are offending.

The Housing Executive has also established a specialist antisocial behaviour unit. A police officer has been seconded to the Housing Executive, and, in turn, the Housing Executive has seconded one of its workers to Mediation Network.

It is mediation that we need. In the end, I believe we must have the increased powers that we seek in both civil and criminal law, as well as the inter-agency community responses to young people who offend. That is the only way forward.

Mr McCartney: It is an indictment of the procedures of this House that, on a subject matter of this gravity, Members wishing to speak are only afforded five minutes to do so. I also find it amazing that Sinn Féin should ascribe the cause of the brutalities and obscenities in the beatings, shootings and stabbings that are going on to the RUC. What is even more amazing is that the representative of the SDLP should suggest that it is really all down to the Housing Executive and the social security agencies.

The PUP suggests that this is a matter of fraudulent statistics by making references to Vincent McKenna. The statistics quoted in the House today, however, were those of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. If anything, those statistics are an understatement of the true position. Everyone knows that a very significant proportion of those who are subjected to beatings and intimidation do not report the matter to the authorities, which essentially makes these statistics an understatement.

Let me return to the political basis for these beatings. Beatings, stabbings, intimidations and shootings are a method by which paramilitary organisations, inextricably linked with some of the parties in this House, exercise political control over substantial areas of Northern Ireland. And why are they permitted to do so? They are permitted to do so in the case of Republicanism because Republicans have the political will and the capacity to bomb the mainland. The British Government's strategic political objective is to keep bombs off the mainland, to halt

attacks on economic targets and to ensure the safety of the first-class citizens on the British mainland. To maintain a degree of balance between the Republicans, who can deliver this threat, they have to also placate the Loyalist paramilitaries. If the Loyalist paramilitaries were to come off the alleged ceasefire and provoke the Republicans into a response, the whole business would collapse like a pack of cards, and the strategic objective of the British Government would be frustrated.

This report highlights two essential features. The first feature is that the principles of democracy in the rule of law, as set out by Mitchell, have been compromised, allegedly for political progress. Secondly, the British Government have adopted a "Hear no evil, see no evil" policy towards the violence of the "good terrorists" that are said to be within the peace process. In fact, there is no difference between the "good terrorists" and the dissident terrorists who have been active recently. There are only terrorists. The "good terrorists" may, in the short term, not be committing these depredations because they feel that the political system has to deliver their objectives merely by the threat of terror. But they also benefit from the terror of the so-called dissidents. Anyone who suggests that the present activity of the so-called dissidents is to wreck the peace process is living in another world.

The purpose of those dissidents is to say to the British Government "This is a taste of what the 'good terrorists' can give you if they come off ceasefire." That is why the British Government, with regard to the definition of the ceasefire, do not count the murder of Andrew Kearney, the murder of Charles Bennett or the massive intimidation and beatings that go on. It is also why they continue to say in the round "These are not breaches of the ceasefire."

3.00 pm

The Chief Constable has talked about the distorted values of those "good terrorists" who describe these beatings as not being a breach of their ceasefire commitments — ceasing military operations. It seems that the British Government prefer the distorted view of terrorists to the opinion of the Chief Constable.

More and more people will be affected by the rise in crime. More and more people will be like the denizens of the ghettos — outside the peace process — and more people are beginning to question what the peace process is. It is a licence for terror as long as it serves British policy.

I support the motion.

Mrs Courtney: Punishment by self-appointed persons has been part of our community for many years. In the past we had kneecapping, which often resulted in severe injuries to individuals and, in many instances, loss of limbs. That was only one of the barbaric practices carried out by so-called punishment squads. This was condoned for years by certain political parties but never condemned. The ultimate punishment is death itself. Often it meant a

bullet in the head, the person blindfolded and left on a remote country road. In more recent times we have had punishment beatings using baseball bats, sticks and even sledgehammers.

The report on informal criminal justice systems carried out by the Violence Research Project found that such systems had different motivations in Loyalist and Republican areas. In Republican areas, the prime targets for punishment are young people involved in antisocial behaviour such as car theft, joyriding and housebreaking. In Loyalist areas, punishment attacks are used to maintain internal discipline and police their own areas.

According to police statistics, between 1973 and June 2000 there have been 2,303 paramilitary shootings — approximately 85 per year — of which 43% were carried out by Loyalists and 57% by Republicans. Since 1982 there have been 1,626 beatings. That is an average of 90 per year — 46% Loyalist and 54% Republican. Those are the official statistics. The actual numbers are higher, as young people are reluctant to report them for fear of reprisals. Approximately 25% of those attacked are under 20 years of age, some as young as 13 or 14. Last week 'The Sunday Times' reported an incident in Belfast in which a 17-year-old was shot in both feet for throwing stones at the house of a man who he believed had shot his cousin.

We are all aware that, in the main, the young people who are attacked come from socially deprived areas where the community is controlled by fear. Something must be done to protect these young people and bring the perpetrators to justice. There are two main restorative justice projects operating in Northern Ireland — Greater Shankill Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice (CRJ). Both offer a non-violent alternative to punishment attacks but need further safeguards involving all the statutory agencies before they can be given the support of the whole community.

I agree with my Colleague Alban Maginness that the Good Friday Agreement is the only means of getting rid of these so-called paramilitary attacks. It is up to us to ensure that we do nothing to disrupt that process.

Mr S Wilson: I want to deal mostly with the amendment put forward by Sinn Féin. One should not be surprised that those who, in this House and elsewhere, call for commissioners for children should defend those who mutilate children. Those who, in their ministerial positions, seek to exclude and expel bullies from school let the bullies loose on the street of Nationalist areas on a nightly basis and then come into this House and try to defend what goes on in their name.

Let us have no doubt about it. What goes on in Nationalist areas goes on in the name of IRA/Sinn Féin. It is carried out by members of IRA/Sinn Féin and then supported in this House by members of IRA/Sinn Féin. What is even more despicable is that there is so little

moral courage in the SDLP that it cannot distance itself from the stance of Sinn Féin.

Let us look at some of the arguments put forward today. We are told that punishment beatings take place because there is unaccountable policing. What do you put in place of that? You put into place unaccountable punishment beatings. You have people who set themselves up — as we have heard — as judge, jury and executioner. You have people who are guilty of some of the acts that they punish others for and, indeed, who protect some within their ranks guilty of similar acts.

Last August 'The Sunday Tribune' all but named an IRA member found guilty of child abuse and who was allowed to stay in his community, protected by the IRA, because he was related to a former IRA chief of staff in west Belfast.

In Monaghan and Newry, IRA members were found guilty of child abuse and rape but were they put out of their community? Were they expelled by those who want to police their community? No. Why? It is because of their connections. We are being lectured today about unaccountable policing, yet we are being told that this is policing, and that the actions being taken are in response to community demands.

The fact is that these actions are being carried out to show — and to enforce — the terrorists' will in their communities. Mrs Courtney referred to the boy who was shot for breaking the windows of the IRA member he believed had shot his uncle. Oddly enough — despite this great talk about restorative justice — the boy's mother said that the Sinn Féin representative of the local restorative justice campaign came around the night before and told the boy to report to him at 7 o'clock to have his hands broken. These are the people who believe in non-violent alternatives.

Let us look at some of those who were formerly in the ranks of IRA/Sinn Féin and who would understand what it is all about. The verdict of one person was — and this was in the lower Ormeau — that Sinn Féin was now doing things which it would be squealing about had those things been done by the RUC.

What is Sinn Féin's aim? It is to set up a one-party police state in Nationalist areas. The RUC has warned that there will be an upsurge in such activity before the coming elections as IRA/Sinn Féin seeks to establish its print on its communities. This has nothing to do with justice.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sammy Wilson is always a hard act to follow. He is such a good performer.

I welcome the chance to debate this issue, and I support the motion. Dr Paisley said — *[Interruption]* Sorry, I rise to support the amendment. That was a bit of a Freudian slip perhaps.

Dr Paisley said that the RUC issue is a red herring. I suggest, in all honesty, that you cannot divorce the absence of an accepted policing service from the issue of punishment beatings. Sinn Féin has consistently attempted, and will consistently attempt, to condemn punishment beatings in our community.

As elected politicians, councillors or Assembly Members, we have attempted to put in place a mechanism to eradicate the dreadful image of punishment beatings. It is a difficult situation, and constituents knock on your door to ask what you will do about certain individuals who are making their lives hell on earth. For one reason or another, these people do not want to go to the RUC. Perhaps in Mr Billy Hutchinson's community they do not want to go because they do not get an adequate response. Members of the Nationalist community suspect that the RUC allows this to happen to create informers or to help create a situation on the ground where people will say that they want it back into their areas and that they want the RUC to be unreconstructed.

Databases and the various devices which were mentioned cannot cure what is a fundamentally political issue. I know of no Republican or Nationalist who wants young men, young women or anyone else to be subjected to a crucifixion shooting or a punishment beating. The fact is that this is what the local people demand, and it is difficult to know how to respond to that. The issue of the RUC is not a red herring; it is one which cannot be divorced from activities such as punishment beatings in Nationalist areas. We have heard from Mr Ervine and Mr Billy Hutchinson about what has happened in the lower Shankill and about the lack of response from the RUC during the dreadful situation that was allowed to develop in that area. It was, in fact, the efforts of the Loyalist paramilitaries, rather than any external agency, that brought an end to those attacks.

Punishment attacks and beatings are wrong; they have no place in any civilised society, and Sinn Féin has no problem in spelling that out. However, we do not yet live in a normal, civilised society that is policed in a normal way. There is an absence of fair and impartial policing. The Nationalist/Republican people do not have faith in, nor do they give allegiance to, what they consider to be a discredited RUC.

Let us not forget the ongoing punishment beatings being administered by the RUC, such as that which took place last week on two young schoolgirls at Greencastle, County Tyrone. Unfortunately, in the absence of fair and impartial policing for all, so-called punishment attacks will continue. That is neither a threat nor a promise, but a statement of fact and a recognition of the reality in Nationalist and Republican areas.

Mrs E Bell: Although I have only cursorily read the report, my comments will be as relevant as some of those that have been made in the Chamber today.

Alliance supports the motion because paramilitary attacks are one of the greatest scourges of our society and it is right and proper that the Assembly should declare its total revulsion towards them. The Assembly must call upon the Government to take more resolute action to stamp them out completely.

We do, however, have reservations about two aspects of the motion. First, I am appalled at the DUP's use of the term "punishment beatings". The use of the term "punishment" confers on the act a degree of legitimacy by suggesting that the guilt of a victim is an established fact.

The victims may be suspected of taking part in antisocial behaviour, but it is solely a suspicion — untried and unproven — on the parts of people who are not legally equipped to make those judgements. In many other instances, victims are singled out, simply for crossing the path of one of the local godfathers. The most infamous example of this is the attack on Andrew Kearney in Artillery Flats.

I want to make it clear: we should never grant legitimacy to such activities — never. The paramilitary groups involved act as judge, jury and executioner and show no regard for either the due processes of law or for basic, internationally accepted human rights standards. At the very least, the DUP should have referred to them as so-called punishment beatings or, better still, as what they really are — paramilitary attacks.

3.15 pm

It is not just the DUP, however, who fall into that trap. The Government, the media and even some human rights groups repeatedly make the same error. The Government retain responsibility for criminal justice, and it is correct that we should call on them for more robust and resolute action against such activities. There have been few arrests, fewer prosecutions and virtually no convictions for these barbaric acts, which seem to get worse every day. There is a major problem with getting people to report what they know and to speak out in court, but there are other methods of getting evidence, such as forensic science. In pursuing the perpetrators of such barbarities, the Government must show no pragmatism or political expediency. Such activities are not directed primarily against the Good Friday Agreement, but the agreement will be greatly weakened if it is not used to strengthen the respect for the rule of law.

The attacks should be seen in the wider context of the growing problem of institutionalised paramilitarism. Some in our society like to paint a picture in which there are good paramilitaries, who are avuncular local figures, and bad paramilitaries, who are a burden on the backs of the people. All paramilitarism is wrong, and it is nothing short of subversion of the rule of law and democracy. Institutionalised paramilitarism contributes to a sense of ghettoisation and social exclusion, to say nothing of the denial of a wide range of opportunities and rights. A culture

of communal separation allows the problem to grow and fester. It gives weight to the misguided notion that distinct communities in Northern Ireland can have autonomy at the expense of the police and the courts. With policing reform well under way, it is time for all parts of society to embrace a single, professional police service for the whole Province.

The RUC has come under scrutiny from a wide variety of ill-informed international bodies — and one or two local bodies — some of whom, undoubtedly, have an axe to grind. The degree of scrutiny is unparalleled anywhere in the world. The RUC has been castigated for methods that, on the whole, are more professional and more restrained than those to be seen daily in the Republic or in the USA. What do we hear from those bodies about the activity of paramilitaries? There is a deafening silence, with only the speeches and behaviour of Prof Brice Dickson and the Human Rights Commission as an honourable exception. Often, there is a suggestion — repeated, I am sorry to say, in the Sinn Féin amendment — that the cessation of such behaviour is conditional upon the creation of what such groups consider to be an accountable policing service. Silence can readily be taken as consent. It is time to stop viewing human rights as an issue relating solely to the duty of the state towards the individual citizen and to start considering it in the context of how we treat one another.

I have often seen at first hand the effects on supposed criminals and their families of a visit from the local hoods. I saw it as a worker with the Peace People organisation in the 1970s and 1980s, when I worked with families who had been intimidated. More recently, I saw it as a member of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland. Prof McWilliams has described the problem.

It is an indictment of our society that such things still occur today. I support the motion, but not the amendment.

Mr Attwood: I have two comments to make on Mr John Kelly's contribution. He said that the attacks would continue because there was no policing and because it was the wish of the community. Such comments have serious implications. It does not surprise me that John Kelly should say that it was the wish of the community. In the past, another organisation from the Republican tradition imposed its will upon the community on this island. I am not surprised that now, when a small, unrepresentative section of the community in parts of the North demands punishment attacks, Sinn Féin responds, using a spurious legitimacy to justify the fact that punishment attacks are carried out in our community.

Secondly, it is the politics of denial and irresponsibility to say that because there is no policing, the worst form of policing should be imposed upon our community. That is a policing that denies human rights and denies the due process and rule of law. It imposes the worst forms of punishment upon people in very spurious and invalid

circumstances. If the only basis on which Sinn Féin can come to the Chamber and explain away its attitude to punishment attacks is to say that they occur because of the wishes of a small section of people in Republican communities, and because there is no policing, then I do wonder how far Sinn Féin has moved on the issues of policing, criminal justice and how to properly conduct affairs at community level.

Mr Roche: I find the Member's comments entirely incongruous. The Member is supporting the implementation of the Patten report, which would permit the people who are currently carrying out these so-called punishment beatings into the police. That seems to be an entirely untenable position.

Mr Attwood: If the Member reads the Patten Report closely he will see that Patten sets out those who are entitled to become members of the future Police Service. There has been no objection raised by the Government on that matter in relation to its legislation. Following a close reading of the report, the Member will realise that what he has just said is inconsistent with both the Patten Report and the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000.

I now move to the Sinn Féin amendment, and attempt to position the issue of punishment attacks in the wider context of the current police debate. There are changing attitudes in society to the issue of policing, and it is important that these attitudes, which are beginning to emerge, be heard. We sense in the community that we represent, and beyond, that people want to begin to test the structures — not just the political structures that have been set up by the Good Friday Agreement, but the policing structures that could yet be set up. That is evident in the fact that many people are beginning to test the new independent police complaints mechanism.

Our communities, which have been so resilient over many years in adverse circumstances, are beginning to strain, and core community values are being put under pressure. It is time to consolidate those communities, and one mechanism of doing that is to have an agreed and acceptable police service. Whatever differences there may be on many issues arising from the Good Friday Agreement, there is a sense that the agreement itself has to be consolidated. It is our last best strategy and our future best hope. Nothing should be done that idly or recklessly endangers what has been so painfully created.

It is time for those in our communities who imposed their will through paramilitary punishment attacks, or who organised to impose their viewpoint on the wider structures of our community, to begin to roll back, so that individuals and the community are liberated and the common good is served.

We face a difficult time, and there are currently negotiations taking place in Downing Street. It is very important to understand that if we can get the policing issue right — and we might not get it right — our

community is minded, willing and able to play its role in that new political and policing order. If we can get that right in the negotiations going on in Downing Street, then we can get our communities right, and we will see the purging of the tribalism of punishment attacks.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Prior to winding up, I make the point that I find it incongruous that we are debating punishment beatings as a result of a DUP motion, when numerous Catholic homes have been attacked in places such as Larne and Coleraine. There has been a deafening silence from the Unionist communities on those sectarian attacks on Catholic homes.

Roy Beggs said that he could not support the amendment because of its source and its objective. I cannot understand how anyone can object to the creation of an accountable policing service that enjoys the support of all communities.

Billy Hutchinson said that there was a need to change attitudes and that the only way we could avoid punishment beatings was to find alternatives. I agree fully with that. We need to work with the community in the interim period when we do not have an acceptable policing service in order to ensure that the community has a say in finding non-violent means of dealing with this matter.

Monica McWilliams talked about the multi-agency approach. We have been working on addressing the policing deficit and spearheading a multi-agency approach. We are working with all statutory agencies to try to eradicate punishment beatings — west Belfast being a good example of that.

I will not bother to comment on most of what Sammy Wilson said. He, like some others in the Chamber, was not listening when I said that I did not condone punishment beatings and that my party does not condone them. He also talked about a one-party police state. We have good experience of that because that is what we have had for the past 80 years — a one-party police state controlled and abused by the Unionist community. There has been plenty of experience of that.

John Kelly talked about the lack of a fair and impartial policing service. I have addressed that. There has certainly been a huge gap in proper policing, which has led to this situation.

Eileen Bell was definitely suffering from “rose-coloured spectacles” syndrome, for there has been plenty of evidence of international criticism of the RUC, including criticism from the United Nations rapporteur. The RUC has been indicted by many credible organisations, both at home and worldwide, and has a horrendous record of human rights abuses. That speaks for itself.

As for what Alex Attwood said about my Colleague John Kelly, Mr Kelly said that punishment beatings are wrong and have no place in any civilised society. Unfortunately, in the absence of fair and impartial policing

for all, it is a reality that so-called punishment attacks will continue until we eradicate the policing deficit.

Sinn Féin has been working incredibly hard on the policing issue since the Good Friday negotiations, and indeed long before that. Today our leadership is in London, working to bring about the new beginning in policing that our community not only wants but needs. Nobody is saying that the Nationalist/Republican community does not need or want a policing service that will work for it. We have to create an accountable policing service acceptable to all people. No one can refute our efforts to support non-violent solutions to try to solve this problem. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Paisley Jnr: This has been a sombre debate at times. I am very pleased that my party was able to get the motion onto the Floor of the House and that we have had a chance to deal with an issue that quite rightly concerns anyone who is interested in getting the people who carry out these evil, atrocious and brutal attacks made amenable to the law. I regret that the SDLP does not want to make those people amenable to the law and will therefore not be supporting this motion. It is unfortunate that it has not been able to pick up the gauntlet, to face the challenge and to run with those of us who want to see people made amenable to the law for their illegal actions.

Like most people, I am disgusted that Sinn Féin attempted to bring in a wrecking amendment on this issue. What was the purpose of its amendment? Its purpose was to take the spotlight away from its own guilty, blood-soaked hands on this issue.

3.30 pm

In reality, Sinn Féin does not want to be held accountable for the actions which are engaged in by its organisation and which that organisation orders to take place. Sinn Féin, in its amendment, wants to blame everybody except those who carry out the punishment beatings. It wants to blame the Housing Executive, the Government agencies, the RUC — everyone but the man who is swinging the baseball bat. The real responsibility lies with its paramilitary organisation. Unless Sinn Féin faces up to that responsibility — and unless the Government accept their responsibility to take on those men of violence — we will be back, in a matter of months, to debate the increase in paramilitary attacks that will have continued to take place throughout our country.

This debate on punishment attacks is marked by the fact that, over the last few months, terrorists have maximised the number of punishment attacks and the level of terrorism. Meanwhile, those people and party members associated with the Belfast Agreement have taken a minimalist approach. They say as little on it as they can get away with; they condemn it quietly; they neither raise the issue nor allow it to make headlines. They take a minimalist approach that has served as a nod and a wink to the terrorists to carry on with their maximalist

approach, which sees approximately five paramilitary attacks taking place in our country every week. This approach causes widows to be harmed, children maimed, and people's lives to be destroyed.

The reality, which is made clear in Prof Colin Knox's report, is that those parties which could do most to stop the beatings are doing the least. We have seen an example of that in this Chamber today. The parties that could stop it will not do so. They want to blame everyone except their own foot soldiers, and they will not take the measures that they should be taking to switch off violence. The evidence of that is very clear. During the first presidential visit to Northern Ireland by Bill Clinton they were able to switch off the violence for a certain number of days and then switch it back on. The Chief Constable told us, at the time, that they were able to change the cycle of the violence and, on the basis of a command from an IRA officer, to switch the scene of an attack from Belfast to Londonderry. They were also able, at the command of an officer, to switch an attack from one in which people were shot in the knees to one in which they were shot in the elbows. They have a direct say in these attacks, and the evidence is clear that these people could stop this violence if they wanted to.

Punishment attacks are the stock-in-trade of the paramilitary organisations, so I almost recognise that they will be hypocritical about this issue. We take their hypocrisy as read. By bringing this motion before the House, we have also pointed the finger at the British Government and the Executive for failing to take action where it is possible to deliver on these issues. The Government's lackadaisical approach of seeing no evil and hearing no evil must be condemned. It is deplorable that such a policy should condemn 15-year-old children to the most ritualised, summary, abusive regime in the British Isles — and that is what is happening.

In this politically correct world we are right to condemn child abusers and find ways to prevent and convict them. Many Members would do a 15-minute stint in front of a camera to help bring in measures to prevent a child abuser. Those same people do not seem to want to run to the cameras to condemn the paramilitaries with the same voracity with which they condemn other issues of political correctness. There is a deafening silence from those people. The media cannot find them when they need to hear these people's condemnation.

During the debate we heard from the Women's Coalition, and it was clear from the comments of the party spokesperson that she had not read the entire report. I note that the Member quoted from the summary of the report. If she had been in the Chamber during the whole debate she would have known more about the report and the extensive work that was carried out.

Prof Knox and Dr Monaghan presented, in just one section of their report, more than 25 specific measures

to deal with violence. A quite deliberate attempt is being made by some to ignore the fact that there is a way to deal with this violence in an effective manner.

There is a way to deal effectively with this violence. The fact is that the political parties in the Government know who are behind these attacks, yet it is probable that the issue has not even been put on the agenda of the Executive Committee. You can understand why there would be very uncomfortable shifting on seats in room 21 if the issue of paramilitary attacks happened to be on the agenda of the Executive of this place. The Minister of Education could name and shame the people who carry out those attacks if he really wanted to. He could indicate people in his own organisation who carry out those attacks, but he does not do it. Perhaps that is because those people are too close to his family home.

The misnamed Chief Whip of Sinn Féin/IRA could take the opportunity to reveal to the House the name of the chief bludgeoner for Belfast IRA company if he really wanted to. But, of course, his party does not want to name and shame people; that might be too close to home. Instead of getting his people in this Assembly to put forward wrecking motions, Mr Adams could, if he wanted to, bring forward motions or use the privilege of this House to name and shame those behind the attacks in Belfast. Perhaps those names are too close to his home for comfort also.

In reality, Mr Deputy Speaker — and I use the words carefully — brothers, nephews, brothers-in-arms of that organisation represented in this House are behind these attacks. That is the reality; that is what the police say, and perhaps we should take the opportunity and the privileges afforded to us in this House to name and shame those individuals. My Colleague came close to it. Perhaps that is called for because it is clear from the comments we have heard from members of the Nationalist community that they have no shame. They have no shame in what they are saying; if they had any shame, they would be supporting this motion.

Alban Maginness's contribution was more disappointing than normal. Once again he has washed his hands of any responsibility. In fact, I almost heard the creak in his neck when he looked over his shoulder at Sinn Féin and the electoral responsibilities that will be facing him. Those parties take a view that is quite clearly political. They have lost sight of justice, decency and truth on this issue. Paramilitarism and paramilitary attacks have soared. It is easy to conclude from Prof Knox's report that the agreement has failed to defeat paramilitarism in this country in any way, and those who let the prisoners out of jail are responsible. The increase in these attacks is the predictable outcome of prisoner releases. We must be crazy if we thought that the release of paramilitary prisoners would not see an increase in violence on our streets. It clearly has.

No, this motion goes right to the heart of the realities that confront us today. The cancer at the heart of these

institutions — putting gunmen into government — establishes a Mafia society and erodes the very fabric of the society that we wish to live in. Indeed, it also turns the vast majority of democratic, law-abiding, decent citizens off taking responsibility and seeing this matter carried through to an ultimate and lawful conclusion.

Many of the comments made to the House by Ms Courtney and Mr “not so legal eagle” Attwood are misguided. The Belfast Agreement does not — to use Mr Attwood's words — offer “our future best hope”. To Ms Courtney I say that the Good Friday Agreement is not “the only means of getting rid of these so-called paramilitary attacks”. Prof Knox has presented cogent evidence that the Good Friday Agreement is failing.

The Good Friday Agreement is failing to stop these violent attacks. Prof Knox's report is thrown down as a gauntlet to us all. We have a responsibility to pick it up, vote and demonstrate our abhorrence of these paramilitary attacks. Those who fail to do so will show the community that they do not condemn paramilitary violence — they condone it.

Question. That the amendment be made, *put and negated.*

Main question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 14.

AYES

Ian Adamson, Fraser Agnew, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Joan Carson, Seamus Close, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, David Ervine, David Ford, Sam Foster, Oliver Gibson, John Gorman, David Hilditch, Derek Hussey, Billy Hutchinson, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, Robert McCartney, David McClarty, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Maurice Morrow, Sean Neeson, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, George Savage, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Bairbre de Brún, Pat Doherty, David Ervine, Michelle Gildernew, Billy Hutchinson, John Kelly, Alex Maskey, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Monica McWilliams, Francie Molloy, Jane Morrice, Dara O'Hagan, Sue Ramsey.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

This Assembly notes with grave concern the contents of the ‘Informal Criminal Justice Systems in Northern Ireland’ report on punishment beatings by paramilitary organisations; deplores and condemns the Government's inadequate response to the report; and

calls on the Government to bring forward measures to ensure that those responsible are made amenable to the law.

3.45 pm

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order. Perhaps you can help me, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thought that when a Member wished to abstain he or she had to go through both Lobbies to register the abstention.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not think that is necessary.

Mr McCartney: At the beginning of this debate a number of people expressed disquiet that Back-Benchers were limited in their speeches to five minutes. Mr Deputy Speaker, you advisedly told the House that as some 30 Members were listed to speak, the Business Committee had decided to limit Back-Benchers' speeches to five minutes. In the event, not all the time was taken up. I understand that this was because Members put their names on a list, on which you and the Business Committee formed your decision, and then withdrew their names. In effect, those who withdrew their names denied other Members the opportunity to deal with certain issues in this debate.

I do not always agree with Mr Billy Hutchinson, but he made the point that a significant part of the debate was not only about stating a problem but also about advising on what might be done about that problem. The time limitation meant that many aspects, such as those he mentioned, were ruled out. You should give direction to those Members who put down their names to speak and then withdraw.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr McCartney, for raising that point. You are correct. A number of people withdrew after indicating that they wished to speak. Also, some of those who spoke did not do so for the full five minutes. Members should note this point for future reference.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Further to that point of order. Will the Deputy Speaker look at how many times this has happened before? To my knowledge it has happened on two other occasions. People put down their names, and the debate was limited. Then they pulled out. Those who wanted to speak did not get to speak, and those speaking, and entitled to more time by the ordinary rules of debate, were cut back. Those who do this consistently should be told that their names cannot be taken unless they give an undertaking that they are going to speak. At Westminster when you put down your name, you stick to what you say.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are quite right. It does create a problem, and I am sure that it will be referred to the Business Committee and discussed at great length at the next meeting.

ON-COURSE TRACK BETTING: EMPLOYMENT PROTECTION

Mr Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to bring forward legislative proposals to provide employment protection rights for those, directly or indirectly, employed in respect of on-course track betting.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

As I explained in my opening remarks to my motion of 29 November 2000, which called for the introduction of legislation to permit Sunday on-course betting, the outcome sought in relation to the overall proposal falls within the remit of two ministerial Departments. For that very reason I submitted this motion to the Business Office simultaneously with the one passed in this House in November.

The purpose of this proposal is to address any fears or concerns those employed, directly or indirectly, in the racing industry may have regarding the pending introduction of Sunday on-course betting. Acceptance of this proposal will also set aside any concerns that elected representatives may have regarding the level of protection available to those who, for religious or family reasons, cannot work on Sundays. I was conscious from the outset that legalising Sunday on-course betting would raise legitimate concerns for both employees and ancillary workers affected by such legislative reform.

All persons could be legally safeguarded by the introduction of adequate employment protection rights similar to those available to workers in England and Wales — pursuant to the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994. Such legislative measures could protect those I have already referred to — employees who, for religious or family-related reasons, cannot work on Sundays. The fact that an Act is already in place in England and Wales simplifies my role in proposing the motion, and, no doubt, it will also prove to be of immense assistance to the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment when he commences the setting up of similar legislation for Northern Ireland.

For the record — to give Members some indication of the level of protection provided by the Act (Chapter 40) — I shall highlight the relevant provisions. Schedule 8, which relates to section 20, deals with "Rights of Betting Workers as Respects Sunday Working". Paragraph 2 of the same schedule defines "protected betting worker". Paragraph 4 deals with "Notice of objection to Sunday working". Paragraph 5 defines "Opted-out betting worker". Paragraph 6 defines "notice period". Paragraph 7 deals with "Right not to be dismissed for refusing Sunday Work".

Paragraph 9 deals with dismissals regarded as unfair by virtue of paragraph 7 or 8. Paragraph 10 deals with

the right of the employee not to suffer detriment for refusing to work on Sundays. Paragraph 11 outlines the employer's duty and the employee's statutory right in relation to Sunday betting work. Paragraph 12 deals with the effect of rights on contracts of employment. Paragraphs 13 to 21 deal with many important issues, such as transitional modifications relating to maternity cases, dismissals on grounds of assertion of statutory rights, dismissal procedures agreements, and conciliation.

4.00 pm

As I said earlier, the fact that such an Act is in place elsewhere in these islands, having been passed by Parliament, is an assurance that comparable workers in England and Wales are fully protected. I am confident that if the applicable sections of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 were to be used by those responsible for drafting the Assembly's legislation, we could fully protect our employees in matters pertaining to Sunday work.

I therefore propose the motion in the clear understanding that the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, Dr Farren, can introduce protective legislation for all grades of workers, similar to that applying in England and Wales.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Birnie): Late last year the Assembly passed a motion proposed by the instigator of this motion. That motion, back in November, dealt with the extension of betting. When, and if, this change does occur — and it is, of course, an open question as to what changes may occur in Great Britain and what implications they may have for the industry in Northern Ireland — it will have implications for the working conditions of workers in the betting industry in Northern Ireland. Hence this motion today.

Among the most relevant previous pieces of legislation are the Sunday Trading Act 1994 in Great Britain, and its equivalent here, the Shops (Sunday Trading, &c.) (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. The crucial distinction — which the mover of the motion has referred to — is that there is legislation in Great Britain which includes the betting industry, whereas our piece of legislation does not.

These various pieces of legislation attempt, within their differing remits, to establish that those workers who find themselves in activities that for the first time involve Sunday working will be given protection. In other words, they will not find themselves compelled to work on Sunday, and they will not be dismissed if they refuse so to work.

I assume — or perhaps now know from what he has said — that Mr Bradley's concern is that such provisions in the Sunday Trading Act in Great Britain and the Shops (Sunday Trading, &c.) (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 should now be extended to include the betting and

gambling industry in Northern Ireland. If this is done — if the situation arises where it needs to be done — the overarching European Union Directives will also be relevant, especially in the area of working time. In normal circumstances these limit the maximum working week to under 48 hours. Some Assembly Members might find a total working week limited to under 48 hours a rather novel concept, but that is now the general provision, which the UK, along with other EU states, has subscribed to. That will have implications for the issue of working on Sunday.

As Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee, I will endorse the motion.

I will conclude on a more personal note, without wearing my Chairperson's hat. I opposed Mr Bradley's initial motion because of the implications that it had with regard to the working conditions that the Assembly is considering today. Of course, it is entirely right that if Sunday on-course track betting is allowed that the Assembly should seek to regulate it and provide adequate employment protection. My impression of the English and Welsh experience since Sunday trading was liberalised is that it is impossible to provide complete legal safeguards to protect workers who, for whatever reasons — family, social or conscience — cannot work on Sundays. Given that, I still hold that the ideal position is that this difficulty should not be entered into in the first place. I support this motion subject to that proviso.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, A LeasCheann Comhairle. I also support the motion. As Mr Birnie stated, it dates back to the legislative change in 1997, which did not include those who worked in the betting industry but did apply to shop opening hours and the hours that employees should work.

If there is going to be Sunday racing in Down Royal, it is timely that provision should be made in law to ensure that no one is penalised or forced to work on Sundays. Adam Ingram said at the time

"I know there are many people who have demonstrated a desire for shopping on Sunday".

On that, one could equally say "for racing on Sunday". He went on to say

"the new legislation provides freedom of choice, enabling people to choose for themselves how they spend their Sundays. I ask those with concerns about the relaxation of Sunday trading" —

or racing —

"restrictions to remember the archaic and inconsistent state of the present law which required urgent replacement."

He continued

"I am very conscious of the need to protect the rights of shop workers" —

one could say betting workers —

“who do not want to work on Sundays. The new protection rights for shop workers” —

that is, betting workers —

“contained in the Order will do just that and they apply irrespective of age, length of service or hours of work”.

I am not going to trawl through everything, but the legislation goes on to discuss working times, including travelling when it is part of the job, working lunches and job-related training. That is all included in the legislation introduced by Adam Ingram.

The one omission that I noted is the issue of pay for those who work on Sundays. I was at Leopardstown last Sunday, where I saw Istabraq restore Ireland's confidence for the Champion Hurdle at Cheltenham. I spoke to a few bookmakers at the racecourse who said that their clerks were possibly the best paid people in Ireland. Therefore we are not talking about bookies' clerks, rather about the ancillary staff who work in the tote, catering and stewarding.

I say to P J Bradley that we should put down a marker not just about working conditions and the issues of forcing people to work on Sundays or whether they are penalised for not working on Sundays but also about the type of wage structure that will exist for those people who work on Sundays.

Thank you, A LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion.

Mr O'Connor: I support the motion in the name of my Colleague. However, it strikes me that surely there should be employment protection laws which act as an umbrella to cover everyone. We live in a society that contains Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and Jews.

Forcing a Christian to work on a Sunday is no worse than forcing a Jew to work on a Saturday. We are now in a multicultural and multi-ethnic society and, overall, our employment laws should reflect that. I know that there are anomalies that come out from time to time, but we should try to be reflective of society as a whole.

Mr John Kelly raised an important point about the working conditions of staff. Does that also include night-time racing? There is more and more betting from foreign countries. Are people going to be made to work shifts? We should not have to deal with employment protection every time a motion comes forward with legislative proposals to provide employment protection rights for anyone. We should have employment protection rights for absolutely everyone in our society.

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): The motion calls on me to bring forward legislative proposals to provide employment protection rights for those directly or indirectly employed in on-course track betting. In case there is any misunderstanding, given the terms of the motion, I should emphasise that the people involved in

this activity are in no sense without employment rights at present. They have the same employment rights as other employees. It is very clear from the remarks of the Member who moved this motion, and those of other Members, that the motion seeks to ensure that such workers should have extra protection with regard to Sunday working in the event of this Assembly making on-course betting on a Sunday legal. That is protection, in particular, from being compelled against their wishes to work on Sundays.

The question of the legalising of on-course betting on a Sunday is a matter for the Minister for Social Development. I understand that he has noted and is considering the debate and the outcome of the debate that took place on this general issue last December. If and when a decision is made to legalise on-course betting on a Sunday, I would be obliged and willing to introduce employment protection measures in tandem with any proposed legislation of that kind.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I am sorry that I was not here for the first part of the debate. When the issue of protecting people because of their religious convictions was discussed in the House of Commons, many promises were made — for instance, that Sunday would not be treated as an ordinary working day. Those promises have all been broken. Can the Minister assure us that if people have to work on a Sunday and it is against their convictions to do so, they will be adequately protected? Many people have had almost a revolution in their family, because Sunday was the time when all the family was present. Because of workloads, they now cannot even have a proper family reunion on a Sunday.

If we are going to have Sunday working, then it should be recognised as a special day. Of course, I take the point — as I heard on the television — about other religions and their special days. The honour should be kept that was given to them originally on this sort of legislation.

4.15 pm

Dr Farren: I assure the Member for North Antrim that I will ensure that the measures prescribed in any legislation of the kind that we are anticipating are enforced. I trust that he is not suggesting that just because British Ministers do not keep their word a Colleague representing the same constituency as himself is not expected to keep his regarding measures contained in any legislation for which he is responsible. I assure the Member that the measures will be implemented in the spirit and the letter of any such legislation.

The sort of protection involved would be the same as that which is now available to shop workers under the Sunday trading legislation. An on-course betting worker would have the right not to be dismissed for refusal to work on Sundays and not to suffer any detriment, such as denial of promotion or training opportunities, for that reason. Those rights would be enforceable by way of a

complaint to an industrial tribunal, and I think that underlines the assurance that I have just given.

It would also be appropriate to ensure that on-course betting workers would be able, without suffering detriment, to give their employer notice that they wish to opt out of a clause in their contract that requires them to work on Sundays.

Protections such as those — and others as detailed by Mr Bradley in moving the motion — might have to be considered, and that would be necessary, fair and just. I would be prepared to introduce those protections if Sunday on-course betting were made legal in Northern Ireland.

My Colleague Mr O'Connor mentioned other days apart from Sunday that are regarded as sacred by people of different faiths. He said that there may be a case for considering the rights of those people whose faiths observe those days as sacred. There may well be a case for our examining the employment legislation with regard to such matters.

However, with regard to the motion, I assure Members that when it is necessary for us to take action we will do so in such a way as to provide adequate, fair and comprehensive protection to the workers who will be involved.

Mr Bradley: As with my proposal, I will be brief in my winding-up speech. I thank the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Minister for his encouraging words; I also thank the Chairperson of the Committee and the other Members who share my views on employment protection. It is encouraging to hear that everyone shared those views.

I remind Members that the previous Administration, under the then Ministers Ingram and Worthington, carried out a consultation process on all matters pertaining to the proposal to introduce Sunday on-course betting. The exercise also sought opinion regarding the rights of betting workers if on-course betting were permitted.

The report which followed the consultation process gave some very revealing information, particularly paragraph 4.7.2 headed "To Provide Employment Protection Rights for Betting Workers Employed on Tracks if On-Course Betting on Sundays is Permitted". There was a poor response to that section of the pre-report survey. Only nine respondents were identified as being in the "broadly content" category. Those included people with track and horse interests, bookmaking interests, people associated with the Law Society and those described as church/religious-type bodies.

So as not to mislead, the report explains that the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland committee on public morals has indicated that employment protection is the absolute minimum required when Sunday on-course betting becomes a reality. In the category headed "Some reservations/suggestions", only six returns are recorded. None of the six make any suggestions.

Their submissions expressed a number of fears, including possible conflict and injustice between employers and staff, as well as pressures on employees to work on Sunday. One submission found it hard to accept the idea that there should be no detriment to a person who refused to work on Sunday. Fortunately, all the fears expressed in this section can be easily addressed in the proposed legislation.

I am pleased to inform the House that in the third category, set aside to record unfavourable comments, not one objection is recorded. I repeat: there were no unfavourable comments. This significant fact alone demonstrates that the general public treated the consultation process with a degree of apathy. As I look around, I think that that apathy is reflected in this House also. I believe that many also demonstrated a level of tolerance, recognising that others may have, and are entitled to have, a different outlook regarding the subject, and that there is a need to adapt to meet other attitudes.

I conclude with the same lines with which I ended my opening remarks. I propose this motion on the clear understanding that protective legislation for all grades of workers, similar to that which applies in England and Wales, must be introduced prior to, or simultaneously with, the changes regarding on-course betting approved by the Assembly on 29 November 2000. I fully appreciate that the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, like his ministerial Colleague, the Minister for Social Development, who is dealing with the successful November proposal, has a very demanding workload that is not exactly lessened by a motion such as this. I believe, however, that both are fully aware of the benefit that my original motion, and this necessary follow-on proposal, will bring to the overall economy of the area.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to bring forward legislative proposals to provide employment-protection rights for those, directly or indirectly, employed in respect of on-course track betting.

Motion made:

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

SECTARIAN ATTACKS (LARNE)

Mr Neeson: I am raising this important and serious issue because of the deteriorating situation in Larne. I am sure that Members will join me in condemning the sectarian attacks on three homes in Larne last night.

It is important in this kind of situation that people recognise the problems in the area. As elected representatives we should provide leadership. In raising the issue, I recognise that other areas of Northern Ireland such as Ballymena, Coleraine and Ballymoney have suffered from sectarian attacks in recent months. We must recognise that there is a major problem. Since October, over 30 pipe bomb attacks have occurred throughout Northern Ireland, quite a number of them in the Larne area.

Mr R Hutchinson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it right for a Member to quote statistics that are not necessarily true? Can he give a breakdown of those attacks? It is not true that most of the 30 pipe bomb attacks occurred in Larne.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr Neeson: I wish that when people quote me they would do so accurately. I said that a considerable number of them have been in the Larne area.

Mr R Hutchinson: Quantify it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Neeson: The statistics I am using have come from the RUC.

Mr R Hutchinson: Quantify it.

Mr Neeson: At the outset of the debate I appealed to Members to give leadership on this issue. This sort of activity by the Member is not going to help the situation. I want a reasoned debate to see how we, as elected Members of the Assembly, can give leadership on this important issue.

Mr R Hutchinson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do not think that it is lack of leadership on my part to ask the Member to quantify what he is saying.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr Neeson: The intention was to have this debate on a reasoned and sensible level, and for people not to get carried away. It is for them to provide the leadership, which the community is seeking elected representatives to provide. You all know that pipe bombs can kill and maim. Fortunately, there have been no serious injuries

from the use of pipe bombs, whether in Larne or elsewhere, over the recent months.

What is happening in Larne is a very complex issue. As someone who worked in the town for quite a considerable time, and who keeps in regular contact with constituents there, I know the complexities of the situation.

RUC statistics show that last year the police stated that there were 76 sectarian attacks in Larne. In reality, as we all know, there were probably a lot more because of the number of attacks that were not reported. There have been attacks on Catholic and Protestant homes. Looking at the statistics, I am sure that everyone will agree that the majority of them have been on the Catholic community there.

Whether they are pipe bombs, petrol bombs or bricks being thrown through windows — as happened last night — the aim is to terrorise individuals and the whole community. In most of the attacks that have taken place, whether they are against Catholic homes or Protestant homes, the motivation is sectarian hatred. It is a sad fact of life that that is permeating society throughout Northern Ireland at the present time. Very often the targets are the elderly, the very young or single parents. There is a deep fear throughout the community in Larne and elsewhere at the present time.

The very fact that we have the Army back on the streets of Larne indicates how serious the existing situation is. The sad thing — and this comes from someone who has worked in Larne and represents the Larne area — is that the image of Larne has been tarnished at home and abroad. When I raised the issue of the attacks with the Prime Minister last Thursday he was very well acquainted with what was happening in the area. This Thursday I and members of my party will be meeting the Chief Constable to discuss Larne and the issues that exist in other parts of Northern Ireland.

The bottom line is that the rule of law must be restored in the streets of Larne and in other areas. The rule of law is breaking down in many parts of Northern Ireland for many different reasons. A big part of it is the whole question of sectarianism, whether it is Catholic sectarianism or Protestant sectarianism. While it is very much a rule of law issue, the community itself has a very important part to play.

4.30 pm

The community must recognise that it has a responsibility, although we must bear in mind the fear that prevents many people not only from reporting attacks but from giving information to the legitimate security services.

There was a series of sectarian attacks in Larne and throughout east Antrim in the 1970s. Indeed, I was almost a victim of a sectarian bomb attack on St Comgall's club in Larne. But for the grace of God and

the fact that only the detonator and not the whole bomb went off, I would not be here today. Nonetheless, throughout the troubles Larne was a mixed housing area; by and large, there were no ghettos. Now, however, there are increasing concerns that people on both sides are trying to create such ghettos. That is not acceptable and more cross-community initiatives are needed to stop it.

I am not saying that no such initiatives are happening; the building of the new YMCA youth club was a cross-community effort. This morning, the rector of St Cedma's told me about the Close Encounter event taking place in Larne this weekend in another attempt to defuse the situation. I also welcome the Wave Trauma Centre's initiative to help victims in Larne, regardless of the community from which they come. The Larne community must stand shoulder to shoulder and isolate those who are carrying out the attacks, but the people need our leadership.

One of the saddest things is that condemnation of the attacks has almost become a ritual. There is a need for new initiatives, and I hope for some worthwhile suggestions from Members today. I also want the Assembly to recognise that there are areas of social deprivation in Larne and that such areas suffer from all the associated social problems. The people need our help in many different ways, and we should provide it. Looking at what has happened in Northern Ireland in recent years, I feel that we can make progress only if people are prepared to talk to one another — one community to another and one individual to another. That could restore the normality that the people of Larne want.

Despite the apparent success of FG Wilson, new investment is still required in the borough of Larne. The six elected Members for the area have demonstrated that we can work together on economic and investment issues. I thank the many people who are working behind the scenes. They have my support, and that of the Assembly. I have tried to approach Larne's problems in a reasoned and balanced manner. As elected representatives, we must help the people of Larne.

Mr K Robinson: I speak on this particular topic with some sadness. Any attack upon persons or property deserves to be condemned. I condemn all the attacks in Larne, as I would condemn them in any part of my constituency or in any part of Northern Ireland.

In doing so, I am reflecting the views and opinions of all decent, right-thinking people in our community who want to live in an atmosphere of real peace. I trust that by engaging in this measured and responsible debate — and I thank the hon Member for starting off in that vein — we are not becoming pawns in any overt or covert considerations driven by party political necessity.

I have listened and watched in sadness as opportunities to provide positive leadership in this sorry situation were missed. Instead, we have witnessed a slow slide into a process dictated by a self-fulfilling prophecy. If

you tell a child often enough that he is a bad boy, he will become a bad boy.

In common with certain other provincial towns such as Ballymena, Coleraine and Portadown, it almost seems that Larne has been selected for a process of communal character assassination. I leave Members to ponder for themselves how and why that process may have evolved.

Larne was — and continues to be — an industrious, prosperous and pleasant town. In common with all towns, Larne has had its problems. However, the people of Larne, following in the tradition of their forefathers, did not sit down and bemoan their lot. Instead, they sought to challenge the spectre of unemployment by accepting the need to refocus the local economy.

A forward-looking borough council and an active business and community sector sought ways to retrain their workforce. Partnership boards, community groups and agencies such as Larne Enterprises Development Company (LEDCOM) and the East Antrim Institute for Further and Higher Education have provided positive approaches to meet these challenges for their whole community.

It is a matter of regret to those who have the best long-term interests of Larne and its people at heart that when the media were treated to a guided tour of the borough, the spotlight fell on a small number of rather nasty and negative incidents rather than on the positive features of the town.

However, as is the way with media interest, the failure to accentuate the positive is matched by the ability to magnify the negative aspects of a situation.

Instead of preparing papers for perusal by powers in a neighbouring state — a state, which incidentally, has a significant number of problems with urban crime and violence on its own doorstep — would it not have been in the interests of all the inhabitants of Larne to seek a united approach with the MLAs of East Antrim and the representatives of Larne? That would have enabled people to identify the real causes for the upsurge in antisocial behaviour in the town. It could be achieved by identifying those in the community who could influence people for the common good. By co-ordinating agencies, we could bring confidence and support to those who have felt uneasy and insecure, thereby isolating the real troublemakers and providing the RUC with the unqualified and total support that the force needed and deserved as it attempted to solve the problems for the benefit of all.

It would be a good start if those who are inclined "in foreign parts to roam" — as the song says — could speak to those a little closer to home. It is evident from moves today that all East Antrim MLAs are willing to be proactive and constructive in solving this problem,

and I congratulate my Colleague Mr Beggs for instigating a process today which I hope will aid that work. We need to have a co-ordinated community solution, and we need to find it quickly so that the town of Larne can once again focus on the task of attracting tourists and investors. We must be able to demonstrate that the traditional warm welcome which the gateway of Ulster has always shown to visitors is still there.

Mr O'Connor: First of all, let us not try and brush things under the carpet. There are problems in Larne, and they need to be dealt with by all of us. We all have a role to play. There were three more incidents last night. Two Catholic families and one Protestant family had their windows broken. Regardless of who they are, no victim should be regarded as worse than any other victim. These people have had their lives turned upside-down by thuggish elements. It might be a stone or a bottle that comes through their window tonight, but they will sit there wondering what it will be tomorrow night.

We can talk about all the good things — Larne Enterprises Development Company, the council initiatives, and all the rest — but in reality there is what Archbishop Eames termed “a culture of lawlessness” in areas throughout Northern Ireland. Larne is certainly one of those areas.

Mr Ken Robinson talked about selecting an area for some sort of assassination of its reputation. In the 1970s there was a Catholic school in Greenisland that had 400 pupils. It closed down in 1992 with 27 pupils. Two years ago — a week after I was elected to this august body — one estate in Carrickfergus was systematically ethnically cleansed of its Catholic population. Now we are into Larne. There is no accident. Gary McMichael spoke on ‘Evening Extra’ last Thursday about elements in the Ulster Democratic Party being disaffected with the way things were going in places such as Larne, Ballymoney and Coleraine. Surprise, surprise. We see where all the incidents that make the news are happening.

There is a problem, and it has to be tackled. It is not just the UDA. There are people from the Protestant community whose homes are being attacked. I deplore those attacks. I want to focus on the need for more police action. We have been told about the number of police officers available and that there are extra patrols. There are, however, no arrests and no convictions. I speak as one whose home has been attacked on multiple occasions. I have given evidence in court, only to see the perpetrators go away with a community service order. The police and the criminal justice system must stand up for victims. Where are the 800 Special Branch officers? What are they doing? For 30 years they could contain the problem in Northern Ireland. Now they cannot contain what is going on in Larne, Ballymoney and Coleraine.

We need to see a different type of policing. We need to see a political decision made by the Secretary of State

that this whole culture of lawlessness — drug dealing, the manufacture of counterfeit goods, money laundering and extortion — will be tackled head-on. We can all stick our heads in the sand, or we can face up to our responsibilities by calling for community action, and by calling for people to report what they know to the police. There are people in the community who know what is happening, and they have a moral responsibility to take that information to the police so that they can do the job they are there to do.

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

Mr O'Connor: I will.

Mention has been made of the Army on the streets of Larne. They were outside my house at 2.30 this morning. They went past again at 3.10 am. They would not be there if they were not needed, and I ask the Government for action. Under the Good Friday Agreement, people were guaranteed the right to freely choose their own place of residence and the right to live free from sectarian harassment. In human rights legislation —

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Connor: May I have half a minute? This is very important to the people I represent. Both Catholics and Protestants need to know that they are safe in their beds at night.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, Mr O'Connor. Your time is up.

4.45 pm

Mr R Hutchinson: I must say from the outset that I am appalled at this motion. It is the last thing that Larne needs. It would have better behaved Mr Neeson to get the six MLAs for the area to sit down together behind closed doors and talk to each other. Then we could have come up with a formula for tackling this issue instead of bringing it again to the attention of the media. There are people in Larne who are hurting. I want to state publicly that there is no justification for the terrorising or intimidation of any human being in Larne or anywhere else in Northern Ireland, be they Protestant or Catholic, black or white, Hindu or Jew. Everyone has the right to live peacefully and to be dealt with equally under the law.

Larne is no different from any other part of Northern Ireland. Mr Neeson gave us the statistics, but I want him to carry those statistics through. Let us look at those figures. Mr Neeson talked about 76 attacks in Larne. Fifty-three attacks have been on Roman Catholics, and 35 on Protestants. Members may notice that that does not add up to 76. However, there could have been four or five people in those houses. That is how the figures add up. There is an imbalance here. There is intimidation, but it is against both sides of the community. Do not try to make out that it is any worse than in any other place. Everyone suffers when there is a breakdown of law and

order. We only have to look throughout Northern Ireland to see that, stemming from the Belfast Agreement, there has been a general breakdown in law and order.

I call upon the RUC to implement zero tolerance when dealing with people who harass, petrol bomb, firebomb and intimidate others. There is absolutely no room for intimidation in any society. The majority of decent people in Larne reject the lawlessness of the few and support their neighbours, regardless of creed or colour. It is time for the silent majority in Larne to speak out. We know what happened in Nazi Germany when the majority turned its back. We do not want that to happen in Northern Ireland. We definitely do not want it to happen in Larne.

The people of Larne need to realise that they have to come forward to the forces of law and order and report anything, no matter how insignificant it may seem. It will help the police to build up a dossier and bring these people to book.

I have been appalled at some of the media coverage on Larne. Ulster Television is the worst offender. A programme on UTV last Friday evening featured an interview with a gentleman from the Seacourt estate. Watchers were led to believe that it was impossible for Roman Catholics to shop in Larne or go to the cinema. That afternoon I had walked the streets of Larne and was stopped by many members of the Roman Catholic community thanking me for my leadership — and they were shopping merrily in Larne. They were able to go into any shop that I entered; they were able to buy their groceries where I bought mine.

I call on the media to realise that Larne is no worse than any other town in Northern Ireland. In Coleraine last year there were 19 pipe bombs; in Larne there were two. In Coleraine there were 18 petrol bombs; in Larne there were 10.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Please draw your remarks to a close.

Mr R Hutchinson: In Coleraine there were seven intimidations; in Larne there were 15. In Coleraine there were 13 firearm incidents; in Larne there were three. Let us have balance and the truth. Larne is a good town in which the majority of residents despise those who are creating havoc for a number of people.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It was interesting that Sean Neeson and Danny O'Connor both compared events in Larne in 1970 to what is happening in the present phase of sectarianism. It is not good enough to talk about this as being antisocial behaviour. It is not — this is a concerted, orchestrated attack on the Catholics of Larne, which extends to Coleraine and Ballymena. Roger Hutchinson provides figures on how many pipe bombs there were in Larne, Coleraine and Ballymena and says

that Larne did not have that many. Even one pipe bomb in Larne is sufficient reason for concern.

People have spoken about members of the Protestant community in Larne being attacked, yet it is the Nationalist community that has borne the brunt of those attacks. There were 150 attacks on Catholics in the Larne area before Christmas last year. This year, those attacks are not abating but increasing, and there is a greater degree of indifference to what happens to the victims of those attacks. There is greater arrogance among those participating in the attacks and a greater feeling that they can get away with it.

The term “ethnic cleansing” is not too strong to use in relation to what is happening in Larne and in other areas of east Antrim. It is clear that the attacks are being orchestrated by Loyalist paramilitaries in the UDA and the LVF.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr J Kelly: I have only five minutes.

Their intention is quite clearly to ethnically cleanse those predominately Loyalist areas in Larne, Ballymena and Coleraine. They want to drive Catholics from their homes — homes in which they have lived for generations. Those families have shown remarkable courage, resilience and determination in standing their ground. That is why I think that it was right for Mr Neeson to bring the matter to the Floor.

UTV is only reporting the news as it gets it. You cannot blame UTV, ‘the Irish News’, the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ or the BBC for what is happening. They can only report the news as it unfolds. I was listening to that man who was recently pipe bombed. He seemed a reasonable and reasoned man who did not attempt to make capital out of the attack on himself and his family, an attack that could have caused the deaths of those who were in the house at that time.

Mr R Hutchinson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The statistics clearly prove 53 attacks on Roman Catholics and 35 on Protestants —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Hutchinson, under which Standing Order are you raising this matter? It is not a point of order.

Mr J Kelly: I will continue and conclude.

What is happening in Larne deserves the condemnation of the Assembly. The Nationalist people in Larne deserve our support and the support of the whole community.

Mr Ken Robinson referred to visits to Dublin. The Irish Government, together with the British Government, have a distinct responsibility to support those people in Larne — people who have lived in Larne all those years and who were born and reared there. They deserve the

support of all Governments and all interested people in our society.

It is quite nice to talk about Larne being the gateway to this or that. At the present time, and in the present atmosphere, Larne is being visited by a degree of sectarianism unparalleled since 1970.

Mr Boyd: I am speaking not as an East Antrim MLA but as an ordinary citizen. Mr Roger Hutchinson has pointed out that Larne mirrors many parts of Northern Ireland. At the outset I want to condemn utterly the sectarian attacks in Larne on both Protestants and Roman Catholics. My condemnation of paramilitary violence, from whatever source, has been consistent.

It is regrettable that the SDLP representative for East Antrim, Mr Danny O'Connor, gives the impression on nightly media interviews that attacks are happening only against the Roman Catholic community. RUC statistics reveal that many Protestants have also been intimidated in the Larne area. Mr O'Connor refers to ethnic cleansing in the 1970s. My uncle and his family, along with many other Protestants, were ethnically cleansed from New Barnsley in the 1970s. Larne town centre was bombed twice by the Provisional IRA in the 1970s.

Some criticisms from Nationalist elected representatives against the RUC in Larne are unwarranted and unjustified. The impression has been given that no one has been apprehended for these attacks. The RUC has stated that it has arrested 25 people in connection with these criminal acts. The situation is inflamed by the type of inaccurate public statements that I have already mentioned. A minority on both sides is intent on causing division in Larne. It is hypocritical of Danny O'Connor to demand more RUC resources, including covert operations, when his party is demanding the destruction of the RUC and the full implementation of the Patten Report, which would result in a reduction of RUC resources. Will Danny O'Connor call on young Roman Catholics in Larne to join the RUC? For years the SDLP has been critical of covert security force operations, including those that have been successful in capturing ruthless terrorists. I trust that Nationalist representatives in Larne will condemn the provocative flying of the tricolour in parts of the borough.

One leading Nationalist from Larne, Bertie Shaw, is currently charged with the attempted murder of two Protestants in the town in 2000. In 1999 the same Mr Bertie Shaw, along with Gerard Rice from the Ormeau Road, organised a Nationalist protest at an Orange cultural event at the Waterfront Hall. My wife and I and others were kicked and punched on the way in to the event. Some young children were too frightened to enter the building. The SDLP did not condemn this violence against innocent Protestants celebrating their culture.

The community in Larne should assist the RUC, and all elected representatives should act responsibly and impartially. I agree with Mr Roger Hutchinson when he

says that it would be better for the six East Antrim MLAs to get together rather than have a divisive debate such as this. I praise those elected representatives who have acted responsibly in condemning the violence, from whatever quarter. I regret to say that comments made by a small number of elected representatives have been irresponsible and have raised tensions in the Larne area. Everyone has the right to live in peace, free from violence and intimidation. Regrettably, the continuing implementation of the Belfast Agreement and its appeasement policy will most likely result in this violent activity spreading to other parts of Northern Ireland unless the Government demonstrate the will to defeat terrorism and restore the rule of law.

Mr Neeson says that the rule of law has broken down. This is due to the release of prisoners under the Belfast Agreement, the strengthening of paramilitary organisations through the elevation of their representatives to political office and the supply of unlimited funding for their organisations.

Mr Ervine: To defend Larne by simply pointing out that it is not as bad as somewhere else is a poor defence. To deny that something is happening, then admit that it is happening, and then ask us all to get together to do something about something that is allegedly not happening is rather strange. Nevertheless, ethnic cleansing is nothing new in Northern Ireland. It is nothing new in our six counties of Northern Ireland in one way or another. Mr Kelly had ample opportunity to tell us of the annoyance inflicted on the Protestant community in Londonderry last evening. He did not do this.

We can all be a bit hypocritical, but the fact is that ordinary decent people are suffering. Irrespective of the political games and chicanery that people want to indulge in, if we do not do something about it as a society, some of our constituents will die. That is the unadulterated truth, and our history tells us that it will happen.

5.00 pm

We exhort the RUC to do better. That is logical, but there comes a time when the tolerance of society is turned upon those who are absolutely intolerant. Those people do what they are doing in Larne, Coleraine, Ballymena or Ballymoney, whichever side of the community they come from, because they think they have a right to act like this. If you happen to be in the Unionist community, for example, you might feel that you are the last bastion of defence and say "I'll do something about it."

How many ex-prisoners are involved in this terrible trouble in Larne? None, or very few. Yet our leaders cry foul. Ludicrous stuff comes from the mouths of politicians; they tell us that we have been sold out, that the other side is winning. When people are given the impression that they are locked into a zero-sum battle,

then, with a perverted sense of duty, some of them may feel that they have a legitimate cause for action. It is called populism.

We are told that those who advocate the demolition of the Good Friday Agreement perhaps have their own little part to play. Nevertheless, their campaign and their threat to scupper it all by walking out create a constant hype and fear in the minds of the Unionist community. Those who fired the bomb at Ebrington barracks this morning and those who were swiftest to condemn it have the same goal. They both want the destruction of the only opportunity that this society has ever had to live in peace in my lifetime, and perhaps the only opportunity that my children and my children's children will have.

I have an affinity with Larne. I lived there as a child — those were my days of innocence, and perhaps Larne's days of innocence. Today, even while they talk about the suffering of innocent people and the need to defend the integrity and decency of what is a wonderful place, two of our Members have also spoken about their need to destroy the Good Friday Agreement. For them it is evil; vile; terrible; deplorable; shameful; and stinking. I am not quoting them, but they may well have said this at some time in the past or may do so in the future.

In reply to those Members, I want to say "It is simple — just walk out." Not only could the couple here at the moment walk out, but the massed ranks as well. They choose not to do so. Instead, while ordinary, decent, innocent people suffer, they earn £39,500 per year, eulogising and chasing television cameras to make sure that they get re-elected.

If you come from the Protestant community and realise how painful it was when people were ethnically cleansed, it is even more shameful then to inflict the same on somebody else who is also wholly innocent. The choices are clear. What is going on in Larne and in other parts of Northern Ireland is either right or wrong. We must choose. Do we create a culture and an ethos where we, the tolerant society, identify the intolerant and deal with them, or do we pay mealy-mouthed lip-service to division and thus give these people justification for their actions?

Mr Beggs: As one of the two Assembly Members who actually lives in the Larne borough, I hope to give some insight into what I have discovered is happening in my town. I aim to show that the impression given over the past weeks and months does not give the full picture, and I want to send a positive message about what Larne can become.

First, I want to send a clear message to the men of violence in our society. Stop. You are acting for no one but yourselves — you have no mandate. Since I was elected to the Assembly I have consistently condemned those in my constituency who have been engaged in

terrorism, whatever the level and whatever the source. I will continue to do so.

However, we must all go beyond the ritual of condemnation. We must analyse what is wrong, and prescribe a remedy. I would like Members to assess what they are saying and doing, both here and in the public domain, that is constructive and that is helping to solve the problems.

The recent troubles in Larne need to be put into context, and in doing so, the perceptions created about the town by the local and national media have to be changed, for they are inaccurate. Yes, we have failings, but Larne is not the hellhole that some people describe it to be.

During the year 2000 there were 76 separate incidents described as sectarian. Of those affected, 53 people were Catholics and 35 were Protestants. The incidents ranged from pipe bombings, petrol bombings, vandalised cars, assaults on people and on homes, and threatening letters. It is clear from the figures that the attacks are coming from both sides. Yet, what are we getting in the media? Even last night, the commentary on some of the provincial media about what happened in the town was totally unbalanced. There was a tit-for-tat attack in Larne last night. A beer bottle was thrown into a Protestant home, and bricks were subsequently thrown into two Catholic homes.

All attacks are wrong. However, some aspects of the media, and some representatives, portray the attacks as coming entirely from one side. There is criminality in both communities.

UTV Internet has actually metamorphosed some of the figures. A recent statement on the web site revealed that 78 Catholic families in the town have been targeted last year. The figures have been lumped together and portrayed as coming from one side of the community. I have referred the matter to UTV, so I hope that it will correct its misreporting. Perhaps it is a case of not letting the facts get in the way of a good story.

I say this not to minimise any of the attacks that have happened to my Catholic constituents but to highlight the fact that there are troublemakers in both communities. If we are going to move forward together as a community, we must acknowledge criminality in both communities.

Larne has been fortunate in many ways. It does not have terrorism to the same extent as many other towns in Northern Ireland. Therefore it is ironic that the troubles that we have at present are coming to a level exceeding that in many other locations.

We must not allow bigots to destroy our community in Larne, and they are not exclusively on one side. Many of the problems have emanated from the Seacourt estate, where local Republicans have said to neighbours "We are going to turn this estate into a Nationalist ghetto or

bring it to the ground.” They are bringing the estate to the ground, terrorising completely innocent neighbours and those who have no involvement in terrorism or in politics.

There needs to be a realisation in the Nationalist community of the failings of these criminals, for many of these people have criminal records. Many of them continue to be sought by the courts for criminal activities. However, we have to move forward positively. In doing so, I would like to advise the House that there have been positive moves behind the scenes with groups and individuals. I welcome the fact that six Assembly Members have signed a letter, which I drafted, calling for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to utilise Peace II funding to improve community relations in Larne.

Mr A Maginness: I congratulate Assemblyman Roger Hutchinson on his very powerful condemnation of the violence in Larne, and I congratulate other Members also. I want to say to him, and to the other Members of the House who have spoken, particularly those on the Unionist side, that there is a very deep well of sectarianism in our society. It is a poisoned toxin that infects and damages the body politic and the fabric of our society.

I believe that places such as Larne, Ballymena, Ballymoney and Coleraine are suffering from the effects of that toxin. There is something disturbing going on in those communities. However, that disturbance and violence would not arise unless the culture of sectarianism was embedded in the social organisation of those communities.

It is not enough to condemn — right and proper as that is — those who carry out the acts of violence. We must look inside ourselves and ask if there is something that we can change about our sectarian attitudes that will remove this poison and help create a new and healthy society that respects human rights. Human rights are the bedrock of the Good Friday Agreement. We have heard about attacks on people’s homes. Those are attacks on human rights. Those are attacks on the right to liberty and security of the person. An attack on a person’s home may also constitute an attack on the right to life. Human rights are being damaged and attacked by those who perpetrate this violence.

Some Members have been talking about violence as if it were some sort of epidemic — almost something that happened as a result of some sort of inexplicable outbreak. However, we are not talking about casual sectarian violence. There may be some casual sectarian violence, but we are talking about organised sectarian violence in Larne. I pay tribute to Danny O’Connor for highlighting and being forthright about this issue.

Mr Beggs: I concur with some of the Member’s comments, but he should bear in mind that a cross-community women’s group — perhaps relevant to himself — in the Seacourt estate was forced out of action by Republicans. It is coming from both communities.

Mr A Maginness: I have no doubt that there is violence on both sides in Larne. However, it must be said — and Danny O’Connor has said openly and courageously — that there is organised violence in that town and in that area. The majority of that violence has been visited upon the minority Catholic community that lives in the borough. In addition, he says that it is his belief that it is organised by the UDA or organisations associated with the UDA. I believe that, and I believe that the police have confirmed it.

I cannot understand why, in a town of 20,000 people — it is not a big town — the police cannot come to grips with that sort of organised violence. Casual violence is more difficult to eradicate. However, organised violence, which requires somebody to make pipe bombs, petrol bombs and weapons with which to attack homes, should surely be detected and suppressed by the police. Assemblyman Roger Hutchinson asked that very question himself on a radio programme. It goes to the heart of the concerns of Catholic people living in that area.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr A Maginness: Why has there not been effective police action on this? This is not such a big nut for the police to crack. I commend those who have constructively criticised the police over their actions in Larne.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr A Maginness: I support Danny O’Connor and Sean Neeson for highlighting this issue.

Mr Hilditch: Like other Members who have taken part in today’s debate, I totally condemn the unsavoury incidents currently taking place in Larne. It saddens me that the severity of the situation has led to the matter being brought before the House today. It is right to condemn the attacks in Larne, as well as similar activity taking place in other areas throughout the Province.

5.15 pm

We have before us a terrible vicious circle. Attack provokes attack; retaliation provokes retaliation, and at the end of the day, both communities are losing out. The cost to individual families is immense, with ruined lives, wrecked homes and vast medical problems which, unfortunately, will surface in the days ahead.

There is no one section of our community with a monopoly on suffering. The statistics released by the RUC that are being quoted today give the true facts on the problem. Both communities are under attack — indeed, members of the DUP have been attacked in Larne by Republicans. Loyalists too must take responsibility for their actions.

Unfortunately, what we have witnessed to date is that he who shouts loudest is the victim. That is the perception coming out of Larne. I call on all local politicians and

community leaders to disregard point scoring. Let us get to grips with the situation here at the grass roots and put the heart back into Larne.

The embryo of a similar problem was beginning to emerge in Carrickfergus last year. Local civic and community leaders came together, stood their ground and headed off the problem. No one had to run to Dublin, London or elsewhere. The matter was sorted out on our own doorstep, without adding provocation to the situation.

The story in Larne is no different from that in any other place in Northern Ireland. Something that, perhaps, starts off as being a case of nuisance neighbours ruins good communities, and lack of action — particularly on the part of statutory agencies such as the Housing Executive — leaves a void that is taken up by the more sinister elements. The results are the same — a huge cost in human suffering, population displacements and, more often than not, perfectly good housing demolished owing to the increasing number of voids.

We do not want to see that in any part of Larne. Let us not allow that to happen in Larne. Let us not see events spiralling any further, as we have witnessed in interface areas in North and West Belfast and in other constituencies. We must take up the slack and tackle the problems head-on. The rule of law and order must be applied to all, irrespective of their political or religious affiliation.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The time for the Adjournment debate is now up.

Mr Irvine: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I suppose it is not my job to point out to you that

this dialogue was timed to take place between 5.00pm and 6.00pm, yet, despite our having been encouraged to nip our commentaries short, we find ourselves, at 5.18pm, going home. Even the capacity to give way is destroyed by the short-termism that is being foisted on us.

I realise that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, have made a decision, which I am not likely to be able to overturn, but I ask that you — along with the Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers — give some consideration to this problem. This is the second time today that this matter has been raised as a point of order in the House.

Mr R Hutchinson: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am gravely concerned. Many of us had prepared speeches containing lots of statistics which we were not able to quote. We rushed our speeches through to comply with your ruling. The situation in Larne is severe, which is the very reason I felt that this debate should not take place today. We were cut short, and things that should have been said could not be said. I am afraid that today's debate has served no purpose whatsoever.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Standing Orders allow one hour for the Adjournment debate. We began this debate at 4.22pm, and it is now 5.19pm. We had five minutes extra because one Member withdrew. That is why we have a few minutes left over. If there are problems with this, they should be taken up with the Business Committee and the Standing Orders Committee.

Adjourned at 5.19 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 29 January 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

THE LATE MR TOM BENSON MLA

Mr Speaker: A memorial service for the late Mr Tom Benson will be held in the Senate Chamber on Monday 12 February at 1.00 pm.

ASSEMBLY: NEW MEMBER

Mr Speaker: On 22 January I informed Members that Mr Tom Hamilton had been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the Strangford constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from the death of Mr Tom Benson. I invite Mr Hamilton to take his seat by signing the Roll of Members.

The following Member signed the Roll: Tom Hamilton.

I am satisfied that the Member has signed the Roll and confirmed his designation. Mr Hamilton has now taken his seat.

CLERK TO THE ASSEMBLY

Mr Speaker: The Assembly Commission has asked me, as Chairman, to announce to the Assembly the appointment of Mr Arthur Moir as Clerk to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Mr Moir is a lawyer and is currently chief executive of the Land Registers of Northern Ireland. It is intended that he will take up his post with the Assembly on 2 April 2001.

GROUND RENTS BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Members have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments. The amendments have been grouped for debate.

I draw to Members' attention a corrigendum: amendment 15 contains a typographical error. The amendment concerns schedule 2, page 24, line 18. The clause referred to in the proposed new article should be 15, not 12.

As Members will note from the list, there are six groups of amendments. We will debate each group in turn. The first debate will be on amendment 1. We will then debate amendments 2, 14 and 16, and so on, with Questions that clauses stand part being taken at the appropriate points.

As no amendments to clauses 1 and 2 have been tabled I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to take them together.

Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3 (Exceptions to, or restrictions on, sections 1 and 2)

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Leslie): I beg to move amendment 1: In page three, after line 42, add

"(9) Section 2 does not apply to the conveyance or transfer of a dwelling-house to —

- (a) the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association; or
- (b) any other housing association (within the meaning of the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 (NI 15)) specified by an order made by the Department for Social Development subject to negative resolution."

The Chairman of the Committee, Mr Molloy, is abroad this week and has asked me to move all the amendments tabled in his name. These amendments were agreed by the Committee. I express my appreciation to the Committee for its work in completing the Committee Stage. This is a complex Bill, and a great deal of work was required to get through it. The Committee met on 12 occasions, heard a great deal of evidence, and deliberated at some length.

I also thank the staff of the Office of Law Reform and the Office of the Legislative Counsel for drafting the amendments sought or proposed by the Committee. Without their help it would not have been possible for the Committee to complete its consideration of the Bill in the timescale.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member — indeed, all Members — please project their voices as strongly as possible. Not all Members can hear clearly.

Mr Leslie: The amendment to clause 3 ensures that when the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Association, or any other designated housing association, purchases

property for inclusion in a co-ownership scheme, it will not be required to redeem the ground rent under the compulsory provisions of clause 2. The amendment protects those organisations offering affordable social housing from incurring additional costs which they would then have to pass on as part of the purchase price of the property to first-time buyers.

I emphasise that although the amendment exempts designated housing associations from the compulsory redemption procedure under clause 3, should a housing association, in a particular circumstance, wish to redeem a ground rent, the voluntary procedure under clause 1 would still be available. This amendment would not negate that opportunity.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):

I accept the amendment. It has been agreed with the Minister for Social Development, Maurice Morrow, who believes that it will further facilitate the provision of social housing in Northern Ireland.

I take this opportunity to thank and congratulate Mr Leslie and his Colleagues on the very thorough role that they played in scrutinising this Bill. I welcome Mr Leslie's comments on the co-operation that they received from my officials in the Office of Law Reform and from the Office of the Legislative Counsel.

The Finance and Personnel Committee's report and Mr Leslie's remarks this morning make it clear that this scrutiny exercise was a collaborative venture between members of the Committee and officials. The amendments that will be tabled today have been agreed by the Finance and Personnel Committee and myself and have also been endorsed by the Executive Committee.

Mr Speaker: Amendment 1 — moved or not moved?

Mr Leslie: Moved.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Clause 3, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 4 and 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 6 (Disposal of money lodged with Land Registry under section 4(2): claims thereto)

Mr Durkan: I beg to move amendment 2: In clause 6, page 5, line 33, leave out

“issue out of the Consolidated Fund and”

I would also like to comment on amendments 14 and 16.

The following amendments stood on the Marshallled List:

No 14 (schedule 2): In page 24, line 12, leave out “(7) to (10)” and insert “(7), (8) and (10)”. — *[Mr Durkan]*

No 16 (schedule 3): In page 24, line 29, column 2, at end add

“and in the definitions of ‘rent owner’ and ‘rent-payer’ the words ‘,without prejudice to Article 32,’ ”. — *[Mr Durkan]*

These three amendments are of a minor, technical or drafting nature. Amendment 2 deletes from clause 6 of the Bill the requirement that redemption money paid to the Land Registry be issued out of the Consolidated Fund to the rent owner of the property whose ground rent has been redeemed. This is a technical amendment, which ensures complete compliance with the provisions of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding votes and allocations out of the Consolidated Fund to individual Departments.

Amendment 14 tidies up an existing amendment to article 35 of the Property (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 contained in Schedule 2 to the Ground Rents Bill. It does so by disapplying clause 13(9) of the Ground Rents Bill in its application to the 1997 Order.

The application of clause 13(9) to the revised provisions of the 1997 Order is unnecessary. The amendment is purely technical.

10.45 am

No 16 is a technical drafting amendment. It removes from article 3 of the Property (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 the definitions of “rent-owners” and “rent-payers” in the context of settled land. Those definitions have been replicated in clause 18 of the Ground Rents Bill.

Mr Leslie: The Committee supports amendment 2 and the reasons advanced by the Minister. I will comment on clause 6, as it provides the mechanics for the payment of money to redeem a ground rent. The Committee spent a great deal of time discussing possible means of simplifying this procedure with the Land Registry and the Office of Law Reform. It is evident that one of the reasons that the current procedure for redeeming land rents is not widely used is that it is a tiresome procedure. The objective of this Bill is to have a more straightforward procedure as well as introducing an element of compulsion.

We therefore examined whether the mechanics of redeeming the ground rent, certifying that this had been done, and the paying over of the redemption money, could be simplified in any way. While investigating that — and discussing the matter with the Land Registry — it emerged that it might be appropriate to amend clause 6. However, after subsequent consideration it became clear that the matter could be addressed satisfactorily under the rules. Although the rules have not yet been drawn up, they will go before the Committee for scrutiny, which is when any efforts to streamline the procedure can be brought into force. Clause 6, as drafted, and accepting the amendment moved by the Minister, should prove satisfactory for mechanical purposes.

Amendment 2 agreed to.

Clause 6, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 7 to 14 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 15 (Mortgages and leases)

Mr Durkan: I beg to move amendment 3: In page 10, line 27, at end add

“and any provision in the instrument providing for an estate acquired by the mortgagor to be held in trust for the mortgagee or appointing the mortgagee as the mortgagor’s attorney in relation to such estate applies to the fee simple”.

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

No 4 (clause 15): In pages 10 and 11, leave out subsection (3). — *[Mr Durkan]*

Clause 15 deals with the position of mortgage lenders on leasehold estates. Amendment 3 was suggested to us by mortgage lenders in Northern Ireland as an assurance that existing mortgages on residential property would continue to affect the enlarged freehold interest in the property. It is a measure to clarify rather than change the effect of the Bill.

Amendment 4 removes from mortgage lenders the requirement to submit to the Land Registry for Northern Ireland the certificate of redemption issued by that same body.

The original policy aim of that provision in clause 15(3) emanated from the redemption provisions in the Property (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, when it was thought that the vast majority of redemption cases would be dealt with between the rent payer and the rent owner, with a minimal involvement by the Land Registry. Since all redemption of ground rent is now to be processed by the Land Registry, it would impose an unnecessary burden on mortgage lenders to have to submit to that body a document which it had issued. The Land Registry has power under clause 13 of the Bill to make any necessary corrections to the register of title or the register of deeds, as appropriate. The effect of these two amendments will be to reduce the cost of the redemption process when the property redeemed is subject to an existing mortgage.

Mr Speaker: Amendment 3 — moved or not moved?

Mr Durkan: Moved.

Amendment 3 agreed to.

Amendment (No 4) made: In pages 10 and 11, leave out subsection (3). — *[Mr Durkan]*

Clause 15, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 16 (Covenants)

Mr Leslie: I beg to move amendment 5: In page 12, line 6, leave out from “his” to end of line 11 and insert

“other participants in a relevant building scheme immediately before the redemption of the ground rent by virtue of that scheme.”

My comments in support of amendment 5 apply also to amendments 6 to 10, all of which deal with the treatment

of covenants under the new arrangements envisaged in the Bill.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 6 (clause 16): In page 12, after line 11 add

- “(j) any covenant, not falling within any of the preceding paragraphs, which is contained in a lease granted by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive before 10th January 2000 and relates —
- (i) to a district heating supply provided by the Executive; or
- (ii) to the repayment to the Executive of any discount of part of the purchase price under a house sales scheme made under the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 (NI 15).” — *[Mr Molloy]*

No 7 (clause 16): In page 12, line 26, leave out from 2(g) to the end of line 28 and insert

“(2)(i) —

‘building scheme’ means a scheme (express or implied) under which land (whether freehold or leasehold) is divided into two or more parcels subject to obligations which are reciprocally enforceable (whether at law or in equity) between owners of the parcels; and

‘relevant building scheme’, in relation to any land, means a building scheme which includes the land or which is taken to subsist in respect of the land by virtue of section 17(6).” — *[Mr Molloy]*

No 8 (clause 17): In page 12, line 40, leave out “or (h)” and insert “, (h) or (j)”. — *[Mr Molloy]*

No 9 (clause 17): In page 13, line 17, after “successors” insert “in title”. — *[Mr Molloy]*

No 10 (clause 17): In page 13, line 37, leave out

“same meaning as in section 16(2)(i)”

and insert

“meaning given in section 16(7)”. — *[Mr Molloy]*

Mr Leslie: The Finance and Personnel Committee paid close attention to the issue of covenants, as there seems to be a groundswell of feeling that the sweeping away of ground rents would be a good thing in simple terms. However, the case of covenants is not so straightforward.

In particular, many ground rent owners regard the covenant as being of considerably greater value than the monetary value of any ground rent. Indeed, in many instances a sale of land for the purposes of building a dwelling would not have taken place without some of the arrangements provided by covenants. Consequently, it is important that covenants survive the redemption of ground rent and the consequent uplifting of the property title from leasehold to fee simple.

A number of tidying-up measures were needed for clauses 16 and 17 to ensure that this proceeded competently. Amendments 5 and 7 seek to ensure that the amenity covenants listed in clause 16(2)(g) survive the redemption of the ground rent and are enforceable between neighbours — that is participants, in a building

scheme. The covenant will be enforceable by any person by or against whom such covenants would have been enforceable if the redemption had not occurred.

Amendment 10 is consequential to the change introduced by amendment 7. Amendments 6 and 8 make special provision for common covenants contained in leases by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to sitting tenants who purchase property under the statutory house sales scheme. This protects the position of the Housing Executive by ensuring the enforceability of covenants that are included in deeds under which dwellings are sold to sitting tenants. Amendment 8 is consequential to the change introduced by amendment 6. Amendment 9 provides clarity in respect of a rent owner's successors by ensuring that the reference relates to successors in title.

Mr Durkan: As I said earlier, I accept amendments 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 as moved by Mr Leslie on behalf of the Committee. Those amendments relate to the question of covenants.

I accept the amendments to clause 16 relating to covenants surviving the redemption of a ground rent.

I also fully support the amendments to clause 17 and concur with Mr Leslie that several of these amendments are consequential upon each other.

Amendment 5 agreed to:

Amendment (No 6) made: In page 12, line 11 add

"(j) any covenant, not falling within any of the preceding paragraphs, which is contained in a lease granted by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive before 10th January 2000 and relates —

- (i) to a district heating supply provided by the Executive; or
- (ii) to the repayment to the Executive of any discount of part of the purchase price under a house sales scheme made under the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 (NI 15)." — [Mr Leslie]

Amendment (No 7) made: In page 12, line 26 leave out from (2)(g) to the end of line 28 and insert —

"(2)(i) —

'building scheme' means a scheme (express or implied) under which land (whether freehold or leasehold) is divided into two or more parcels subject to obligations which are reciprocally enforceable (whether at law or in equity) between owners of the parcels; and

'relevant building scheme', in relation to any land, means a building scheme which includes the land or which is taken to subsist in respect of the land by virtue of section 17(6)." — [Mr Leslie]

Clause 16, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 17 (Enforceability of Covenants)

Amendment (No 8) made: In page 12, line 40 leave out "or (h)" and insert "(h) or (j)". — [Mr Leslie]

Amendment (No 9) made: In page 13, line 17 after "successors" insert "in title". [Mr Leslie]

Amendment (No 10) made: In page 13, line 37 leave out

"same meaning as in section 16(2)(i)"

and insert

"meaning given in section 16(7)". — [Mr Leslie]

Clause 17, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 18 to 33 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 1 (The Redemption Money)

Mr Leslie: I beg to move amendment 11: In page 22, line 36, leave out

"is more than 12 years after the application date"

and insert

"falls after the expiration of the relevant period".

My comments in support of this amendment apply also to amendment 12.

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

No 12: In page 23, leave out from "is 12 years" in line 1 to the end of line 9 and insert

"falls within the relevant period, the yearly amount of the ground rent shall be determined in such manner as may be specified in an order under paragraph 2.

(4) In this paragraph 'the relevant period', in relation to a ground rent, means the period commencing on the application date and consisting of the number of years fixed by order under paragraph 2 as the number of years purchase applicable to ground rents (or, as the case may be, applicable to ground rents of the same class or description as that ground rent)." — [Mr Molloy]

Mr Leslie: Both amendments deal with the intention that where the ground rent is subject to a provision for increase, the redemption money takes account of that provision but is subject to a discount of 8% per annum. Where that increase would occur more than 12 years after the application date, it would be ignored. That was the intention of the Bill as originally drafted. This amendment to schedule 1 relates to the discount payable upon the redemption of a ground rent, subject to a future increase.

11.00 am

The effect of the amendment is to remove the figures of 12 years and 8% from the face of the Bill, leaving it to the Department's Order-making power to fix the relevant number of years and the appropriate discount rate. As these figures may change over time, it is proposed that the primary legislation remain neutral in regard to the actual figures to be used. The Department's Order-making power will be subject to scrutiny by the Assembly Committee, and further consultation and

consideration will occur when such rules are drawn up. These remarks relate to the Committee's rationale in putting forward this amendment.

I want to make some personal remarks on the structure and some of the implications of schedule 1 in relation to how the multiplier is set. I had intended to put down an amendment, reflecting my comments, to give the Minister and his staff an opportunity to focus on those matters, but, because I was indisposed, I regret that I was unable to do so in time. I apologise to the Minister that he did not get as much warning of this issue as he, and I, would have preferred. We do, however, have a further Consideration Stage available.

I will set the scene on this issue. Clause 3 exempts from the Bill any ground rent with an unexpired residue of a term of 50 years or less. The owner of a ground rent with, for example, 40 years to run will not be able to use the provisions of the Bill, nor will the payer of the ground rent be able to use the provisions to redeem that ground rent. The ground rent will therefore continue to be paid for the balance of the term.

As I indicated at the Second Stage, it could be argued that that would imply that the multiplier could be anything up to 50 times — although I agree with the Minister that that would be excessively generous. It emerged in discussion with the Minister that the basis on which he set the multiplier at nine times was the received wisdom on the state of the market in the sale and purchase of ground rents. That implied a field of between nine and 12 times for the multiplier.

During the hearings I expressed concern that no notice seemed to have been taken, in deciding the correct level of the multiplier, to the replacement value of the asset in financial terms. I would automatically seek to calculate the multiplier by reference to an equivalent interest rate, and this is perhaps a reflection of my professional background. As a ground rent is usually undated or very long-dated, this would entail looking at the yields prevailing on undated or very long-dated Government securities to obtain a benchmark.

On one hand, somebody could own a ground rent that entitled them to £5 per year for the life of the lease — and many of these leases extend for very long periods. On the other hand, at current interest rates, somebody could deposit £100, and also receive £5 per year. So, *prima facie*, it could be argued that the value of the ground rent should be the same, if one were to sustain the payment of £5 per year. That would therefore imply a multiplier, at a 5% interest rate, of 20 times. That figure would change according to current interest rates. Had we been discussing the issue around 10 years ago, when interest rates were over 10%, by the same calculation one would have devised a multiplier of 10 times rather than the current 20 — that reflects the change in interest rates. We need to bear in mind that

interest rates change over time. I felt that the Minister should take this into account when setting the multiplier and that he should be prepared to consider it in the future when revising the multiplier.

I concede that, for two reasons, a ground rent is not precisely analogous to a Government. First, the cost of collection needs to be taken into account. Secondly, there is the risk of non-payment and the tiresomeness of pursuing payment. It would therefore be entirely justifiable to discount the yield deemed to be appropriate. The issue is how much that discount should be — that is a matter of opinion, and many opinions could be expressed. In my view a discount of about one third would probably be appropriate, given those two factors. However, the multiplier of nine times that has been set implies a discount of slightly over 50%, which is a quite harsh level.

The calculations that I have used are based on the fact that the current yield on war loan — which is undated — is 4.6%. To replicate that would require a multiplier of 21.7 times. I agree that that could be discounted. If it were discounted by one third, the multiplier would decrease to 14 times. If it were discounted by a half, the multiplier would be reduced to 10.8 times. Both these figures are higher than the nine times that has been proposed by the Minister.

I have also been led to consider whether the limited use that has been made hitherto of the existing section 35 procedure for redeeming ground rents might partly reflect the fact that the amount being offered for a ground rent was not, in most cases, very tempting. It might well be that more ground rents would have been extinguished had a higher price been offered. I therefore invite the Minister to consider taking the factors that I have outlined into account when setting the multiplier.

I am aware that this matter is dealt with by Order and is subject to the scrutiny of the Committee, and there will therefore be an opportunity to discuss the matter. It is particularly pertinent to schedule 1, paragraph 4, to which amendment 11 relates. There are certain cases, for which paragraph 4 was devised, in which the person framing the ground rent has deliberately set out to protect its future value by including a provision for an increase of the ground rent. This could, for example, be linked to some measure of inflation to preserve its real value. I was concerned that the original wording of paragraph 4 would confiscate a provision which somebody had prudently made to protect the value of a ground rent and offer a compensation that, in my view, does not reflect the financial value of that ground rent.

There is a considerable view — certainly in the legal profession — that this Bill will be very helpful in tidying up part of the land law and will, in due course, make conveyancing easier. However, we have to be conscious that it does, at the compulsory level, involve a

measure of confiscation. The Government should always be cautious about proceeding in that manner. That is why I have raised these concerns. I invite the Minister to reflect upon them and revisit them, possibly at the next Consideration Stage, or, alternatively, through the Rules.

Mr Durkan: As I indicated earlier, I am content with these amendments to the provisions in schedule 1 to the Bill. They deal with the calculation of the redemption money payable to a rent owner. They give my Department a greater degree of flexibility when determining the period after redemption to be applied when calculating the redemption money and the rate at which future increases should be discounted. My Department's power to make orders under schedule 1 will be subject to scrutiny by the Assembly.

Mr Leslie has gone further than this on behalf of himself rather than of the Committee. He has asked me to consider a further amendment, which would require me and future Ministers of Finance and Personnel to have regard to the average dated yields on Government securities when fixing the multiplier under schedule 1 to the Bill.

Notwithstanding Mr Leslie's points, and the professional credentials that he cited, I am unable to give any commitment on this matter now. I am not inclined to move in that direction, but I shall carefully consider the issue with my officials.

Mr Leslie pointed out that we will have a further Consideration Stage. If I were minded to agree an amendment, I would have to clear it with the Executive Committee, which will not be meeting before the Further Consideration Stage. I accept Mr Leslie's mitigating point that, although this is not the most appropriate form in which to advance the matter, his recent ill health did not allow him to table this as an amendment in the normal manner. Although I sympathise with him in that regard, I am still not minded to move in the direction that he suggested.

As I said at the Second Stage debate on this Bill, while I intend to fix the multiplier at nine times the annual ground rent, I will obviously keep the matter under review, and I have no doubt that future Ministers of Finance and Personnel will also do so.

The decision to fix the multiplier at nine times the annual ground rent was based on the advice of expert valuers, who said that that rate reflects current market value. Those who wanted to be less precise cited eight to 10 years. In my opinion, therefore, nine is a reasonable rate at which to fix the multiplier in this instance.

Mr Leslie contended that nine is a low and punitive figure, but our expert valuers from the Valuation and Lands Agency have indicated that the purchase price of a ground rent for certain properties in a state of disrepair would be just five times the ground rent. Such considerations must also be borne in mind. Notwithstanding

Mr Leslie's observations, the Committee, when it looked at these issues, took account of a broader range of factors and interests, as have I. The proposals contained in the legislation and schedule 1 are reasonable, and I certainly believe that they were acceptable to the Committee.

Mr Leslie: I thank the Minister for his response to the remarks I made in parentheses about the calculation of the multiplier. Neither of us is wholly persuaded by the other's view. While I am well aware of the evidence and of the advice that the Minister has received about transactions over ground rents which have taken place in recent years, we must nonetheless bear in mind that those were commercial transactions between willing buyers and willing sellers. On the other hand, what is being instituted here is a compulsory transaction, and I suspect that quite a number of owners of ground rents are not fully aware of this proposed change.

11.15 am

For the most part, the value of these ground rents is low, and this will not be of great significance. Nonetheless, that will not be so in every case. It should therefore be borne in mind that when a ground rent is created, it will have some effect on the value of the property concerned. If a ground rent of £1,000 a year is set on a property, the capital value will be less than that which a potential owner of the lease of that property would be prepared to pay if he were getting a transfer or fee simple with no ground rent. That is self-evident. This also happened in the past when ground rents first started to emerge. Ground rents can be used as a means of reducing the purchase price in return for an ongoing commitment, and that is sometimes overlooked. In that case a purchaser would pay most of the capital up front and a certain amount on tick, in perpetuity. The impact of inflation on eighteenth and nineteenth century ground rents, in particular, has reduced that to almost nil. Exceptions to this are those ground rents referred to in paragraph 4, where a specific provision is made to preserve the value of the ground rent by allowing for increases to be made over time.

I acknowledge the Minister's comments about the professional advice he sought. However, I ask him to bear in mind that there may be some difference between the market that has pertained hitherto, with willing buyers and willing sellers, and the attitudes that there may be to compulsory purchase. However, this matter can be revisited by the Minister, and that revisiting can then be scrutinised by the Committee. We can therefore continue to address this issue over time.

Mr Speaker: Amendment 11 — moved or not moved?

Mr Leslie: Moved.

Amendment 11 agreed to.

Amendment No (12) made: In page 23, leave out from "is 12 years" to the end of line 9 and insert

“falls within the relevant period, the yearly amount of the ground rent shall be determined in such manner as may be specified in an order under paragraph 2.

(4) In this paragraph ‘the relevant period’, in relation to a ground rent, means the period commencing on the application date and consisting of the number of years fixed by order under paragraph 2 as the number of years purchase applicable to ground rents (or, as the case may be, applicable to ground rents of the same class or description as that ground rent).” — [Mr Leslie]

Schedule 1, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 2 (Amendments)

Mr Durkan: I beg to move amendment 13: In page 23, line 34, after “35(8)” insert “or 35A(7)”.

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

No 17 (schedule 3): In page 24, line 32, column 2, at end insert “Article 3(2)(a)”. — [Mr Durkan]

Mr Durkan: These amendments deal with the redemption of nominal fee farm rents.

Members will be aware that amendment 15 has been tabled in the name of Mr Leslie, and I will leave it to him to speak on the substance of that. The two amendments tabled in my name, 13 and 17, are consequential to the substantive amendment.

I support Mr Leslie’s amendment, which will provide a system whereby owners of nominal fee farm rents may, by declaration lodged with land registers, discharge the property free from the ground rent. It complements the existing well established procedure contained in article 35 of the Property (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 for freeing leasehold properties of nominal ground rents.

Amendment 13 is technical in nature. Its purpose is to amend the Land Registration Act (Northern Ireland) 1970 to include reference to the new provisions that would be inserted by Mr Leslie’s amendment.

Amendment 17 is technical in nature and removes from article 3 of the Property (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 a now-redundant definition of a nominal ground rent. A new definition of a nominal ground rent is included in article 35 of that Order.

Mr Leslie: I shall move amendment 15: In page 24, after line 18, insert

“() After Article 35 insert —

‘Redemption of nominal ground rent

35A. — (1) Subject to paragraph (2), this Article applies where the rent payable under a fee farm grant is a nominal rent.

(2) (This Article does not apply at a time when —

- (a) the land is used wholly for business purposes; or
- (b) the rent-payer is prohibited by any term of his title from using the land otherwise than wholly for business purposes; but land is not prevented from being used wholly for business purposes by reason only of the fact that part of

it is occupied as a dwelling by a person who is required or permitted to reside there in consequence of his employment or of holding an office.

(3) The rent-payer may by deed “the deed of declaration” declare to the effect that the ground rent is discharged and may, in accordance with rules, make application to the Registrar for the purpose mentioned in paragraph (4)(a) or (b).

(4) On an application under paragraph (3) —

- (a) if the land is registered land, the deed of declaration is sufficient authority for the Registrar (subject to compliance with rules) —
- (i) to discharge any burden such as is mentioned in paragraph 2 of Part I of Schedule 6 to the Land Registration Act; and
- (ii) to make such alteration in the class of title with which the land is registered as appears to him to be appropriate;
- (b) if the land is not registered, the Registrar may register the rent-payer’s title with such class of title as appears to him to be appropriate (and until the rent-payer’s title to the land is so registered, the deed of declaration has no effect);
- (c) in either case, the deed of declaration is sufficient authority (notwithstanding any caution or inhibition) for the Registrar to make in the register such consequential entries, changes, cancellations or notes as appear to him to be appropriate;

(5) Except where the Registrar is satisfied that the land was subject to no or nominal superior rent on the date of execution of the deed of declaration, the Registrar shall enter on the register a note to the effect that the fee simple estate is subject to a rent charge of so much (if any) of any superior rent as would have been redeemed by virtue of section 11(1) of the Ground Rents Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 if a ground rent to which the land was subject had been redeemed under section 1 of that Act on that date; and such a note may be discharged in accordance with rules, and it is sufficient to satisfy the Registrar as to the matter mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph that he is furnished by a solicitor with a certificate to that effect.

(6) Subject to paragraphs (4), (5) and (7), the deed of declaration operates by virtue of this paragraph to discharge the estate of the rent payer from all estates in the land of the rent owner and any superior owners to the extent that those estates carry entitlement to ground rent or a superior rent or relate to matters connected with the rent and to that extent those estates are extinguished.

(7) Where a ground rent is discharged under this Article, section 13(8) (read with subsection (10)) and sections 12(2), 16 and 17 of the Ground Rents Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 apply in relation to the land as if the ground rent had been redeemed under that Act; and, accordingly, for the purposes of this Article those sections shall be read with the necessary modifications.

(8) For the purposes of paragraph (6) matters are connected with rent if they are concerned with the amount of the rent or its payment or recovery or are otherwise concerned (directly or indirectly) with the rent.

(9) In this Article “nominal rent” has the same meaning as in Article 35.”

I would like to explain the background to amendment 15, and I thank the Minister for moving the other two amendments that relate to it.

Article 35 of the Property (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 applies only to a leasehold estate. The article 35 procedure is not therefore available to fee farm rents, which are a type of freehold. Although the standard redemption procedure in this Ground Rents Bill does not distinguish between ground rents and fee farm rents, and it quite deliberately encompasses both, the article 35 procedure is available only for ground rents.

As drafted, the Bill amends the article 35 procedure to include nominal ground rents, but it does not amend the procedure to include fee farm rents. This amendment addresses concerns that were raised by the Law Society in relation to nominal fee farm rents. The amendment will ensure that nominal fee farm rents can be redeemed in future under the article 35 procedure.

Mr Durkan: I reinforce the point that these amendments are necessary as a result of the change in the definition of a nominal ground rent contained in this Ground Rents Bill. It differs from the definition originally contained in the Property (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. The policy aim is to ensure that the redemption procedure does not apply to nominal rents and that those small rents can be discharged through a different and simple mechanism.

Mr Speaker: Amendment 13 — moved or not moved?

Mr Durkan: Moved.

Amendment 13 agreed to.

Mr Speaker: An amendment to schedule 2 — No 14 — has already been debated.

Amendment (No 14) made: In page 24, line 12, leave out “(7) to (10)” and insert “(7), (8) and (10)”. —
[Mr Durkan]

Mr Speaker: Amendment 15 — moved or not moved?

May I remind Members of the corrigendum: In page 6 of the Marshallled List — paragraph (7) of the proposed new article — delete “12” and insert “15”.

Mr Leslie: Moved.

Amendment (No 15) made: In page 24, after line 18, insert

“() After Article 35 insert —

‘Redemption of nominal ground rent

35A. — (1) Subject to paragraph (2), this Article applies where the rent payable under a fee farm grant is a nominal rent.

(2) This Article does not apply at a time when —

- (a) the land is used wholly for business purposes; or
 - (b) the rent-payer is prohibited by any term of his title from using the land otherwise than wholly for business purposes;
- but land is not prevented from being used wholly for business purposes by reason only of the fact that part of it is occupied as a dwelling by a person who is required or permitted to reside there in consequence of his employment or of holding an office.

(3) The rent-payer may by deed “the deed of declaration” declare to the effect that the ground rent is discharged and may, in accordance with rules, make application to the Registrar for the purpose mentioned in paragraph (4)(a) or (b).

(4) On an application under paragraph (3) —

- (a) if the land is registered land, the deed of declaration is sufficient authority for the Registrar (subject to compliance with rules) —
- (i) to discharge any burden such as is mentioned in paragraph 2 of Part I of Schedule 6 to the Land Registration Act; and
- (ii) to make such alteration in the class of title with which the land is registered as appears to him to be appropriate;
- (b) if the land is not registered, the Registrar may register the rent-payer’s title with such class of title as appears to him to be appropriate (and until the rent-payer’s title to the land is so registered, the deed of declaration has no effect);
- (c) in either case, the deed of declaration is sufficient authority (notwithstanding any caution or inhibition) for the Registrar to make in the register such consequential entries, changes, cancellations or notes as appear to him to be appropriate;

(5) Except where the Registrar is satisfied that the land was subject to no or nominal superior rent on the date of execution of the deed of declaration, the Registrar shall enter on the register a note to the effect that the fee simple estate is subject to a rent charge of so much (if any) of any superior rent as would have been redeemed by virtue of section 11(1) of the Ground Rents Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 if a ground rent to which the land was subject had been redeemed under section 1 of that Act on that date; and such a note may be discharged in accordance with rules, and it is sufficient to satisfy the Registrar as to the matter mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph that he is furnished by a solicitor with a certificate to that effect.

(6) Subject to paragraphs (4), (5) and (7), the deed of declaration operates by virtue of this paragraph to discharge the estate of the rent payer from all estates in the land of the rent owner and any superior owners to the extent that those estates carry entitlement to ground rent or a superior rent or relate to matters connected with the rent and to that extent those estates are extinguished.

(7) Where a ground rent is discharged under this Article, section 13(8) (read with subsection (10)) and sections 12(2), 16 and 17 of the Ground Rents Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 apply in relation to the land as if the ground rent had been redeemed under that Act; and, accordingly, for the purposes of this Article those sections shall be read with the necessary modifications.

(8) For the purposes of paragraph (6) matters are connected with rent if they are concerned with the amount of the rent or its payment or recovery or are otherwise concerned (directly or indirectly) with the rent.

(9) In this Article “nominal rent” has the same meaning as in Article 35.’ ”

Schedule 2, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 3 (Repeals)

Mr Speaker: An amendment to schedule 3 — No 16 — has already been debated.

Amendment (No 16) made: In page 24, line 29, column 2, at end add

“and in the definitions of ‘rent-owner’ and ‘rent-payer’ the words ‘, without prejudice to article 32,’ ” — [Mr Durkan]

Mr Speaker: An amendment to schedule 3 — No 17 — has already been debated.

Amendment (No 17) made: In page 24, line 32, column 2, at end add “article 3(2)(a).” — [Mr Durkan]

Schedule 3, as amended, agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Ground Rents Bill, which now stands referred to the Speaker.

ASSEMBLY STANDING ORDERS

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy): I beg to move

In Standing Order 40(4) delete “may by leave of the Assembly” and insert “shall”;

and after Standing Order 40(4) add “(5) A Bill shall not be carried forth if the Assembly stands dissolved”.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Standing Order 40(4) states that where a Bill has not completed its passage by the end of an Assembly session, it may by leave of the Assembly be carried over and its passage continued into the next session. The vote of the Assembly must be unanimous or the Bill will fall. It has been brought to our attention that that disadvantages the legislative process as a whole, and in particular parity legislation. The Committee on Procedures has considered that and recommends that the Assembly adopt the proposed changes to Standing Orders. Those changes will allow Bills that have not gone through all stages of the legislative process to be carried forward automatically into the next session. However, this does not apply when the Assembly stands dissolved at the time of an election.

Mr Speaker: No Member has requested to speak, therefore I assume that a winding-up speech is not necessary. Let me remind Members that amendments to Standing Orders require cross-community support. I have indicated before that where there appears to be no objection to a motion, and there are indications of Ayes from all sides of the House, I shall not require a Division for cross-community support to be demonstrated. However, if there are objections, because of the requirement for cross-community support, a Division will be called.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

In Standing Order 40(4) delete “may by leave of the Assembly” and insert “shall”; and

after Standing Order 40(4) add “(5) A Bill shall not be carried forth if the Assembly stands dissolved”.

Mr Speaker: Further amendments to Standing Orders are to be moved, and I will explain how I propose to conduct the debate. As the next eight motions relate to the Committee of the Centre’s role in dealing with legislation, I propose to conduct only one debate, after which I will ask the Clerk to read each of the motions. I will then ask the proposer to move each motion formally. I will put the Question on each motion without further debate. My earlier comments about the need for a cross-community vote will also apply. If that is clear and there is no objection, I will conduct the debate in that fashion.

Mr C Murphy: I beg to move

After Standing Order 31(1) add

“(1A) Where the First Minister and Deputy First Minister acting jointly are in charge of a Bill, the Bill shall stand referred to the Committee of the Centre unless the Assembly shall order otherwise; and the provisions of this Standing Order and Standing Orders 33 and 48 shall apply in relation to the Committee of the Centre acting by virtue of this paragraph as they apply in relation to a Statutory Committee.”

11.30 am

This series of proposed amendments to Standing Orders is an attempt by the Committee of Procedures to deal with some of the questions surrounding the fact that the Committee of the Centre, which is meant to scrutinise the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, does not have the same powers as the 10 Statutory Committees. It is not an attempt to address all of the arguments about the Committee of the Centre and its relationship with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. However, it is a bid to try to ensure that legislation that comes from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will automatically be able to be referred to the Committee of the Centre, without a motion having to be put to the Assembly.

Section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides that Standing Orders must make provision for conferring on Statutory Committees the powers described in strand one of the Good Friday Agreement. One of these powers is the approval of relevant secondary legislation and the taking of the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation.

Standing Order 31 states

“On the Second Stage of a Bill being agreed to, the Bill shall stand referred to the appropriate Statutory Committee.”

Standing Order 41 states

“Every Statutory Rule or draft Statutory Rule ... which is laid before the Assembly ... shall stand referred to an appropriate Statutory Committee”.

There is rarely a difficulty in deciding on the appropriate Committee, but, as Members are aware, there is no Statutory Committee to deal with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. This is not an attempt to conclude that argument or debate, which has been raised several times in the Assembly; it is about trying to deal with matters as we currently find them. Standing Order 59 says that the Committee of the Centre shall examine and report on the functions of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

The Committee of the Centre is a Standing Committee, not a Statutory Committee. Until now, when progressing any piece of legislation from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, it has been necessary to put a motion to the Assembly seeking leave to refer it to the Committee of the Centre — as happened recently with the Electronic Communications Bill. In moving these amendments the Procedures Committee is trying to overcome this anomaly.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): The Committee of the Centre welcomes the opportunity to be able to conduct its business more efficiently, as a result of the Standing Orders being amended. The situation was, indeed, an anomalous one, in that the Committee could not deal with issues coming from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister without a motion being put before the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Do you wish to speak, Mr Nesbitt?

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Nesbitt): I thought, Mr Speaker, that you had indicated a procedure whereby I was to speak.

Mr Speaker: The Member needs to understand that if he wishes to speak in a debate, he needs to catch the Speaker's eye or put his name down. This is in respect of a motion.

Mr Nesbitt: I am not speaking as a non-Executive Member.

Mr Speaker: That does not make any difference. If the Member wishes to speak, he has to put his name down. This is not a ministerial reply; it is a procedural motion. Does the Minister wish to respond?

Mr Nesbitt: On behalf of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, I welcome these amendments. They have been given clear, careful consideration, and, taken as a group, they represent an important step forward. They recognise that the Committee of the Centre, as a Standing Committee, does need to have that scrutiny role in respect of legislation. I commend them to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: This motion will require cross-community support. I remind the Members of the rubric I described earlier: we will proceed through the other motions in regard to this matter without debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:.

After Standing Order 31(1) add

“(1A) Where the First Minister and Deputy First Minister acting jointly are in charge of a Bill, the Bill shall stand referred to the Committee of the Centre unless the Assembly shall order otherwise; and the provisions of this Standing Order and Standing Orders 33 and 48 shall apply in relation to the Committee of the Centre acting by virtue of this paragraph as they apply in relation to a Statutory Committee.”

Resolved:

In Standing Order 31(1), at the beginning of paragraph (1), insert

“Subject to paragraph (1A),”. — [Mr C Murphy]

Resolved:

In Standing Order 41(1), line 6, delete “Statutory”. — [Mr C Murphy]

Resolved:

After Standing Order 41(1) add

“(1A) In this Standing Order “Committee” means:

- (a) a Statutory Committee; and
- (b) in the case of a Statutory Rule or draft Statutory Rule which has been made or is to be made by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister acting jointly, or by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, the Committee of the Centre”. — [Mr C Murphy]

Resolved:

In Standing Order 41(2) delete “Statutory”. — [Mr C Murphy]

Resolved:

In Standing Order 41(5)(a) delete “Statutory”. — [Mr C Murphy]

Resolved:

After Standing Order 59(1) add

“(1A) This Committee shall also have the functions conferred by virtue of Standing Orders 31(1A) and 41(1A)”. — [Mr C Murphy]

Resolved:

In Standing Order 12(1), after “Statutory Committee reports,”, insert

“Reports of the Committee of the Centre made by virtue of Standing Order 31(1A) or 41(1A)”. — [Mr C Murphy]

ASSEMBLY STATUTORY COMMITTEES: MEMBERSHIP

Resolved:

That Mrs Annie Courtney shall replace Mrs Patricia Lewsley on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. — [Mr Tierney]

Resolved:

That Mr Tom Hamilton should serve on the Committee for the Environment. — [Mr J Wilson]

Resolved:

That Mr Tom Hamilton should serve on the Committee for Education. — [Mr J Wilson]

CHILDREN’S COMMISSIONER

Mr Speaker: I have received a request from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on a children’s commissioner.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): The Deputy First Minister and I have an important announcement to make today about the safeguarding and upholding of children’s rights. If there is one matter on which there is common ground among all parties in the Assembly it is surely our common desire for a better, more secure future for our children. To achieve that, we must act now to ensure that children can grow and develop in an environment where their rights are upheld, their safety secured and their needs met.

The Deputy First Minister and I, and our Colleagues in the Executive, are in full agreement that this should be a high priority for the Assembly. We also acknowledge that this is a matter of concern for many, and we have received representations from political parties across the spectrum, individual MLAs and children’s organisations. We told the Assembly last October that we were determined to ensure that our arrangements for upholding children’s rights were based upon best practice. Since then, we have given careful consideration to how best to achieve that objective.

We examined the position in other parts of the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and the rest of Europe. It was clear from that that our current arrangements lag some way behind. In England, for example, a children’s rights director will be appointed next year. In Wales, a children’s commissioner has been appointed, and in the Republic of Ireland a children’s ombudsman will be appointed. The Scandinavian countries, in particular, have led the way. Countries such as Norway established commissioners for children many years ago. The children of Northern Ireland deserve no less.

The Deputy First Minister and I, and our Executive Colleagues, are convinced that we need a commissioner for children to carry out this role. Therefore we are pleased to announce our intention to bring forward proposals as soon as possible to establish an independent commissioner for children for Northern Ireland. There are, of course, complex issues to be worked out with regard to the precise role and remit of the commissioner — the statutory powers and responsibilities that the office will have and its relationship with other statutory authorities. We also need to consider issues such as how the commissioner can best represent children’s interests and advocate their needs. The commissioner’s role might, for instance, include challenging public authorities and investigating complaints. It might involve advising Government on policy, including the measures required to meet our commitments under key international human rights instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It is also important to have a wide ranging debate and discussion before finalising proposals, including an opportunity for children and young people and the organisations that represent them to influence the way forward. Therefore we have decided to initiate a comprehensive consultation process to give interested parties an opportunity to express their views. We aim to begin consultation as soon as possible and bring legislative proposals before the Assembly at the earliest opportunity.

The establishment of a commissioner for children is the most important proposal in the field of children's rights for many years. It has the full backing of the Executive, and I hope that the Assembly will warmly welcome it. The Deputy First Minister will now consider some further possibilities.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Mallon): I fully endorse the First Minister's comments on the need for a commissioner for children, and I commend the proposal to the Assembly. It is a fundamentally important initiative and one that will enjoy not only broad political support but the overwhelming support of people in Northern Ireland. We have before us an opportunity that should not be missed; an opportunity to shape new arrangements for protecting children and upholding their rights, an opportunity to put Northern Ireland at the cutting edge of world practice.

I, like the First Minister and my Executive Colleagues, believe that the single most important element of those new arrangements should be a commissioner for children. Too often our children, particularly the most vulnerable, are neither seen nor heard, with the result that their needs can be, and sometimes are, overlooked. With a commissioner for children acting as their champion, we hope to change this and ensure that no voice in our society goes unheard.

However, a commissioner alone will not be enough. To be truly effective, the establishment of a commissioner for children needs to be part of an overall strategy to address children's rights and needs.

11.45 am

Within that strategy a commissioner will act as an independent champion for children, outside Government. Other elements of the strategy will be needed to ensure a joined-up approach to children's matters within Government and the Assembly, to give children and young people a stronger voice, and to ensure that legislation and policy continue to be shaped by research and best practice.

We intend therefore to introduce such a strategy, and we will develop proposals covering four key areas: first, examining how the Executive might ensure the development of co-ordinated policies on children's issues; secondly, suggesting how the Assembly might exercise its interests in scrutinising policies on children's matters; thirdly, looking at how best we can consult with children and

young people and assess how our policies affect them; fourthly, considering how research and development needs might be met.

We intend to further develop these proposals, initially through the Executive, and thereafter through public consultation as part of the consultation exercise on the role and remit of the commissioner for children. We have consciously come to the Assembly at the start of the process, not the end, in order to give Members the chance to propose and influence the direction that we take and not just to scrutinise actions proposed by the Executive.

Members will recall that a focus on young people was central to the vision of the Programme for Government. We committed ourselves to combat social exclusion and poverty, with a particular emphasis on children. The First Minister and I believe that these proposals demonstrate that commitment and complement the initiatives that we are already getting under way, such as the establishment of the Children's Fund.

The proposals outlined today are bold and imaginative. They have been shaped, to date, by the best practice throughout Europe and careful consideration of representations made to us. They represent an opportunity for this Administration to secure the well-being of our children and mark another step in our human rights agenda. We commend them to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: We now have up to one hour for questions to the First and Deputy First Ministers on their statement.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): I give a general welcome to the proposal. Some time ago, I went to table a motion in regard to this matter, only to find that on the previous day the Alliance Party had tabled one, which was worded virtually the same as mine. Although I did not get to put my motion down, I welcome the thrust of today's statement.

Bearing in mind that there will be a consultation process and, therefore, that they cannot give definitive answers to some questions, I ask the First and Deputy First Ministers how long they perceive the consultation process will take. When do they envisage that the commissioner will be in post, and what funding have they set aside to enable the commissioner to carry out his or her job?

The First Minister: First, I thank the Member for his welcome of these proposals. I appreciate — as we said in the statement — that other parties in the Assembly have been looking at this issue also and clearly wish to see progress on the matter, as do we. The impetus for this, apart from a natural concern with regard to children and young people, has been the recent developments from the Waterhouse Report and other matters as well.

We are anxious that the consultation should proceed rapidly. Although we want progress to be as speedy as possible, we do not want to rush the process. An interdepartmental working group, which will be chaired

by the junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, is being set up. One of the priorities will be to engage in a thorough and extensive consultation process on the precise role and remit of the commissioner, and the other elements that could be included in the strategy.

Legislation will, of course, have to be made to establish the appointment, and we hope to introduce that during the next Assembly session. The appointment will be made as quickly as it can be after the legislation is passed.

I am sure that we will be able to meet the funding of a commissioner, but we will have to examine the funding that the other elements in the strategy require.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I welcome the statement that a commissioner for children is to be appointed, and I congratulate the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on that. The statement says that too often children, particularly the most vulnerable, are neither seen nor heard, with the result that their needs can be overlooked. I appreciate that there will be wide consultation on that.

May I draw the Assembly's attention to the report 'Inquiry into Residential and Secure Accommodation for Children in Northern Ireland' that was produced by the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee. I do not need to draw this to the attention of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. That report recommended the appointment of a commissioner for children. Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister explain how the Assembly might exercise its interests in scrutinising policies on children's matters?

The Deputy First Minister: I appreciate the Member's reference to the report. It is an important and substantial report which will inform us all in progressing this matter. When the Executive bring forward their strategy they will consider how the Assembly might wish to examine children's issues. That is a matter for the Assembly, not the Executive, to decide upon; we are very conscious of that.

However, as part of a wider framework to ensure the vindication of children's rights, it seems appropriate that we make some suggestions. The setting up of a Standing Committee on children and young people is a matter for the Assembly to decide. Members may wish to table a motion proposing the creation of a Standing or Ad Hoc Committee. The Assembly would then decide on the need for such a Committee and its role, but it could facilitate co-ordinated scrutiny by the Assembly of policies affecting children.

In the Republic of Ireland, as part of the wider strategy, a Dáil Committee on children has been established, and its first meeting is due to take place shortly.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the statement of the First Minister and the Deputy First

Minister. It is a positive first step to ensuring that children's rights are centre stage.

The statement mentioned the Children's Fund. This fund has been around for a number of months. When will Members receive relevant information on it?

Will the commissioner for children have a remit for children in the juvenile justice setting? This falls within the remit of the Northern Ireland Office and is still a reserved matter. That is a concern.

Also, what progress has been made with regard to cross-border child protection? The First Minister has refused to nominate the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Education who were dealing with the issue. Has progress been halted with the refusal to nominate them?

The First Minister: There is a need for co-operation with the Republic of Ireland in some matters, particularly with regard to the register of offenders. There is provision for information to be exchanged. People can move easily between one country and another so there is a need for information to be exchanged. That is taking place and will continue.

With regard to the juvenile justice system, the Northern Ireland Office will be represented on the interdepartmental Committee and will have the opportunity to look at that issue.

The Children's Fund is one of the five new Executive programme funds, and we are in the process of beginning to develop procedures to address those funds. The funds are limited for this year, but next year the Children's Fund has an indicative allocation of £2 million which will rise to £10 million and £15 million for the two subsequent years. The Executive are trying to define their procedures with regard to how they will consider the programmes and the projects those funds will be used for. They will be developed as we develop our own procedures and consider proposals on them.

Mrs E Bell: I welcome this statement. A number of parties have been lobbying the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and I am very glad that we have been listened to. I applaud the sentiments expressed, particularly in seeking to ensure a joined-up approach to children's matters in Government and the Assembly and to give children and young people a strong voice.

Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister assure us that the consultation exercise and the appointment of a commissioner for children will be based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995? Do the First and Deputy First Ministers agree that in order to be effective and credible to children and young people, the commissioner must be independent and non-partisan?

The Deputy First Minister: I thank the Member for her question and for her personal interest in this matter, which has been obvious for a long time. The commissioner must be independent of Government and of the Assembly. In effect, the commissioner for children must be the independent voice and force who guides the protection of children in Northern Ireland. The most important point is that the process envisaged is a consultative one, inviting all to participate fully and completely. The first task of the group will be to develop proposals for consultation.

We welcome this opportunity to hear the first reaction of the Assembly, and I have no doubt that Members will contribute to the wider debate. An interdepartmental working group will quickly be established in the devolved Government; it will comprise senior officials from the relevant Northern Ireland Departments and will be chaired by Ministers Haughey and Nesbitt. The Northern Ireland Office, which is responsible for juvenile justice, will also be invited to participate.

We are also interested in hearing proposals on how to involve interest groups outside Government. As in so many other crucial areas, the working of the social partnership between Government and interests outside of Government is absolutely crucial. We want to ensure their input in the most potent way.

Ms McWilliams: I thank the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for their very thorough statement. It is good that we are entering a huge period of change throughout Northern Ireland. We are already aware of the enormous reviews of acute health care, primary and community care and of post-primary education. That is another element of change that Northern Ireland will be glad to hear about.

I welcome the proposals for legislation. Mr Speaker, you may be aware that later today we will be putting down a Private Members' Bill on the children's commissioner. Like Mr Poots and the Alliance Party, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition has a major interest in this area and has gone as far as drafting, with the assistance of secretariat members. Will the consultation process include proposals for legislation? What is the time frame for the terms of reference? When will they be published? Is there a closing date for the consultation period? The First Minister said that the Children's Fund would have an indicative allocation of £2 million. Do they intend to draw down money from the Children's Fund to finance the establishment of a children's commissioner? Where will the finance come from for this post?

12.00

I note, in their statement, that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister said that the office would include development and scrutiny functions in relation to policies as well as having a research element. What powers of investigation would the commissioner have?

The First Minister: I thank the Member for welcoming this legislation, and I acknowledge the interest that she and her colleagues have displayed in this area. It clearly has broad support in the Assembly and is very much in keeping with our present needs.

I am sorry that I cannot give further details of the consultation. We intend the consultation to be genuine, as broad as possible, and we hope to move forward as quickly as we reasonably can. We would like to be in a position to introduce legislation in the next session. Of course, the need to carry legislation through in the next session means that we would want to introduce the legislation early in the next session. Consultation will have to be completed with that target in mind.

An obvious area for the children's commissioner is that of investigation of complaints. The purpose of the consultation will be to look at the detail of that and see what other functions need to be added. Dealing with complaints and investigations is obviously a core area. One of the things that has prompted the creation of a commissioner, here and elsewhere, is the revelation of various scandals that have occurred in care. We are very anxious to ensure that when children are taken into care they are better off as a result and that they are protected and looked after. We are very concerned about the examples we have had from a variety of places. In Northern Ireland, we are not immune to this.

The examples show that children are being exposed to dangers when they are being brought into care and many have suffered as a result. Clearly, the commissioner will have a central role with respect to that. The Member may be interested to know that the Commissioner appointed in Wales, as a result of the legislation following the Waterhouse Report, has an estimated budget of £800,000 per annum. That gives you an indication of the general cost of an equivalent post in Northern Ireland. We hope that the position would not be financed from the Children's Fund, but, for obvious reasons, I do not want to give an absolute commitment on that or on any financial matter at the moment.

Rev Robert Coulter: I apologise for being absent when the statement was made; I was involved in other business of the House. I welcome the statement and support the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in all their plans.

The Health Committee report identified a number of areas, including the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, on which agreed actions had not been taken. Pending the establishment of a commissioner for children, will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister undertake the responsibility to keep a close watch on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that children's rights are protected and not neglected?

The Deputy First Minister: The Member touched on a very valid point. In regard to departmental responsibility, this is a very substantial cross-cutting issue. It is a matter for a number of Departments in terms of ministerial responsibility, and, as pointed out earlier, the Northern Ireland Office is also involved as regards juvenile offences.

I can give an assurance that all Ministers within the Executive will be aware of the importance of this issue and its implications. The appointment of a commissioner and the community involvement in the widespread consultation will, of itself, highlight areas of childcare and responsibility for children that we must collectively — the Executive, the Assembly and the political process — protect at all costs and at all times.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the announcement. It is not just about appointing a commissioner for children but about the effect that that will have across this Administration. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister mentioned the national children's strategy in the Republic of Ireland. Do they have any details of that strategy, and can they give us a commitment that those details will be included in their consultation?

The Deputy First Minister: We have looked at experiences in many countries: not just the Republic of Ireland but Wales, Scotland and the Scandinavian countries, where Norway is far in advance of the rest of us on this. The Irish Government launched a national strategy for children in November 2000. The comprehensive package of reform establishes an ambitious series of objectives to guide children's policy over the next 10 years. It identifies a number of guiding principles and provides a more holistic way of thinking about children.

New structures are proposed in order to deliver better co-ordination between Government Departments and agencies providing services to children — for example, a national children's office within the Government, a Cabinet subcommittee, and a national children's advisory council. The Government have also approved the drafting of a Bill to establish an office of ombudsman for children. It is proposed that the office will be independent and that the ombudsman for children will be appointed by the President and accountable to the Oireachtas.

The principal functions of the ombudsman for children will be to promote the welfare and rights of children, to respond to individual complaints, to establish mechanisms through which there will be regular consultation with children, and to advise the Government. The annual budget for the ombudsman for children will be approximately IR£1.3 million. The annual costs of the other elements of the strategy are approximately IR£3 million.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirleach. I welcome the statement. It would be useful to know who is likely to be on the interdepartmental working group? Can the Committee

have a list of names as soon as possible? I want to stress the need for involvement from the voluntary and community sectors to ensure that there is a real and relevant decision-making role for those groups within our community. Go raibh maith agat.

The First Minister: We are setting up an inter-departmental working group, which will be headed by the junior Ministers in our Department. It will include the Departments that have responsibility for children's matters: Health, Education, Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment and other Departments. The Northern Ireland Office will also be represented. The intention is to have senior officials from all the Departments that are concerned with children's issues on the working party. The list I have mentioned is not exhaustive, and we will publish further details when appropriate.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the announcement. The issue of sex offenders has been described by another Member as a North/South matter. What measures are being taken across the Administration to protect children from sex offenders?

The Deputy First Minister: That is a crucial question. The protection of the public from offenders is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office. However, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is represented on an inter-agency steering group on sex offenders which recently approved a guidance manual for the assessment and management of the risks posed by sex offenders.

The Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are working with Government Departments in England, Wales and Scotland to introduce a reciprocal mechanism to prevent unsuitable people from working with children. This development is also being pursued by colleagues from the Department of Education and Sciences and the Department of Health in Dublin under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council's joint working group on child protection.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the statement. It is a welcome development, and one that I am particularly interested in, because I have worked in the Health Service. It is also my party's policy, which is now being implemented. How will the money be made available? While I appreciate that the budget is finite, this is an important post and one that we are all deeply interested in.

The First Minister: The policy has been developed by several Assembly parties, and that accounts for the broad support it has received.

The children's commissioner for Wales is expected to cost up to £800,000 per annum. The Deputy First Minister has mentioned the cost for the Republic of Ireland, which is IR£1.3 million for the commissioner, and a further IR£2 million to IR£3 million for associated programmes.

Those figures give some indication of the range involved. It may be that it will cost a little less here. However, certain basic costs apply in all cases, such as the establishment of an office. I do not anticipate any difficulty in funding this, in terms of our overall budget. I hope we can find the money from the resources without having to have recourse to the Children's Fund.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement. Will the community and voluntary sector be involved in the working group?

The First Minister: The community and voluntary sector will be involved in the consultation. At present, the working group is envisaged as comprising senior officials headed by Ministers. It would not therefore be appropriate, in that context, to involve a voluntary organisation as members of the group. However, they should be involved in the consultation, as indeed a wide range of interests will be. That will certainly happen.

Mr Byrne: How will the office of the commissioner for children affect the workings and management of the Children's Fund as outlined in the Programme for Government? Furthermore, does the Minister recognise that the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) has a proud record in dealing with vulnerable children in Northern Ireland? It is currently dealing with an average of 800 children.

The Deputy First Minister: Two issues have been raised. The amount of money to be derived from the Children's Fund in the Programme for Government will be a matter for judgement. The issue surrounding the commissioner for children is more widespread and fundamental to the protection of young people.

I pay tribute to all groups and organisations for their work throughout the years. I pay tribute to those voluntary organisations — some well known; others less so — that have made such an enormous contribution, both at regional and local level. Without such organisations, the type of consultation that we hope to make would be incomplete.

Mr B Hutchinson: I give the statement a guarded welcome, because I want to see what statutory powers are given to the new body. Should we not be using those community groups and other organisations that have been referred to today, given their wealth of experience? Will this commissioner have investigatory powers in regard to juvenile detention centres?

12.15 pm

The First Minister: I understand the caution expressed by the Member. We intend to draw on the expertise available, here and elsewhere, from both Government and voluntary bodies.

On the question of complaints, we hope that the obvious core role of the commissioner will be to look at complaints and conduct investigations, et cetera. We cannot say whether those will extend to the area of juvenile justice,

because that is a reserved matter. However, that is the reason for the inclusion of the Northern Ireland Office in the interdepartmental working group, and we hope to be able to proceed in co-operation with it.

The sitting was suspended at 12.16 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the chair) —

Oral Answers to Questions

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Economic Council Report

2.30 pm

1. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the recent report from the Northern Ireland Economic Council entitled ‘The Capabilities and Innovation Perspective: The Way Ahead in Northern Ireland’; and to make a statement. (AQO 600/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): This is an excellent report which provides a valuable insight into how entrepreneurial firms compete successfully. It identifies strategic priorities for economic development that, together with the forthcoming Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee report on Strategy 2010, can help us refine our own thinking in finalising the Programme for Government and producing departmental corporate plans.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his deep analysis of the complex document. Two aspects to the report were critical. One element considered the lack of innovation against a backdrop of a community with high levels of scientific and computerised graduate and college facilities. The business community does not seem to be availing itself of that. The second aspect of the report is the critical question of the level of productivity in Northern Ireland, which is only 2.5% of turnover, compared with over 12% in Wales and some 20% to 40% in the various countries of the European Union. Does the Minister not think that it is appropriate and necessary for Government to evolve a more positive strategy to create that innovation based on our skills and to enhance production to give an environment in which industry and business can achieve better results?

Sir Reg Empey: As regards productivity, last year, when manufacturing output rose in Northern Ireland by 7.3% compared with 1.9% in the UK as a whole, productivity also increased significantly. The use of ICT, upmarket methods, and innovation are the key issues for any economy that wants to be knowledge-based. The Programme for Government sets out a series of targets for increased research and development spending. While that spending has increased over the past few years, as

the triennial report produced last month indicated, it is clear that there is more to be done in some sectors.

In the last year there has been a much higher take-up in the use of ICT to the extent that we rate about middle-region in the UK. The next step is to use that technology. More and more people are acquiring the technology, and my Department is requiring people to have that capability before we offer them assistance.

The Member is right to focus on the need to make the next step. IRTU is focused on this. As he may have heard in my announcement before Christmas of the establishment of a new agency to deal with these matters, I want innovation to be the “golden thread” that runs throughout the new organisation. I assure the Member that the Department is well aware of the implications of this report.

Mr B Bell: Will the Minister indicate how our traditional industries such as the textile and the Irish linen industries fit into this report and the way forward?

Sir Reg Empey: As I have said many times before with regard to research and development, innovation, and the use of ICT technologies, the traditional industries are in more urgent need of these facilities than the new ones — if that does not sound like a contradiction. These new technologies are applicable to all industry. I assure the Member for Lagan Valley that, following the publication last week of the Kurt Salmon Report into the textile sector, it was clear that the focus which we will be working out in the next few weeks has to be on innovation, technical textiles and design issues. There is a real determination to ensure that these new skills, technologies and techniques are applied to our traditional industries.

Bakery Industry: Employment

2. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to quantify the number of jobs lost in the bakery industry in the last three years and to outline his proposals to protect the remaining jobs from unfair competition. (AQO 657/00)

Sir Reg Empey: There have been 509 redundancies in bakeries that are or were client companies of Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment agencies within the past three years. I have been involved in discussions about the situation with the Northern Ireland Bakery Council, and I wrote recently to the chief executives of the multiple retailers on the question of margins paid to suppliers.

Mr Dallat: The Minister’s interest in this matter is widely recognised and appreciated. However, is he aware that a great deal of apprehension and fear remains, not only among bakery workers but in the wider community, that we may become totally dependent on imports? This is because those large retailers he refers to continue to demand bread at prices that are well below production

costs. Can the Minister assure the House that he will continue to monitor the situation closely and consider legislation if it is deemed necessary?

Sir Reg Empey: I am conscious of the concern in the industry and of the impact that these changes have had in his own constituency. I have had discussions with the General Consumer Council of Northern Ireland, which represents the interests of consumers, and it has expressed an understanding that cheapest is not necessarily best in the long term for the consumer. It realises that if one becomes dependent exclusively on imports, there is a very real risk to the supply and ultimately to the price of the product.

Everyone knows that if you get a few days of bad weather, the shelves in the supermarkets very quickly go empty. It would be a very serious situation if we were unable to produce sufficient bread for our own consumption. Of course, speciality products will always be coming and going, and we all accept that. However, it would be a very negative development if we did not have the ability to produce some basic products here to ensure continuity of supply. I assure the Member that I am watching this very closely.

I have had several discussions recently with IDB executives. We are willing to co-operate and to help the industry when specific proposals are made. I am taking the matter up directly with the supermarkets. The General Consumer Council is now completely of the view that price is not the only issue that has to be considered. I think the Member would agree that that is a very significant development.

Mr McClarty: Does the Minister accept that although the consumer may actively look for meat and vegetable products sourced in Northern Ireland, bread tends to be overlooked? What is being done to encourage large retailers to buy locally?

Sir Reg Empey: A significant amount of produce is supplied by local producers. The problem is that the margins that they are earning on the principal staple products are insufficient to provide the necessary levels of investment to sustain them and make them more efficient. However, there are notable exceptions. Before Christmas I was at one bakery when it made a major announcement that it has substantially increased its sales of speciality products to the major retailers in Great Britain. Two of our bakeries are very active in that area. That is perhaps one of the ways ahead.

I assure the Member that if the industry comes forward with proposals I will look at them very carefully and sympathetically. This can only be done if there is co-operation by the major retailers. They are the big customers, they give the volume sales, and without them it is impossible to support some of the other lines. Retailers are purchasing more goods locally. They have to understand that they have a responsibility. Ultimately,

as consumers, we are their customers. The public are their customers. I do not want us to be in a situation where a whole sector is removed, thereby weakening the product base in Northern Ireland.

Inward Investment: New Jobs

3. **Mr Clyde** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of new jobs created through inward investment as a result of direct action by his Department during 2000. (AQO 634/00)

Sir Reg Empey: During the calendar year 2000, the IDB secured 29 projects from externally owned companies, which promised the creation of 5,024 new jobs.

Mr Clyde: How many jobs does the IDB expect to create in 2001?

Sir Reg Empey: In my response I cited figures for the calendar year 2000, which overlaps the current financial year. According to the information I have, this will be the best financial year on record for the IDB in its securing projects to create jobs throughout the Province.

Members must understand, however, that the figures are indicative of the number of jobs secured. It takes up to four years for these figures to translate into jobs on the ground. Many jobs being created now relate to announcements that were made two or three years ago. There is an overlap, and we must be careful when referring to figures. However, as things stand, we appear to be on target for the best-ever year, and IDB's targets for the following year will take that into account. It is always better to be surprised by higher figures than were estimated, rather than being disappointed at a later stage.

Mr J Wilson: I commend the Minister on his very successful efforts to bring new jobs to Northern Ireland. He will be aware that my constituency of South Antrim has much to offer potential investors, particularly with regard to modern technology. Will he assure me that his Department will work with the local business community and local councils to give South Antrim an opportunity to market itself?

Sir Reg Empey: Four of the projects included in the figures cited were based in the South Antrim constituency, and a fifth was related to a South Antrim-based company that established jobs in another constituency. There is a significant base in South Antrim, and one of the significant potentials of the constituency lies in the development of the industrial park at Ballyhenry. A good deal of engineering work is currently taking place to facilitate the site and to build infrastructure. ProLogis, the preferred developer of the site, is very optimistic, and we are working in close co-operation with Newtownabbey Borough Council and Antrim Borough Council. Given the significant industrial base in that constituency, it is clear that there is much vitality in the industrial sector in South Antrim. We will

continue to work in close co-operation with the district councils to achieve even greater success.

Small Firms: Financial Aid

4. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the steps he is taking to ensure that small firms are accessing all the grants and financial aid available to them. (AQO 606/00)

Sir Reg Empey: By providing information through its own web site and that of EDnet, LEDU enables greater numbers of people to access information to help them start up and grow their businesses. Each business that approaches LEDU for assistance is individually assessed, and the form of grant assistance is determined on the basis of need.

Mrs E Bell: I am glad to hear that. Is the Minister aware of the SIGNAL Business Growth Centre in North Down, and does he believe that it is a useful model that could be encouraged and promoted by the Department? Further to that, what steps are being taken to get women into business generally?

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware of the SIGNAL Business Growth Centre in North Down, which I had the pleasure of visiting three months ago. It is a very innovative centre that is not dependent on the Government. Local people have decided to carry out their own, different initiatives, and I was extremely impressed during my visit. I have since had contact with them, and members of the board are in regular contact with me to put forward ideas.

2.45 pm

With regard to the involvement of women in industry, there is no doubt that in North America the Small Business Administration has been the significant creator of new jobs. Of those new jobs, over half are in companies run by or controlled by women. While there has been improvement in Northern Ireland, it is perfectly clear that there is still a long way to go. We are well behind the North American model; we are also behind the UK profile as a whole. No doubt the Member for North Down will be aware that under the European Social Fund in particular, district councils and others have been running special schemes for women in industry and women in business. LEDU is no exception; it has been a partner in many of these schemes, and, indeed, district councils, through their economic development departments, may well have provided some of those schemes themselves.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the fact that LEDU makes extensive use of the Internet to provide information to small firms; it has a very good site, which must be commended.

Given the diversity of need among small businesses, how does LEDU ensure that its assistance meets the needs of individual businesses?

Sir Reg Empey: It is done by individual assessment. The client executive visits the company and establishes its specific needs. Yes, there is information on the web site, but, by definition, it is general information — not specific. Therefore we always follow that up with a visit, tailoring a model for a particular company, and those models vary greatly. Some companies need advice; some need marketing assistance; some may need capital assistance; others need revenue grants; still others will need training, and the Training and Employment Agency is one of our major partners in this exercise. I assure the Member, however, that the key driver in this is an individual assessment of individual applicants.

Dr McDonnell: Some weeks ago the Minister announced a new development agency, which will have to be focused on and sensitive to the needs of small business. What work has already been done to ensure that? How will the Department ensure that those with the relevant operational experience, both inside and outside of the existing structure, are mobilised and brought to work on the needs of small businesses?

Sir Reg Empey: About 99% of the people employed in businesses in Northern Ireland are employed in businesses which have fewer than 50 employees, therefore 99% of our companies fall into that category. If we were not to take that into account when formulating any proposals, that would amount to a dereliction of duty. I can assure the Member for South Belfast that teams have been established in the Department to plan various aspects of the establishment of the new agency, and all matters are being considered along the lines that the Member has laid out.

The fundamental rationale behind the proposal is to bring together all the sources of assistance and help and guidance that the state can apply to help industry. By definition, therefore, if we do not help small businesses, we fail, because growth comes from the small business sector. I assure the Member that the provisions of the legislation, the operational remit and corporate plans of the new agency will have to address the issues of small businesses, and plans will not proceed until all of these issues are addressed satisfactorily.

TSN Action Plan

5. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what changes are planned for the targeting social need action plan. (AQO 650/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Draft plans have been amended in the light of last year's consultation process, and all departmental action plans will be published shortly by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. When progress for 2000-01 is reported, there will be an opportunity to update and revise our plan.

Mrs I Robinson: Can the Minister state what policy he is following with regard to wards that suffer from severe deprivation but are situated within regions not listed as TSN areas? Will the Minister assure us that such wards will not be ignored? Does he accept that this is the case in Strangford? Finally, will he assure the House that he will not follow the advice given by Gerry Adams on the deliberate skewing of resources on a preconceived political agenda but rather on a basis of fairness and proven need?

Sir Reg Empey: I fully understand the issue of pockets of deprivation within areas of apparent affluence. The hon Member knows that my own council area contains a series of such pockets. A year ago I addressed Ards Borough Council and established a task force to deal with the concerns of people from the textile industry, and I know that there are pockets of serious deprivation within spitting distance of areas of affluence — Westwinds, for example.

The position regarding new TSN is that the Programme for Government contains an indication of a general policy and a determination to set targets to introduce and stimulate economic activity in areas that have traditionally suffered according to a range of indices.

That being said, the IDB has made it clear — and I repeat it now for the benefit of the hon Member — that that does not mean that no attempt will be made to deal with the specific concerns of areas such as those she has indicated. Many Members, noticeably those representing Belfast constituencies, have made exactly the same point. One measure of our success will be the extent to which we are able to deliver on those concerns.

Mrs Courtney: I am sure that the Minister will agree that the creation of the new agency provides an opportunity to improve the level of service and the speed of response to business. It also provides an opportunity to decentralise meaningful Government jobs and activities to strategically important centres throughout Northern Ireland. In particular, I am thinking of Derry and the north-west. How can we ensure that we maximise the business potential of these opportunities by delivering substantial services from bases across Northern Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: I am sure that the Member knows that the matter to which she refers is a concern of my hon Friend, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who has responsibility for dealing with this aspect of decentralisation. It may be that she can influence him more than I can. There has been some relocation in Belfast, so we know that jobs can be provided in these areas.

However, physically moving offices does not necessarily bring in new jobs. Relocation may bring in new people, but they may be the same people who held the posts in the other location, so it may not necessarily benefit the local community. These matters have to be

addressed on a case-by-case basis to see what real benefit actually accrues.

Mr Neeson: Given that the Robson index and, to an extent, the 1991 census figures are still being used as indicators for designating TSN areas, does the Minister think that the current system is seriously flawed and ignores the pockets of high deprivation that exist throughout Northern Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member has drawn attention to a matter of which we are acutely aware. At present, my Department uses the Robson index, together with local employment information, as one of its guides. As the Member may know, the Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency (NISRA) is currently undertaking a review to assess new criteria under the direction of the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Many Members and organisations have fed into that review the concerns expressed by Mr Neeson and the Member for Strangford — namely, how the question of pockets is dealt with.

I assure the Member that that information is due to be published by around May 2001. The Department and the Committee will have the opportunity to assess it, and we will then consider how to apply it to our circumstances.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Textile Industry: Employment

7. **Mr Davis** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the steps he is taking to safeguard employment in the textile industry; and to make a statement.
(AQO 612/00)

Sir Reg Empey: In June 2000 Kurt Salmon Associates were appointed to work with the IDB and an industry steering group to develop an action plan for sustainable growth in the textile and clothing industry. That review has been completed. Recommendations have been put to the industry and are ready to be implemented.

Mr Davis: I am sure that the Minister would agree that while reports may serve a purpose, what we really need for our textile industry is action. What does he intend to do with the report's recommendations?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is correct, although this was a report with a difference — not simply a consultant's report. It was drawn up in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Textiles and Apparel Association (NITA). They were partners in what was an interactive exercise. The report was formally launched and presented to the industry last Friday afternoon. As a result, I have endorsed the report and indicated to the industry that, in future, we will base our assessment of the need for help on the extent to which the applications are in line with the report.

An implementation team has been established to set up a company, and I hope that this will be dealt with in the next few weeks. The company will be owned by the

industry and facilitated by my Department. It will be charged with implementing the strategy and bringing the industry together — one of the Kurt Salmon report's main recommendations. At a later stage, I hope to propose how we can assist with the huge investment of nearly £119 million which has been recommended for the industry over the next five years. I assure the Member, knowing his constituency interest in Lagan Valley, and other Members who have raised the issue — not least Members from the north-west — that I am acutely aware of their concerns. However, I am convinced that a significant base exists. There are many profitable companies, so we should not be prophets of doom. Other countries have fought their way out of this position. We have a good basis for doing the same. My Department is determined to respond rapidly to proposals from the industry, but the industry must take the lead.

Inward Investment (Mid Ulster)

8. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of inward investment in the Mid Ulster constituency.

(AQO 648/00)

Sir Reg Empey: In the last five years there have been three inward investments in the Mid Ulster constituency. Copeland Corporation announced a £34 million new inward investment in a compressor manufacturing plant in Cookstown, creating some 330 new jobs. There were two expansion investments from externally owned companies offering 28 new jobs. The area continues to be marketed for more inward investment.

Mr Armstrong: While I welcome the success we have had in securing inward investment in Mid Ulster, examples tend to be few and far between. I am aware of inward investment in Creagh Meadows, near Toome, which is in the east of my constituency but near enough to South Antrim.

Will the Minister tell us exactly what the IDB is doing to encourage inward investment? Is it working with local representatives to find ways to improve our attractiveness to potential investors? Moreover, will the Minister comment on the recent takeover of Lafarge — that is the Blue Circle Industries — outside Cookstown and the effect that that may have on other inward investment and the Mid Ulster economy.

Sir Reg Empey: The IDB announced today the acquisition of 54 acres of land at Craig Meadows to provide new opportunities for investment in the Magherafelt District Council area. The IDB acquired the land on 15 January. It will advertise soon for expressions of interest from civil engineering contractors wishing to tender for the site development contract. I hope that it will be possible to have this site available for occupation by the autumn of this year. Magherafelt District Council has warmly welcomed today's decision.

3.00 pm

Regarding the constituency as a whole, on the LEDU small business front Mid Ulster continues to be one of the most successful areas in attracting new jobs, and new letters of offer have been issued. It is certainly one of the best in the Province.

The Blue Circle matter still has to cross some competition hurdles. Lafarge already has interests in Northern Ireland through Redland Tile and Brick, and the amalgamation with Blue Circle would make a very powerful industrial group. The company has been in contact with me, and it will be some months before the full implications of the takeover are clear. I assure the Member that I am keeping in close contact with the company throughout this time of change.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

“Back to Your Future”: Expatriate Professionals

1. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline the number of information and communication technologies expatriate professionals who have indicated an interest in the “Back to Your Future” campaign; and to make a statement.

(AQO 636/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): The “Back to Your Future” campaign has attracted a positive response from expatriates, at whom it was targeted. Of 2,437 unique visitors to the web site established for the campaign, 124 professionals have registered on the system. Those registered have made 169 job applications to 17 companies. Members will appreciate that it is too early to establish whether those people have been successful in obtaining jobs. However, I can report that companies involved in the campaign have expressed satisfaction with the scheme to date.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the emphasis on developing more ICT jobs in Northern Ireland. I draw the Minister's attention to a LEDU initiative in the western region called “Into the West”. This tries to encourage expatriates from Tyrone and Fermanagh who are in business in Australia, New Zealand and Canada to return and help business development here. What other initiatives does the Minister hope to undertake to assist ICT companies to attract high-calibre employees in that sector?

Dr Farren: The Member will appreciate that we need to evaluate the “Back to Your Future” campaign in conjunction with the companies involved. I am aware of initiatives undertaken in the industry itself without public support; these too are making an important contribution

to trying to attract expatriates, from whatever part of Northern Ireland, to become aware of the tremendous expansion taking place in the ICT sector and the opportunities that exist in related sectors. I trust that we will be successful in this campaign and that others will supplement it. I will be maintaining contact with my Colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, whose Department was associated with us in the "Back to Your Future" campaign, to see what more is necessary in this regard.

Literacy And Numeracy (Adults)

2. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline how he intends to address deficiencies in literacy and numeracy amongst adults. (AQO 651/00)

Dr Farren: Work is being done to tackle low levels of adult literacy and numeracy, which have given rise to considerable concern, not just in the education world but across the community. A basic skills unit has been established to provide advice on strategy to my Department. Basic skills provision is a priority area for the learndirect service and initiatives are already underway in the further education sector and the New Deal programme.

Many adults with literacy and numeracy needs are already receiving assistance through these initiatives. However, I intend to develop additional initiatives, in conjunction with the Department of Education and all sectors of adult and continuing education, to meet the needs of those people as quickly as possible. This is in response to the strategy framework, which the basic skills committee within the Department has recently published.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's statement. Is he aware that recent figures released by the Department of Education indicate that performance targets in literacy and numeracy are not being achieved? This serious problem is likely to continue for some time. Can the Minister assure us that he will attract adequate resources to address the serious problem in the future?

Dr Farren: All Members will be aware that I have expressed several times my concern about this issue. It is a concern, as I indicated in my first response, shared by my Colleague, the Minister of Education and, more widely, with those in the education world.

We are developing a concerted approach. I assure the Member that, since this issue has been highlighted in the Programme for Government, the Executive will provide the necessary resources to address the problems associated with literacy and numeracy levels in our community.

Mr Beggs: Can the Minister assure me that measures to address deficiencies in adult literacy and numeracy will be implemented in all constituencies? What actions is he taking to encourage such projects in areas that have been in obvious need, but which have been missed in

the past — in particular, parts of East Antrim where there have been very few such projects?

Dr Farren: I want to give a clear assurance that our strategy and the initiatives within it to deal with adult literacy and numeracy problems will be focused on all areas where there is a need. Insofar as we can, it will be directed at individuals using the resources and facilities which will be available to us under learndirect. We will so target those initiatives. I assure the Member that no constituency will be neglected in this context.

It is important that the House appreciates that a considerable amount of valuable and effective work is being undertaken within existing course provisions at further education and community levels. However, we are not complacent, and we will be developing new approaches to meet the needs of all who have numeracy and literacy problems, so that we will never again be faced with the evidence of recent reports. Approximately 25% of adults experience varying degrees of literacy and numeracy difficulties.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the Minister's assurances that resources are being directed towards this very difficult and important problem that needs to be addressed under the Programme for Government. However, what targets has his Department set to ensure that resources are devoted towards basic adult literacy and numeracy courses?

Secondly, does the Department have any figures on drop-out rates in the further education sector, as compared to those for courses delivered through the community-based sector? Thirdly, will the Minister assure the Assembly that resources will continue to be directed towards further education colleges, so that they can imaginatively expand literacy and numeracy courses?

Dr Farren: The first question was related to targets. It is important to stress what I said a few moments ago. Provision already exists in community and further education sector initiatives, and it has done for some time. I also mentioned the fact that the basic skills committee published a strategic framework document just before Christmas. It sets out for the Department the approaches that must be undertaken with regard to the number of tutors and the forms of co-operation for delivery between the community and further education sectors. Future targets have yet to be detailed, but I assure the Member that we are working hard to produce them.

The second question referred to the further education sector. As I did not have notice of the question, I am not in a position to provide an immediate answer on the numbers that fail to complete courses. However, I will provide an answer in due course.

I assure the Member that every effort will be made through the combination of the community and further education sectors' resources to ensure an effective range

of provision. We cannot just consider a single, discrete approach; we need one that encompasses a range of provisions for those who need assistance with their literacy and numeracy problems. The Programme for Government is firmly committed to achieving rapid progress in this area.

Mitchell Scholarship Programme

3. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the Mitchell scholarship programme and give an update on progress with the 2000-01 programme. (AQO 652/00)

Dr Farren: The Mitchell scholarship programme was established by the United States-Ireland Alliance to honour the contribution that Senator George Mitchell made to the shaping of Northern Ireland's future. The programme provides scholarships for outstanding American students, which enables them to study in Ireland — North and South — and is partly supported by my Department.

The first 12 scholars commenced their courses in universities throughout Ireland last autumn. Three of the 12 are studying in Northern Ireland — two at Queen's University, Belfast, and one at the University of Ulster. I was privileged to meet all 12 students in Belfast shortly after they arrived in the country.

I want to place on record my recognition, and the gratitude and recognition of my Department and our educational institutions — particularly the Northern Ireland universities — of the contribution that individuals and organisations in the United States, Northern Ireland and throughout Ireland have made to the establishment of this scholarship scheme. As time goes by, I believe, it will make a significant contribution to understanding between our two countries, especially in the academic and professional worlds.

3.15 pm

Mr A Maginness: It is fitting that a man who has made such a great contribution to the Good Friday Agreement and the setting up of the Assembly should have a scholarship programme named after him. What financial support will the programme receive from the Department? For how long will that support be provided? For how long will the programme last?

Dr Farren: The Department has agreed to provide an annual sum of \$33,000, to be increased at the annual rate of inflation, to cover administrative costs and expenses for two students to come to study in Northern Ireland. Support for the scholarship programme will last for an initial period of five years and will be subject to review at the end of that period.

Members may have spotted a disparity in the student numbers that I have given in my responses. The third student has been supported by a private, anonymous donor who wished to make a significant contribution to the

scholarship programme. We are grateful to the donor for that additional support; it has enabled us to have three students in Northern Ireland — one more than the number originally intended.

Student Support

4. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail when he expects to bring forward details of the proposals outlined following the student support review. (AQO 654/00)

11. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the cost to his Department of abolishing tuition fees for university students from Northern Ireland.

(AQO 610/00)

Dr Farren: I shall answer questions 4 and 11 together. My officials are finalising the details of my proposals on student support with the Department of Finance and Personnel. I hope that the process will be completed soon, so that I can set out my proposals in detail for consultation, as part of the Department's equality scheme. The additional public cost of abolishing tuition fees for full-time students studying in Northern Ireland is estimated at £22.5 million.

Mr McMenamin: We would all like to see the abolition of fees. How many students will be exempt from fees, as a result of the Minister's proposals?

Dr Farren: As I said, work is still being done on the detail of the proposals, so I am not yet able to provide the detail that the Member seeks. I hope that I shall be able to do so when the appraisal is complete.

Certainly, the Department should be able to state the number of people likely to be able to avail themselves of the various forms of new support. The level of support will always be demand-driven, and we will not be able to predict precise numbers from one year to the next. However, we will have a general indication of the likely level of demand. It will be a welcome additional form of support for students in higher and further education.

Further and Higher Education: Cookstown Students

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment how many students from the Cookstown area are currently enrolled at (a) the East Tyrone College of Further Education and (b) the North East Institute of Further and Higher Education in Magherafelt. (AQO 647/00)

Dr Farren: The home postcodes of all enrolling further education students are collected. A significant percentage of postcodes are incorrect, incomplete or missing. The Department is working to improve the quality of the data. At present, our data are collected not by campus but by institution.

That makes it difficult to answer the question. However, as the data becomes available and is collated I will be happy to provide the Member with the details that he requests.

Mr Armstrong: Are there any long-term plans for the upgrading and development of Cookstown College of Further Education? If this area is going to be successful and secure jobs in the future, it needs to be identified as an area of higher and further education, training and employment.

Dr Farren: Members will be aware that the East Tyrone College of Further Education has joined with Omagh College of Further Education in a major private finance initiative (PFI) project which in a few years' time will provide significant new facilities for colleges in both parts of County Tyrone. The East Tyrone College of Further Education includes the Cookstown campus, and it is hoped that the facilities at Cookstown will be enhanced along with the other developments that will be taking place.

Mr McGrady: Does the Minister agree that all colleges of further education and the communities which are served by them — east Tyrone, the north-east, east Down or wherever — are restricted by the quota that is applied to the provision of higher education courses? Will the Minister consider either improving those quotas or abolishing them so that the necessary skills can be provided for a greater number of people in the areas where inward investment requires the highest level of skills? The quota system is unfair and unjust to those regions.

Dr Farren: I am sure that Members will acknowledge the very clear commitment on my part and that of my Department to developing the further education sector. That sector has a significant contribution to make to higher education and to the economic, social and cultural development of our society.

From time to time I have highlighted the additional places available in some key areas where courses are provided which are directly related to job opportunities and economic development. Those include software development, electronic engineering, construction, hospitality and catering — areas in further education for which the Department has been keen to see courses developed. There has been a significant increase in the number of students admitted to those courses as a result of the additional places provided. The Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Department's investment has been welcomed by the sections of industry to which it is directly related.

Student Debt

6. **The Chairperson of the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Birnie)** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline his plans to carry out detailed surveys similar to the Callender

Report (Department for Education and Employment RR 213) on student debt. (AQO 611/00)

Dr Farren: The Callender and Kemp survey was commissioned by all four United Kingdom education Departments and was based on a representative sample of higher education students throughout the United Kingdom. At present I have no plans to carry out a separate survey for Northern Ireland.

Dr Birnie: Is the Minister aware of the evidence presented to the House of Commons Select Committee in December? It suggested that actual or perceived debt was leading to a significant problem of students dropping out of higher education institutions in Great Britain. Does he agree that we need to know, as a matter of urgency, the extent of that problem in Northern Ireland?

Dr Farren: I am aware of the evidence and the interpretation placed on it. It is important that we do not make simple comparisons between Northern Ireland and other regions. Our situation has its own characteristics. Notwithstanding the changes that have been made to student funding in recent years, there have been significant increases in the numbers of students enrolling in higher education courses and completing higher education courses. I stress that such figures have not led to any complacency on my part, given my firm commitment to improving the situation on student support, as evidenced in the review and in the proposals that have emerged from that review.

Further and Higher Education Institutes: Access for the Disabled

7. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline the steps he is taking to ensure adequate access for people with disabilities, not only to buildings but to all services and facilities in institutes of further and higher education. (AQO 639/00)

Dr Farren: Significant steps have been taken to improve disabled access to colleges including the requirement to publish a disability statement, a support fund to assist with the costs of technical or carer support, a higher financial weighting in the funding formula and capital allocations to improve physical access.

In this building last Thursday I launched a register of support workers for students with specific learning difficulties. It will assist such students to access appropriate support during their studies. The register is currently available at the University of Ulster, Queen's University and the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education. There are plans to extend its availability and accessibility to students in all higher and further education institutions.

Ms Lewsley: In the United Kingdom the Disability Rights Task Force made recommendations to improve access to colleges and higher and further education

institutions for people with disabilities. What is the Minister's commitment to those recommendations? Will the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment put measures in place to implement some of those recommendations?

Dr Farren: The Department has an additional support fund of around £310,000 per annum to provide technical or carer support to students. A £1.2 million access fund is available to colleges for students over the age of 19 whose access might be inhibited by financial considerations or who, for whatever reason, including physical or other disabilities, face financial difficulties. Priority is given to students who have been in care and to those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. I assure Members that the Executive have been taking their responsibilities in this regard very seriously. That seriousness is reflected in the commitments contained in the Programme for Government to enhance facilities and support, not just in education, for those with disabilities or difficulties of the kind referred to.

Textile Workers (Craigavon)

8. **The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Mr Carrick)** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline his plans to retrain and reskill textile workers in Craigavon following the latest factory closure at Carn, Portadown. (AQO 630/00)

3.30 pm

Dr Farren: Training and Employment Agency officials are providing a full range of services, including a job clinic on 23 January, to workers made redundant from the textile industry. I mention that date because the question refers specifically to the recent factory closure at Carn in Portadown. A range of job vacancies and information about training opportunities have been made available to assist people to re-enter employment at the earliest opportunity.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how he proposes to extend the domestic energy efficiency scheme to cover central heating and other measures within a £5 million budget.

(AQO 617/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): The funding for the first year of the domestic energy efficiency scheme has been set at £4 million. If additional funding is required because of a higher level of uptake,

then, if the work can be undertaken by installers, a bid for extra funds will be made during the financial year.

Mr McCarthy: Are the allocated funds substantial enough to make a serious impact on fuel poverty? As I understand it, a promise has been made in Great Britain to eliminate fuel poverty inside 10 years. It will take us 30 years, even with the extra funding. How does the Minister react to the Scottish decision to give free central heating to all pensioners?

Mr Morrow: It is extremely difficult to estimate the uptake in regard to this scheme. It is well known that a considerable need exists. However, we have made an adequate bid to cover demand, but in the event of more being required we will make additional bids. I do not accept for one moment that Scotland, or anywhere else, is ahead of us as far as this matter is concerned. I certainly take the Member's point, and I ask him to bear in mind the amount of work that is envisaged. It is difficult to put a precise figure on what is needed. Nevertheless, I believe that the sum of money that we have available is adequate to kick-start the whole scheme. If we do not have adequate funds we will go back, in a determined way, to seek additional funding for the scheme.

Mr McMenamin: I welcome any measures that will assist householders to have oil-fired central heating installed. Does the Minister realise that in my constituency of West Tyrone some Housing Executive tenants have nothing other than a coal fire to heat their entire house? They are living in virtual fridges. Can the Minister address this wanton neglect sooner rather than later? Will he give an assurance that the extra £2 million announced by the Minister of Finance will be built into his budget for future years?

Mr Morrow: I concur entirely with what the Member has said, as I have constituents who find themselves in the very same position. Indeed, only last week, I wrote a letter on their behalf. We know that the greatest level of fuel poverty exists in the private sector and not in the social sector — although it has not been eliminated in the social sector. However, I want to emphasise that all the figures and all the information that we have at our disposal clearly point to the fact that the biggest problem exists in the private sector and not in the social sector.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat. Can the Minister confirm the health benefits of insulation to both the customer and the housing stock? Will he meet with other Ministers to contribute to real joined-up government in this area?

Mr Morrow: There are substantial health benefits. The scheme will target groups such as the over 60s on benefit, families on benefit with young children and families on low income. In addition, disabled facilities grant will assist those under 60 who fall outside the new

scheme. We are satisfied that the spin-off from this scheme will be beneficial and have a marked impact.

2. **Mr R Hutchinson** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of households in East Antrim that have received insulation measures under the new domestic energy efficiency scheme in each of the last three financial years, and how this compares with other constituencies. (AQO 596/00)

Mr Morrow: I refer the Member to the table contained in my reply to AQW 1,205 on 24 January 2001, which provides the information requested. I do have this information at my disposal, but it would take a considerable amount of time to read through all the 18 constituencies, dealing with the years 1998-99 and 1999-2000 up until 31 December 2000. However, I am ready — at your direction, Mr Deputy Speaker — to take up the rest of Question Time if that is necessary.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Hutchinson has indicated that he would be happy with a written answer.

3. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that over £250,000 has been spent under the domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES 1) in West Belfast, representing the highest need in the 18 parliamentary constituencies; and to make a statement. (AQO 618/00)

Mr Morrow: Based on information provided by the manager for the domestic energy efficiency scheme, more than £250,000 has been spent in West Belfast. However, my Department does not fund DEES on a constituency basis, as the scheme is demand-led. It would be wrong to assume that West Belfast has a higher need for energy efficiency measures compared to other constituencies.

I wish to make it clear that the level of expenditure under the domestic energy efficiency scheme is not a barometer of fuel poverty. DEES provides basic energy efficiency measures and is not targeted specifically at the fuel poor. The new scheme to be introduced later this year will, on the other hand, provide a more comprehensive range of energy efficiency measures and will target the most vulnerable groups in our society.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for his response, but, given the slight increase in the budget for scheme two, will the demand in a constituency such as West Belfast be assured of the same level of support?

Mr Morrow: Mr Deputy Speaker, I refer you to my earlier answer that this is not done on a constituency basis; it applies throughout the Province and is demand-led. However, based on the information that is readily available, £795,077 has been spent in the constituency of West Belfast to date.

Mr Ford: While welcoming the Minister's assurance that money is being spent on a demand-led basis does he agree that it has the potential for problems if the

information is not being distributed across the whole region adequately? What efforts is his Department making to ensure that knowledge of DEES is spread as widely as possible, so that this year's additional funding is spent properly and he can justify seeking future funding?

Mr Morrow: I assure the Member that I am concerned that the money should be spent in the most efficient manner across the Province. I also assure him that every effort will be made to make the public aware of this scheme so that everyone in Northern Ireland — across the 18 constituencies — will be equally aware of its existence. I believe that that is the best way forward to avoid criticisms and accusations that we are labouring for any particular constituency. We are trying to avoid that, and I believe that that will be possible, given the way in which the scheme is made up.

Mr Hussey: I welcome the realism contained in the Minister's answer. So far, expenditure has been demanded, or on an application basis — that is not to deny that need would exist elsewhere. The Minister will be aware of the independent nature of many living in rural communities.

Can the Minister assure me that the Department will adopt a strong, proactive stance in the social sector, and in the private sector particularly, where the Minister has identified a real problem in respect of rural communities?

Mr Morrow: I assure the Member that that will be the case. I hoped that I had made that clear. We will not be dealing with this as a purely urban or rural scenario. Strenuous steps will be taken to ensure that the very type of person in the rural communities that the Member refers to is targeted and is made fully aware of this. I hope that that will happen; indeed, I am confident that it will.

Housing Executive Waiting Lists

4. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of applicants on the Housing Executive's waiting lists in each region which have lost their priority status due to the introduction of the new housing selection scheme (AQO 622/00)

Mr Morrow: Prior to the implementation of the new common selection scheme, there were 5,600 priority applicants on the waiting list. Of these, 2,289 applicants retained priority status, and those remaining were recategorised as pointed applicants under the new scheme, alongside all other applicants on the waiting list. Until the scheme has been evaluated it cannot be assessed whether these applicants will be rehoused less quickly than they would have been previously. The evaluation will probably be carried out in November 2001.

Mr Fee: I welcome the fact that there is to be an evaluation and that it will be done quickly. However, it is shocking that thousands in urgent need of housing have

been reassessed and are now much further down the waiting list than they may have been before. Will the Minister do everything in his power to ensure that the evaluation is comprehensive and that it is done speedily? Will he re-examine the needs of those with mental disabilities who would have previously received special consideration? There is nothing under the new scheme to take account of their particular needs.

Mr Morrow: I will look at this point again. I assure the Member that that matter will be given due and proper consideration, and I thank him for bringing it to my attention.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Minister share my cynicism at the mock horror expressed by Mr Fee at the change in the waiting lists as a result of the new housing selection scheme? Will he also confirm that there was widespread consultation about this scheme and that members of the party to which Mr Fee belongs had an input? We were all well aware of the fact that the purpose of the housing selection scheme was to ensure that those who were most in need of priority housing were placed on the list ahead of those in less need.

Mr Morrow: It is Question Time, and it is not for me to go into the intricacies of what happened in a particular party and whether it did or did not do certain things. In relation to how our assessments are carried out — and this is important in the context of what we are discussing here today — applicants on the waiting list, used by all participating landlords, are assessed on a points basis in descending order according to their housing need. There are four headings under which applicants may be awarded points: intimidation; insecurity of tenure; housing conditions; and health and social well-being assessment. This adequately covers the situation, although it will be kept under review.

Disability Living Allowance

6. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development to explain why it can take 12 months between a disability living allowance applicant appealing a decision and its resolution. (AQO 621/00)

3.45 pm

Mr Morrow: At present there are delays of 10 to 12 months in the resolution of disability living allowance appeals. Due to the introduction of new legislation in October 1999, there was an unprecedented increase in the number of disability living allowance appeals received by the Department, and a backlog developed. In response, the Department implemented a recovery plan and recruited additional staff to deal with the extra work. That is beginning to result in a reduction in the backlog, but it will be some time before the service returns to normal. I apologise to all customers who are affected by those problems.

Mr M Robinson: Can the Minister assure the House that he will continue to monitor this situation? If the pitiful situation of many constituents who come to my office is anything to go by, this situation is continuing to deteriorate.

Mr Morrow: The situation is not continuing to deteriorate. We hope to see significant and marked improvements, and we have recruited additional staff to deal with the problem. We have increased the number of appeal writers from 15 to 35, but they have to be trained and that takes time. Where the Member sits, I once sat, and probably one day will be sitting so I have a direct interest in the matter. I too feel the impact of the problem on the ground, because my constituents come to me. It will be very closely monitored. I assure the Member and the Assembly that there should be a marked increase towards the middle of this year. I hope that we are getting over the worst of the situation.

Mr Ford: Question 8 stands in my name, but I fear that in my enthusiasm, and assuming that the Minister would answer it along with earlier questions, I have already asked it, and he has given me a supplementary answer.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

9. **Dr O'Hagan** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how he will guarantee that the new domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES2) will result in at least the same spend in the Upper Bann constituency as under the previous scheme (DEES1). (AQO 605/00)

10. **Dr Adamson** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the allocation of funding to the East Belfast constituency under the new domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES 2). (AQO 616/00)

11. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Social Development to ensure that the new domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES 2) will result in the same spend in the Lagan Valley constituency as under the previous scheme (DEES 1). (AQO 640/00)

12. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that the new domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES 2) will result in at least the same spend in the Foyle constituency as under the previous scheme (DEES 1). (AQO 653/000)

13. **Mr J Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Development if he will guarantee that the new domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES 2) will result in at least the same spend in the Mid Ulster constituency as the previous scheme (DEES 1). (AQO 631/00)

Mr Morrow: I propose to take questions 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 together. I am a wee bit surprised that there are so many similar — if not identical — questions. Perhaps it is a coincidence.

Funding for the domestic energy efficiency scheme is not allocated on a constituency basis. The existing DEES is very much demand-led. Members have heard this before. Funding is provided to the scheme manager, who responds to requests from individual clients for the installation of energy efficiency measures in their properties. In some respects the new scheme will be similar, but greater emphasis will be given to focusing on, and targeting, those in greatest need. This will be achieved through publicity and marketing and through the development of an effective referral network. In the circumstances, therefore, I cannot predict the future allocation of funding.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister confirm that only £200,000 per year has been spent under the DEES1 scheme in Upper Bann? How does he propose to increase that to a meaningful level? How does the Minister propose to tackle fuel poverty seriously — not only in Upper Bann, but throughout the North of Ireland — with a £6 million budget?

Mr Morrow: I cannot confirm that only £200,000 was spent. However, I will look at the matter and ascertain the exact figure. As for the future, I have already said that I cannot guarantee that a particular constituency will have a particular amount of money spent on it. The scheme is demand-led, which means that it applies right across the Province. Therefore it is difficult for me to give that assurance.

As regards the availability of adequate funds, I have already stated that in the event of there not being, or if we anticipate that there are not going to be, enough funds available we will make a robust bid for further funding.

I see this as an ongoing scheme. It is an excellent scheme — one of the better ones — and the spin-off from it will be considerable, not only for people's comfort but for their health. We have piloted two schemes, in Aghnacloy and Darkley, and we will learn a considerable deal from those schemes.

Dr Adamson: I welcome the extra £2 million to the Department for Social Development's energy efficiency budget this year, and the Minister's previous statements. Can he confirm that he needs to more than treble this budget to meet the target set across the UK to eliminate fuel poverty, and would he be able to bid for such an amount?

Mr Morrow: Perhaps I should give some background information on this subject, as there have been a considerable number of similar questions about it.

We know that 170,000 households in Northern Ireland experience fuel poverty, and there are approximately 600 excess winter deaths due to cold-related illness annually. We also know that fuel poverty is a contributory factor to social exclusion. I am certain that the amount of money in the kitty is adequate to kick-start the scheme. However, we are not 100% sure

of the volume of response, but we are ready for it and, in the event of the response being higher than our expectations, we will make a robust bid for more money to continue this scheme.

I do not see the scheme as one that will peter out; I see it as an ongoing scheme to tackle a serious problem, which exists mostly in the private sector. Social housing has dealt with the problem reasonably well, but it has not eradicated it.

Ms Lewsley: The question of the allocation of appropriate funding for the scheme has been dealt with. As the Minister has said, the Department does not know how many people are going to avail of the scheme. Surely, even if it takes 30 years, this is a good start and we may be able to prevent some of the 600 deaths already mentioned.

My worry is that the new scheme will still be discriminatory, particularly against some of the disabled whose cases slip through the net, because they are in receipt of a specific type of benefit, such as incapacity benefit. The scheme will discriminate against single people who do not have children, as they do not fall into the category. The Minister mentioned that many of the problems are in the private sector so if one takes the example of a young couple, just starting out in rented accommodation, who have no heating —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you move to your question, please.

Ms Lewsley: I am asking the Minister if he considers the scheme to be discriminatory.

Mr Morrow: I do not believe that it will be discriminatory. I will make every effort to ensure that it is not so. Ms Lewsley said that some disabled people would miss out on the scheme, but a scheme is available to the disabled via the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to which they would have redress if they miss out on this scheme.

If there is a specific case which the Member would like me to examine, I would like to hear from her and will give the matter due consideration.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister's responses and his intention to make sure that fuel poverty is eliminated. He said that he had sufficient funds to kick-start it, but whether he has sufficient to see it through is another story. In the draft Programme for Government the Minister was allocated a certain amount of money to address fuel poverty, and last Monday it was announced that he had got an extra £2 million from the Minister of Finance and Personnel. If the Minister finds that he will not have enough money and that he would need to double his budget, is he prepared to bid for the increase?

Mr Morrow: I can leave the Assembly today, confident in the knowledge that the Assembly has taken this matter very much to heart. That is clear from the volume of

questions that I have received. I have no doubt that when I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel for the additional millions of pounds I will have the full backing of the Assembly. If I fail, I am certain that the Assembly will not fail. If I am not instrumental in getting the money from Mr Durkan, I know that I will have the full backing of the Assembly and that Mr Durkan will also have to answer to it. I can rest confident in that knowledge.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My question has already been asked. I welcome the Minister's statement, except perhaps for the last part.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 14 — Mr Armstrong.

Question 15 — Mr Poots.

Question 17 — Mr Hay.

Sub-Standard Housing (Legahory and Burnside)

19. **Mr Carrick** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his plans to deal with the sub-standard social housing conditions at Legahory and Burnside in Craigavon. (AQO 629/00)

Mr Morrow: An area-based survey has been carried out in the Legahory Court estate in Brownlow. The Housing Executive is currently developing a strategy to deal with sub-standard properties in the area. However, as these properties are predominantly privately owned, current housing legislation restricts the options available to the Housing Executive. The Department, in conjunction with the Housing Executive, is presently considering a number of possible ways through which these houses might be acquired and subsequently demolished, but this will be a slow process.

On the other hand, the Burnside estate, which is a Housing Executive estate containing some housing association properties, remains an integral part of the Housing Executive's stock in Brownlow. The properties are generally in good condition and the Housing Executive is committed to their upkeep. By way of consolidating the estate, 48 dwellings were demolished last year. The Housing Executive is constantly reviewing the supply and demand situation and will, if necessary, proceed with further demolition where stock becomes surplus or vulnerable. In the interim, the Housing Executive continues to liaise with the borough council, other agencies including the RUC, and the local community, to develop initiatives to improve conditions in the area.

I am taking a personal interest in this matter and am updated on progress on a regular basis. I have visited both estates and have seen the problems at first hand. I am very concerned about the situation there and am giving it as much attention as I feel it deserves.

Mr Carrick: I thank the Minister for his response and acknowledge the personal interest that he has taken in the

problem, shown by his visit to the area concerned. I note his remarks about selected demolition. Does the Minister agree that the selected demolition of further identified unfit housing will contribute to the vital environmental upgrade of the area and will improve the social conditions for all those still living in the area?

Mr Morrow: I agree. I believe that further demolition would enhance the area. It is as bad a social housing situation as I have seen in a very long time. I assure the Member that it is being given very urgent and considerable attention by my Department. We will not be letting up on this problem or walking away from it until we see a satisfactory resolution.

Sectarian Attacks on Homes

20. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what policies are in place to facilitate the needs of families whose homes have been the subject of sectarian attacks. (AQO 656/00)

4.00 pm

Mr Morrow: The needs of families who are being subjected to sectarian attack are addressed in a number of ways. Some owners can apply to the Housing Executive to have their homes bought under the special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme, which enables intimidated occupants to move out relatively quickly. Tenants in property owned by the Housing Executive or a housing association or those in private rented accommodation can apply to be re-housed by the Housing Executive on the basis of homelessness. A range of permanent and temporary housing is available for this purpose in the private and social housing sector. A small amount of grant aid is available through the Housing Executive.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that some families in Coleraine have been the subject of a sectarian attack over the last few months. Will those families have their needs attended to without further delay?

Mr Morrow: I have two words: categorically, yes.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is my understanding that, as Deputy Speaker, you should treat each Member equally. At the end of today's Question Time, a number of Members, who were perhaps unaware that we would progress as quickly as we did, were not in the Chamber. Why, at this stage, did you read out the names of those Unionist Members who were not here to ask questions, while omitting to read out the names of those in the SDLP who were absent? You simply glossed over the fact that they were not here.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are correct in stating that I did not read out Mr McGrady's name.

Mr S Wilson: Well —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Excuse me, Mr Wilson. I am on my feet, and you should not be on yours. Remain quiet, please.

Even for someone like me, it is not always possible to see who is in the Chamber and who is not. On this occasion, it was not obvious to me that Mr McGrady was absent.

Mr Hussey: On a point of order, in relation to Standing Order 19(1)(a). Last week I submitted to the Business Office a question for oral answer on rural proofing. I wanted the question to be addressed to the Office of the First and the Deputy First Ministers, but it was ruled inadmissible by an official. Rural proofing is dealt with in section five of the Programme for Government, and the Office of the First and the Deputy First Ministers is listed as one of the main Departments responsible for it.

In the light of these facts, will you reconsider the admissibility of my question, and if it is considered admissible, will the Business Office reconsider the ballots of questions for oral answer next week?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will arrange for the Speaker's Office to examine the issue, and it will get back to you.

Mr Dodds: Out of fairness to Mr McGrady and to the Unionist Members whom you named, it should be said that Mr Byrne was also absent from Chamber, and you did not call his name. I presume that you would be happy for this matter to be raised at the Business Committee, so that we can get a consistent line on which Members should be named and which Members should not. It is unfair for one side of the House to be treated differently from the other.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It would, of course, be unfair if one side of the House were treated differently from the other. You may raise the matter with the Business Committee.

ORGANS OF DECEASED CHILDREN

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the announcement on 12 January 2001 by the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, that the organs of deceased children have been stored without parental consent during the past 50 years; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the measures she will take to alleviate the distress caused to the families of the children concerned and to confirm that this practice was not carried out at other facilities in Northern Ireland.

I am glad to move this motion. The removal of children's organs has concerned many people in the Province and in my constituency, primarily because they had children who died at the Royal Victoria Hospital. The issue encompasses the interests of all political parties in the Chamber, and I hope that it will find support. Every one of us sees this issue very clearly.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

First, I want to express my concern, anger and dismay that children's organs were in the possession of the Royal Victoria Hospital from 1944 to 1994, without the consent or the knowledge of the parents who had lost their children. It is disgraceful that the Royal Victoria Hospital should have had the organs stored — allegedly for training purposes — for so many years, oblivious to the feelings and knowledge of the parents.

We have reached the end of January, and we have witnessed another revelation, this time from Londonderry's Altnagelvin Hospital. A statement from the hospital said that the organs of 15 babies had been retained without the consent of the parents. Altnagelvin has told one lady whose son lived for two weeks that his brain and heart had been retained. This lady had only consented to a post-mortem examination of her son, and now she is facing the harrowing prospect of having to dig up her son's grave to place his organs with him. Where is the dignity in that?

The disclosure has caused great embarrassment to Altnagelvin Hospital, because, when the news of the scandal at the Royal Victoria Hospital broke, hospital officials in Londonderry replied to media enquiries on 12 January about its policy on the retention of organs following post-mortem examinations. They said that one brain and spinal cord had been retained for pathological examination and that this had been done with the parents' consent. The facts indicate clearly illustrate that that was not the case.

We cannot allow this situation to spiral out of control, leaving every parent who has ever lost a baby to wonder if that child's organs were removed and retained without his or her knowledge. This is why we need to know urgently whether this practice has been carried out at other hospitals across the Province.

After the Royal Victoria Hospital made the announcement a family came to me in my constituency office in Newtownards. They were distraught, annoyed and very upset. The family lost a baby some 19 years ago and, having come to terms with this and having had three other children, this announcement brought the pain of their loss right back. The family felt that pain as if the 19 years had never passed. The parents were confused and did not know how to go about finding out if their child's organs had been kept without their knowledge or consent. They have been placed in an extremely unfair situation, and many questions need to be answered.

I want to pay particular attention to the announcement made by the Royal Victoria Hospital, to its content, and to the timing of the statement. It was truly heartless to make the announcement on a Friday afternoon, when many people would not be able to contact the Department until Monday. In my opinion it was a calculated move by the hospital to allow time to research the issue more thoroughly.

That weekend, thousands of distressed parents throughout the Province sat at home in a state of mental torment, anxiously waiting to find out if their baby's organs had been removed. This, I believe, illustrates that the RVH has had little or no thought for the feelings of the families concerned. We must not forget that these families had to find out about the situation through the media. We cannot begin to imagine the pain of having to find out in such a public way.

This announcement will have brought back all the painful memories and emotions which the parents have already endured once before. Many now feel it afresh. The phrase "Time heals everything" can have been of no comfort to these families, as the years spent coming to terms with the death of their child were wasted by one abrupt and insensitive announcement. These parents have effectively been catapulted back to square one in the healing process. I am sure that the light at the end of the tunnel has been totally switched off for many of the families involved.

Unfortunately, to this day many families are still waiting to find out if their children's organs were involved. It is ridiculous to leave people waiting for an answer for this length of time, and it further exacerbates an already terrible situation.

I want to know why the Royal Victoria Hospital made a statement to the media without first contacting the parents involved to warn them that the story was about to become public knowledge and to explain the situation to them. Did the Royal Victoria Hospital make this statement because it was faced with the threat of the news breaking without the hospital's knowledge, which would have reflected badly on its reputation? Did someone who knew of the practice of retaining babies' organs at the Royal Victoria Hospital threaten to blow the whistle

by going to the media? We need to know whether the hospital released the statement willingly or was forced into it.

And why did the Royal Victoria Hospital leave it up to the parents to contact the hospital to find out if their babies' organs were involved? Could the situation not have been made somewhat easier by contacting the families involved and clarifying the situation for them? These families should have been offered counselling and some form of emotional assistance; instead, every family who lost a baby while in the care of the Royal was left wondering if its baby was involved. The handling of the entire situation, from start to finish, has been deplorable.

It is quite inconceivable that the Royal should have made the decision to remove a baby's organs without the consent of the families involved and that it was oblivious to the trauma felt by the parents at the time of their loss. The death of a baby, at any stage in pregnancy or around the time of birth, is a sad and traumatic event. What must not be forgotten is that, even though a baby has died, a woman has carried that child for nine months and has become a mother, if only for a very short time. This can never be taken away from such a lady, but, unfortunately, the Royal Victoria Hospital, given its practices, has not taken this into consideration. It is as if there were never a life. The few minutes or hours that the parents had with their child must have been the most precious time ever.

We need to know under what criteria the children's organs, some 361 in total, were removed. In a statement issued by the Royal Victoria Hospital, it said that the organs were looked after sensitively and securely, but this is of no comfort whatsoever because the parents' permission had not once been asked for. They were never consulted; they were never told; and they were never asked.

In its statement the Royal also said that many parents had finished their grieving and moved on. Surely this new disclosure will have brought all those very raw emotions of grief to the surface again and wiped out the years that it took to overcome the loss of their babies.

If we sit down and think about this situation, we see a horrific picture. Some people were able to block the event from their minds, but there are many more out there, thousands indeed, who were unable to do so and became involved unwillingly in this situation. How will they get back to normal and carry on with their lives? A counselling service could now be offered to these people, a service that was not offered when they lost their children many years ago.

The Royal Victoria Hospital has not once issued an apology to the families concerned. Instead, in a statement released since this shocking practice was revealed, the Royal has backed up its actions by saying that consent to retain organs was not sought because it was felt that the suffering of families would only be increased by

detailed discussion of the autopsy and that what it was doing was with the best of intentions and in keeping with best practice. Many people disagree with this, and I also think it is in dispute.

The Royal has stressed that the retained organs were not used for research purposes. This will have been of little or no comfort to the parents involved. At the end of 1999 the Royal Group of Hospitals introduced procedures that required parents' written permission for organ retention. At least this gives the parents a say now in what happens to their babies. Parents who have lost babies are also now given detailed information about the autopsy procedure so that they can fully understand why an autopsy has been requested and what it involves. This enables the parents, armed with knowledge that was never offered before, to make informed decisions.

Many parents caught up in this deplorable situation will feel that they have not laid their children to rest properly, as certain organs remain in a hospital laboratory. The discovery will be heartbreaking for them. How will parents of babies who died up to 25 years ago cope with the revelations after coming to terms with the death of those children? That announcement has opened old wounds, and brought back the heartache and pain as if the events happened only yesterday. All those parents who have lost babies deserve an explanation as well as an assurance that no organs are being stored unknown to them.

4.15 pm

Hard on the heels of the scandal at the Alder Hey Hospital in Liverpool, the shocking announcement in Northern Ireland chills our blood. We tend to think that this happens elsewhere. However, the reality hits home when it happens on your own doorstep. In the news last night there was a reference to Alder Hey's being involved in the "systematic harvesting of children's organs". That puts the matter into perspective. Will any other hospitals in the Province be making announcements, as yet more parents try to come to terms with this unspeakable news? We need an assurance that other hospitals are not retaining children's organs.

The Royal Victoria Hospital and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety cannot wash their hands of the situation. Their handling of the matter has been both insensitive and heartless, and they must be prepared to answer the many unanswered questions. The scandal cannot be brushed under the carpet. It must be brought out into the open, with no stone left unturned, so that all parents can come to terms with their grief and try to get over it. What other hospitals have yet to make an announcement? We need to know the answer. Have they taken decisions to remove children's organs without consulting with parents and without their consent?

We need an assurance that this will not happen again. The announcement was made on a Friday, in the knowledge that it was the weekend and that parents would not be

able to contact the Department until Monday. Indeed, some of those who did contact the Department are still waiting on an answer. For that entire weekend, people were living in torment.

We suggest that the parents affected should have been notified, but in this case they were not. Their viewpoint was not considered. Are the Minister and her Department aware of the hurt and emotional distress caused?

On the radio today we have been assured that new legislation will be introduced across the water to ensure that in the future the retention of children's organs will be with parental consent only. We want assurances that that legislation can be brought in here quickly and, in the short term, that the policy of the past is at an end. We also need an assurance that counselling will be provided for those who have undergone trauma and emotional upset. I urge Members to support the motion. It has been moved for the right reasons. Let us have the answers.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion. We are all aware of the widespread concern over this issue. Public concern was heightened last week following the announcement by Altnagelvin Hospital that it had stored the organs of both children and adults for some years. That has caused deep distress for the many families involved. The trauma affects the parents, but it also affects brothers, sisters, grandparents, uncles, aunts and the family circle.

Last week in County Fermanagh — part of the constituency that I represent — two families were informed that Altnagelvin Hospital had retained the organs of their deceased children without their permission. Given the importance of adequate support services at a time when that sort of distressing news has to be broken to families, the arrangements made by the hospital for dealing with those families could have been much better. For example, the information leaflet provided to the families about counselling services carried a Derry telephone number. Some family members told me that they felt that the particular service on offer was very far removed from them. They felt isolated from it and therefore felt that it was of little value. In those circumstances, I appealed to the local hospital in Enniskillen, which is under a different trust —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am stopping the Member for a moment to get the view of the House. Two Members have mentioned hospitals other than the Royal Victoria Hospital. I am perfectly willing to accept, with the approval of the House, that we should not limit the debate to the Royal Victoria Hospital. Does everybody agree with that? If not, I will have to stop any Member who mentions another hospital.

Mr Dodds: Am I to understand that the proposition is that we expand the scope of the debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes; the motion simply refers to the Royal Victoria Hospital. I am prepared to extend matters, if Members so wish.

Mr Dodds: I have no objection to the issue. However, I would be wary that it might be used as a precedent in the future. That would make it a difficult proposition to support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is my difficulty.

Mr Irvine: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I feel that there is substantial latitude within the motion for those Members taking part. Some will concentrate specifically on their own constituencies, and the motion does say that the Assembly

“calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the measures she will take to alleviate the distress caused to the families of the children concerned and to confirm that this practice was not carried out at other facilities in Northern Ireland.”

The mention of “other facilities” provides the opportunity for discussion of all such facilities.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does everybody accept that?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Gallagher: I appreciate that clarification.

The trust with the greatest responsibility did not make appropriate arrangements, so another local trust had to be involved. In this case, Enniskillen very readily responded and made sure that the services were available for the affected families in their own homes, or elsewhere. It should not have been necessary for elected representatives, or anyone else, to have to intervene at such a distressing time for the families.

The upset caused has been mentioned before. The revelations around this issue have been dreadful, and the repercussions will continue for a very long time. There is therefore a greater need for reassurance for the families — reassurance from the highest level. First, the practice cannot continue without the express consent of the family. Secondly, the Minister should immediately outline a departmental strategy to make sure that not only will this not be repeated in the future, but all who need support will have it readily available at a local level.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Deputy Speaker. I support the motion and thank Mr Shannon for bringing it before us.

We agree that the announcement made by the Royal Victoria Hospital on 12 January was a shock to everyone, but more so to the families and the parents of the children involved. I accept Mr Gallagher’s point that it affects the wider family — from brothers and sisters right through to aunts and uncles. When the statement was made by the Royal Victoria Hospital the Minister pledged to do everything possible to improve procedures governing the retention of children’s organs. She also said in a media

statement that her thoughts were with the families affected and the extreme distress that this has caused them.

Everybody has been aware — and it has already been mentioned by some Members — of the continuing scandal at the Alder Hey Hospital in England. We have been told that over 40,000 organs were retained. I want to place on record that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has asked her officials to monitor developments closely to see what emerges from that. The report into the scandal at Alder Hey is due to be published tomorrow, and according to media speculation it is going to be a very damning one. I suggest that the Minister and her officials look closely at this report.

Everybody is shocked that hospitals removed organs from children without the consent of the parents. The key issue is that it happened without consent. I am thankful that the procedure has changed. However, it has come too late for those who were involved. I am shocked by the announcement that the retention was standard practice and that there was therefore nothing wrong with such action. It was standard practice a number of years ago to send children up chimneys; that was not right either. I do not accept the line that it was standard practice. Without consent, it is wrong.

Some Members mentioned the announcement from Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry that it had retained organs. How many hospitals are we talking about? I was shocked that Altnagelvin Hospital stopped this procedure just last May. We need to discuss that issue as well.

Who sets these procedures? The doctors? The hospitals? Questions must be asked about accountability. The Minister has said that she will take on and implement recommendations from the Alder Hey inquiry. The retention of organs is wrong. The seeking of consent from parents would have solved many of these issues. What were the hospitals afraid of? Parents would have supported the need for research into the deaths of their children. I cannot see what the problem was with asking for consent.

Mr Shannon and Mr Gallagher also mentioned that this has caused parents to revisit the deaths of their children, and it is shocking for them. I agree that hospitals need to provide proper long-term counselling — it should not be just a one-off measure — which includes the wider family.

We need to monitor standard practice every year, because standard practice can change from one year to the next. We need to touch on the whole issue of accountability by the Health Service.

I support the motion, and I thank Mr Shannon for proposing it. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ford: It is noticeable that for once we are debating a topic in a fairly sombre mood, without any attempts at political point scoring. This is clearly an issue of major

concern to the entire community and certainly in all parts of this Chamber.

The issue that we are examining is the fundamental right of people — in this case, the next of kin of recently deceased people — to be told the truth or, if dressed up in appropriate professional jargon, to be allowed to give an informed consent.

The central point is that for too long doctors have not been putting people in that position. Until very recently there was a major presumption that if doctors felt that something was right, it was right, and that patients should really do as they were told. This might or might not be good for the patients, but it is certainly not good for the doctors. That is the issue we are facing here. Doctors, who had been put on a pedestal, assumed that they should base their decision on what best suited their clinical needs, rather than what gave full respect to other people.

In a sense, I say that as a criticism, but I am conscious that my own profession of social work might be seen by some in a similar light. However, we learned, rather earlier than doctors did, that professional competence and decision-making are not excuses for getting away with concealing matters from those most directly involved.

4.30 pm

Mr Shannon talked about how this practice was carried out with the best of intentions and about how it was best practice. Clearly, it is not best practice to treat any deceased person's organs, especially a child's or a baby's, in that way. It was bad practice. It was just plain wrong. It is right that the Assembly should look at this issue and examine the lessons for the future, so that from now on these matters, which cause considerable grief to parents and, in many instances, a wider family circle, are dealt with in a sensitive, caring and professional manner.

Having criticised doctors, I acknowledge the difficulties under which they were operating. Bereavement causes enough trauma for a family, particularly in the case of a sudden or tragic death — and the death of a child or young person obviously falls into that category. It was natural to try to soften the blow. It is difficult to criticise those who sought to soften that blow by not providing a full explanation of what a post-mortem required.

Hospitals in general, and the Royal Victoria Hospital in particular, have improved practices considerably, especially in regard to written material. That should be welcomed, and we should congratulate them for it. However, the fundamental point is that they failed to provide the necessary information in a sensitive and caring way and because of that a situation was created which left families even more traumatised when the information emerged.

I will not go over all the points made, particularly by Mr Shannon, about the difficulties that individual families have faced. We are aware of the details, and we do not need to prolong them. However, we must ask the Minister

today for an assurance that procedures will now be implemented to ensure that such trauma does not occur again. We must also ask the Minister what exactly is being done in the Royal Victoria Hospital, and in other hospitals, to deal with those who are traumatised and suffering either because they know that their loved ones' organs were retained or because they still do not know the full story. Some may still be in that position.

In addition, I ask the Minister to deal with an issue which I believe has been clouded by the use of the term "retention". As I understand it, in almost every case where a post-mortem is carried out, it is necessary to retain some of the tissues taken as samples, because further tests may be required or the lab might have to examine them again. In a large number of cases where the term "retention" is used, it is possible that only a small amount of tissue is retained for a few days for testing. Clearly, as Ms Ramsey said, parents might understand the need for a post-mortem if it were explained that the procedure could help to save other children's lives. We must do everything to ensure that scientific advances are made possible from tragic deaths.

Mr O'Connor: You mentioned the retention of tissue samples from post-mortems. Do you not agree that parents at Alder Hey Hospital were duped into allowing the retention of their children's organs —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please address the Chair.

Mr O'Connor: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member will agree that parents at Alder Hey Hospital were asked to sign a consent form to allow tissue samples to be taken from their children. However, that tissue-sample authorisation led to the retention of children's organs.

Mr Ford: I do not want to become too involved in the Alder Hey issue. In the light of your earlier comments, Mr Deputy Speaker, that would definitely be beyond the Minister's responsibilities. However, there is no doubt that some people believed that a sample was being kept only to subsequently discover that an entire organ was being kept. That is the kind of problem that arises because of a lack of complete information. Perhaps the attempt to mitigate trauma actually created a situation in which the trauma was increased.

As for the specifics of retention, the Minister must explain if statistics on retention refer to small samples that are retained for specific reasons in the short term. Is there a case for the retention of samples? One hospital lab staff member whom I spoke to raised the possible scenario of another Dr Shipman, whose behaviour necessitated the examination of a large number of his patients' samples.

Subsequently, if no tissue is retained, it is not possible to carry out the checks necessary to ensure criminal prosecutions and to provide lifesaving measures for other patients. We therefore need to compare that to the suggestion that some 300 organs were retained in the

Royal and to the concerns about Altnagelvin Hospital and others, where organs were retained for lengthy periods for apparently no good reason. That is the opinion of the families concerned, although possibly in the eyes of medical staff at the time they were being retained with very good reason. We need to be sure that when the Minister gives statistics, those relating to the retention of complete organs for long periods without due cause are not included and, therefore, hidden.

We need to be assured that there will be no repeat of such trauma as parents' facing two funerals, or three, because the issue of retention has not been clarified.

I welcome the motion that was proposed by Mr Shannon. It should concern us, but the important thing that we can learn is what steps the Minister is taking to ensure that families are protected from such trauma in the future and that those who have suffered trauma in the past are helped through it.

Mr Ervine: This controversy has been raging for some time, and it has now found its way to our shores. The first thing that we should acknowledge is that nothing will ever be the same again. It might give us a sense of how we can make a difference to people's lives, even though people have suffered. I am sure that the Minister will be aware of the importance of the decisions she makes and the guidelines she lays down, given the effect they may have on people's lives.

It seems to me that there is little point in castigating the doctors, and I am sure that some of them will feel very vulnerable at this time. Any profession, including that of politician, runs the risk of becoming case-hardened. You can deal with circumstances all day, every day, that can overtake you and become part of your working ethos. Perhaps you become a little less human than you would normally be to those who are suffering, or perhaps we laypersons just expect you to be.

We have to be conscious of the balance needed. There has been a lot of hype, especially on the mainland where it has been drip-fed, and it has almost taken coaches and horses to draw out of the authorities what actually happened. When the Minister is finally able to reveal everything, the Assembly will be able to know exactly what happened. Not only will we know everything, but every parent who is remotely affected by what has gone on in our hospitals — our "theatres of excellence" — over the last 50 years will also have access to that information.

As an aside, if I had been fortunate I would have had an older brother. However, I do not know whether any organs were taken from him in the Royal Victoria Hospital. I do not know whether I want to find out or if my 89-year-old mother wants to know, for it has been a long time. I think she has got over it, but there are people who lost babies a short time ago, and who are still grieving for them. The babies in some sense have been passed on "unwhole". If we are to strike a balance, we need parents

in the future who will allow their babies to be passed on "unwhole".

We will have to strike a balance between protecting life and investigation or exploration. There must be no ambiguity in any guidelines that may be laid down, and it is important that the Minister say that it is not just necessary to obtain consent; the consent must be informed.

The retention of organs is not the issue, provided that the hospital asked permission first. Hospitals may even want to ask for a degree of "ownership" of the organs. However, the parents and wider family must be made aware of what is happening at every step — they must be informed of every dot and comma.

There is no easy way to deal with the issue. It is a sombre and difficult subject, and a hurtful circumstance affecting humans. However, I implore Members to be careful to avoid taking a populist attitude towards the matter. When the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety tells the House, as I expect she will, what the future may hold, it is to be hoped that she will give society the option to have access to those doctors operating under an ethos that cares and that shows it cares. It is to be hoped that the Minister will also tell the House that a life lost was an opportunity for a life to be saved.

I am sure that the Minister and her officials, or the medical staff from the Royal Victoria Hospital, Altnagelvin Hospital and other hospitals around Northern Ireland, are not relishing the media attention surrounding the debate. They too need to be protected. They can be protected by processes, guidelines and the politicians in society who must strike that balance.

It would be disastrous if we were to buy organs from Africa, or carry out some other such shameful transaction, in order to carry out research. Medical science must explore and develop. However, that should not stop us from commiserating with those who do not know if their loved ones were treated like commodities — as we have seen in Alder Hey — or treated with love and consideration, or, as I suggest, dealt with by someone who was case-hardened.

Mr McFarland: I will be brief, as most of the key points have been made. This is a depressing and distressing situation. However, we must remember that the medical ethos, customs and practices of the past 50 years are not necessarily the same as those today. There was a need for research, and, rightly or wrongly, it was considered acceptable to use organs in the interest of medical science.

However, it is surprising that those practices continue in this day and age when we are familiar with most aspects of the human body and when the understanding of human genetics has reached such an advanced state. It is appalling that those practices still go on without families' being consulted.

It is to be hoped that hospitals have learnt from this crisis of confidence in their judgement. There now needs to be a clear protocol between doctors and families. If doctors wish to engage in this sort of activity, it should be done in a way which is clear and above board. I call on the Minister to develop such a clear system. I support the motion.

Mr McGrady: I too support the motion, and I was impressed with the sympathetic manner in which it was moved.

4.45 pm

When the notices were published a couple of weeks ago and the information was given to the public by the Royal Victoria Hospital, followed by a less informed bulletin from Altnagelvin Hospital, it is no exaggeration to say that a shock wave passed through the community, particularly among the thousands of people who, over the years, had passed through the portals of those hospitals for one reason or another. They were left with a terrible question in their minds. While we know that, statistically, this would not apply to the majority of people, nonetheless it applied to some, and people do not know whether they were among them.

This has caused great distress; I know that for a fact. Many representations have been made to my office by traumatised and distressed families asking me to find out what happened to their children, their loved ones, because they felt that they could not do that themselves. I have heard references to involvement by politicians — unfortunately, whether we like it or not, we are involved. In many cases, we will be a buffer between the hard reality of the facts and the conveying of those facts to the families — the parents and relatives of those involved. There is still an element of doubt in the public's mind as to whether we have, or are going to get, a full disclosure of what happened, and whether we will be able to have confidence in the new procedures which we all hope will be put in place.

In a statement issued two weeks ago Altnagelvin Hospital said that one organ was being held for pathological examination. However, two weeks later in another statement it said that organs which belonged to no less than 60 people — 15 children and 45 adults — were retained between 1992 and May 2000. This is not some old practice; it was ongoing up until May 2000. There is nothing to suppose that it did not continue from May up until the recent exposure. That has caused immense distress, sorrow, pain and grief to the parents. It has also caused other emotions, which I discovered personally, of anger and outrage that they had been so treated.

Whatever happens and whatever the Minister does must assuage those totally understandable emotions, which are deeply held. As a salve almost, we have been told that this is past practice and that “those sorts of things were done in those days.” However, we are not talking

about “those days”; we are talking about recent history. As I mentioned, in the statement from Altnagelvin Hospital it said that this happened no later than May of last year.

Information was withheld from parents and relatives. This was not done accidentally; there was a policy of ignoring the rights of patients, families and parents. Let us not get away from that. There was an arrogant regime in the medical profession. Its members assumed that the ignorant patient knew no better. The reality is, however, that in what are often very tragic circumstances where bereavement is only a couple of hours old, it is enormously generous of parents and relatives to allow autopsies to be done for medical purposes and for organs to be donated or researched. It is not a question of importing organs from Africa. The goodwill to enable research to go ahead is in the community and has been for many years. We all know that research in these circumstances is essential.

The need for research can be immediate, if the relative or child died of a disease, disorder or complication that might affect immediate family members and may be part of their physical make-up. There is also long-term research into more modern and beneficial medicines. I have no doubt that people will respond, but they resent the deceit that they feel is being practised on them. I tend to agree with them. We have heard about the “tick in the box” forms, which do not really allow for any appreciation of what is happening. A much more open regime is needed.

When the news first broke, I asked the Minister whether she would hold a public inquiry. Her response was that she had asked the Chief Medical Officer to inquire into the issue, but that is, in a sense, an in-house inquiry. I do not want to go into the detail of individual cases, but I think that it would be appropriate to establish the extent of organ investigative work. We need to know for how long it was practised, how many patients were involved, what has happened — and what will happen — to the organs that were removed.

Further information and counselling should be given directly to the families, who have been caused great distress. The hospitals involved should develop an outreach programme to enable them to assuage the suffering. The families must be given answers that will lay to rest their fears. We need not wait for legislation in Great Britain. The medical profession has said in its defence that its actions were custom and practice. Most of custom and practice is prescribed by legislation, so why would we need legislative changes? The practice could change today or tomorrow; the key matter is the ethics. The situation was created by arrogance and disregard for the rights of the bereaved parents or relatives at a difficult time for them.

Anyone who has experience of attending a hospital when someone has died will know that it is difficult for

consultants or doctors to ask for permission for a post-mortem, a biopsy, an autopsy, an organ transplant or organ investigation in such circumstances. Nonetheless, our society demands that it should be done, as it is the only way of protecting the health of others. I am no psychologist, but at least some of the pain of the immediate bereavement could be assuaged if the family knew that the death was making some contribution to future betterment. People would understand, if it were explained to them. However, what I resent is the arrogant attitude of ignoring the patient and relatives, which created the situation that has been exposed.

Will the Minister consider having an inquiry, following the Chief Medical Officer's investigation, to reassure the public that what happened took place in a specific context, that it is not happening now, and that there will be new guidelines on the matter? People will not get that reassurance from a piece of paper that has been handed to them in a hospital at a traumatic time.

We need an openness that will be of benefit to the future. In those circumstances, and with such a modern understanding of the need for organs to be used for all the reasons I gave earlier, I have no doubt that many parents and relatives will donate their children's organs, not gladly, but with an understanding of the need for them.

I ask the Minister to consider in her response, or at a later time, whether the terrible trauma — and it is increasing, not decreasing — can be better assuaged by the introduction of some inquiry, in the fullness of time, which will expose what has happened and what the new regime will be.

I support the motion, and I compliment Mr Shannon for bringing it before the Assembly.

Mrs I Robinson: I support the motion. I thank Mr Shannon for bringing this timely issue to the Assembly.

I understand, as many people do, that in order to advance medical research it is necessary to use donated organs. However, the important words here are "donated organs". It is a scandal of the highest degree that for 50 years medical staff at the Royal Victoria Hospital have been guilty of removing and retaining babies' organs without the prior consent of the parents. The shock waves that have followed that announcement on 12 January still reverberate around the Province. Like many others in Northern Ireland I believed, wrongly, that it was against the law to remove organs without a signature of consent by the child's parent or parents.

This announcement could have far-reaching consequences. In future, many bereaved parents will refuse to give their permission for doctors to remove organs because of this recent disclosure. Hospitals that have followed correct procedures in obtaining organs could also suffer.

The mental anguish of losing a baby is just too horrible to contemplate. Adding to that anguish the news that organs from the dead baby were removed without prior knowledge or permission is bound to bring fresh waves of grief and despair to the many unsuspecting — until now — parents.

Let me give you an example of the impact that the news has had on one couple who contacted my office and related their experience. Their child died in 1993. The parents were asked whether they wished to bury the baby themselves or leave the arrangements to the hospital. The family, in its grief, gave permission to the hospital to arrange the burial. In 1995, a member of the family — still grieving over the loss of that child — went to the cemetery to see the grave where they believed their child was buried. They discovered that there was no record of the child being buried there.

When inquiries were made, it transpired that the infant's body was still at a hospital other than the Royal. When the parents asked why this was so, they were told that the paperwork had been lost for some time. There was also the excuse that, due to the security/political situation in Northern Ireland at that time, a number of bodies were being handled and so the baby remained at this hospital. The parents eventually took possession of the baby's remains and the baby was buried in 1995 — two years after its death.

Now, because of the news and publicity surrounding Alder Hey in England and the Royal Victoria Hospital's admission of organ retention over a period of 50 years, those same parents were once again thrown into turmoil as they wondered if their dead child's organs had been removed also. After lengthy enquiries and few answers, they were eventually told that the organs had been removed at the time of the post-mortem in 1993. When the parents asked where the organs were, the hospital admitted that it still had them. The hospital asked the parents whether they wanted the organs back for burial or would prefer the hospital to deal with them. *Déjà vu*.

5.00 pm

No one here can begin to imagine the trauma that this family has experienced — not once, but twice — since their child died. The disregard for the family's feelings beggars belief, and surely Members will agree that no one should ever have to go through such a nightmare again. For that to happen, the Minister must take steps to identify how many other hospitals have been guilty of the practice of removing organs from dead babies without the written consent of the parents.

The Minister's recent directive to halt the practice must be strictly monitored, and swift action must be taken against those who might persist in this callous action. The Minister must ensure that all parents and relatives affected by the recent announcement are informed and offered immediate counselling, should they need it.

To do anything less would be adding insult to injury. We have a duty to protect the rights of parents to choose whether they wish to donate the organs of their dead children, to respect that choice and to strictly adhere to it.

The investigation initiated by the Minister must be thorough. She must discover how many other hospitals have been carrying out this practice; how many babies were involved; what lessons can be learned; and what ongoing changes need to be made to the procedures for governing the removal and retention of organs.

I support the motion.

Mrs Courtney: I too support the motion. It is such a sensitive issue and, it is unfortunate that we have to debate such an issue in the Chamber today.

On first hearing of the scandal at the Alder Hey Children's Hospital, Liverpool, which Mr Shannon described as the systematic harvesting of children's organs — that sentence alone was a dreadful indictment of a caring organisation — it was so far away from us, and we gave it scant attention. We did not give it the attention it deserved. It was only when we heard the news that the Royal Victoria Hospital had, for the last 50 years, retained organs of children that we began to sit up and take notice.

Although I have worked at Altnagelvin Hospital for many years, I still feel that the Royal Victoria Hospital is my alma mater, and I know of the good work that has been done there throughout the years, particularly during the troubles. Today, while I do not feel defensive, I do feel a certain reluctance to criticise something that happened in a hospital that I know gives such care and attention.

However, it is indefensible that parents who lost a child should be put in such a traumatic position today. It is indefensible that parents were led to believe that they had buried the complete remains of their child, only to discover — perhaps nine years later — that that is not the case. It is indefensible that they had to go through the trauma once again of opening a grave for the reburial of a child. Regardless of what we say or do here today it will be very difficult to advise those parents that what happened to their child was in their best interests — if that is what is now being said.

I understand that the hospital has put out a second statement. We accepted the first statement in good faith, but the second statement informed us that the organs of 15 children had been retained and that the families had been contacted. That was the least that could have been done. At least it was done before the media announced that organs had been retained.

Those families have been placed in the invidious position of wondering whether they have been advised fully, or if there are other things that they do not know. They have been told that the organs were retained purely to establish the cause of death. It is difficult to understand why they were kept for over nine years if not for research or

commercial purposes. That is why we must ask the Minister to establish exactly why the organs were retained. Why do we need to retain organs to establish the cause of death of someone who died nine years ago?

That is poor consolation for the parents who grieved at the time, and who grieve again. Having worked in the hospital for many years and witnessed children die on an operating table, I know that it is a terribly traumatic time for the staff also. At times such as these, people do not take in what is said to them. A period of time must be allowed for grieving before they can be approached and told what has happened. Sometimes that is not possible because of our custom of burying our dead. However, some time should elapse before people go through the trauma of being asked if a post-mortem can be carried out.

We are talking about the post-mortems which are carried out by a hospital, rather than by a coroner — they are entirely different. If organs are retained during a hospital post-mortem, we are not aware of it. In this instance, we must ask for answers, and I thank Mr Shannon for proposing the motion. When I first saw the debate listed, I did not think that the issue affected us in Derry and in the north-west, because it had not happened there. Unfortunately, however, it has happened. We really need to know if Altnagelvin Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital are the only hospitals involved. Are there others which have not come clean? We need those answers.

I support the motion, and I ask the Minister to do everything she can to implement the recommendations that are now so urgently needed to reassure both parents and the public.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh mait agat, a LeasCheann Chomhairle. I thank Mr Shannon for proposing this motion. It is timely, and I congratulate him.

The issue that is central to the motion is consent. Once that matter has been resolved, everything else will be peripheral. It is good to see that the emotive element has been kept out of this debate. Consent ought not to be tied up with the emotion that it could engender.

We should also pay tribute to the system of voluntary organ donation, and we should not allow that to be confused in the public's mind with what has been happening for several years in some, or perhaps all, of our hospitals. Bad as things are, what happened here is not comparable with what happened at the Alder Hey Hospital.

I am not qualified, but I assume that there are three steps — removal, retention and the very noble matter of transplant. There is then the matter of the post-mortem and the autopsy. These are all tied to the subject being discussed, as is the difference between research and diagnosis. In certain circumstances there must be a

diagnosis. Dr Claire Thornton said in her statement that it is very important to have a post-mortem to find out why a baby died, because there are implications for the rest of the family.

Those are positive steps. However, the issue of consent is central. I rang Dr Thornton this morning to give her a chance, in fairness, to indicate her feelings about the situation. I was not speaking to Frankenstein. These are people who, within the parameters in which they work, have made a very sincere effort to explain what happened over the years. To return to Dr Thornton's statement, I was not aware, until she informed me, that one of the organs dates back to 1944. The senior consultant confirmed that the hospital still has 361 babies' organs — mainly hearts and brains — in a secure store.

In all cases the organs were removed without the consent of the parents. It is good that the people who were there are beginning to admit that those acts were carried out without the parents' consent.

Dr Thornton also said that they felt that any baby was a little person and that all babies should have the same respect and dignified end. With regard to Mr McGrady's comments, if people at that level can retain such an outlook and such a respect for a baby, we are on the way to ensuring that such activity will not happen again.

I thank Mr Shannon for introducing the matter. Most of what needs to be said on the issue has already been said.

I would like to mention the issue of post-mortems. For example, if someone is killed, accidentally or otherwise, on a Friday or Saturday, it is possible that no forensic pathologist will be available to perform the post-mortem because they will be very busy. In my constituency, an 18-year-old girl was killed on a Friday night and her body was not released until the following Monday. That is a traumatic experience, and we ought to look at the issue. It is perhaps outside the ambit of today's discussion, but we are talking about trauma, difficulties, suffering and bereavement.

I support the motion. If we can solve the central issue of consent satisfactorily, everything else will fall into place.

Mr O'Connor: I support the motion in the name of Mr Shannon, and I thank him for tabling it.

I appreciate the need for sensitivity in dealing with this important matter. Many Members have already discussed organ donation, but that is not what we are debating. The parents of those children did not donate their organs; the organs were taken without consent. To take something without consent is to steal — some may feel that that is strong language, but it is a fact that the law determines theft as the taking of property belonging to another without that person's consent. Why should doctors be above the law? It may have been custom and

practice, but custom and practice is not the law and is not necessarily right.

In regard to full disclosure, I appreciate Mr Ervine's point that there may well be those in our society — perhaps people who are old or infirm — who do not want to know about cases that date from over 50 years ago. Mrs Iris Robinson recounted an incident that occurred in her constituency. I can touch on a case that happened in my constituency, where a baby girl was born in 1954 and died shortly after birth. Her mother, having been told by the hospital at the time that it would take care of the burial, died in 1979 not ever knowing what happened. That woman carried to her grave a suspicion that something was not right.

People need to be made fully aware of what documents they are signing and what the implications are. There can be no repetition of the cases in England where people were told that a baby's tissue sample was being taken, only to find that the baby's heart and lungs were retained. Most people in our society get comfort from the fact that if a loved one dies he or she receives a Christian burial. If something like this happens, we cannot begin to contemplate the trauma inflicted.

5.15 pm

We must deal with this issue with the degree of sensitivity it warrants. We need a statement from the Minister that this has not happened in other hospitals in Northern Ireland. This has come right onto our doorstep, and people throughout the country are now worried that similar retention has happened in their local hospitals. The public needs to be reassured.

On the question of full disclosure, I appreciate that some people might not wish to know about that, but for those who do, the information should be made available. They should be given whatever help or counselling is required to ensure that they can fully recover from the tremendous grief they have suffered.

I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús caithfidh mé buíochas a ghabháil le Jim Shannon as an díospóireacht thráthúil seo a thionscnamh. Ceist í coinneáil orgáin páistí, agus go háirithe saincheist thoiliú tuismitheoirí i ndiaidh scrúdú iarbháis, a bhaineann leis an Teach seo, agus is ceart go mbaineann; is ábhar mór imní í do na teaghlaigh lena mbaineann agus don phobal i gcoitinne.

Le linn na díospóireachta chuala mé sonraí teaghlach ar chuir foilsithe gur coinníodh orgáin gan fhios dóibh agus gan chead uathu go mór leis an bhrón phríobháideach a d'fhulaing siad nuair a cailleadh páiste dá gcuid. Tá an tráma seo os comhair cuid mhór tuismitheoirí. Ní amháin go gcaithfidh siad cuimhní pianmhara a athbheochan, ach caithfidh siad an dara tórramh a bharraíocht. Caithfear

aghaidh a thabhairt ar an ábhar seo le tuiscint agus le hoscailteacht. Ní bhaineann an t-eolas gur le dea-rún agus chan mioscais a coinníodh orgáin páistí nó gur gnás coitianta é SSN seo a dhéanamh gan chead tuismitheoirí, ní bhaineann sin de bhuaireamh na ndaoine ar bhain seo leo.

Tuigim gur glacadh leis san am a chuaigh thart, agus leoga go dtí le deireannas, nuair a thoiligh teaghlach le scrúdú iarbháis ospidéil go gcuimseodh sin coinneáil fíocháin agus orgán iomlán i dtosca áirithe. Bhí an gnás seo coitianta ar fud na SSN ach is léir nach bhfuil sé inghlactha agus gur cúis mhór buartha é. Caithfidh mé a rá go soiléir agus ar taifead go bhfuil coinneáil orgán gan lántuiscint agus toiliú dearfa na dteaghlach lena mbaineann iomlán doghlactha.

Agus mé ag tabhairt aghaidhe ar an ábhar seo, ba é na teaghlaigh lena mbaineann mo phríomhchúram. Is é mo thosaíocht a chinntiú go bhfaigheann siad an t-eolas agus an cuidiú atá de dhíth orthu go gasta agus go tuisceanach. Tuigim gur chuir na hospidéil iomchuí socrúithe speisialta teagmhála ar bun agus go bhfuil siad ag tairiscint comhairliú agus tacaíochta eile mar is gá. Tá coinne agam go ndéanfaidh siad gach ar gá le baint den strus atá ag teaghlaigh sna tosca deacra seo. Tá sé tábhachtach go bhfaigheann teaghlaigh an t-eolas atá de dhíth orthu go gasta agus go dtugtar aghaidh láithreach ar cibé ábhair chúraim atá acu agus ar cibé éiginnteachtaí atá orthu faoin mhéid a dúradh leo.

I thank Jim Shannon for initiating this timely debate. The question of the retention of children's organs and the issue of parental consent in regard to a post-mortem are matters that rightly concern the House. It is a matter of great concern to the parents involved and to the general public.

In the course of the debate I have heard details of families whose private grief at the loss of their children has been compounded by revelations about organs being retained without their knowledge or consent. Those are harrowing stories. Many parents face the trauma of not only reliving painful memories but having to cope with the prospect of a second funeral. The matter needs to be approached with sensitivity and openness.

The knowledge that the retention of children's organs was undertaken with good intentions, not malice, and that the practice of doing so without express parental consent was common practice in the NHS does not diminish the anguish of those affected. Indeed, as Mr Ford said, attempts to mitigate the trauma have ultimately increased that trauma.

My understanding is that in the past, and until fairly recently, consent given by the family for a hospital post-mortem was taken to include the retention of tissue and whole organs in certain circumstances. That was common practice throughout the NHS, but it is clearly not acceptable and has caused much distress. I must state clearly, and on the record, that the retention of any organs without the full understanding and explicit consent

of the families concerned is unacceptable. People need full and open information and explanation.

My first concern in regard to the matter has been for the affected families. My priority has been to ensure that they obtain the information and help that they need, promptly and sensitively. The hospitals concerned have set up special contact arrangements and are offering counselling and other support, where required. I expect them to do everything necessary to minimise the stress experienced by families in those difficult circumstances.

Mr Shannon, Mr J Kelly, Mrs Courtney and other Members referred to parents' need for — indeed, right to — full information. It is important that families now receive the information that they require quickly and that any concerns or uncertainties about what they have been told are addressed immediately. I welcome Mr Gallagher's emphasis of the need for local support for affected families, particularly those not living near the hospitals. He spoke of the support that Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust provided for families in his constituency. I am determined to ensure that our health authorities collaborate to support the affected families. That must include firm arrangements to assist families living at a distance from the hospital in question.

Mr Shannon asked about the timing of the RVH announcement. That was dictated by the reconciliation summit that had taken place in London the previous day, which led to a specific enquiry from the media to the hospital. As a result, over that weekend the hospital put in place arrangements with Dr Claire Thornton to deal with the many calls from parents who had gained the information in a way which caused great distress.

As soon as the issue emerged, I set up an immediate departmental investigation. I aim to establish the exact position of each of our acute hospitals. That work is continuing as a matter of urgency. The current assessment is that around 400 individual children's organs have been retained since 1944. The Department's investigation continues and I will keep the House informed of the latest situation.

The organs have been retained primarily at the Royal Victoria Hospital and at Altnagelvin. That hospital is in direct contact with the 15 families affected. The state pathology service has also retained some organs following post-mortems conducted under the Coroners Act (Northern Ireland) 1959. Some are held at the Royal Group of Hospitals and have been included in the census of retained organs there. Others are held by the state pathologists outside the hospital service, and I have no information on those organs. I will ensure that when I establish the full facts, as I have set out to do, Members, families and the wider public will be made aware of those facts.

I am informed that the regional paediatric pathology service, based at the Royal Group of Hospitals, revised

its working practices in 1999 and that the changes introduced were underpinned by the Chief Medical Officer's interim guidance issued in March 2000. Copies of the interim guidance, the current consent form of the regional paediatric pathology service and an accompanying explanatory booklet have been placed in the Assembly Library.

While public concerns to date have understandably focused on children's organs being retained, similar practices have occurred with adult organs in the past. To establish the situation, I have asked for detailed information about the retention of adult organs in the North. I am clear that absolutely no organs should be retained by the Health Service without the explicit and informed consent of the family of the deceased. That is essential. I have received assurances that all post-mortem examinations now carried out are in accordance with those guidelines. This means that proper informed consent to a post-mortem must be obtained, with parents given explicit explanation in regard to the removal and retention of organs as part of the consent process.

Any organs that are retained following consent are subsequently either returned to the family or otherwise handled according to their wishes. Information provided by the hospitals indicates that, for those organs being retained by the hospital service, there is appropriate documentation and organs are sensitively stored.

Mr McGrady asked whether an inquiry should be set up subsequent to the departmental investigation that I have already launched. I am still establishing the full facts concerning the retention of organs without informed consent and I will take whatever steps are necessary. I am determined to move quickly to repair the damage done by former unacceptable practice and to ensure that such practice cannot reoccur. At this point, I am ruling nothing out. I assure Members that I will be taking careful account of their comments this afternoon. I believe that the investigation that I have commissioned will cover the ground highlighted by them.

Mrs Robinson, Mr McFarland, Mr McGrady and others talked specifically about the need for a change of practice. I absolutely accept that any change must include the requirement for informed consent. I am committed to taking whatever steps are necessary to honour parents' wishes regarding the organs being retained at present. I will expect the hospitals to deal with all inquiries promptly and sensitively. I also expect hospitals to review their arrangements for responding to parents' enquiries and to establish a mechanism for addressing any problem identified by parents.

Before reaching any decision on the necessary actions — which may include changes in current legislation — it is important that I be in possession of the full facts. I have outlined how I am setting about that process. I also want to benefit from seeing the report being prepared by

Dr Liam Donaldson, Chief Medical Officer in England, offering guidance on the handling of the 40,000 organs retained in NHS hospitals in England.

It is difficult for us now to understand how the practice of removing tissues and organs from children without parental consent developed. However, I am advised that our paediatric pathology service is now working closely with parents and clinicians in this regard. I will give careful consideration to the many points emerging from today's debate in determining the way forward, along with the information emerging from the departmental investigation and from the report by Dr Liam Donaldson. I reiterate that at this point I am ruling nothing out.

One of the key issues to which Members returned many times in the debate is that many parents coping with the loss of a child have not been given the full information and explanation.

5.30 pm

Indeed, as Sue Ramsey and David Ervine said, many parents coping with the loss of a child may have given consent for the removal of tissue and organs in the knowledge that others would benefit. However, as Members said, the point is that they were not asked. They should have been asked; they must be asked.

The death of a child is a traumatic experience for a family. We are under obligation to deal sensitively and comprehensively with the question of organ retention to ensure that proper respect is afforded to the wishes of the families affected. In doing so, we must work in partnership with parents and not take them for granted as has happened in the past.

The interim guidelines that were issued, copies of the consent form and an information booklet have been placed in the Assembly Library. Members will be able to see how that is currently being handled.

With regard to legislation, I want to see what emerges from Dr Liam Donaldson's report and the departmental investigation before progressing.

I am absolutely committed to ensuring that the legacy of past practice is carefully and sensitively dealt with. Future arrangements covering post-mortems and organ retention must be open and transparent. Future practice must be based on the principle that informed parental choice is paramount. No parent should be left in the position that so many find themselves in today. My Department and, I believe, all sections of the Health Service are now committed to taking the necessary steps to ensure that this is what happens.

Mr Shannon: I thank Members for their honest contributions to the debate — it was conducted in a fair manner. Members made valuable comments, and all were able to tell a story from their constituency that clearly illustrates where the system has fallen down.

The theme evident in all the speeches is that there is need for criteria and a system that is suitable for today's modern society. Mr Ford discussed that, as, I believe, did every Member who spoke. Iris Robinson provided the illustration of parents who lost a child. The hospital was meant to bury the child, but the family discovered that it did not, and they had to bury the child two years after the death. That shows that the system was cold, unfeeling and unaccountable.

Perhaps, the Minister and the Health Department are today providing some commitment to important changes. Mr McGrady showed that the old practice did not finish years ago by stating that organs were being retained in May 2000. The Member also illustrated, as did I in my contribution, that Altnagelvin Hospital issued one statement in which it said that it only retained a brain and a spinal cord, but it subsequently emerged that it had retained 15 organs from children. This shows that the system is not, and has not been, accountable, at least until now.

We want openness, and a commitment has been given along those lines. We need to learn the lessons that have been raised in today's debate. We also need to learn from what has happened at the Royal Victoria Hospital and Altnagelvin Hospital and to know why the state pathologist is retaining organs.

We welcome the inquiry, the investigation by the Department and the fact that the Department has decided that it is necessary in order to address people's concerns. People need to feel that the issue has been addressed.

That is vital to the constituents who are represented by every one of us who spoke today, and many others who were not able to speak. The consent process is essential — people must feel that they are part of it and must not feel ostracised by it.

The Department is starting to address the fact that many people should have received counselling and did not. I know that the people who came to me needed counselling. They shed real tears, even though the twins were lost 19 years ago — the loss was just as real as it was on the day that they died. Counselling is needed, not just for them but for everyone affected.

We want an assurance that the findings of any investigation will be made known to the Assembly. We are looking for that assurance from the Department so that, whatever investigation or inquiry takes place, we can see what happens and that it is acted upon. We all want to see that. That is where we are coming from.

The change of practice on informed consent was also mentioned. We welcome that as a very satisfactory way of making progress. We need a strategy that will take all our concerns on board so that we can tell our constituents that we have achieved something: that there will be an investigation, that it will be acted upon and that this will never ever happen again.

The theme of this debate has been parental consent. It is crucial that they feel part of the process. They have not done until now. Those parents whose children's organs were removed were never asked for their opinion. They were never asked "Would you agree to it?", "Is it all right?" or "What is your opinion on it?". They were ignored; they were never asked. They still feel the trauma, pain and emotion of what happened.

The Minister said that the Health Service is committed to providing a new or better service. That is something that we all wish to see — a better and more accountable Health Service that every one of our constituents can feel part of. It is important that they feel that it represents them and their concerns well. The Health Service has let them down. It is time to address those issues fully to meet the interests and demands of the people whom we represent. That is a way forward.

The Minister also mentioned a review of the system for dealing with parents' enquiries. One of the aspects that always grieves me, and many other elected representatives, is that the inquiries that we ask for are not always carried out as we would like. There will be a review of that — and we will hold the Minister and the Department to that — and we will have a better system at the end of it. If we achieve that, at least we will have made progress.

Our thoughts at this time are with all those parents who have had to go through trauma and emotional pain. I ask Members to support the motion, because that is the will of the people that we represent.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the announcement on 12 January 2001 by the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, that the organs of deceased children have been stored without parental consent during the past 50 years; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the measures she will take to alleviate the distress caused to the families of the children concerned and to confirm that this practice was not carried out at other facilities in Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 5.40 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Tuesday 30 January 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

DOGS (AMENDMENT) ACT

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that Royal Assent to the Dogs (Amendment) Act has been signified. This Act became law on 29 January 2001.

Clauses 1 to 60 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 61 (Short title and commencement)

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I beg to move amendment 1: In page 39, line 5, at end add

“; but section 39 shall not be brought into operation by such an order before 1 April 2002”.

I have always been opposed to fundholding because of the inequalities associated with it in respect of patient care. As I have already said to the Health Committee, I have been in general practice for many years. I retired not very long ago, but nevertheless I still have a slight link with a practice in west Belfast that in turn is linked with a multifund — a large conglomerate of over 200 doctors. The link is very slight; I am paid for what I do, but I do not receive any pecuniary gain as a result of the fundholding aspect of that practice.

Nominally, this debate is about GP fundholding, but it is really about the future of primary care services in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, told us not all that long ago that the National Health Service should be primary-care-led. That is what all senior health personnel were saying. What we wanted in these islands was a primary-care-led Health Service starting at the coalface from the bottom up, not from the top down. The former direct rule Health Minister, John McFall, produced the document ‘Fit for the Future — A New Approach’. It was addressed not only to the people of Northern Ireland but to the Northern Ireland Assembly. It emphasised a primary care service but left it to the Executive and Members of the Assembly to progress.

My Committee was familiar with that document. It certainly had a vision for the future of primary care. It expressed a vision of health and personal social services as a single integrated service centred around primary care, directed by and accountable to the Assembly, where the needs of the people came first and the needs of organisations came second — and I want to emphasise that.

We must build on the present strengths of the Health Service. There are many things wrong with it, but there are some strengths, and we should build on them. The structures should be simplified, and the number of separate organisations should be reduced. Dr Maurice Hayes’s acute hospitals review is due to report in the spring, and I hope that it suggests a rethink of management principles and how the health and personal social services can be restructured to make a deal with patients in a meaningful way. Dr Brian Patterson, who is on the

GP committee of the British Medical Association, states that

“the establishment and maintenance of ego-building empires must give way to patient-centred service. Primary care relies on a vibrant and effective hospital sector to facilitate the delivery of safe and quality care for patients. This is another reason why any hiatus in the delivery of primary care would be counter-productive. The future of primary care services is much more complex than simply abolishing GP fundholding and pilot commissioning schemes. To abolish fundholding and pilot schemes before new arrangements are in place is wrong and counter-productive.”

Mr John Simpson, former chairperson of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, was reported in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ of 23 January as saying that to transfer responsibilities for delegated decision making back to health boards would be equivalent to putting the clock back.

I have always been opposed to fundholding because of the inequities it caused. Patients of fundholding doctors did better than those of non-fundholding doctors in accessing secondary care. If fundholding were to cease on 31 March without specific and appropriate primary care arrangements being in place, there would be a massive hiatus. Furthermore, the considerable expertise gained by commissioning pilot schemes would be lost.

There have been many such schemes in Northern Ireland, and they have all been successful. The Minister would accept that point. Let me give one example. The Lisburn primary care commissioning group was able to develop an integrated care pathway across primary and secondary care for terminally ill patients. It was also able to develop a model of community consultation that brings health and social care professionals and statutory and voluntary agencies together with service users to identify local needs and the action required to address them. It also improved the quality and standard of care that patients received through an agreed programme of clinical governance at practice level, where information and good practice is shared between GPs in respect of, for example, patients with diabetes. I emphasise this, because this involves many people — doctors, nurses and various people at community level. Primary and secondary care professionals have developed jointly prescribing guidelines for ulcer-healing drugs, antibiotics and analgesics and hormone replacement therapy.

The Armagh primary care commissioning pilot scheme developed a significant range of patient-centred services through a partnership of professionals, users, the local community and other statutory and voluntary sector organisations. It delivered the first community-based cardiac rehabilitation programme in Northern Ireland. It is important for Members to appreciate that point. Since that programme was launched in April 2000, more than 70 people have benefited from that vital service, compared with only six in the previous year. Its nurse-led Heart Wise clinics are in all local GP practices and provide a high quality of evidence-based secondary prevention

service for cardiac patients. The pilot scheme has also provided a primary-care-based counselling service for people who are depressed or have suffered a bereavement and a fall prevention programme for the elderly.

I could also go on about pilot schemes commissioned in mid-Ulster, Ballyclare, north Down, Antrim, Ballymena and north, south, east and west Belfast, all of which have been substantial achievements. I saw those schemes as the nuclei of a future primary-care-led health service. It is important, therefore, to build on the benefits. What are they? A higher quality of patient care; greater access with improved local service; a better response from hospitals; a reduction in waiting times and lists; greater choice for patients; highly motivated primary care staff; patient involvement; computerised, easily accessible clinical information systems; and the development of nurse practitioners. I am sure that the Minister would not want to be responsible for withdrawing the following: cardiac rehabilitation services based in leisure centres in Armagh; enhanced delivery of diabetes care in Newcastle, Whiteabbey and Magherafelt; screening of people with learning difficulties in Antrim, Ballymena and north and west Belfast; and community development initiatives in the Hillhall estate in Lisburn and in south Down. Nor, I am sure, would she want to be responsible for the closure of primary-care-led hospital beds in Whiteabbey and Castlewellan, which will further increase pressure on our hospitals.

It is vital that the achievements of the present arrangements be preserved and carried into a new framework. A top-down approach will not work. Effective and efficient management of new primary care structures cannot be enhanced by increasing the power and influence of health boards.

The Assembly is unlikely to have another chance to create major initiatives in primary care in the foreseeable future. That is why this debate is so important. Giving more power to health boards makes any future review of such a structure much more difficult. The Minister has said on a number of occasions that the Executive will carry out a major review of public administration. I accept and support that, but the Health Service cannot wait for it. A review of the Health Service, which examines looking at boards and trusts, is needed within the next year and a half.

The draft Programme for Government states that we must

“refine existing policies and programmes and create new ones, tailored to the specific needs of Northern Ireland.”

It says that

“our joint aim must be to improve our policies and programmes and create the best legislative framework for the future.”

That is what this debate is about.

"A vision of a modern, successful society must include major improvements in the health of our people."

Former President Bill Clinton said recently that to stand still is to go back. What the Minister is proposing for primary care is, de facto, a return to the days before fundholding, with the inevitable loss of expertise gained by staff involved in pilot commissioning schemes and fundholders in general. In the draft Programme for Government, one of the actions to be taken is to

"finalise a strategy which will replace the GP Fundholding Scheme with fairer, less bureaucratic arrangements in primary care designed to strengthen structures for delivering high quality primary care services in local communities".

Giving more power to health boards will not strengthen those structures. After all, they are the ones who are looking after GPs in Northern Ireland who are not fundholders. It is ludicrous, therefore, to put everyone in the charge of the boards. In the past it has been a failure.

Dr Brian Patterson said that going back eight years to health board management would undo much of what has been achieved. What we have always asked for is a seamless transition. It is not just fundholding; the commissioning pilots are also being told to down tools. The Royal College of Nursing has said that it welcomes the primary health care document, especially the abolition of GP fundholding in Northern Ireland. However, if GP fundholding is abolished in April, with no infrastructure in the interim, many problems will emerge for nurses and nursing.

10.45 am

Royal colleges have been inundated by primary care people, both doctors and nurses, expressing their deep concerns about job losses. General practitioners have been funding nurse-prescribing roles from fundholding savings. They have already informed nurses that their employment will be terminated in the future due to a lack of funding. We are deeply concerned about this latest development and would like to express our support for the amendment proposed by the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee on Wednesday 24 January 2001.

The mere mention of the words "royal colleges" results in some Members becoming annoyed. While surgeons and physicians may have played some role in the downgrading of Dungannon, Magherafelt and Downe Hospitals, one cannot have a blanket condemnation of all the royal colleges. Mr Speaker, you will appreciate the point. We are talking about the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Royal College of Nursing. Dr Peter Colvin, Chair of the Northern Ireland faculty of the Royal College of General Practitioners, as said:

"I think the hiatus in the organisational structures is very detrimental to primary care. It is demoralising for health care staff and frustrating for those trying to deliver a quality service to their patients."

He added that the resource implications for the overhaul of primary care structures must be addressed.

The Minister's document contains a list of aspirations for the development of primary care services. There is no commitment to resources and no timetable to put these aspirations in place. Dr Colvin further declared that he was concerned that the quality of patient care would be affected gravely by the hiatus.

We must give the people of Northern Ireland the best primary care service possible. Our people deserve that. It is what this debate is about. We are not likely to have another chance for some time. The future of primary care will affect every family in Northern Ireland. It will affect every man, woman and child. It will affect the elderly, children, the mentally ill, the disabled and the socially deprived. Therefore, we must get it right. We all know about the poor health of people in this part of the world. Life expectancy in Northern Ireland is among the worst in Europe. We have the third-highest death rate in Europe from coronary artery disease. Female lung cancer rates are the highest in Europe, as are those for breast cancer and teenage pregnancy. Young male death rates from accidents and suicide are the highest in the EU.

With regard to health inequalities, sickness and death hit the poorest worst and first. The death rate for the unskilled is three times greater, and the poorest are twice as likely to die prematurely. The Health Service in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, is in a poor state, with huge hospital waiting lists and delays in the treatment of cancer and cardiac surgery. These factors all add to the great confusion. Our patients deserve better.

Given the will, there is more than enough talent in primary care in Northern Ireland to enable us to develop a primary care service that is fit for the twenty-first century. Before Members vote, I ask them all to consider the positive proposals in John McFall's document 'Fit for the Future — A New Approach'. Members should consider this and then look at the main section of the document, titled 'Building the Way Forward In Primary Care', and ask themselves whether, if fundholding and, above all, the GP commissioning groups, finish on 31 March, structures will be in place not only for the smooth development of primary care but also for the provision of the best possible service for the people.

Mr McFarland: GP fundholding is wrong in principle, and it must be changed. It is an inequitable system. Members will be aware that some 90% of medical care is carried out at primary care level. Sixty per cent of GPs — 600 — in Northern Ireland are fundholders. They cover 65% of the population. Two thirds of the Northern Ireland population come under GP fundholding. It is fair to say that fundholding has been, by and large, a success. There have been some failures. Some doctors have not handled it well. However, those doctors who are in

fundholding believe that it has been a success. Their patients are happy that they get a better service. This is where the problem arises, because that situation is inequitable for patients who are not in fundholding practices and whose commissioning is done by the boards. They do not get as good a deal. That is unfair, and that is why there has to be change.

Over the past few years, a substantial expertise has been built up in fundholding. Professionals deal with the money and commissioning matters. There is a great danger that, if fundholding is ended precipitously on 31 March, many people who are not NHS staff but who are contracted to GPs will be lost. They will find jobs elsewhere. The future plan for primary care, as you are aware, is to bring GP commissioning into being at a slightly higher level, not with individual doctors but with groups of doctors. Those organisations will need the expertise which currently exists in fundholding, but by the time we get round to it — in a year, perhaps — and we are then looking for such people, they will have obtained work elsewhere.

What is the hurry about all this? We are being asked to end fundholding on 31 March and to give commissioning back to the least successful commissioners in the current system — the boards.

Members will be aware that a primary care review is taking place. Dr Maurice Hayes is carrying out an acute hospitals review. The object of the exercise is to produce a new system, a seamless robe of medical care that is the best we can design for our patients. The primary care review does not report until 2 March. It seems that, regardless of its findings, we will chop fundholding by 31 March. We have had no opportunity to look at what the proposals might be, nor to devise an equitable and suitable system that we all like. Regardless of our choice, fundholding is to be chopped. That is not right.

The Committee has spoken to the British Medical Association, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Royal College of Nursing. Those organisations are happy that GP fundholding should go but are very unhappy at the speed with which it is taking place. This morning I received a letter from my north Down primary care organisation that said, "Please do not do this until you have something to put in its place." My point is that I do not understand why this is being rushed, why a decision to chop this is being taken before there is something better — which we hope will come out of the reviews — to put in its place. It makes no sense. We will lose the expertise, and how will we get it back? What is the hurry? We need time to put the new system in place.

The professionals are against stopping GP fundholding on 31 March. Patients will lose out until there is a better system. I urge Members to think carefully, because we are in serious danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water. We need time to allow these studies to take

place, and to allow the Department to bring forward something sensible with which Members and professionals are happy. I urge Members to support the amendment and buy us that time.

Mr Berry: I support the amendment. Many discussions have taken place in the past few weeks in relation to the repeal of GP fundholding. It was expressed time and time again — Mr McFarland and Dr Hendron have covered it very well — that many professionals argued before the Committee that they had no problem with the ending of GP fundholding. The problem they found was that there was nothing to replace it, and they asked why we should rush through the whole process. We should give it a year and then go for the ending of GP fundholding. If this measure goes through as it is, our Health Service will become nothing more than a joke.

Like many others, I find it hard to understand how anyone could come up with such a measure without first asking a few simple, common-sense questions. What have others done about this issue? What will replace the present system? What will be the immediate effect of abolishing that system? Most importantly, what vital services will close as a result of ending GP fundholding? If the Minister had been briefed properly she would have asked herself these questions. Are there any excellent things we ought to keep? Should this matter be phased in along a set timetable? These and other simple questions were never asked, and perhaps never answered.

The English model says that whatever is good will be retained. As Mr McFarland said, we are throwing the baby out with the bath water. Many would say that we are not even keeping the bath. GP fundholding was not in itself a disaster, which is why it is being retained in England. Rather, the fault lay in the fact that not every GP was a fundholder. That is why so many have come to oppose it: it brought division to a once-unified service.

The Assembly is faced with a choice of whether to act like vandals or like responsible politicians. The vandal will abolish without replacement; the responsible politician will replace and abolish as a unitary act. Since we have nothing to replace GP fundholding, we cannot abolish it. Discarding the system is the work of a philistine with no comprehension of the effect and impact on patients, services and GP morale. If a person were to fix a vehicle in the way that the Minister proposes to fix the Health Service, it would be akin to abolishing the petrol engine and going back to steam, while waiting for an inventor to come up with a replacement.

Many people and professionals in the community do not want to see the continuation of GP fundholding, but they want something credible in its place before action is taken. I support the amendment, and I trust that Members will stand behind the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee in support of it.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I oppose the amendment. I am a member of the Health Committee, and we had a number of frank discussions in the Committee. In fact, some Members have said more today than they said at the Committee meetings. Perhaps it has something to do with having speech-writers.

My colleague on the Committee, John Kelly, and I felt that we could not support the amendment. Our views were placed firmly on the record. Sinn Féin is on record as saying that GP fundholding has been wrong from its inception. Every party in the Assembly has said, at one time or another, that GP fundholding is wrong and that it welcomes the ending of that system.

The Chairperson of the Committee, Dr Hendron, said that pilot schemes will be lost. It is my understanding that pilot schemes will not be lost. Extending GP fundholding for another year would not give us time to put in place a proper replacement. The expertise and staffing mentioned will not be lost; they will just be reintegrated into another part of the service. Keeping GP fundholding would send out the wrong message, because for years it has created uncertainty, not only among staff but in the service as a whole. This amendment would just add to that.

GP fundholding is wrong. It created inequalities and a two-tier system in the Health Service, and it must go. Mr McFarland said that GP fundholding is wrong but that it has been a success. I do not know where he got that from. If something is wrong, how can it be a success? He also mentioned expertise. As I have said, that expertise will not be lost.

11.00 am

The professionals are against change. They do not want to lose control of GP fundholding. We need to point out that the overspending within fundholding has led to large deficits that have had to be met by the boards. Those deficits are taking money away from front-line care. The Minister told the Committee last week that, because of this overspending, some 45 GP fundholders will be legally required to leave the scheme this year. That adds to the uncertainty.

GP fundholding is unfair. It has created a two-tier system. Continuing it for another year will tie up much-needed resources and will only add to the delay in delivery of primary care. The Committee Chairperson was also told that GP fundholding will not end right away; there will be a phased rundown over six months, while at the same time implementing primary care. Members need to take that on board. If we delay it for another year, and there is then another phased rundown, where will we be going? We will be two years down the road.

The services provided by GP fundholders will not end. The delivery of the service will continue. The only difference will be in who commissions that service. This fightback by fundholders be stopped. The sectarian,

anti-Sinn Féin politics of the DUP must not be allowed to dictate this amendment. I find it worrying that some members of the SDLP are prepared to support maintaining fundholding, even though —

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that this is a matter of judgement on health issues? It is totally false to introduce sectarianism. This is a matter of looking after patients in all Northern Ireland.

Ms Ramsey: I accept what the Member says. What I am clearly saying is that anti-Sinn Féin sectarian attitudes should not be allowed to dictate this amendment.

Some members of the SDLP are prepared to support maintaining fundholding, even though the Chairperson of the Health Committee, Joe Hendron, has said time and time again that fundholding is wrong. Fundholding created inequality in the Health Service. For the first time, this Bill gives us the opportunity to tackle the inequalities in the Health Service and the inequalities created by GP fundholding.

I cannot support the amendment.

Mr McCarthy: I support the amendment. I ask the same question that Alan McFarland asked: what is the rush? We must get it right this time. Many important points have been raised this morning, particularly by the Chairperson of the Health Committee, Dr Joe Hendron, whom I consider to be more expert on the subject than many Members.

Fundholding was interesting and, perhaps, useful in certain circumstances. However, a decision has been made to leave fundholding behind, and we in the Alliance Party and many other parties in the Assembly support that. The extra time outlined in the amendment will give all concerned the opportunity to put in place something that will benefit both the patient and the GP. Using the experience of fundholding and other practices during recent times can only help us all to provide a more equitable way forward for the Health Service.

The Alliance Party supports the amendment.

Mr B Hutchinson: I support the amendment, as a member of a party that has been totally opposed to GP fundholding and recognises that it creates a two-tier system. We believe that it should be taken out of commission. Our big difficulty is that nobody has convinced us that this money will not go back to the boards when the time for doing away with GP fundholding arrives at the end of March.

We all talk about how we will spend this money on primary care. In my view, if the money goes back to the boards it will not be spent on primary care. It will be spent where it is always spent — in acute hospitals, particularly the Royal Victoria Hospital. That is where the inequality is. We allow the Health Service to take money from primary care and put it into acute services. We continually must ensure that whatever we have in place

is primary care, and that it recognises the nurses and the health visitors in the areas where we live and work. That is what we need to do. To date, nobody has convinced me that primary care will be a winner when GP fundholding is removed. We want fundholders to remain for another year, until such care is in place.

We could argue about where the money will be spent, but when GP fundholding goes, the boards will be left in control of their money. In recent years, I have watched my area's board spend that money as it pleased. It spent it on the deficits for which it, rather than the GP fundholders, was responsible. It has done away with the people we need, such as physiotherapists and occupational therapists, who have been taken out of my area and not replaced. Despite this, there are still elderly people in my community, some aged 84, who have to wait at least two years before they can even get a consultation.

Let us make sure that we get this right. Let us hold on to the GP fundholding for one more year until we have an alternative primary care service in place. Let us not leave it to the boards, because they will put the money into acute hospitals and not into primary care.

Ms McWilliams: This is a time of uncertainty, but it is also one of major change. The ongoing reviews of acute hospitals, acute care and primary care and investing for health signal a period of hope. That should be seen as a period of opportunity and not as a period of threat.

The extent of people's concern that we may move backwards rather than forwards is disappointing. In my opinion, the reverse is taking place, and the announcement that GP fundholding is to end marks an opportunity for us to move on to something different.

I am very concerned, and I have a number of questions for the Minister about the closure of fundholding and the role of the boards. It is also important for us to remember the members of other multidisciplinary teams in primary care. "The Invisible Army" was the title of a conference held last week by community nurses, district nurses and health visitors, who believe that their voices have not been heard in this debate. We must remember that it is not just GPs who should have a major vote in deciding the way forward.

The removal of fundholding has been presented in a very negative light, even though many GPs and other health care and social care professionals welcome such a move in the light of the inequities and the perverse incentives it created. We should be made accountable for deficits. In the Eastern Health and Social Services Board alone, fundholding has created a deficit of £4.1 million. According to empirical evidence, five fundholding practices in the North Belfast and West Belfast constituencies had £2.7 million savings, of which £1.47 million went back into the practices for structural improvement. Only £117,000 was spent on services to the community. This is taking place not just in South Belfast but also in extremely

deprived communities, of which there are also many in South Belfast.

We who hold others accountable for how they spend their money should be making decisions on such inequity and deficits. Is that what we want to continue over the next year?

Fundholders have also expressed concern to Members of the Assembly and Health Committee members that innovative practices will not be protected or continued. I ask the Minister to address that point.

According to the departmental officials who addressed the Committee, it seems that they will build on good practice and incorporate its various elements rather than just end them. I pay tribute to the excellent practice that has emerged from the commissioning pilot schemes, including the pilot scheme on the care of the elderly which took place outside my constituency in the Down Lisburn Trust area. And if we can build on the innovative practices now in place and mainstream them, we will relieve some of the alarm, anxiety and fear of those working on that pilot scheme.

Savings on prescriptions have been made, and that is probably the area flagged up most by GP fundholders. However, it is unfair to suggest that non-fundholders have not saved on prescriptions also in the past years. On some future occasion we may debate the distribution of generic rather than specialist types of drugs to some people. Nonetheless, whether or not patients' needs are best served by the way in which doctors have had to address themselves to the prescription charge debate, it remains laudable that both fundholders and non-fundholders have made substantial savings on prescriptions. The main worry for GP fundholders is that any savings they have made to date may be dispersed after 31 March. That will obviously be an anxiety for people who have gone out of their way to make savings. If these economies are taken from doctors and given to the boards, the doctors may feel that all their hard work has been to no avail. On the contrary, I believe that where savings were made, they were benefited from. Perhaps the Minister could address that issue in her response.

There is also the matter of redeployment. What is to happen to the staff who were part of the pilot schemes and those who work in fundholders' practices? We are not heartless individuals. The boards have been asked to address that task. The debate must continue about whether or not those staff can be redeployed elsewhere and whether some of the best practices can be mainstreamed. Otherwise, we will wake up on 1 April and suddenly discover that everything has changed and all the best has been thrown out.

Even if we had gone down the road of 'Fit for the Future', as opposed to the road of the current consultation document, we would still be going through a period of transition. Transition is something that we know about.

As we are often told, we are in a period of transition with devolution. Clearly, there is going to be a massive public administration review, and we are heading towards that in this period of transition. In the end, we will be focused and fixed on agreed best services for primary and community care, and all Assembly Members will have been part of that decision-making process. We do not want to move away from providing services to the community. Those models are the options we must consider.

I would also like to mention data systems. GP fundholders tell us that they have the best data systems and that those who are not in fundholding practices have poor systems. This is not an issue of GP fundholders versus non-fundholders; it is an issue for the whole country. We should have a regional strategy on accurate data systems. We need a database across the country that records waiting lists and tells us accurately when patients went into hospitals, how long they were there and when they came out. To date, it has been possible for patients to fall through the system, and they have neither been tracked nor traced. We should now attempt to redress this problem as part of our strategy on the way forward rather than leave efficient data equipment a premium available only to GPs who benefited from the fundholding system.

We need to focus on clinical practice. The best clinical practice should not be lost. Concerns have been voiced that the innovations implemented there did not show the best way forward. Dr Hendron said in his introduction that he is concerned about expertise. I have experience of restructuring and major change in universities. We built on the best expertise and made progress. The last thing anyone wants to do is marginalise good expertise; rather we must continue to centralise it and thus dispel fears.

11.15 am

That is why we need to move forward quickly from a system based on those GPs who showed an interest in change and a pilot system toward mainstream organisation in primary care with a view to raising standards everywhere. It is time to end that uncertainty and move forward.

I am concerned about this issue in relation to the boards. Clearly, there is great unease about the role of the boards and a worry that if local health and social care groups are established as subcommittees of boards it will be more difficult to review and change their role following a review of public administration. Members have already said that it will be difficult to take that power away. I am also concerned that not everyone takes an interest in this issue and that Members attack boards unnecessarily. Different parts of the administration have different roles to play.

The community service is an excellent public service. The Minister and I saw it last week when the South and

East Belfast Trust was handing out awards for home-care packages, which are delivered by a multidisciplinary team working together in the interests of individual patients to ensure that the patients remain at home, or are discharged earlier from hospital, or never have to go to hospital in the first place.

Members have voiced fears that boards want to give themselves even more power. That may happen in the transitional stage, but my understanding is that the opposite will happen once a decision has been made on the best strategic model, which is currently out for consultation.

There should be no special pleading for boards, but they are a key building block in the current system. In the transition period they may be the glue that holds the different elements together. When the jigsaw pieces are eventually put together the glue will no longer be needed. My understanding is that the boards do not want to be in that position any longer than is necessary.

A central thrust of the proposed new arrangements is not about adding to bureaucracy. However, it is when Members think that an additional tier is being added that we get the longest speeches. The arrangements are about creating opportunities for integration and partnership with the health and personal social services. In Northern Ireland we have been commended for our integrated family that encompasses the social services on the one hand and the Health Service on the other. We aim to drive forward the different components of that service.

Primary care professionals and trusts have important roles to play in working with boards to develop the new plans. I am very heartened by the action, health, well-being and implementation plans in 'Investing for Health', and the contents of that document need to be incorporated.

Let me also give voice to those least heard — community nurses, district nurses, school nurses and health visitors. More than 150 of these health care workers have written to me. Their conference was held on Friday 26 January 2001, and I have tried to circulate a letter I have received to as many Members as possible. The letter states:

"GP fundholding has curtailed innovative practice and staff development in the community. One example is that many GPs have been very reluctant to support the development and extension of practice of community nurses and health visitors, even though such developments are beneficial both to patients and to staff.

I am appalled by the injustice of this two-tier system which allows inequity of service provision within the communities.

Limitations have been placed (both financial and professional) on community nurses and health visitors. The latter especially have lost a large part of their public health role that they are trained and skilled to deliver.

If GP fundholding is extended, health visitors will be unable to effectively deliver the public health agenda which has been proposed in the 'Investing for Health' consultation document. Because of the payment system to GPs" —

many Members may not realise this —

“health visitors are commissioned by them to meet their targets in relation to immunisation programmes and development surveillance of pre-school children. Community nurses and health visitors are trained to work using a holistic approach to patient/client care. GP fundholding has served to disempower nurses by focusing on a medical model of intervention and a task orientated model of practice. This scenario exists largely because GPs are trained to treat disease rather than to prevent it.”

Those are pretty harsh words. However, community nurses and health visitors are concerned that, if this remains in place for another year, they will continue to be treated as people who simply carry out immunisation and surveillance programmes because of the payments given for that work. Rather, they should be viewed in a holistic way, given that they have been trained to carry out the public health role of preventative care.

Community nurses and health visitors say that they feel —

Mr Speaker: Order. While there is no guillotine on such stages of legislation, or on the length of time a Member may speak, the Member has now been speaking for substantially longer than any of the other Members — including Dr Hendron, who moved the amendment. In fairness, I ask all Members to try to make their points as concisely as they can. That would allow everyone to join in the debate and prevent our postponing to the evening the rest of the day’s business.

Ms McWilliams: I am aware that there is no guillotine, and with that in mind I am trying to present as much information as I can so that an informed decision can be made. However, I will take on board your views and draw my remarks to a close.

Having asked the Minister to address a number of anxieties and fears, we should make a decision on how we are going to vote on this serious issue. In the end, the focus on improving services for those in the community is what should drive us forward. This decision will lead us to that decision. The sooner we consult and decide on the models, rather than endure uncertainty for another year, the better for all of us.

It is time to promote equality of access and service across all our communities. We know the inequities and the deficits that exist when we do not do that. It is time to build on partnership and get clear and simple lines of accountability.

Rev Robert Coulter: I support the amendment. The Health Service has been subjected to a multitude of changes over the past number of years. The past 10 to 15 years has been an era of almost constant change that has proved most unsettling for all involved — administrators, employees and the patients themselves. Insecurity and uncertainty have been the main characteristics of the Health Service for too long. The many reviews and recommendations have been an enormous waste of time,

finance and resources, especially when so many of those recommendations have not been implemented. People today expect the Health Service to be professional in every respect, and that includes those who make decisions.

Society wants a service that delivers the appropriate care at the right time, in the right place and by the right people. As the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has said, there must be a seamless service for a patient from his first contact with his GP through to primary care and on to whatever treatment is required afterwards. Many points have been made, which I will not repeat. Questions, however, must be asked. One question that has been raised concerns the level of deficit in certain GP fundholding practices. The amount quoted was approximately £5 million. Why is this being raised as a problem when groups such as the Royal Group of Hospitals Trust are over £13 million in debt? The use of this kind of argument indicates a lack of consistency.

Prof McWilliams said that best practice should not be lost. Is there any guarantee that it will not be lost, particularly as specialists have been brought in and expertise has been gathered in the fundholding system? Is there any guarantee that, if fundholding is cut off and there is staff disruption — and we have been told that staff will be reintegrated — these people will be prepared to change again and come back to the co-operatives or whatever system replaces fundholding?

We agree that fundholding must go. It is inequitable. The question before the House is when will it go. Why proceed now when a consultation process is taking place? As has already been asked, what is the hurry? It is regrettable that the Ms Ramsey said that opposition to fundholding is a Sinn Féin prerogative. It is not — we are all against fundholding. Why introduce sectarianism to the debate when we should be concerned with getting the best for all patients in our country?

As has been mentioned, the cutting of fundholding now would be a regrettable step. We are going backwards. John Simpson is right when he says that

“to give back the whole of the fundholding control to the boards is a backward step”.

We are supposed to be making progress, but we are going back 10 years. The Assembly is here to progress every aspect of life in this community, but in one step our attitude is regressing at least 10 years. If the Health Service is to be restructured, we must question the need for a Department, four boards, four health councils, five agencies, 19 trusts and five health co-operatives. These are the questions we should be considering. It would be unprofessional to cut off fundholding now without waiting for the results of the consultation. I ask Members to stop and think about what we are doing, and I ask them to give the consultation an opportunity to succeed.

Ms Hanna: This debate would not have taken place if it were not for the attitude of the Minister and her Department. I want to place it on record that the SDLP is opposed to the principle of fundholding. I want that on record in order to avoid anyone making political capital of it. The issue is too important for that.

Fundholding introduced differences in the treatment of patients. It discriminated between patient categories. The SDLP believes in a National Health Service in which services are free at the point of delivery. The Minister and her Department refused to extend the consultation period to develop more radical options for primary care. That short-sighted approach will waste money in the long term. The Minister and her Department want to go backwards to the failed system that was recognised as such in documents such as 'Fit for the Future' and 'Fit for the Future — A New Approach'. The same Department wrote those documents. 'Fit for the Future — A New Approach' was presented to Assembly Members almost two years ago by the then Minister for Health and Social Services, John McFall. We are now being presented with a far more conservative option than that of two years ago.

11.30 am

I want to see real partnerships on the ground, involving GPs, nurses, social workers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, pharmacists and podiatrists commissioning services for their patients. It is the professionals and the practitioners working on the ground who best know the needs of their patients. I have talked to many practitioners. I can assure Members who are worried that the nurses have not been consulted that I have talked to many nurses. They have deep concerns that the Department and the Minister are going backwards.

We need to see the results of the review of acute hospital services in place if we are ever to make the fundamental changes required. We talk about an integrated, interdependent health care system. How can we create that without all the pieces of the jigsaw? I want to see fundholding ended, but I want real primary-care partnership at the heart of whatever replaces it. We need to build on the innovative practices and pilot schemes that have evolved in the past few years.

The main urgency for ending fundholding now appears to be a monetary one — an overspend of approximately £5 million by fundholding practices. Of course, much primary care has been under-resourced, and it is essential that money be spent where it is needed. I need to know the real cost of going back to where we were before fundholding. Surely it would be more cost-effective to make some radical decisions at this stage, rather than taking retrograde steps that will move us further away from the ideal of an integrated and interdependent health care system. Ironically, we will now need additional resources for primary care to go backwards. I urge the

Minister to listen and to take a more radical approach to the future of our health care.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I oppose the amendment because it is divisive and unnecessary. It is predicated on the view developing here that those of us who oppose the amendment are uncaring about primary care, the health of our constituents or ensuring that we make provisions for a health service that is delivered at the point of need.

I have listened to everyone arguing for the ending of fundholding. No Members have said that they are for the continuation of fundholding. All that they say is "We want fundholding ended, but why the hurry?" Why then the hurry on this amendment? Why bring to the Floor of the Chamber an amendment that is divisive in our attempts to create a proper, caring Health Service, particularly in the area of primary care? It puts people such as Sue Ramsey and myself in a position where, by opposing the amendment — and opposing it in Committee for four and a half hours or more — we are somehow seen as backward-looking people who are not in favour of a Health Service that is socialist in its content and direction. That is why this amendment is unnecessary and divisive.

There is a suggestion that fundholding will end completely on 1 April. In fact, the statement from the Minister says that there will be a six-month, or perhaps longer, winding down of fundholding. To suggest that ending fundholding in this way is somehow detrimental —

Mr Ervine: If the Member would give us some understanding of what it would wind down to, perhaps those who support the amendment might have a totally different attitude.

Mr J Kelly: I can only speak from my understanding as to what it would wind down to. It is winding down to the wind-up of a primary health care. That is why I am opposing the amendment. If I thought that the winding down of fundholding was not going to be in line with arrangements ensuring that we were making the beginnings of a primary care service that is radical and will deliver care to those who need it, I would not be opposing the amendment.

I oppose the amendment because it is divisive and unnecessary. I received a letter from members of the mid-Ulster commissioning pilot scheme this morning. It went through all the various things that we have already discussed. While they are not in favour of ending fundholding in what they call a transitional period, they are saying that the scenario whereby GP fundholding is extended for another year would be worse. Even they are aware of the fact that fundholding has not delivered an equitable health service. It has delivered a two-tier system of health.

Mr McFarland: The Member will recall that we had extensive discussions about how we might find some

way through this. It is fair to say that the Committee did not wish to extend it for a year, but the Committee had no option because there would be no system in place if it went through. We are interested in having something to replace the present system. If the Minister could produce something to replace it, and find a way of altering the timescale, I am quite sure that we would all be happy enough with that. The problem is about the replacement.

Mr J Kelly: Let us hear what the Minister has to say about that. I am confident that this Minister will attempt to deliver — and will deliver — a primary health service that will be worthy of her own political and social philosophies. I will look forward to that.

I agree that there are difficulties in the interim and in the transition. However, those difficulties are exacerbated by the amendment. They could have been better overcome had we adopted a more consultative approach. I do not take on board that the winding down of fundholding will hinder the beginnings of the delivery of a proper primary care service.

On the question of costs, there is no doubt about it. We talked to the boards in relation to the present position. Who will pay for the deficit of the fundholders, except the boards? Who will pay for the deficit of fundholders, except the Department? If fundholders get an extension for a year, they will surely say at the end of that year that they will not be paying the deficit — whatever it might be. It will then be open season as regards what happens within fundholding.

I oppose the amendment because it is divisive and unnecessary. I would not oppose it if I thought for one minute that we were not all saying the same thing. We are singing from the same hymn sheet — for a change. We all want a proper primary care service and a proper health service for the people we serve. The only dispute is about how and when it should be delivered. This hiatus that we talk about might not be as big a chasm as some are making it out to be.

I listened to Dr Hendron's list of doom as to what might happen. I would not oppose him if I thought that the things he suggested would come to pass. I have just been handed 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care', in which the Minister states:

"I am pleased to present this consultation paper. It sets out proposals for new arrangements in primary care to be put in place following the end of the GP fundholding scheme. It also puts forward a future policy agenda for the delivery of primary care services."

The Minister and the Department have given a commitment. I hope that the Assembly will drive that commitment forward, not in a divisive way, but in a united way, so that we, as Ms de Brún said, might deliver the best possible health service to our constituents and the people we serve, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mrs I Robinson: It is obvious that the Minister's stance has more to do with politics than the good practice of

providing the best care to the public. Sixty-five per cent of GPs chose the fundholding alternative, and 35% opted to stay with the boards. The so-called inequality of the present system is down to a matter of choice, not direct or indirect discrimination against those GPs who decided of their own volition not to become GP fundholders. That is a matter of fact. The "them and us" scenario that has been painted is due to choice alone.

The relevant facts were well put by the Chairperson of the Health Committee, Dr Hendron, Mr McFarland, Mr Berry and Billy Hutchinson. We wish to see an end to GP fundholding. However, during the Health Committee's deliberations, it accepted that there would be a void if fundholding ceased by 1 April 2001. The Health Committee's vote on this issue last Wednesday reflected these concerns — it was six to two in support of this amendment.

We need to take account of the expected reviews of primary care and the future of acute hospitals. Sensible and informed decisions can be taken with all of that information to hand. The bogeyman of the £5 million deficit run up by several GP fundholders was held up as a good reason to end the practice. That seems strange to me, bearing in mind that it costs an additional £90 million a year to run the 11 Government Departments, whereas only six were required before the Assembly was established — there was no concern about that. An extra £20 million is required to service the North/South bodies — again, no concern.

We will get only one chance to make the Health Service work for all of Northern Ireland's people. I urge caution and ask the SDLP to remove its three-line whip so that it can join the Health Committee's Chairperson and the majority of its members in support of the amendment.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's decision to end GP fundholding. I welcomed that decision before I listened to this morning's debate. After listening to everyone else say that fundholding is wrong, I want to put that point across strongly.

Before the establishment of the Assembly and the Executive, all the political parties were clearly calling for the end of GP fundholding. I cannot understand the argument behind this morning's debate. In my opinion, the amendment is madness. GP fundholding has created an unequal, two-tier health system at primary care level. Delaying the end of GP fundholding will result in the waste of millions of pounds in propping up a system instead of developing new arrangements.

Given that primary care is so important, and given that the delivery of primary care services has major ramifications for every other aspect of the Health Service, it is critical that the Assembly get this issue right. The inequalities created by the GP fundholding system cannot be perpetuated because we do not have

the bottle to change it. GPs lobbied me before the Executive was set up and during the suspension period because of uncertainty in the Health Service. That fact illustrates how demoralising this issue was.

We need to use resources wisely to put a credible system in place that treats everybody equally. Health should not be used as a political football. The Assembly should use this opportunity to create a fair and equitable system. I oppose the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

11.45 am

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim i gcoinne an leasaithe seo go tréan. Chiallóidh sé go leanfadh an scéim chisteshealbhaíochta liachleachtóirí ar aghaidh go ceann bliana eile. Creidim go bhfuil cúiseanna láidre ann le deireadh a chur leis an scéim seo ar 1 Aibreán 2001, mar a d'fhógair mé é bheith de rún agam a dhéanamh.

Bhuanódh leanstan ar aghaidh le cisteshealbhaíocht éagothromaíochtaí aitheanta na scéime, chomh maith leis an mhaorlathas agus na costais arda riaracháin a bhaineann léi. Dhéanadh sí dochar do fhorbairt socruithe úra sa chúram phríomhúil agus d'fhéadfadh sí cur leis an róchaiteachas sa bhuiséad sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta, rud a rachadh go dona do sheirbhísí.

Is sainmharc í an chisteshealbhaíocht den seanmhargadh inmheánach sa chúram sláinte agus sóisialta a chaithfear a ligean chun dearmaid. Is mian liom gluaiseacht chun tosaigh a fhorbairt socruithe sa chúram sláinte agus sóisialta a bheas bunaithe ar an pháirtíocht agus ar an chomhoibriú chan ar an choimhlint agus ar an bhristeachas. Beidh mo mholtaí do shocruithe úra sa chúram phríomhúil níos cuimsithí ná an chisteshealbhaíocht, ag cur réimse níos leithne de ghairmithe cúraim phríomhúil san áireamh agus ag coimisiniú réimse níos leithne seirbhísí.

Tá roinnt fáthanna praiticiúla ann a gcreidim gur gá deireadh a chur le cisteshealbhaíocht ag deireadh na bliana airgeadais seo. Ag deireadh na bliana is dóiche go mbeidh róchaiteachas cisteshealbhóirí níos airde ná mar a bhí anuraidh — agus seo nuair atáimid ag iarraidh an ceann is fearr a fháil ar fhadhbanna easnamh agus róchaiteachais sa bhuiséad SSSP go ginearálta. Má leantar de chisteshealbhaíocht go ceann bliana eile, tá gach seans go mbeidh an róchaiteachas níos airde arís ag an am seo ar an bhliain seo chugainn. Cuireann róchaiteachas cisteshealbhóirí brúnna ar áiteanna eile i mbuiséad na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta. Díolann na boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta astu agus caithfidh siad acmhainní a chur i leataobh chun na críche seo — acmhainní a b'fhearr a chaithfí ar sheirbhísí eile.

Ceanglaítear ar mo Roinn, de réir na reachtaíochta cisteshealbhaíochta, bheith sásta go bhfuil cisteshealbhóirí ag riar a mbuiséad go héifeachtach. Má leantar den chisteshealbhaíocht, tá seans go mbeidh ar an Roinn líon

suntasach chleachtais an róchaiteachais a bhaint den scéim, rud a dheifreodh an scéim titim as a chéile in aimhréidh. Cuireann riar éifeachtach cisteshealbhaíochta éilimh nach beag ar chisteshealbhóirí, ar bhoird agus ar iontaobhais. Dá mbeifí an saothar mór seo le cur le scéim sheanchaite a choinneáil ag dul go ceann bliana eile bhainfeadh sin saothar agus acmhainní ón chlár suntasach oibre a bheas riachtanach i bhforbairt socruithe úra sa chúram phríomhúil.

Lena chois sin, dá leanfaí den scéim go ceann bliana eile ní dhéanadh sin ach fad a chur leis an éiginnteacht faoina bhfuil cisteshealbhaíocht ag feidhmiú. Chuirfeadh sé leis na fadhbanna atá ag cuid cisteshealbhóirí foireann chisteshealbhaíochta a choinneáil. Ó Aibreán 1998, d'fhág 28 gcleachtas cisteshealbhaíocht. I mórán cásanna tharla seo de bharr fadhbanna le foireann a choinneáil nó a earcú agus de bharr fadhbanna a bhí acu ag riar de réir buiséad. Dá gcuirfí fad leis an scéim ní dhéanadh sin ach cur le fadhbanna oilteacht a choinneáil agus bhainfeadh sé faoin chumas cisteshealbhóirí an scéim a riar go héifeachtach i rith a bliana deiridh.

Tá cuid mhór den airgead atá de dhíth orm le hinfheistiú i socruithe úra sa chúram phríomhúil ceangailte sna costais riaracháin a bhaineann le cisteshealbhaíocht. Má leantar den chisteshealbhaíocht go ceann bliana eile, b'éigean domh na hacmhainní atá riachtanach le socruithe úra sa chúram phríomhúil a fhorbairt a chuardach in áit éigin eile. B'fhéidir go mbeadh orm cuid den airgead a úsáid a bhí de rún agam cur le seirbhísí cúraim phríomhúil na líne tosaigh sa bhliain seo chugainn.

Tá sé de chuspóir ag mo chuid moltaí úsáid a bhaint as cuid den airgead atá ceangailte faoi láthair i gcostais riaracháin cisteshealbhaíochta le hinfheistiú £2.5 milliún i seirbhísí cúraim phríomhúil na líne tosaigh. Dá mbuanófaí cisteshealbhaíocht chuirfí moill le scaoileadh an airgid seo.

Is maith is feasach domh an gá leis an tréimhse aistrithe idir deireadh chisteshealbhaíocht liachleachtóirí agus tús na socruithe úra a riar go cúramach agus go tuisceanach.

Ón 1 Aibreán 2001, an dáta a ceapadh do dheireadh a chur le cisteshealbhaíocht, ghlacadh na boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta freagracht, go ceann tamaill ar scor ar bith, as réimse iomlán na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta dona ndaonraí uilig a choimisiniú chomh maith le freagracht as acmhainní atá á riar ag cisteshealbhóirí faoi láthair. Coimisiúnaíonn boird bunús na seirbhísí do chisteshealbhóirí cheana féin chomh maith le hiomlán na seirbhísí do neamhchisteshealbhóirí. Toiseoidh siad ar iomlán na seirbhísí a choimisiúnú arís nuair a bheas deireadh le cisteshealbhaíocht. Leanfadh na socruithe seo ar aghaidh go dtí go raibh na grúpaí áitiúla sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta, ag brath ar thoradh an phróisis chomhairliúcháin, ábalta cuid de fhreagrachtaí coimisiúnaithe na mbord a ghlacadh orthu féin. Leanfadh liachleachtóirí ar aghaidh ag cur seirbhísí ar fáil mar a dhéanann siad faoi láthair.

I strongly oppose the amendment, the effect of which would be to continue the GP fundholding scheme for at least a further year. There are strong grounds for ending the scheme on 1 April 2001, as I have announced it is my intention to do. Continuing fundholding would perpetuate the acknowledged inequities of the scheme, and the bureaucracy and high administrative costs associated with its operation. It would be damaging to the development of new arrangements in primary care and could contribute to overspends in health and social services budgets which would affect services adversely.

Fundholding is the mark of the old internal market in health and social care, and it must now be consigned to the past. I want to move forward to develop arrangements in health and social care that will be based on partnership and co-operation, not confrontation and fragmentation. My proposals for new arrangements in primary care will be more inclusive than fundholding is. They will involve a wider range of primary care professionals and commission a broader range of services.

For a number of practical reasons it is necessary to end fundholding at the end of the financial year. At the end of the year, fundholders' overspends will probably be higher than last year. That should not be the case at a time when we are actively trying to get to grips with the problem of deficits and overspends in the health and social services budget. If fundholding continues for a further year, the overspends may be even higher next year.

Fundholders' overspends create budget pressures elsewhere in the health and social services. The overspends are paid for by the health and social services boards. They have to set aside resources for that purpose, resources that might have been better spent on other services. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is required, under fundholding legislation, to be satisfied that fundholders manage their budgets effectively. If fundholding continues, the Department may therefore be obliged to remove a significant number of overspending practices from the scheme, thereby hastening the disorderly disintegration of the scheme.

Mention has been made in the debate of the differences that exist between legislation for trusts and legislation for fundholding. The legislation is different, and that is why the approach is different.

Managing fundholding places considerable demands on fundholders, boards and trusts. Investing all that effort in sustaining an obsolete scheme for another year would divert effort and resources from the formidable agenda involved in developing new arrangements in primary care. Moreover, continuing the scheme for a further year would prolong the uncertainty under which fundholding has been operating. It would exacerbate the problems that fundholders have had in retaining fundholding staff.

Since April 1998, 28 GP practices have left the fundholding scheme. In many cases, that was because there were problems with retaining or recruiting fundholding staff and with managing within the budgets. Prolonging the scheme would simply increase the problems of retaining expertise and undermine fundholders' ability to manage the scheme effectively during its final year.

Much of the money that I need to invest in new primary care arrangements is currently tied up in the administrative costs associated with fundholding. If fundholding continues for a further year, I will have to look elsewhere for the resources needed to develop new arrangements in primary care in order to bring them forward. That could mean having to use some of the money that I intend putting into front-line primary care services next year. My proposals envisage using some of the money currently tied up in the administrative costs of fundholding to invest an extra £2.5 million in front-line primary care services. Extending fundholding would delay the release of that money.

I am very aware of the need to manage the transition period between the end of GP fundholding and the start of new arrangements carefully and sensitively. On 1 April 2001 — the intended date for the ending of fundholding — the health and social services boards will assume responsibility, at least on an interim basis, for commissioning the full range of health and social services for all their populations and for the resources currently managed by fundholders. Boards already commission the majority of services for fundholders as well as all the services for non-fundholders. They will resume the commissioning of all services once fundholding ends.

These arrangements would continue under my proposals until such time as the proposed new local health and social care groups, subject to the outcome of the consultation process, are in a position to take over some of the boards' commissioning responsibilities. GPs would continue to provide services, as they do at present.

Guidance issued by my Department has instructed boards to urgently consider, with fundholders and trusts, the impact of ending fundholding on services put in place locally by fundholders, and to ensure that these are maintained where possible. In order to provide boards with greater flexibility in managing the transition from fundholding, I have proposed that they should get additional resources for primary care in the next financial year. As a result, there will be no vacuum in the delivery of services when fundholding ends. Services will continue to be provided, and only the commissioner will change during the interim period.

I am aware of concerns raised in some quarters — and I have heard them in this debate — about the transition to new arrangements. I believe that these problems can be managed. As elsewhere, it will not be necessary to create new statutory bodies, and this, as I have said, has not happened. In developing new arrangements in

primary care, health and social services boards will be given an explicit remit by the Department to support the new groups actively and positively. They will be held accountable for their performance in this regard, and will be expected to work in close partnership with primary care professionals so that all involved have real ownership of the process.

If we are to move forward, as we envisage, to a primary-care-led service, everyone in the health and social services at all levels will be expected to facilitate and support whatever emerges from the consultation process. The consultation period on the new arrangements will end on 2 March 2001. There has been a suggestion that I was asked to extend that period. I have not been asked to do that. After that date, I will take decisions quickly on the way forward in order to enable the service to turn its attention to putting in place the new arrangements early in the new financial year. The intention is to build up as quickly as possible to the implementation of the new arrangements.

During the six-month period that will be required after the end of fundholding to wind down and close fundholders' accounts, the new arrangements will be built up. The resources needed to invest in new arrangements are currently tied up in fundholding, and investments in the new arrangements will be able to be made only as those resources are released.

12.00

There was also the issue of pilot schemes. This is a separate question and is not tied to this legislation. I want to look at how the services put in place by the pilots can be maintained during the transitional phase. However, maintaining the work of pilots is a different issue to the matter of ending fundholding.

A number of other issues have been raised, principally by Committee members, about the health and social services boards. As I said, everyone throughout the service will be expected to facilitate and support whatever emerges from the consultation exercise. I believe, therefore, that the transition from fundholding to the establishment of new arrangements can take place without disruption to services or detriment to primary care, provided that fundholding ends on 1 April 2001.

Resources for primary care will be addressed as part of my announcement about next year's financial allocations for health and personal social services. The boards have been explicitly instructed to examine how services put in place by fundholders will be maintained. It is true, as Prof McWilliams said, that non-fundholding GPs have made savings in prescribing costs — and some of these have been substantial — through the prescribing incentive scheme which will be open to all GPs after fundholding ends.

Information technology systems and a new information and communications technology strategy for health and personal social services — which will embrace primary care — are being developed. Following the repeal of existing legislation, new regulations will be introduced outlining how any fundholder savings remaining at the end of the scheme will be used. Guidance on this will be issued with clear ideas of how savings will be used. The key issue here, however, is that fundholding savings are currently used, and will be used after the scheme ends, for the benefit of service users. In fact, fundholders who are permitted to use savings for a variety of purposes set out in the legislation have used them to improve premises, and in some cases there have been complaints that this represents a personal asset to the GP.

The proposal for change, as I have said, will not increase the power of boards. They will have to include all primary care professionals in the new arrangements that are up for consultation. They will also all be tasked with improving primary care for their populations and with the work of commissioning services for them. I can therefore give an assurance that the position of boards will not be copperfastened by arrangements whereby new groups would operate as board committees, nor will this have a bearing on the outcome of the forthcoming review of public administration. Members would not want me, at any stage, to bring forward proposals that would pre-empt that review. I am only one member of a larger Executive, and my proposals need to fit in with the wider arrangements being made by that Executive.

The establishment of the proposed new local health and social care groups as committees of the boards is to provide a legal and accountability framework within which to operate. My proposals are designed to be accommodated within existing health and social care services structures in order to not prejudice the outcome of the Executive's planned review of public administration. However, they will be sufficiently flexible to be able to be adapted to any changes to health and social services structures that emerge from that review. My proposals in no way rule out radical changes to health and social services structures in the future, depending on the outcome of the public administration review.

I can give an assurance that staffing issues associated with the ending of fundholding will be dealt with sympathetically. Action is currently being pursued on a number of fronts to ensure that redundancies can be avoided and that the skills and expertise of fund management staff are not lost to the service.

Health and social services boards will consider sympathetically bids from practices to retain former fund management staff permanently in other posts. In making financial allocations to the health and personal social services bodies for 2001-02, I propose to provide additional resources for primary care to allow boards

more flexibility in considering the staffing requirements of practices.

I hope that this will also extend to a redeployment facility, which currently exists in health and personal social services for staff who are employed in fundholding. This will enable those staff members to be matched with suitable vacancies arising elsewhere in the health and personal social services field as well as with vacancies in any new primary care arrangements set up after the consultation exercise. Some fund management staff will continue to be employed for several months following the end of the scheme to close fundholding accounts, by which time I expect fresh employment opportunities to be available within the new primary care arrangements.

This amendment, if accepted, will extend the life of a scheme that already experiences difficulties and is inherently inequitable. Depending on the outcome of the current consultation on the 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care' document, I hope to press ahead quickly with developing new arrangements in primary care that will end the uncertainty that has existed in this area for a number of years. To extend fundholding for a further year is unnecessary. It will damage all progress that has been made towards the new arrangements and create greater problems for the service than it is designed to resolve. I urge that this amendment not be accepted.

Dr Hendron: I would like to thank the Minister and my Colleagues who have spoken in the debate. The Minister has mentioned the matter of one year. I told the Minister on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety that a period of six months had been suggested but that the Committee had decided that a six-month period would not work because it would end in the middle of the financial year.

I want to refer to a few of the points raised by my Colleagues. Alan McFarland spoke about the GP staff and about how we are losing expertise in these professions. That is the burning point of the debate. Paul Berry said that there is nothing in place to deal with the need for a unified service, but something credible must be in place. That is the key to the debate, and it has not been dealt with, in my opinion. Sue Ramsey said that it is the policy of Sinn Féin to oppose fundholding. That has also been the policy of the SDLP from the very beginning, as well as the policy of most Members. However, the debate is concerned with what will replace the arrangements that the Minister has proposed.

Mr McCarthy said simply that we should get this right because it concerns the future of primary care. That is it in a nutshell — we must get it right. Mr Billy Hutchinson pointed out that the money would go to the boards rather than into primary care. He made a valid point regarding these funds being taken away from occupational therapists and physiotherapists. The boards will use the

money in whatever way they deem necessary, but there is a lot to be desired of it by the community.

Monica McWilliams spoke at great length on many issues. First, she talked about a period of opportunity to move forward and said that in all of this the nurses' voices are not being heard. I have not said that the nurses' voices are not being heard — I have spoken to many community nurses. Although I mentioned the Royal College of Nursing and the fact that I have spoken to its leadership, I have spoken with ordinary nurses as well. We will not move forward if this amendment is not accepted; we will move backwards. On behalf of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee and given my wealth of experience in primary care, I can safely say that that would be a backwards move.

Monica McWilliams also talked about building. Building on what? If the fundholding and the primary care arrangements disappear — and the Minister has not indicated that the pilots will stay — what is there to build on? That will be a backward move. Most doctors — certainly the younger ones — use generic prescribing and therefore save on prescriptions.

I have nothing but the most profound respect for community nurses. Most health visitors are employed by trusts, but some are employed by fundholders, and they are worth their weight in gold.

Rev Robert Coulter said that we needed a seamless service. That point has been made over and over again by many people in the last few months. As we move along, we should remember that John McFall's 'Fit for the Future' document has been around for a couple of years. That was addressed to the Assembly and to the people of Northern Ireland, and it seems that its findings are being pushed aside. The Minister's suggestions bear some very vague similarities to that document.

Carmel Hanna made the point about being against fundholding — which we all are — but she highlighted the problems of going back to a failed system. That is exactly what would happen on 1 April — we would go back to the 1993 situation.

We all want a first-class primary care service. I accept that the Minister wants that — way down the line. However, I have already made the point that we have every reason to be concerned about the whole transition period. That point was certainly not answered.

John Kelly said that Members were all against fundholding, and he also mentioned the deficits. He asked what we would be winding down to. I have already made the point that we would be going backwards, and I will come to the deficits in fundholding shortly.

Iris Robinson talked about inequalities and the fact that doctors have a choice. That is true, although some practices in Northern Ireland might have wanted to go to fundholding but were not allowed to. She is quite right, however, that

others chose not to. The review of acute hospitals is coming up shortly, and there is an ongoing review of primary care. Those reviews should be interwoven.

Michelle Gildernew said that she wondered why the amendment was put forward. That was explained over and over again. She asked why fundholding should be propped up. I think that she was missing the point there, and she did not suggest what might take the place of fundholding.

The Minister's key point, made again and again, concerned the financial aspects of the issue, and the perpetuating of inequalities. What she is doing, however, is going back. I accept that non-fundholder patients were at a disadvantage, and that the majority of patients under fundholders — generally speaking — were advantaged. It is now being suggested that we move a step backwards to where the boards were in control of non-fundholders. Surely we should be taking a step forward for everybody in Northern Ireland. I spoke of that earlier, as did my Assembly Colleagues who are supporting the amendment. That is what it is all about — for everyone to move forward. We have heard nice, but vague, aspirations for the future, but we have not been told specifically what will happen in the transition.

The Minister greatly emphasised the matter of overspending, and some Colleagues mentioned it. One should understand how fundholding works. When it was first introduced, amounts of funding were given to run the practices. If savings could be made of, say, £50,000 or £60,000 — not for personal gain, but from a practice's point of view — the board would permit the savings to be used to develop that practice. That was good — perhaps another clinic could be run, or an extra nurse employed. That is fair enough. However, the following year, that money is taken off. Each year they are given a smaller budget. Any savings gained are taken from them. So, you can see how they would get in trouble.

12.15 pm

The Minister did not comment on the four points I am going to raise on the spending issue. No additional money has been given to elective surgery in the last four or five years. Therefore, extra demand affects GPs and primary care. Elective surgery has been cancelled over and over again in hospitals across Northern Ireland. To consider the debate sensibly and positively, one must take that point into account when talking about fundholding.

The second point is that there are fewer hospital procedures — meaning operations and other types of procedures — with increased, higher-than-inflation costs. That puts more demand on primary care. The Minister has tried to reduce waiting lists, but only with token money. The main money went into acute services, and we understand the reasons why. However, that put more pressure on fundholders.

On the question of overspend in hospitals, the Royal Victoria Hospital was mentioned earlier as having a massive overspend. Belfast City Hospital is in the same situation. Almost all the hospitals have overspent.

Let us take the Eastern Health and Social Services Board as an example. Let us say that it has a contract with a main hospital and things get to the stage where the hospital has overspent. The board will then state that no more money will be forthcoming. However, GPs are buying per item of service — that is not normally the way it is expressed, but factually that is what the situation amounts to. Therefore, if the hospital is overspent it will use fundholders to bail it out.

To look at the problem from another angle, if someone presents themselves at hospital with chest pain or with acute symptoms of cancer, can a general practitioner tell a patient that his budget does not allow for the patient's care? There is no way that that can happen. The Minister did not address those points. It was all about pushing at the primary care people and it is costing money. The hospitals are costing money. The way they are run — by trusts and boards in Northern Ireland — is what is costing money.

The acute hospitals review is coming up shortly. With respect to acute hospitals, the Health Service is in a mess and the situation goes back for many years. Hospitals and primary care are interwoven.

The Minister mentioned overspend and she also spoke about perpetuating inequalities. I think I have addressed those points. There has been chaos in many hospitals, with people lying on trolleys. If the amendment is defeated there will be chaos in primary care. I do not want those who are opposing the amendment, including the Minister, to wash their hands and walk away from that responsibility.

The Health Service boards have been around for years and have been running practices as non-fundholders. Have they succeeded? No, they have not, and we are moving backwards instead of forwards. This is not a sectarian debate, it is one about the future of primary care affecting every man, woman and child in Northern Ireland. The proposals are top-down, not bottom-up. The Prime Minister and others talked about a primary-care-centred Health Service. That is not happening here, but was in the 'Fit for the Future' document.

The Minister put great emphasis on the point that she would give a remit to the boards. However, we know a wee bit about remits going to the boards. Remits were made to children's services — we discussed them in the Health Committee. I wrote to the Minister about the fact that money that should have been ring-fenced was being earmarked for children's services. This is a criticism not of the Minister but of the system. In her reply, she said that the applicable word was "earmarked", not "ring-fenced". If the Minister is going to give remits and funding to the boards, she may advise them on what they should do, but the boards will do what they feel is necessary if their

hands are tied financially. Most of the money is given to acute hospitals, but I will not repeat that point.

The Minister said that pilot schemes are a different issue. That is correct in the context of the debate on this legislation, but they are very much part of the issue. I believed — and most people in primary care believed — that the pilot schemes in Northern Ireland were to be the centrepiece for a new primary-care-led health service. Therefore they are very much part of this discussion. It would have been a positive move if the Minister had indicated that the pilot schemes, which have had outstanding results, were to be continued.

This is not a sectarian debate; it is about the future of primary health care. The people of Northern Ireland deserve the best — for heaven's sake, let us give them the best.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 52; Noes 32.

AYES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Joan Carson, Seamus Close, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, David Ervine, David Ford, Sam Foster, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, Carmel Hanna, Joe Hendron, Derek Hussey, Billy Hutchinson, Roger Hutchinson, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Kieran McCarthy, David McClarty, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Maurice Morrow, Sean Neeson, Dermot Nesbitt, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, George Savage, Jim Shannon, John Taylor, David Trimble, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Alex Attwood, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, John Dallat, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Donovan McClelland, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Eddie McGrady, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, John Tierney.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 61, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 5 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill, which now stands referred to the Speaker.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL: MINISTERS' ATTENDANCE

Mr Speaker: During a statement by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister at the Assembly sitting of 22 January 2001, Mr Ian Paisley Jnr put forward a reason for the non-attendance at a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council of the Minister for Regional Development. Mr Paisley indicated that the Minister's non-attendance was in line with his election commitment to oppose "North/Southery".

Subsequently, Mr Maskey raised a point of order, asking whether the Minister would be in breach of the Pledge of Office by adhering to party manifesto commitments rather than to the Pledge of Office. I undertook to give a ruling.

Ministers are legally bound by the Pledge of Office set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Once nominated as Ministers, and having accepted the nomination, they must, under section 18(8) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, affirm the Pledge of Office before taking up office. The obligations contained in the Pledge of Office are therefore legally binding and override any contrary political commitments.

I remind the Assembly that to date I am unaware of any situation in which a Minister who has been nominated to attend a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council has declined to do so. In such circumstances the Minister is likely to be in breach of the terms of the Pledge of Office. Comments from Members who are not Ministers cannot be taken as an indication of a Minister's intention, irrespective of the party affiliations of the Members involved.

I understand that the High Court recently ruled on North/South Ministerial Council attendance, and I shall be studying this ruling with interest.

Finally, with regard to the remit of the Speaker, I should remind the House that, while it is open to any Member to challenge a Minister's alleged failure to attend if he or she so wishes, it is not a matter on which the Speaker will rule. The move can be made in a number of ways. A Member may table an Assembly question, written or oral, to ask the Minister about his or her alleged non-attendance and/or his or her future intentions; a Member may apply for a judicial review for it to be determined whether the Minister's alleged decision not to attend is in conflict with the obligations of the Pledge of Office; or a Member may initiate the procedure for exclusion provided for in section 30 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

I trust that that clarifies the position.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Mr Speaker, have you received notice from the First Minister that he intends to come to the House to make a statement about his failed sanction on

Sinn Féin/IRA following the High Court's decision this morning?

Mr Speaker: I have received no requests from any Ministers to make statements. As a member of the Business Committee, the Member will be made aware of any statements that arise.

The sitting was suspended at 12.39 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair) —

MATERNITY SERVICES

2.00 pm

Mr Berry: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give due weight to the determination of both the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee and the Northern Ireland Assembly on maternity service provision in Belfast in light of the decision of 29 November 2000 of the High Court.

Maternity service provision has been an important issue for some time. The debate on this issue began in 1994 with the acute hospitals reorganisation project under Dr McKenna. Out of that exercise came the 1996 maternity services paper, which looked at the two options — location at Belfast City Hospital or at the Royal Victoria Hospital, with either refurbishment or a new block. The recommendation was that maternity services should be located at the tower block of Belfast City Hospital for clinical reasons — and I want to stress that point, for the clinical arguments have become somewhat clouded of late. Those clinical reasons were that the key services, namely gynaecology, neonatology and obstetrics — and other related services — would be kept together.

This was accepted by the then Health Minister, Mr Malcolm Moss, and finalised in 1997. Unfortunately, management at the Royal Victoria Hospital adopted a typically self-centred and empire-building attitude and raised a row over this decision, and the result was that a review was undertaken under Liam Donaldson in 1997. From the start, it was evident from both the membership of this committee and the fact that its remit was widened — after some petty lobbying — that this review would reach one conclusion only: location on the Royal Victoria Hospital site. Every argument, either fair or foul, which could be used to back the Donaldson line has been and is being followed, and that has been the difficulty with this issue since 1997.

For example, the ridiculous argument has been put forward that sick babies would die if maternity services were to go to Belfast City Hospital. That allegation is not only unfounded, but completely and utterly untenable. If it were true, there would be no maternity services in Northern Ireland.

Instead of decisions being made on sound, logical and clinical grounds, other criteria are being used, and the decision to locate maternity services at Belfast City Hospital has thus been overturned.

However, the flawed nature of that decision meant the matter's being taken to the High Court by Mrs Claire

Buick, and the court ruled in her favour that the decision had been procedurally unfair.

In the course of making his ruling, the judge quoted Donaldson's view that on clinical arguments, Dr McKenna was right. The judge said it was "understandable and justifiable". That point also needs to be emphasised, because we are given the impression that neither Dr McKenna nor anyone else knew what they were talking about. The result was yet another consultation exercise that began in July 1999, and another report was published — and if ever there was a slanted document, this was it. Every possible red herring was dragged into it, while obvious issues were ignored. There were references to other linkages that were never spelt out. In short, it was a cover-up — and an expensive one at that. This was a consultation exercise that did not consult. This was a document that was short on hard evidence.

It was, and remains, extremely disconcerting that the entire consultation process was interfered with by clinical blackmail. I use those words deliberately. The decision by paediatricians to withdraw cover from the City Hospital was a deliberate move to coerce the Department and circumvent the overwhelming clinical evidence that favoured the City Hospital.

As clinicians have done elsewhere to good effect, they demonstrated that the only thing that matters is the policy of a clinical group — everyone else can go to pot. They wanted the Jubilee closed and decided that the way to achieve that was to go on a form of strike.

Following the equally flawed consultation process, we were then treated to the rather bizarre situation of a new Minister of Health, using all her narrow sectarian bias, deciding that maternity services were to go to the Royal Victoria Hospital. Unfortunately, it has been a ministerial decision that was wrong — clinically, socially, politically and legally. The Minister's decision to close the Jubilee, in the face of every rational and clinical argument, has resulted in a shambles that has turned our maternity services into what could be termed a joke, if it were not so serious.

It was a bad decision for our mothers across the country — hence the enormous campaign against the closure of the Jubilee. The Jubilee philosophy was an enormous benefit that has been destroyed.

It was a bad decision clinically. The Minister was unable to furnish a single rational, coherent and intelligent clinical argument in favour of her decision.

It was a bad decision politically. The Health Committee, on which I serve, voted overwhelmingly to retain the Jubilee. The Assembly also debated the issue and voted to retain the Jubilee. Yet, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety chose to ignore that.

Finally, it was a bad decision legally. A High Court challenge to her decision rightly followed. That demon-

strated once again that the decision was flawed. Twice there has been a High Court decision on this issue. Each time, the Department has been found guilty, though in the recent case it was the Minister who was found guilty.

The motion calls on the Minister, in view of the decisions of the Assembly Committee and the Assembly itself, to give due weight to the High Court ruling that overturned her decision. I remind the Assembly of the need to obey the law, the need to give due respect and regard to the Health Committee and ultimately to those mothers and clinicians, all of whom argued in favour of the City site from the beginning of this process.

There is a growing body of evidence that this Minister has only one objective — to ensure that any service that can be relocated to the Royal Group of Hospitals will be placed there. It seems that we are going to see the very same wrangle over dermatology. I make that statement about the Minister on hard evidence. The Minister, in announcing her decision on maternity services, said that it was done on the best clinical advice. Some questions need to be asked of the Department. Where is that advice at present? What was that advice? Who gave the advice in the end? All of this remains hidden. I challenge the Minister and the Department to give the public the information that she and her Department have so far refused to divulge. We all wonder why.

This is decision-making by fiat, not decision-making following the normal rules of clinical, democratic and rational debate. Let us not ignore the cost of this decision. Forty staff have left the Royal as a result of the closure of the Jubilee. Services are continually being closed because of staff shortages. The wards are filthy, and mothers who are used to the level of care at the Jubilee are finding themselves treated increasingly as nothing more than clients who are to be moved out as quickly as possible.

Some warned not only that the closure of the Jubilee would be a disaster but that the short-term decision would also become a long-term millstone. Where is this new building that was promised? Where is the excellent service that was promised?

What we get instead is money slipped into the budget of the Royal Victoria Hospital to try to help it out with its wild spending spree. We get fobbed off with more and more reviews that never seem to come to any conclusions. We get public money squandered on bad health decisions that are defended in court — public taxes defending the indefensible — when it ought to be spent for the benefit of those from whom that tax was lifted.

The Jubilee should never have been closed. The Assembly needs to regain control of the situation to see that every step is taken to send all services to the City tower block or to see that a new block is built at the City Hospital for the right clinical reasons, not for narrow political self-interest. The current Minister of Health has become the "monster of health", fully evidenced in her

irrational decision to close the Jubilee without any firm replacement, in the face of every sound argument.

Finally, I want to return to a statement from the Belfast City Hospital consultants. They quite clearly say:

“It is our opinion that the evidence presented to the Minister was incompetent, clinically unsound and biased against the Belfast City Hospital site. The so-called advice was produced by a group of people with no relevant expertise to enable them to give the advice they did — this is one reason why it is clinically unsound.”

It is important that we listen to the words of those professional people and the consultants, who know more than, possibly, everyone in the Chamber. They also went on to say:

“We fail to understand how a Department, which has been involved in this process for so long, could have proceeded with such a flawed document and tried to pass it as clinical advice.”

The motion calls on the Minister to act in accordance with the Assembly Health Committee, the Assembly itself and, ultimately, with the High Court. I commend it to the House.

Dr Birnie: This morning the Chairperson of the Health Committee said that the matter being discussed then should not be treated in a sectarian manner. That applies to this debate equally. The priority, as all Members in the House would agree, is the interests of the baby and the mother. That can and should transcend both Unionism and Nationalism, and particular constituency interests.

The fact that we are returning to debate this motion, which was considered almost exactly a year ago in the House, suggests major problems both with the content of the Health Minister's decision and with the manner in which she carried out that decision — as ably described by the proposer of the motion. The Minister on that occasion managed to override both the majority preference of the Health Committee and what was shown subsequently to be the majority of opinion in the Assembly.

Over a century ago a particular Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, said that we should never trust experts. In this case, since most of us, including myself, have no particular medical expertise, we have had no alternative but to listen to the many experts in this field. They have, of course, sometimes given conflicting advice. It has to be said — I suppose I differ a little from Mr Berry — that strong clinical cases were made in favour of both options, which were an integration of the services on the site of the Royal Hospital or, alternatively, at the Belfast City Hospital location.

We should also recognise and pay tribute to the high quality of the service previously offered at both the Royal Maternity Hospital and the Jubilee, though there were some distinctive elements between the two locations in the manner in which maternity services were provided.

2.15 pm

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding all that, I considered the so-called expert advice, and I found that the most

convincing arguments were those which said that maternity services should be beside a major centre for women's health care, including cancer, rather than being physically beside a children's hospital. As the proposer noted, that principle was recognised in the 1997 McKenna Report. It was not really challenged in the subsequent Donaldson study. Indeed, it is consistent with practice elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Both options have their attractions, and neither is ideal. However, I believe that the balance lies with the City Hospital, because of the likely flow of mothers requiring other medical services, as opposed to the probably smaller movement of babies between a maternity hospital and the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children.

I will conclude with two general points. First, Ministers must not be allowed to become feudal lords, exercising unaccountable power in their own fiefdoms. The outcome of the debate on the Further Consideration Stage of the Health and Personal Social Services Bill is perhaps significant in this context. Secondly, it is right to give attention to the issue of the distribution of maternity services. However, we must recognise that the House will have to move on to consider what can be done about other medical specialisms and activities, which by all reports are facing pressure and are close to breaking point.

I support the motion. It is a marker, which indicates that when the Assembly comes to finalise or approve the building of a new integrated, modernised maternity service in the city, that it should be on the Belfast City Hospital site.

Ms Hanna: I support the motion. One year ago, less a day, we were debating the siting of Northern Ireland's regional maternity hospital. We are back debating the same issue today. What a waste of time and resources. Is there any point in further consultation?

The Minister stated that it was her decision that the regional maternity hospital would be located at the Royal Victoria Hospital site, adjacent to regional paediatric services and near to the accident and emergency department. I did not agree with her then, and I do not agree with her now. More importantly, the judge in the most recent judicial review of the case did not agree with her decision either.

This time, it is essential that there be an open and accountable decision-making process. That was not the case previously. The judge said that it was somewhat unusual for the Department not to create minutes, notes or any other records of meetings held with medical, nursing, economic and legal advisers. Furthermore, the consultant obstetric staff at the Jubilee Maternity Hospital asked to see the clinical evidence upon which the Minister made her decision. However, this request was refused. The information only came to light in the judicial review.

The Minister emphasised that the choice between the Royal Victoria Hospital and Belfast City Hospital sites

was a close one. In the final analysis, she concluded that maternity services would be more clinically effective if located adjacent to regional paediatric services and the accident and emergency department on the Royal Victoria Hospital site. Despite the prolonged consultation process, the Minister allowed the advocates of the Royal Victoria Hospital site to introduce a new factor at the last moment — proximity to accident and emergency services. However, those advocating the Belfast City Hospital site were not given the same opportunity. The proximity of accident and emergency appeared to have perhaps become the deciding factor.

However, if a woman requires emergency admission while pregnant, she does not go to the accident and emergency department for treatment. Instead, she goes to the early pregnancy unit for specialised care. The proximity or otherwise of an accident and emergency department is fairly irrelevant.

Central to the Belfast City Hospital's case was the proximity of the majority of gynaecological services and gynae-oncology. The Donaldson and McKenna Reports also agreed that that was an important factor. That is also the view of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. However, the Department's advisers did not think that it was a strong argument.

There also seemed to be a presumption that gynaecological services would eventually go to the Royal site. The clinicians in the field — practising obstetricians and gynaecologists — believed that proximity to the adult intensive care unit was very important for critically ill mothers. On the other hand, the Minister's advisers thought that high-dependency beds, which would be in the maternity unit on either site, would suffice. The clinicians in the field would certainly take issue with that. The latest report by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists nowhere states that paediatric services need to be beside maternity services.

This time last year we had two maternity hospitals that were both excellent, though perhaps different in ethos. Where do we go from here? We are on a merry-go-round of reports, consultations and judicial reviews, which are all sucking up funds that should be used for women and babies. This time round, I ask the Minister to listen and approach the issue with an open mind. We want the best regional maternity services for all women and babies.

Mrs I Robinson: I commend my Colleague, Mr Berry, for tabling this motion down for debate. The decision to close the Jubilee ranks as one of the most ill-thought-out decisions a Minister has made so far in this Assembly. The High Court decision makes very sad reading. In fact, the more I read it, the more amazed I am that anyone could have been so blinded as to actually defend the closure of the Jubilee.

The judge noted that it is the Minister, Barbara Brown, to whom Parliament has entrusted this decision. The

judge repeated the view that the three key services of maternity, neonatology and gynaecology should be kept together, that Donaldson had agreed to that, that it was a central issue, and, further, that the Department itself had accepted that very point, only to come back later on and say that it did not consider that it was a strong argument. That demonstrates that it knew that it was a very strong argument but, in order to back the Minister's decision, it had to reverse that view and say that it was not.

Even more interestingly, it transpired that the origin of the idea of separating obstetrics from gynaecology came from the Royal in order to justify its intention to have maternity on its site. To make matters worse, gynaecology has been thrown into confusion as to where it ought to be. Hardly good medical practice. The judge put it much better. He said:

"The Minister was not informed that the process of separately considering the location of maternity and gynaecology services had its origin in a decision by the body charged with responsibility for overseeing preparation of the business case to support the construction of a new maternity hospital on the Royal site."

Here we have either a Minister making decisions based on half of the facts or a Minister being deliberately misled by her Department. What heads have rolled over that? Who was responsible for failing to tell the Minister? The judge said:

"The Minister did not have the relevant information to ask and correctly answer the question."

To make matters worse, we have an argument based on accident and emergency services thrown into the equation. We were told that that was the clinching argument. Nowhere else in the world and in no other clinical body of evidence has that argument ever been used. However, here we have it, and it came from the management of the Royal. When it comes to specious arguments, the management of the Royal can do it in a style that no one else can. It is no wonder that the judge said that

"the Minister committed the same breach of the requirements of procedural fairness".

The Royal was allowed to introduce a new factor without giving Belfast City Hospital any opportunity to consider it. Had the Minister understood what was happening she would have immediately thrown it out or extended consultation on the point. However, she failed to do that, and we all know why.

Had that been all, it would have been bad enough, but what follows is quite extraordinary. A letter about maternity services from Dr Hendron on behalf of the Health Committee created a frenzy in the Minister's mind that a decision had to be reached as soon as possible. The judge drew attention to the "unusual decision"

"not to create notes, minutes or other records of the Department's meetings with the Minister's medical, nursing, economic and legal advisers".

How can that be? What prompted such a decision? Could it be that there was information that the Minister did not want recorded, knowing full well that her decision was suspect, illegal, immoral and clinically unsound?

The judge also ruled against the Department on the intensive care unit argument, saying that

“more reflection might have produced a more accurate analysis of this factor”.

What a damning indictment of the Minister and her entire Department as it scratched around for something — anything — that would get the Jubilee closed.

Even that is not the end. The judge summed up by saying that the Minister

“did not appreciate the nature of her discretion in relation to the linkage between gynaecology and maternity services”.

The Minister was persuaded

“by a linkage that was not previously featured during the long history of the decision-making process”.

Thus the Minister’s decision was quashed.

It is imperative that the Minister undo the damage that she has inflicted on maternity services. She has destroyed the best maternity centre in Belfast — the Jubilee — which had a philosophy that is found nowhere else. It was a mother’s dream. Mothers had choice and control, but that has been taken from them. The Jubilee’s breastfeeding programme was the best in the Health Service. Its ethos of childbirth ensured that, unlike elsewhere, mothers were mothers and not machines. Now nurses are demoralised, staff are leaving by the score, and what have we got so far? Nothing.

If it were any other Minister or party, I would feel confident that the lessons learned from the judicial review would allow the proper outcome to be realised: a first-class maternity service based at Belfast City Hospital. However, given the nature of the individual and the party she represents, she will totally disregard the judge’s findings, the Health Committee’s majority vote in favour of the Belfast City Hospital site and the Assembly’s support for the City. So much for a new beginning.

Undoubtedly, the Minister’s party will be demanding reinstatement to the “North/Southerly” following the court decision in its favour today. Likewise, we demand that she and her party — in light of the recent judicial ruling against her decision — immediately act and redress that decision. I support the motion.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I listened attentively to what Dr Birnie said, and I agree that this ought not to become a sectarian or political debate. However, when I hear words like “the monster of health” being mouthed by a member of the DUP I find it difficult to come to any other conclusion than that this is a politically motivated debate entertaining a degree of sectarianism from that party. I cannot explain

in any other way why that kind of language, which we are unfortunately too familiar with, should be reiterated in the Assembly. I do not intend to play sectarianism with the DUP or its representatives here today.

2.30 pm

It is a year since we discussed this matter — a year that has been spent in the courts battling over an issue that, as I said at the time, Belfast is fortunate to have. Coming from a rural constituency where we do not have maternity services, or at least we have a very meagre maternity service, I find it astounding to see people arguing over the siting of two hospitals within kicking distance of one another, and whether they should have a maternity service.

The judicial judgement that overturned the Minister’s decision was based on the process and not the actual decision. I listened to the radio this morning and was reminded that Baroness Denton made one decision and Tony Worthington made another decision. The Belfast City Hospital versus the Royal Victoria Hospital has been kicking about for a very long time. Perhaps we thought we had resolved it at last.

We heard talk about the overwhelming majority in the Committee, but there was not an overwhelming majority in the Committee. The Committee voted 7 to 4. A year ago the Committee Chairperson, Dr Joe Hendron, said:

“We are talking about a regional hospital service for Northern Ireland: maternity services for Belfast, but a regional service for Northern Ireland, and I want to put great emphasis on that. If we were just talking about Belfast, we could toss a coin between the Royal or the City. But we are talking about a regional service for Northern Ireland; we are talking about a regional neonatal unit for Northern Ireland to care for sick or premature newborn babies; and we are talking about a regional paediatric service for Northern Ireland. There is only one major regional paediatric hospital in the North of Ireland, and it is not my fault if that happens to be in west Belfast.”

To suggest that there was some kind of overwhelming unanimity about the location of this hospital is to be totally misleading about the debate that ensued over the provision of such a critical area in the lives of mothers.

To use words like “filth” about the Royal Victoria Hospital can only have the most detrimental effect on the mothers who go there. It can only have a detrimental effect on the people of west Belfast to insinuate, comment or make a statement that somehow the Royal Victoria Hospital is a second-class service; it is redolent of days that we thought were behind us. It is, in many ways, a political debate clothed, as usual, in the kind of sick hypocrisy that we get from the DUP. I said that I was not going to get involved in mixing it with the DUP but unfortunately one is led tentatively off the path — *c’est la vie*.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, I said that this is too serious an issue to be used as a political football. I said here last year that

“the debate about the siting of maternity services has been long and acrimonious, embroiling no less than five Health Ministers, thousands of residents, scores of gynaecologists, obstetricians and paediatricians from as far away as America”.

That was last year, and what do we have today?

I continued:

“Wednesday’s decision concluded years of wrangling and the Minister pledged on taking office that any decision she made would be made on professional grounds putting the care of mothers and babies first.”

I would like to think that that is still the mind of the Minister.

Mr McCarthy: As other Members have done, I remind the Assembly that tomorrow it will be one year since we last debated this issue. One year on, it seems that little progress, if any, has been made towards the creation of a central maternity unit joined with a specialised paediatric unit. In fact, we seem to be going backwards. Who suffers because of our inaction? Mothers and children, of course — and, indeed, fathers.

This saga has been going on for at least eight years and has been subject to widespread consultations, numerous reports, and now several judicial reviews. In a sense, the motion is meaningless and superfluous. The Minister cannot do anything other than comply with the rulings of the courts and, to be fair, she has not indicated that she is going to do anything differently. It could be said that the motion is little more than a pathetic attempt by the DUP to score political points against its opponents — namely, Sinn Féin. If we had a DUP Health Minister — and that could have been the case had the DUP had the courage to accept the portfolio — would there be the same opposition? I very much doubt it.

When the Alliance Party voted on the issue, it sided with the Minister’s decision to relocate maternity services to the Royal Victoria Hospital. However, every Member of the Assembly labelled Nationalist voted to support the Minister, while every Member labelled Unionist voted against the Minister. If every debate in the Assembly on major socio-economic issues becomes polarised along Unionist/Nationalist lines, what kind of —

Ms Hanna: On point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to put it on the record that, although perceived as a Nationalist, I did not support the siting of maternity services at the Royal.

Mr McCarthy: I accept the Member’s comments.

If every debate in the Assembly on major socio-economic issues were to become polarised along Unionist/Nationalist lines, what kind of message would we be sending to the wider community about how the Assembly is going to conduct its business? Fortunately, there was cross-party support this morning. That is to the Assembly’s credit.

The original vote on maternity services did not have cross-community consensus and could not pass the safeguards created under the agreement. If we keep going in this way the potential for deadlock is clear. Most issues facing the Assembly are about the future. They do not, and should not, have anything to do with our ancient tribal squabbles. The health of our people must come first, be it our newborn babies or people coming to the end of their lives.

In a sense, the debate has now moved on. It is now recognised that maternity services have been consolidated elsewhere in Northern Ireland. That has to take place in Belfast. The Jubilee site is no longer an option for maternity services. Indeed, it has been earmarked for a new cancer unit for Northern Ireland. I say to the Assembly that the sooner that vital facility is in place, the better for everyone.

Notwithstanding the court’s decision on the procedures adopted by the Minister, Alliance still believes that the Royal Victoria Hospital is the best site for the Belfast and regional maternity unit. We are fed up with review after review, consultation after consultation, without anything being done to improve our health facilities. The main reasons are clinical. The existence of a full range of specialised paediatric services on the Royal site must be the decisive factor. Maternity services can be concentrated in Belfast, adjacent to and connected to the Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. Expert opinion suggests that maternity, neonatal and paediatric services should, ideally, be located on one site. A panel of independent experts, led by Prof Liam Donaldson, suggested that course of action. I take exception to the accusation made earlier that the outcome of their deliberations was predetermined.

For 90% of women, pregnancy is relatively straightforward. Significant problems arise in about 10% of pregnancies. One to 3 per cent of babies require neonatal intensive care. When complications arise, speed is of the essence. Transport from other hospitals not only adds time, but can create further complications.

Not every woman will give birth at the Royal, but surely it makes sense to maximise the number of births by providing easy access to specialised paediatrics? The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that decisions affecting children should be taken with their best interests at heart. That is central to our thinking when advocating a children’s commissioner for Northern Ireland, as my Alliance Colleagues here will be doing later. Women require a service in which they feel safe and in control. Regional and national policy guidance for maternity and related services emphasises the need for woman-centred care, continuity of care and the provision of choice. A full range of gynaecology services can be found on the Royal sites. The Royal Maternity Hospital has the appropriate woman-centred service. It should therefore be possible to create on the

Royal site a specialised maternity unit linked to paediatrics. I understand that the main reason for granting a judicial review of the Minister's decision was the failure to consult adequately with respect to gynaecological services. However, the point was missed that such services were available on both the Royal and the City sites.

Finally, there are some non-medical reasons for supporting the Royal Victoria Hospital. One is its relatively easy access to the road network. That, as has already been mentioned, is very important indeed. Another is the provision of parking. Policy appraisal and fair treatment (PAFT) analysis also suggests that the Royal option would increase the prospect of antenatal appointments being kept by women from deprived areas.

I must express disappointment at some of the phrases used and accusations made by Mr Berry, who moved the motion. In view of my party's earlier stance on that provision, we cannot support the motion and will abstain. We must be realistic. The Jubilee Maternity Hospital is no more. The new provision on the Royal site must go ahead. No more time-wasting — action is needed now.

Ms Hanna: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I should perhaps have declared an interest while I was speaking. I was employed by the Health Service until I was elected to this body.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you for that. The Member has set a very good example to everyone in the Assembly in declaring an interest that it is important for us to know of.

Ms McWilliams: This remains a difficult debate, and the matter has yet to be resolved. My decision at the time was that the merger should not happen until we had a new purpose-built hospital, not solely for the women of Belfast, but a regional hospital with a neonatal unit. I remain very concerned.

2.45 pm

I do not want to go over the arguments that I put to the Minister at Question Time two weeks ago, but it is important that we keep in mind that the process needs to be moved forward rapidly. There is overcrowding. Six thousand mothers and babies have been put into an old hospital, whose chief executive would agree that refurbishing it in order to bring it up to the standard for accommodating such numbers was all that was done. He was never in favour of it being a permanent solution. From speaking to him and his counterpart in the City Hospital, I know that they want a decision to be made on the siting of a new hospital.

Uncertainty creates many morale problems and there is an issue of morale attached to this decision at the moment. Having visited Ward D in the Royal Victoria Hospital, I never believed I would see such conditions. I gave birth myself in that hospital many years ago. The present conditions do not reflect the dedication of the wonderful midwives; they reflect the standards under

which these people have to work. There used to be 17 beds. There are now 15 beds sitting alongside each other. There was no room to move. The beds were along the middle of the ward and there was one bathroom. I saw that for myself and it cannot be disputed. I have since been told that the midwives have to tear up blankets in order to have enough for the newborn babies. This is a new century, and no mother should have to watch that going on in a ward.

I remain deeply concerned that unless we move forward on this issue all we are doing is overburdening and stressing an already demoralised staff. We do not need a lengthy consultation process because many of the arguments are already there.

Members have reiterated the arguments on paediatrics versus gynaecology and obstetrics. Unfortunately it seems that the paediatricians had a very strong voice in the last consultations. One of the senior midwives tells me that they have visited brand-new, purpose-built maternity hospitals elsewhere in the UK and it is not the case that they have been located next to a paediatric unit. Consultants tell me that it is dangerous to move a sick baby. They say that one should stabilise the baby's condition and then carry out whatever surgery is necessary. They say that it is much more dangerous to move a sick mother and that intensive care facilities should always be where the mother is, particularly if urgent gynaecological surgery is required.

I want to pay tribute, as my younger sister almost died as a consequence of needing an urgent gynaecological operation, which was carried out speedily because the intensive care facility was close to the gynaecological ward. The evidence continues to point to the fact that gynaecology and obstetrics should remain close to mothers and the maternity unit.

I do not want this to be a debate about buildings; it needs to be about mothers and babies in Northern Ireland and their needs. The development has already gone ahead. Any location on the Royal Hospital site would not be close to the intensive care facilities and urgent transfers would have to be made across considerable distances. None of us wish to see fatalities rising as a consequence, particularly those during pregnancy, when we have done such wonderful work in reducing the numbers of deaths during childbirth.

We have heard from the oncologists — and there cannot be anything worse than being told that one has a gynaecological-related cancer problem and that treatment will be given at different sites. A leading consultant in Northern Ireland on gynaecology was asked whether it would be possible to provide the same quality of service to patients if all gynaecological surgery were to be performed on the Royal Victoria site rather than the City Hospital site. His answer was an emphatic "No". He said that such patients need efficient and fast treatment from a physical and psychological point of view. He added that

a move from the City Hospital to the Royal Hospital would be a retrograde step.

We heard a great deal about a “seamless service” in the debate on the Further Consideration Stage of the Health and Personal Social Services Bill. The plea is being made here for a current seamless service, which would not be obtainable if the two units were to be separate.

I introduce that because when the project board sat down to look at maternity services, it found the issue of gynaecology so difficult that it left it for a future date. However, we cannot do that. All of us know and understand that if you need surgery, you should try to have as many of the people who are involved in those decisions as possible located on the same site.

We are talking about a women’s hospital. Let us not concentrate on the small number of babies who are sick but on the large number of women who give birth under normal circumstances and whose outcomes are predictable. It is clearly the case that there are a number of unpredictable outcomes in relation to pregnancy, and that is when you need neonatal services to be at their best. I remain concerned about the neonatal services at the moment, having been told that they were closed to outside admissions on three occasions in December. One woman was transferred to the Royal Victoria Hospital from another hospital on Christmas Eve. There were insufficient cots, and so she had to be moved again to the Craigavon neonatal unit. That is not good for our regional neonatal services, as they are being told that they are simply taking the overload. Why can they not take women with babies at other times of the year? We are sending very bad messages to the regional services outside the centre, which is supposed to be the centre of excellence.

It is no reflection on those working in the Health Service. It is because we do not have sufficient neonatal nurses. They are having to try to be innovative in the way that they deal with very sick babies in the intensive care unit at the moment.

Medical negligence cases remain an awful issue. Let us not have a Health Service that has to pay out huge sums of money for medical negligence. We saw in the budget for health and personal social services last year that over £3 million was paid out. Let us be forward-thinking and try to plan for these emergencies so that we have services in place where surgery can take place effectively and efficiently.

Ms Carmel Hanna has already outlined the issue of accident and emergency departments. It was extremely unfortunate that this was brought in as a separate issue and, as the judicial review pointed out, a rather irrelevant issue in the end. The consultants make the point that since accident and emergency has remained on the City Hospital site, and since gynaecology services are also located on that site, we should integrate and co-ordinate

them, and that it would be a disaster if we were to create isolated units elsewhere.

Another question is the biased and non-independent nature, not of the consultations but, initially, of the project board. If another one is ever established, it needs to be independent. There were three representatives from the City Hospital and nine representatives from the Royal Victoria Hospital, and it was chaired by the chief executive of the Royal Victoria Hospital. I am not at all disparaging of the roles of professionals in the Health Service. All I am suggesting is that there is a conflict of interest if you are the chief executive of one hospital and are attempting to make a decision on any site, move or merger. You cannot possibly be asked to do that if you are simultaneously putting in a business case for that to be on your own site. It is unfair to ask anyone to chair such a board and try to remain independent at the same time, never mind the fact that the numbers speak for themselves.

We have had the mistakes. Let us address them. They say that the meaning of silliness is to do more of the same and expect a different outcome. We cannot afford to do more of the same.

The other question is how much the judicial review of the Buick case and the more recent Hindes case cost. The figures are not based on any empirical evidence — I have asked those questions and am awaiting an answer. We know that it is expensive to take cases through the courts — those cases cost over £1 million. I am still waiting for a response from the Department. The Chairperson can confirm that when officials from the Department came to address us over a month ago, I asked for the figures. How often have we been taken to judicial review? We should not be letting the courts make these decisions. We should be attempting to be independent and basing decisions on clinical evidence and evidence from women, women’s groups, community groups, midwives and many others who are working at grass-roots level in the Health Service.

I am not just making a plea for an integrated service, which is the most important priority. We also need to avoid following the project team’s suggestion of separating pre-natal gynaecological services from post-natal services. That cannot be allowed to happen, because many gynaecological matters must be dealt with together. During the training of specialist surgeons in this field, no distinction is made between pre-natal and post-natal patients. Their expertise is derived from their experience in dealing with problems right across the spectrum.

When I read the judicial review I was also concerned about the breach of the need to be fair. This is a fairly damning indictment, and the issue must be addressed. There were neither notes, minutes nor records kept of crucial meetings. When we got devolution we promised that we would be accountable and transparent. Without

transparency, how can we expect action groups to be well-informed? We need women to be active in our constituencies.

Finally, we should move quickly down this road, because the issue does not just affect Belfast City Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital. It has implications for the Mater Hospital, Lagan Valley Hospital, the Downe Hospital and the Ulster Hospital as well. In response to Mr McCarthy's final points, I must say that the vote should not have been described as being split between Nationalists and Unionists. I also voted in the Lobby, as I did on the Committee, for the Jubilee to remain open, yet Members know that I am from the Catholic community and am so perceived. It is time to move forward on this issue.

I will be concerned if the private finance initiative is to play a predominant part in this decision-making. As Members know, on previous occasions I have spoken out about introducing private finance into the National Health Service. If that is to be a part of the decision on a new maternity unit, I would like a debate on the matter to take place now rather than at the very last stage.

Mrs Carson: As a representative of a rural constituency without a maternity service, I support the motion, which calls for the retention of, or improvement work on, maternity services in Belfast. It should be carefully noted by the Minister, since the issue of Belfast's maternity services will not go away until it is addressed in a consistent manner. Northern Ireland and Belfast need a good maternity hospital. The saga of maternity service provision in Belfast will continue following the Minister's decision to issue a directive in favour of the Royal Victoria Hospital and her claim that the decision was her prerogative, which she said could not be challenged. This decision flew in the face of the recommendation of the Health Committee, which favoured the Belfast City Hospital as a site for the maternity hospital. The decision also highlighted the derisive way in which the Committee was treated by the Minister.

However, it transpired that the Minister's prerogative could be challenged in the High Court. I am not surprised by the Department's and the Minister's shabby treatment of Belfast's maternity services, for my area of South Tyrone has also been treated shoddily on this subject. My constituents in Fermanagh and South Tyrone received countless promises that the removal of services was merely temporary, yet every single promise to restore services was broken.

South Tyrone Hospital was promised a midwifery-led service, and it is still waiting for it. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has failed to address this very important part of the Health Service quickly, and this failing must be addressed immediately. The Department and the Minister are failing in their duty to ensure the equality of treatment envisaged in section 75 and schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

3.00 pm

The relationship between the Department, the health boards and the trusts is called into question — it has always been rather too convenient in the past to keep passing the buck. The Minister must take responsibility for the failure to provide adequate maternity services for the people of Northern Ireland, in the Belfast area and, particularly, in my area of South Tyrone. I would welcome the return of maternity services there.

This sorry affair of the problems of the Belfast maternity service is merely the tip of the iceberg, and it must be resolved quickly. This is too important an issue for the Minister to make a decision on it without referring to her Committee, the Executive and the Assembly. She and her Department are not infallible. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Dr Hendron, who, I think, will be speaking as a Back-Bencher rather than as Chairperson of the Health Committee. Is that correct?

Dr Hendron: It is sort of half-and-half, Mr Deputy Speaker.

First, I apologise for not being here for the beginning of the debate. I understand and respect the motion put forward by Mr Berry. I have spoken on this subject on many occasions in the Chamber, in the House of Commons and in other places over the last few years. I have not had an opportunity to study the judgement that this debate is really about.

This debate is a very important one, and the matter should have been resolved long ago. People talk about empire-building, and I do not want to point the finger at any one person or hospital. However, the senior staff of the Royal Maternity and City Hospitals could have had this resolved years ago. Nevertheless, as this important matter will be coming before the Health Committee, I shall make no further comment until then.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Deputy Speaker. Dr Hendron has caught me unawares — he was so quick. I was trying to concentrate on the next debate. I am getting a beating for this morning, Joe!

The decision on the site for a new hospital for women and babies throughout the North has been due for a number of years, and the building of a new site will delay that decision. As a member of the Health Committee who voted in favour of the Royal Victoria Hospital, I believe that my decision then was the right one, and I uphold it. I based that decision on much evidence mentioned earlier today but also on presentations from a number of groups, in particular those from the Shankill Women's Centre and the Falls Women's Centre. They all pointed to the need for proper maternity services, and they indicated that the Royal was the best option.

The Minister made her decision based on what were the best options for parents and babies and on the clinical evidence which was presented to her. I would like to

point out that the judicial review and the judgement were based on the consultation process and not on the decision on where maternity services should be placed.

After taking up her role in the Department, the Minister visited both the Royal and the Jubilee. We must give her credit for the consultation process she was involved in, because she did speak with interested parties herself.

A Member spoke earlier about the report and the recommendations from Dr McKenna and Prof Donaldson. It was pointed out that this acute hospital reorganisation project, which was set up in 1994, and headed by Dr McKenna, made 28 recommendations, 27 of which were accepted by both the City Hospital and the Royal. A second report was commissioned, chaired by Prof Donaldson, and he concluded that to provide the best possible services, maternity and paediatric centres should be side by side.

As Mrs Carson and John Kelly pointed out, we need to emphasise that this is the new regional maternity centre for everyone. We are talking about hospitals whose sites are 1.5 miles apart, and rural people do not have such a luxury. Not all Committee members endorsed the recommendations; the vote was 7-4.

Members have already spoken about confusion in the Health Service. This ongoing saga of maternity services in Belfast has added more confusion, not only to the staff but also to mothers and babies and families. As Monica McWilliams said, this comment is not intended as an attack on staff. Staff should be spoken of highly and congratulated at every opportunity for the work they do in maternity services.

I ask the Minister to take on board not only the views of the Assembly and the Health Committee but those of everyone involved in the consultation exercise. I am confident that she will do so. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Ní gá domh a chur i gcuimhne do Theachtaí gur ceist í seo atá á plé gan réiteach le roinnt blianta. Leoga, bhí sí á plé i bhfad sular bunaíodh an Tionól — rinne Mr Berry tagairt dó sin nuair a bhí sé ag moladh an rúin.

Nuair a rinne mé an cinneadh ní raibh ar m'aird ach leas na mban, na máithreacha agus na leanaí. Tuigim go maith an tábhacht a bhaineann leis an chinneadh seo a dhéanamh mar is ceart. Tá an t-ospidéal máithreachais cónasctha barrthábhachtach do Bhéal Feirste agus, mar ionad réigiúnach máithreachais, don Tuaisceart ina iomláine. Ní cinneadh é seo a rinne mé i mí Eanáir seo caite gan machnamh a bheith déanta agam ina leith.

Is é a bhí ar intinn agam mo chinneadh a bhunú go daingean ar bhreithniú cúramach gairmiúil ar gach — gach — eolas cuí. Agus mé ag cuimhneamh air seo, bhain mé úsáid as na freagraí mionchruinne a fuarthas mar chuid den bhabhta mór comhairliúcháin a rinneadh i bhfómhar na bliana 1999; bhuail mé leis na príomhghrúpaí

tacaíochta don dá aonad máithreachais; chuir baill foirne an dá iontaobhas ábhar faoi mo bhráid agus labhair mé leo; agus thug mé cuairt ar an dá ospidéal.

Chuir mé cinntí anailís neamhspleách PAFT san áireamh go cúramach; rinne mé breithniú ar dhá bhreithmheas eacnamaíocha a coimisiúnaíodh go speisialta; agus bhain mé leas as a lán anailíse agus comhairle gairmiúla mionchruinne ó mo Roinn féin. I ndeireadh na dála, bhí sé de bhuntáiste agam go bhfuair mé comhairle ón Choiste Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí a tháinig le chéile dhá uair i mí Eanáir le freagra a ullmhú ar iarratas uaim go gcuirfeadh sé a thuairimí ar an bhealach chun tosaigh faoi mo bhráid.

D'aontaigh muid gur ghá cinneadh a dhéanamh go práinneach; d'aontaigh muid gur ghá ospidéal máithreachais nua a fháil in áit ospidéil athchóirithe; d'aontaigh muid gurbh é an t-aon rogha idirlinne seirbhísí máithreachais a chónascadh san Ospidéal Ríoga Victoria; agus d'aontaigh muid nár cheart réiteach buan a dhéanamh den réiteach eatramhach. Níor aontaigh muid ar phointe tábhachtach amháin: an áit inar cheart an t-ospidéal nua a lonnú. Chuir an Coiste in iúl domh nach dtiocfadh leis teacht ar aon intinn faoi ach go raibh a bhunús i bhfách le hOspidéal Chathair Bhéal Feirste.

Thomhais mé agus mheáigh mé gach — gach — eolas a bhí ar fáil agam agus mé ag teacht ar an chinneadh a rinne mé. Is í sin an fhreagracht atá orm mar Aire. I ndeireadh na dála is é a bhí mar threoir agam nuair a rinne mé an cinneadh measúnú eolach a bheith déanta agam ar cad é ba sábháilte agus a b'fhearr do mháithreacha agus do leanaí.

I need not remind Members that this issue has been running unresolved for a number of years. Indeed, it predates the establishment of the Assembly, and Mr Berry made reference to its being a long saga during his opening speech. In taking this decision, my sole focus was the welfare of women, mothers and babies. I well understand the importance of getting this decision right. The combined maternity hospital is vital for Belfast and as the regional maternity centre for the North as a whole. When I made this decision in January of last year I did not make it lightly. My intention was to firmly ground my decision on a careful and professional consideration of all the relevant information. With that in mind, I drew on the detailed responses to the major consultation exercise undertaken in autumn 1999 — an exercise that was completed before I took office as Minister.

I met the main support groups for both maternity units; I received presentations from, and spoke to, the staff of the two trusts; and I visited both hospitals. I also took careful account of the findings of an independent policy appraisal and fair treatment (PAFT) analysis. I considered two specially commissioned economic appraisals, and I had the benefit of a great deal of detailed, professional analysis and advice from my Department.

Finally, I had the advantage of the advice of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee. The Committee met twice in January 2000 to draw together a response to my request for its views on the way forward in that year. We agreed that a decision was urgently needed; we agreed that a new maternity hospital was required, rather than a refurbished one; and we agreed that, in the interim, the only practical option was to combine maternity services at the Royal. We also agreed that the interim solution must not become the final solution.

The location of the new hospital was the one significant area in which there was disagreement. The Committee advised me that it could not reach a consensus view, but it reported a majority vote in favour of the Belfast City Hospital site. In reaching my decision, I measured and weighed all the available information — that is my responsibility as Minister. In the final analysis, my decision was guided by my informed assessment of what was safest and best for mothers and babies.

Immediately following my decision, the Royal Group of Hospitals began work on a business case for a new maternity hospital on the Royal Victoria Hospital site. The trust had intended to bring its outline business case to the Department by the end of this month — January 2001 — but, following the court's ruling, work on this has been suspended.

When an issue such as this ends up in court, it is inevitable that plans will fall behind schedule and that there will be delays. In the debate today, Members have repeatedly spoken of the delay. I appreciate the problems arising from the continuing uncertainty over the location of the new maternity hospital, and I want to take this important development forward as quickly as possible. That is why, on 18 January, I announced that I have initiated work on the preparation of a further consultation process to help me bring about the required new maternity hospital, and, once again, I will be guided by what is best for women, mothers and babies. I have asked that this work be taken forward as a matter of urgency, with a view to getting further consultation under way in the spring.

I have some reservations about the basis of the judgement that overturned my decision, and I have thought long and hard about taking this matter to appeal. I am, however, particularly concerned, as are those who spoke today, about there being further unnecessary delay in developing the new maternity hospital, and I have concluded that to appeal that court ruling would not be in the best interests of those who rely on these services. I accept the advice given by Members in this debate that a new maternity hospital is needed soon. It is my responsibility, as Minister, to take this matter to a successful conclusion, and that is what I intend to do. That is important.

3.15 pm

It has been suggested during the debate that the letter from the Committee to me in January 2000 led me to

make an early decision. However, the need for an early decision had already been signalled well in advance of the letter. Everybody I met, including the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee, pressed me for an early decision. There is also a suggestion that the gynaecology issue has been driven by a decision of the Royal Victoria Hospital committee. That was not the case, as was made clear in the course of the judicial review. The decision to separate gynaecology had been taken by a previous Minister.

The separation of obstetrics and gynaecology was also raised. There was talk of the separation of pre- and post-pregnancy gynaecology and references to the proximity to intensive care and the factor of accident and emergency. In essence, obstetrics and gynaecology, although provided by the same individuals, are provided to largely separate groups of women. Gynaecology services are provided to women when not pregnant — or during the early stages of pregnancy — and obstetric services are provided to women who are pregnant.

Regarding the reference to separate populations of non-pregnant women, some will never become pregnant but may require gynaecology services. Others may require post-pregnancy treatment.

As regards the proximity to intensive care, both sites have access to that and this factor could not weigh in favour of either. With high-dependency beds in a combined maternity unit, it is thought that very few women would require an intensive care bed.

Ms McWilliams: Does the Minister agree that the point about high-dependency beds was raised during the judicial review? A distinction was made between a high-dependency unit and an intensive care unit. The judge argued that there had been a slight bias in the Department suggesting that a better option might be put forward and, indeed, that a high-dependency unit could have been provided on either site. The judge suggested that, with the use of the word “better”, there was a bias and we would be better concentrating our attentions on the potential of some women dying, even though it is a small number. Hence the requirement for intensive care as opposed to high-dependency care.

Ms de Brún: As both sites have access to intensive care services, and will therefore be able to cater for people who need those services, the factor could not weigh in favour of one site or the other. The high-dependency beds in a combined maternity unit would be able to cater for the larger number of women who would not need access to intensive care services.

On the question of the new factor of accident and emergency, I am committed to real consultation and I do expect that issues will arise out of the process. The suggestion that accident and emergency was the overriding factor, as opposed to just being a factor, is not correct.

Its inclusion reflected that it was a factor and that it could make a difference to some women.

A significant number of serious conditions in early pregnancy, particularly ectopic pregnancy, may give rise to problems before a woman is aware that she is pregnant. Many women will present at an accident and emergency unit and not an early pregnancy clinic.

The link between gynaecology and oncology is important, as are other linkages. The care of women with cancer involves urgent, but planned, treatment in the main, involving multidisciplinary teams. These cases are quite different from the emerging gynaecology cases that are presenting through the accident and emergency department and coming in as emergency gynaecology cases.

As regards the urgency of maternal versus neonatal conditions, the availability of relevant expertise and facilities for mothers differs little between the two sites. The availability of the relevant expertise and facilities for sick newborns, however, differs significantly.

With regard to the withdrawal of neonatal services by paediatricians, the neonatal service at the Jubilee was inspected by the relevant Royal College, which determined that the service was not suitable for training junior medical staff, thus rendering it non-viable. That drove the change. It was not and cannot be for me as Minister to challenge the clinical advice of the Royal College.

Ms McWilliams: Surely that same decision could have applied to the Mater and to many other hospitals. We do not have a new maternity hospital, and it might have been expensive in the interim to pay for the extra services to be placed at the Jubilee, but surely that would have been a better solution than closing the Jubilee at that stage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Had the Minister finished?

Ms de Brún: No. I gave way to Prof McWilliams on that point.

With regard to the Royal College's decision at that particular time, Prof McWilliams will be aware that, following that inspection, the Belfast City Hospital made significant efforts to make good the difficulties that had arisen and to overcome the points raised, and was not able to do so. Had it been able to do so, there might have been a different outcome.

As regards the question of private finance, as with any major capital development, the first stage is the submission of a business case for approval by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Finance and Personnel. I have already dealt with what has happened with that in the interim.

There is a comprehensive business case approval process in place that ensures, as is demanded in this case, that there is no presumption that private provision is better than public or vice versa. Objective assessment of all

available options is required. Any agreement for the building of a new hospital will be subject to this process.

In setting in motion a new consultation process, it is important that I state publicly for the record that I am approaching this issue with an open mind. I will approach this decision as I would any other: in a totally professional manner. I am determined that the new process should be both open and transparent. It must take careful account of the legitimate concerns of all those with an interest in this development.

With that in mind, the team developing the new consultation process is arranging to meet the interested parties in the coming weeks to listen to their views and ideas on how the consultation should be carried out. My intention is to issue a fresh consultation document in the spring. This document will provide an opportunity for all those with an interest in this matter to register their views and contribute to the shaping and development of the new service.

Of course, the process will be the subject of detailed equality proofing in accordance with the current legislation. In taking this matter forward, I am more than happy to give due weight to the views of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee and to the Assembly itself, alongside all the other inputs that, as Minister, I must consider.

In summary, my aim is to arrive at a decision that will provide the best and most sustainable maternity service for the women, mothers, and babies of Belfast and the North in the years to come. I am sure that Members here today join me in seeking to give substance to this long-overdue development.

Mr Berry: This has been an interesting debate on a serious issue. Members raised many points and issues. One of the first Members to speak, Dr Esmond Birnie, made a good point. He said that the mother's interest and well-being was most important. We all agree with that. That is why I proposed the motion. I did not do it on a political basis, which some have accused me of, but for mothers' interests right across this country and because of the seriousness of the issue. The well-being of mothers is certainly not advanced if 40 staff have left the Royal Victoria Hospital and services continue to close because of this decision. Mothers, children and babies are not being dealt with properly. Ms Carmel Hanna, who supports the motion, clearly said that, at times, it has been a waste of the consultation period. We can all recall the hours that the Health Committee spent debating this issue. Many good points and arguments were put forward.

However, I want to remind Members across the Chamber that a majority on the Health Committee voted in favour of siting maternity services at the Belfast City Hospital. It was not a one-party issue. Some Members, particularly Mr McCarthy from the Alliance Party, said that it was a Unionist/Nationalist argument. Carmel Hanna

and Monica McWilliams said that that was not the case. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to remind Members that Ulster Unionist, DUP, SDLP and Women's Coalition party members all voted in favour of the Belfast City Hospital site. Those Members who said that it was a Unionist/Nationalist argument were totally and utterly wrong.

As Carmel Hanna said, the new process must be completely open and accountable. Members such as Mrs Robinson asked why there were no notes or minutes concerning this decision. What are the Minister and the Department trying to hide? The Department, and the Minister in particular, will have to answer these questions, because she did not answer the questions raised in the Chamber today. Mrs Robinson said that the decision was suspect, immoral and clinically unsound. Those who support the Belfast City Hospital site stand by that conclusion.

One of the most interesting statements came from IRA/Sinn Féin Member Mr John Kelly. He said that I should not have said that there was a "monster of health" instead of a Minister of Health. I stand by those words. I would have so called any Minister who had made that decision. It came across quite clearly that some of these Sinn Féin/IRA Members — *[Interruption]*

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is the use of the word "monster" to depict another Assembly Member acceptable parliamentary language?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I would like to study that before making a decision.

Mr Berry: It came across clearly in the Health Committee and in today's debate that Sinn Féin/IRA Members are nothing but glorified spokespersons for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. On every decision made, they jump behind their Minister and say "Yes, Minister. No, Minister." It has come across quite clearly time and time again.

Mr John Kelly, the Sinn Féin/IRA spokesperson, was concerned that I raised the serious matter of filth in the Royal Victoria Hospital's corridors. That comment did not come from me; it came from the nurses who are working in the Royal Victoria Hospital. I will give you an example.

3.30 pm

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the Member had intended to quote from some source, he should have named the source in the course of his address. He should not be coming back now to make excuses for what he said.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I cannot accept that point of order. As the Member is making his winding-up speech he is entitled to make a quote. However, I ask him not to be repetitive.

Mr Berry: For security reasons I will not give information about the source, especially as it concerns the Royal Victoria Hospital. We are all well aware of what happened to my Colleague Mr Dodds and his children while in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

I will return to what I said about the filth in the Royal Victoria Hospital — I would say the same about other hospitals across the country if they were in a similar situation. Only last week a nurse informed me that a patient had vomited on the hospital corridor and that the vomit lay there until it was caked into the floor. I am not blaming the nurses or the medical staff, for I know they are under extreme pressure, but more must be done to deal with this problem. Those matters must be addressed and taken up with the Royal Victoria Hospital.

Once again, Mr Kieran McCarthy talked about the Nationalist/Unionist agenda and the arguments that were put forward. I spoke about that earlier and about the representation that was on the Committee at that time. Ms McWilliams said that decisions must be made as soon as possible. I agree, as, I am sure, do the majority of Members. Low morale is a great problem in both hospitals at present, and that must also be addressed. There are great pressures on the staff.

Joan Carson talked about the treatment of the Health Committee at the time the decision was made. I again state that the majority of the members of the Health Committee felt betrayed by the Department when the decision was made.

I have not heard the Minister say anything beneficial to this debate today. Her decision was bad for mothers and was bad clinically. The Minister is still unable to furnish a single rational, coherent and intelligent clinical argument in favour of her decision. It was bad politically, as the Health Committee and the Assembly voted for the Jubilee to remain open and for the maternity services to remain at the Belfast City Hospital. It was bad legally, because the High Court challenge on the Minister's decision, which rightly followed, demonstrated again that it was a flawed decision.

We have one firm conclusion today, and I will state it again. The Jubilee should never have been closed. The Assembly needs to take every step to regain control of the situation. This is a very important situation and it is not a political situation in the way it has been accused of being today. I tabled the motion today for the well-being of all mothers across the country, and I trust that every Member will support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give due weight to the determination of both the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee and the Northern Ireland Assembly on maternity service provision in Belfast in light of the decision of 29 November 2000 of the High Court.

GARDA SÍOCHÁNA

Mr Kennedy: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Secretary of State to make representations to the Government of the Republic of Ireland to conduct a public inquiry into suspected collusion between members of the Garda Síochána and the Irish Republican Army in the planning and execution of acts of terrorism.

I am grateful for and welcome the opportunity to raise this important topic. It is timely and important. May I say at the outset that I reject the amendment in the names of Mr Alban Maginness and Mr Attwood, who apparently are happy with internal inquiries. I do not believe that those inquiries would satisfy public confidence. An internal inquiry would be open to allegations of a political whitewash and, therefore, it is unacceptable.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

It is important to look at the historical background to the motion. Over many years, serious allegations have been made that members of the Garda Síochána have actively colluded with Republicans, particularly Republicans in the Provisional IRA. Evidence of that is emerging from books by respected journalists, Northern Ireland authors and individuals living in areas in which incidents such as the murder of RUC officers — many high-ranking — and the attempted murder of RUC, RIR and UDR officers have occurred. There has also been the murder and attempted murder of officials of the Northern Ireland judiciary system and private individuals. Those collusion allegations will not go away until they are properly dealt with.

I do not want to individualise cases. That would be improper given the heartfelt cases involved, and it would rekindle the pain felt by many families. I am not interested in politicising items of this nature. Those events have taken place, and they must be investigated.

It is clear that incidents of this nature could not have taken place without the involvement of Garda Síochána officers at some time. There is very clear evidence that garda stations in the north County Louth area and their operational material were used to pinpoint the movements of RUC officers, security personnel, officials of the Northern Ireland judiciary system and individuals, which ultimately led to their murder.

It is important to state the necessity to hold an inquiry into the activities of rogue garda officers who have stained the reputation of that force. I am not making a call for the abolition of the Garda Síochána. I want to place on record that I recognise the attempts made by garda officers at local level to help and assist the RUC and the security forces with murder inquiries and other

investigations and incidents. Had it not been for political interference by Government people in Dublin, there might have been more success over the years in getting information on many of these incidents. I know from personal experience about the willingness of garda officers and their dedicated attempts to eradicate IRA terrorism in the border area. Those attempts failed to get proper political support from the Governments of the day. Successive Dublin Governments and Irish politicians, at the very highest level, have much to answer for. With the recent release of cabinet papers in relation to the arms trial, we saw that very prominent senior politicians in the Republic had been involved in the establishment, arming and funding of the Provisional IRA. Arms were procured, and Republicans were made ready to wage war on the Unionist people of Northern Ireland.

We might usefully ask for an independent inquiry into that disgraceful chapter of Irish history. Of course, I, amongst others, remain completely astonished at the hypocrisy of the Irish Government and Irish Government Ministers in their unending demands for public inquiries into events that have taken place in Northern Ireland. I think they should clean their own barrel out in relation to events of this nature instead of insisting and ordering public inquiries into the affairs of another jurisdiction — this part of the United Kingdom.

It is clear that internal inquiries conducted by garda officers, who would, after all, be investigating their colleagues, will not satisfy public opinion, especially in Northern Ireland, particularly in the border areas. Therefore, I believe that this Assembly should call for a full-scale, independent and international commission to investigate these matters on an open, impartial and transparent basis. Let us have the truth — warts and all.

It appears that corruption is almost a way of life in the Irish Republic, certainly within the political class, with senior politicians constantly being investigated for unlawful and illegal actions. We have witnessed tribunals investigating irregularities in respect of land and property deals, beef and all manner of illegal behaviour by politicians there, yet they have the effrontery to lecture us on standards of policing here.

Allegations have been made — many of them by a very well-known and respected author, Mr Toby Harnden, in his recent book 'Bandit Country'. They have not been dealt with, and I think they warrant a full and impartial investigation. In view of the importance of this matter, such an investigation should be undertaken by a panel of international law experts, either from Northern Ireland or from other parts of the United Kingdom — perhaps even someone from North America. If it can be proved that there was collusion, as I believe it undoubtedly will be, then prosecution must follow. Let the Republic of Ireland authorities prove that they will not stand for

illegal behaviour on the part of their security forces. Let them prove that there is no hiding place for murderers, especially those motivated by sectarian hatred.

I believe that unless and until there is such an inquiry, it is not, and will not be, possible for the very open wounds suffered by Northern Ireland's people — particularly those who live in the border areas who are pro-Union and who have felt most keenly the murder campaign directed against them from people in the north Louth area and other parts of the Irish Republic, helped in some way by rogue garda officers — to heal. They will never be able to have a proper relationship with the Irish Republic or to trust the Irish Republic and its authorities.

3.45 pm

I look forward to a healthy and constructive debate. I will be interested to hear the reasoning behind the SDLP amendment, which essentially calls for an internal inquiry. I contrast that with their recent demands on aspects of policing in Northern Ireland. I will also be interested to see what, if any, response comes from the Members who represent active Republicans.

Mr A Maginness: I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after "Assembly" and add

"notes the current investigation into allegations made against certain Garda Síochána officers and that a report arising from the investigation is to be submitted to the Irish Government in the near future."

I was disappointed by Mr Kennedy's opening speech. I had expected much more detail on the allegations forming the basis of the motion. In fact, the motion itself is vague. There are no details or dates given, and the nature of the allegation has not been specified beyond simple collusion. It is fair to say that, while he has made sweeping allegations, he has been very short on detail. That is disappointing, because one would have hoped that Mr Kennedy would provide details for some of the arguments he put forward. Furthermore, he called for an international public inquiry. That is absent from the substantive motion. He said that he finds the present garda investigation to be unsatisfactory and he is critical of internal investigations, as, indeed, the SDLP would be. I support his view that they fall short.

Nonetheless, let us look at the totality of the situation and attempt a reasoned debate based on that. The SDLP's position is quite clear. In no way does it condone any cover-ups, nor would it be party to them. It wants to see the truth exposed and it wants to see those who are guilty of any crimes of collusion or co-operation with terrorist organisations brought before the courts, convicted and sentenced. The SDLP has nothing to hide, and it supports the most rigorous examination of collusion. It has always been committed to human rights and non-violence, and it views any collusion by any police force anywhere — including the Garda Síochána —

with abhorrence. It regards any collusion as monstrous, deplorable and quite unacceptable.

In the past, it has been alleged of two garda officers that they colluded in some way with the Provisional IRA in the murder of judicial figures, their families, at least two senior RUC officers and some other serving members of the RUC.

This forms the basis, the kernel and the very centre of the present motion. These allegations have been brought to the attention of the Irish Government and, in particular, to the attention of the present Minister for Justice, Mr O'Donoghue. It is a matter of public record, particularly inside Dáil Éireann, that he views these allegations with deep concern. His attitude has not been one of dismissal or of cover-up. There has been an intensive investigation by the Garda Síochána.

I might add that that investigation involved not only the garda but the RUC. The RUC investigated allegations made in respect of incidents that took place in Northern Ireland, and the Garda Síochána investigated those which took place in the jurisdiction of the Republic. Those allegations related to incidents that occurred in the 1980s and the 1990s. The two police forces, therefore, co-operated closely on the investigations.

As a result of those investigations there was no — I use the term advisedly, and it was used by the Minister — tangible evidence uncovered to show that information was passed by a garda informant, or informants, to the Provisional IRA.

Subsequent to that internal investigation by the Garda Síochána, similar, or the same, allegations emerged. Once again, these were raised in Dáil Éireann and, once again, the Minister for Justice viewed them with deep concern and dealt with them very seriously indeed. As a result of representations made inside and outside the Irish Parliament, he ordered fresh investigations into the allegations. He regarded them as raising issues of the utmost seriousness. He said that their repetition in the media caused understandable concern, North and South, and he was committed to finding the truth in relation to them. He said — and repeated — that, even though there was no tangible evidence to substantiate the re-emergence of these allegations, every effort must be made to assure, and to reassure, the public, both North and South, that they had been thoroughly investigated. The Garda Commissioner was therefore asked to appoint a senior officer to examine the files and to further investigate the allegations. That appointment was made.

We should await the result of that investigation from the Garda Síochána before calling for what is central to this motion today — a public inquiry into those allegations.

My party and I hope that the investigation will be successful in establishing either that there is nothing to the allegations or that there is substance to them. If there has been collusion between members of the gardaí and

the Provisional IRA, we hope that evidence sufficient to bring to prosecution those people who committed such offences — and offences they are — can be established and that those people will be brought to court and prosecuted for their crimes. That is my hope in relation to that investigation, and I hope that, ultimately, it will be successful.

If the investigation does not unearth sufficient evidence to establish the basis for a prosecution, yet does establish that there was an element of collusion that needs to be properly and further investigated, then at that stage we should consider taking the course of action contained in the motion. We should consider the establishment of a public inquiry to examine at those allegations.

That position will be reached when there is at least *prima facie* evidence to indicate that some collusion took place in the 1980s and 1990s. The SDLP's present position is that, in the absence of tangible evidence of collusion between the gardaí and the Provisional IRA, it is premature to call for a public inquiry. We are therefore not in a position to recommend one.

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

Mr A Maginness: We have brought forward this reasoned amendment, which does not rule out an inquiry in the future. It does say that we should wait for the gardaí's report and the result of the reinvestigation before calling for a full public inquiry.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before we move on, I remind Members of Standing Order 68, which refers to matters that are sub judice, and in particular paragraph 68(6). I will rule out of order any reference to specific incidents or individuals. The category of incidents that Mr Maginness gave is acceptable. I will judge each point as it arises.

Having considered the number of Members wishing to speak, I ask Members to restrict their remarks to no more than five minutes each.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I congratulate Mr Kennedy for tabling this motion. It is right and proper that he call on the Secretary of State to insist that the Irish Government conduct an independent public inquiry into the murder of individuals and into the allegations of collusion between the Garda Síochána and the Provisional IRA.

If we want to have justice issues in the Province and across the world addressed, someone has to drive the matter forward. All that Mr Kennedy's motion asks is that the Secretary of State take up the reins and press the Irish Government. That is perfectly right and proper.

What is appalling is the woeful statement from the SDLP to the effect that its amendment is reasoned. Reasoned amendment my foot, Madam Deputy Speaker. What we heard from the SDLP today was sanctimonious claptrap. Its amendment just about notes that the sun

rises in the morning and sets in the evening. It does nothing else. The amendment does not address the issue in any proper or scrupulous way. If that is what Mr Maginness calls an intensive investigation, I should hate to see what he would call a failed investigation. The SDLP has today washed its hands of the human rights of people who have been murdered and butchered on this island by the Provisional IRA. That is the action that the SDLP has taken.

Some time ago a journalist by the name of Kevin Myers wrote in 'The Irish Times', in the 'Irishman's Diary' column, words that today come back to haunt the SDLP, because they are right and probing: while

"Nationalist Ireland is happy to point accusingly at complicity-with-terrorism in the RUC, it is strangely silent when it comes to confronting similar betrayal of duty in the ranks of the Garda Síochána."

4.00 pm

I was astounded by the SDLP's effectively moving a wrecking motion. It is sanctimonious claptrap for it to refuse to allow this motion to go forward and to attempt to wash its hands of it, taking inaction as opposed to action.

Toby Harnden has been mentioned, and I mentioned Kevin Myers, who wrote at length about well-placed moles within the Garda Síochána. He indicated that one individual betrayed sensitive security details to the IRA for 12 years so that it could murder members of the RUC, judges and families travelling to Northern Ireland.

I understand your ruling, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I will try to stick scrupulously to it.

The details of the mole are well documented. Essentially, he has acted with impunity since 1985. In May 1985 four officers were killed, one of whom was a 21-year-old woman named Tracy Doak. The extraordinary thing about this murder was that the Garda Síochána alone could have known about the movements of the RUC vehicle that day. Subsequently, there was no investigation or internal inquiry — there was nothing but public procrastination by the Garda Síochána.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I warn the Member that he must be take great care to avoid prejudicing the outcome of any proceedings that might take place. He is sailing very close to the wind on this issue.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The likelihood of any investigation taking place is a joke, but I understand your ruling.

The issue is this: for years this mole betrayed material to the IRA. There were 12 specific cases — the Doak case was one; the Justice Gibson case was another.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have ruled that mention of specific cases will be out of order. You are out of order in mentioning these cases.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Twelve cases — involving judges, families, a seven-year-old boy and a number of others — have been brought to the attention of the Irish judiciary and the Irish authorities. Their inaction and their engagement in cover-up instead of correction is a national scandal that has not been addressed. Today the SDLP is backing that failure to address these matters.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Please draw your remarks to a close.

Mr Paisley Jnr: It is a joke for the SDLP to come to the House today and speak about its commitment to human rights. The SDLP's commitment to human rights has been found desperately wanting in the House this afternoon.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I will make a few brief points. I do not want to detract from Mr Kennedy's reasons for moving the motion, but I will not be supporting it because it is a very narrow one. Mr Kennedy has presented absolutely no evidence to back up his arguments, other than the kind of dubious speculation to be found in certain cheap books and magazines. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that Mr Kennedy and other representatives have very serious concerns about what has happened in and around their constituencies. They have every right to raise these concerns.

My concern is that the proposed amendment is of no substance, for it does nothing but affirm that we note that an investigation is taking place. Over the years, quite a number of members of the Garda Síochána have not only been charged and convicted but served time in prison for passing on information. That is a matter of public record. My main concern about today's motion is that it does not go nearly far enough.

There has been clear and compelling evidence over the years — and in more recent times — in relation, for example, to the Dublin/Monaghan bombings, which obviously rank as one of the greatest tragedies on this island. Compelling evidence has been produced, and it suggests that, at the very minimum, there was at that time, and subsequently, collusion between senior members of the Garda Síochána, the RUC and Loyalist paramilitaries. We raised this matter with the new Secretary of State yesterday morning.

My only real point is that I would prefer it if we were dealing with a motion which called for a full, independent, international inquiry into all these allegations of collusion on this entire island which have involved Governments from both the Irish and the British sides of the border.

This cannot and must not be allowed to escape the public's attention. Therefore, I will not be supporting Mr Kennedy's motion. I respect his right to move the motion, but it is far too narrow. I would be more in favour of an opportunity to debate the whole range of allegations of collusion, which has caused untold damage and has taken

the lives of untold numbers of people across this island. I would like to see an inquiry into these allegations.

Mr Neeson: I am sure every Member welcomes the interception by the Garda Síochána in County Cork of four suspected dissident Republicans with guns in their car. This incident highlights the continuing threat from dissident Republicans.

The motion illustrates Members' genuine concern about incidents in the past. Collusion on the parts of the security services with terrorists, and even suspected cases of such activity, north or south of the border, is a very serious matter.

There have been many calls over the years, and in recent times, for independent and international inquiries into the events of the troubles as a whole. But it must be remembered that there have been over 3,500 fatalities during the troubles, and many more thousands have been maimed for life, including civilians, police and Army personnel and even the Garda Síochána. We must ask ourselves where we draw the line.

It is vital that every victim of the troubles be remembered. It is important that truth and justice prevail, but we must also look to the future of Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland. Over the years the Government of the Republic of Ireland have lectured us in Northern Ireland on the subject of police accountability. I look forward to the day when the Assembly can debate the issue of police accountability in the Republic of Ireland. For many years Northern Ireland has had the Police Authority, which has provided substantial accountability when dealing with difficult issues in very difficult circumstances. While some groups have refused to take their seats on the board of the authority, the gardaí are simply accountable to the Republic of Ireland's Minister for Justice.

The Good Friday Agreement and the Patten Report have provided structures that will make the new police service even more accountable, particularly through the new police board. A new police ombudsman has also been appointed. The thrust of my argument is that there should be similar accountability in the Republic of Ireland. That is very pertinent to this debate. The bottom line is that if meaningful structures of accountability are in place, public inquiries, such as demanded today, would be superfluous.

Mr Roche: I congratulate Mr Kennedy and those who have already supported the motion on how they have put forward the case for a public inquiry. I find Mr Maginness's comments absolutely reprehensible. He argued that Mr Kennedy had not been specific, when you, Madam Deputy Speaker, quite rightly ruled that the nature of the subject matter that we are discussing precludes specificity.

He also put forward — *[Interruption]*

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Roche: I will not give way.

In opposing the motion, Mr Maginness proposed such conditional requirements for investigations which, if applied to the RUC, would never result in an inquiry. At the same time, the SDLP proposed an amendment in the House of Commons to what is now the Police Act 1997. If that amendment had been incorporated into the Act, it would have given a police board, containing members of Sinn Féin/IRA, virtually unlimited scope for indefinite investigations and, therefore, an indefinite witch-hunt of the RUC that stood between decent citizens in Northern Ireland and the terrorists who would be on that police board for 30 years.

Without being able to be specific on these matters, I want to go on to consider the background relationship between the political, judicial and security establishments in the Republic. That relationship, as it developed over 30 years, renders the sort of collusion Mr Kennedy wants investigated not merely probable or likely but virtually inevitable.

There are three main aspects to the relationship that developed between the Southern state and the Provisional IRA. The first is that the Provisional IRA was financed and established by the Fianna Fáil Government under Jack Lynch. There are two things of significance about the Government's role in establishing the Provisional IRA.

First, how far did responsibility penetrate into the Cabinet? How high did it go? That was discussed in the most recent book by Justin O'Brien, 'The Arms Trial'. The point that I think O'Brien is making in the book, though I have not had time to read it exhaustively, is that contrary to many perceptions that this activity within the Cabinet was confined to Mr Haughey, Mr Boland and Mr Blaney in conjunction with an elected Member of this Assembly who represents Sinn Féin/IRA, it was actually done with the knowledge if not the sanction of Jack Lynch, who was the Taoiseach or Prime Minister.

Secondly, why was it done? It has been well established for some considerable time — and this was very clearly stated by Conor Cruise O'Brien in his introduction to Martin Dillon's book 'The Dirty War' — that there were two basic considerations in the mind of those who manoeuvred this organisation and split the IRA at that time. One of them was the concern in the Republic about agitational politics, which were a characteristic feature of the IRA of the late 1960s under the leadership of Cathal Goulding. The idea was that if they could split the IRA and finance the armament of a section of the IRA, they could return it to the old physical force tradition that it had effectively abandoned or put into abeyance in the 60s.

This was one of the most cruel and cynical operations you could think of. The plan was to finance the physical force tradition and to focus that tradition on Northern Ireland in order to lift the weight of agitational politics and the possibility of instability — a real concern to the

security forces in the Republic in the late 1960s — regardless of the consequences. That was the point.

The other point is that within the judicial establishment in the Republic there was a total aversion to the extradition of terrorists for 30 years. For example, one warrant was regarded as invalid because a full stop was omitted at the end of a sentence. Margaret Thatcher is on record in her memoirs as saying that one of her reasons for signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement was to get further support on security from FitzGerald. However, she then realised that she would never get it.

I have to draw my speech to a close. Finally, I note that an enormous amount of arms was brought in and shifted around Ireland, which the security forces in the South never seem to get.

Mr Ervine: This is quite a shock to me; I agree with much of what Mr Roche has just said. I think that he has focused his mind on what the motion should have been focused on: the political attitudes of the Republic of Ireland.

4.15 pm

And it should have been focused not only on the political attitudes of the Republic of Ireland but also on the ambivalence of the Republic of Ireland. Anecdotally, it is very powerful to listen to IRA men talk about phone calls from Dublin asking "Did you get the sewing machines?" These phone calls were from Dublin to Derry.

There have been two instances of serious collusion involving the Government of the Republic of Ireland. And remember that every institution in the Republic of Ireland is under Government control. How could it be otherwise? The Republic's relationship with the Catholic Church must also be considered. Mr Roche alluded to one of the reasons for collusion but did not expand on it quite as starkly as I am about to.

IRA members were socialists, and because they were socialists they were dangerous, and they wanted to do away with them. So they armed the ones who bit the altar rails, appealing on the basis of the "pogroms" in Belfast and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. The Irish Government and the Catholic Church thought it legitimate to involve themselves, but the underlying reason was the destruction of a socialist movement.

Mr Alban Maginness says that there is not enough evidence to examine what might have happened in the Republic of Ireland. He probably has the same view about the United States — another good friend of his — which would never ever have abandoned a legally constituted and democratic Government to install the Shah of Iran. The United States would never have abandoned the perfectly legitimate Government of Salvador Allende in Chile to replace it with their own people and all the subsequent trauma and tragedy. Perhaps he is unaware that Governments are inclined to do these things. When he looks at an ordinary RUC man he immediately thinks

collusion — much the same as members of Sinn Féin do. I was disappointed that Alex Maskey did not come clean, own up and tell us truth about these circumstances. Sooner or later, the truth will out.

Back to Mr Maginness. When he looks at an RUC man he sees collusion, but he cannot imagine seeing that in the nice little Republic — the decent, nice little Republic. The Republic has more faith in itself than he has. In the Republic, a Government fell because of a paedophile priest. The Government have had their nightmares with a litany of public commissions and inquiries — and we laugh at them. Unionism says “Look at them, they’re very bad people. Look what they’re up to.” The people in the Republic get a bit fed up with it, but in effect what we are seeing is a nation coming of age, a nation where it is no longer sensible, rational or reasonable to sweep things under the carpet. It is an attempt to convince the world that they are the nice little people that undoubtedly Mr Maginness considers them to be. They tell some modicum of the truth, and then they build that modicum of truth into the whole truth. We have seen it played out with the brown envelope culture and land development issues. It was also to be seen in governmental and institutional attitudes in the Republic throughout the troubles. It can happen.

Mr Maginness and others need to come to terms with the fact that Unionism is perhaps saying “You know what it feels like”, because kindred spirits, whether we like it or not, often help each other. Since there is one encompassing entity called “Irish Nationalism”, how is it irrational for a Unionist policeman or soldier to think that it is in the best interests of his people to pass on a piece of information, whether it is legal or not? They have done it, and they have been found guilty. But the Nationalist Benches tell us that that would and could not happen in the Republic of Ireland, that there is no evidence of it. Are they not human beings, human beings unwillingly trapped in a conflagration? If it is fair and reasonable to presume that many Governments have behaved badly, why does Mr Maginness defend a Government that presumably has behaved as badly as any other?

Mr Berry: As an MLA who also represents the constituency of Newry and Armagh, particularly the south Armagh area, I support the motion. We can say that our constituents have suffered a great deal at the hands of the IRA. Our constituents have often come to us saying that they felt that there was collusion between the Garda Síochána, the Irish Government and the IRA. As the Unionist representative for that area, I thought that I would take it upon myself to bring the issue to the attention of the security Minister, Mr Adam Ingram. When I raised the issue with him he replied:

“You will no doubt have seen that Mr John O’Donoghue, the Irish Minister for Justice, announced on 13 April 2000 that a senior Garda officer would be appointed to re-examine the files on terrorist incidents in the border area in the 1980s and 1990s and to

specifically investigate allegations of collusion between the Gardai and the IRA.”

That is an insult to the people of this country.

The SDLP has called for investigations and inquiries into the murders of some of its constituents. Would Mr Alban Maginness appreciate an RUC investigation into the Hamill case? I am not saying that that is wrong or right, but I would like Mr Maginness to answer that question. I do not believe that a senior garda officer should be investigating these allegations. These are serious allegations of collusion between the gardaí and the IRA, and I think that means that the investigator should be independent. Collusion is not neutral, and the Irish Government should appoint someone neutral and independent. I would like Mr Alban Maginness to say whether he agrees with me on that.

Mr Kennedy and others have raised many issues today, and there should be an inquiry into the allegations that have been made. The Assembly should support a call for a public inquiry into these allegations of collusion between the Garda Síochána and the IRA.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Would the Member go further and agree that any inquiry into the Garda Síochána should be international? Does he agree that it should include people from Northern Ireland of the highest standing and professionalism, for example, senior RUC officers, so that they can cast their eye over these issues and allow people here to draw their own conclusions once the reports have been completed? Does he agree that there should be an international inquiry?

Mr Berry: I agree wholeheartedly with my Colleague that there should be a full international inquiry into these allegations. There have been few real calls for an investigation into the collaboration between the gardaí and the IRA during the troubles. We hear much of the investigations that Republican so-called politicians continually pursue. The unjust goings-on between the Southern Government and the security forces should be cause for an inquiry into these allegations. I support the motion.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support my Colleague Mr Maskey in saying that Mr Danny Kennedy’s motion does not go far enough. There should be an all-Ireland inquiry into the involvement of both the British and Irish Governments. It is ironic that Unionists should, at this time, make allegations of gardaí and IRA collusion when no shred of evidence has been produced to substantiate them. Ordinary gardaí have been charged and sentenced, but it has never been proven that the Garda Síochána hierarchy has ever been involved in collusion with the IRA.

However, an array of newspaper articles published in the course of recent months clearly points to collusion between the British Army, the RUC and Loyalist murder

gangs. Unionists would do well to focus on these, rather than running off on flights of fancy.

From the information gathered by the Stevens inquiry, and the leaks to the media which can be sourced to former British intelligence operations, it is clear that the undercover British Army unit — the Force Research Unit, better known as FRU — infiltrated, restructured and rearmed Loyalist gangs. Working in conjunction with the RUC, it made information relating to personal details of Nationalists available to Loyalists. It directed Loyalist murder gangs to specified targets in the Nationalist community and regularly ventured into the Twenty-six Counties on surveillance operations.

We then have the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. Nobody has ever been made accountable for those. These matters deserve our undivided attention and need to be properly investigated. Given the inability of Stevens's team to protect witnesses and their lack of authority in instructing former FRU operatives to give evidence, it is clear that important inquiries cannot be left to them.

Mr Ervine: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Where is the matter of the jurisdiction of the Irish Republic referred to in my Colleague's commentary? There has been a lot about FRU and the RUC, but none of it, or very little of it, has been about the jurisdiction of the Irish Republic, in which, of course, the Garda Síochána function. Any inquiry could only take place in that jurisdiction.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for his remarks. I ask Mr Murphy to return to the substance of the motion.

Mr M Murphy: I am sticking to the substance of the motion. It is a well-known fact, and recent newspaper articles say that FRU was part and parcel of the Monaghan and Dublin bombs.

I will bring my remarks to a close. We in Sinn Féin demand that this matter be brought to a public inquiry.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. My earlier ruling suggested that I was cautioning against mention of specific incidents and individuals, and I rule that out of order. I ask you not to refer to specific incidents.

Mr M Murphy: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

As my Colleague Mr Maskey said, we demand that a public inquiry should emphasise the parts played by both the British and Irish Governments in operations during the conflict in the Six Counties. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it not proper that Members declare an interest when taking part in discussion if they have, or have had, association with an organisation under debate?

Mr A Maginness: Does the Member mean the Garda Síochána?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am not aware of any such association. Members will, of course, declare interest.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will declare an interest. I was sentenced for membership of the Irish Republican Army, and I make no apologies for it. That is my declaration of interest.

4.30 pm

I have listened with interest, and I welcome the fact that Mr Kennedy has given us the opportunity to discuss this, but the motion could have been deepened and made more widespread in its context.

I listened with interest to Paddy Roche and to David Ervine, who were trying to give us a revisionist view of history and of what happened in 1969 and subsequently. I hold no brief for any Irish Government which, I believe, behaved in the most disreputable fashion in relation to the Nationalist community in the Six Counties over that time.

People talk about government, but let us go back to the 1960s, to the collusion there was then in the old Stormont Government, when Loyalist paramilitaries tried to depose and bring down Terence O'Neill, Chichester-Clarke and the late Brian Faulkner. Let us remember that the bombs that were exploded throughout the Six County area at that time were blamed on the IRA, when the IRA was non-existent.

However, now we know, by word of mouth, or to use the words of Mr Kennedy's motion, that there was "suspected collusion" between Members of the then Government and Loyalist paramilitaries. There is nothing new about collusion in the history of this part of Ireland or in any other part of Ireland. It was called co-operation at one time.

A Member: Get to the motion.

Mr J Kelly: I am coming to the motion.

For years, the Stormont Government and Unionist politicians asked for — pleaded for — co-operation between the security forces on both sides of the border, much to the disgust of Irish Republicans, and they got that co-operation. We were scathing of it; we condemned it; we asked that it should not happen, but it continued throughout the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s. However, no Member on the Unionist side is talking about the level of co-operation — or collusion, as we might call it — between the security forces and the various branches of Government throughout that period.

They are isolating one or two incidents and turning those into — in the words of the motion —

"suspected collusion between members of the Garda Síochána and the Irish Republican Army".

The only members of the Garda Síochána whom I know about in this regard are the ones who were brought before the courts, charged and put in prison. They were not suspected but arrested and put in jail.

There is a bit of a flight of fancy in all of this. People want to revise history. However, Mr Ervine cannot just write off what happened in 1969 as being the responsibility of the Catholic Church. It would be a travesty of history to write off the Catholic Church as placating those in the Republican movement who were eating the altar rails.

Mr Ervine: The second great conflagration was a division between the IRA and the Provisional IRA. At that point the decision was made to be anti-socialist, and the Irish Government and the Catholic Church had an involvement in the creation of the Provisional IRA.

Mr J Kelly: I was a member of the Provisional IRA, and I am still a socialist, so I do not see the relevance of that comment.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have had a confession in the House today that this man has been a member of the Provisional IRA. He should be arrested and put behind bars. That carries a sentence of seven years. If he still is a member of the Provisional IRA he should be put back behind bars this afternoon.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member declared an interest at the start of his presentation.

Mr J Kelly: As I said, I am talking about the past and not about the present, and I declared my interest at the outset.

This is a serious matter, however, and the debate and the remit ought to be more widespread. It should cover all aspects of what has happened in this part and the other part of the island, perhaps not in the last 30 years, but certainly since partition.

Mr Poots: It is interesting to speak after the previous Member. The Member often speaks for Sinn Féin/IRA. They appear to have difficulty getting Members to speak. The Member from Mid Ulster seems to be the spokesman on everything and the expert on nothing.

I support this motion. It is important that the public's attention be directed towards this matter. Many people, particularly in the Nationalist community, are living in a world where they like to believe that nothing wrong has ever been done in the Irish Republic — everything is good and above board. However, north of the border everything suddenly turns bad — for example, the police force and the Civil Service. Everything is under the terrible, corrupting influence of Protestants.

I went to a meeting once involving companies that were in competition with businesses in the Irish Republic. The businessmen said "They are better at telling lies than we are at telling the truth." With regard to this issue, the Republic of Ireland's Government and police force are better at telling lies than the Government and the police force in Northern Ireland are at telling the truth.

Along the border, there has been case after case of Protestants being murdered. Where did the perpetrators of those murders go? They went to the Irish Republic. How did they get to the Irish Republic? They went over a free border. Apparently, the Irish Government did not have the resources to man that border. However, when the BSE crisis broke out in 1996 the Republican movement in south Armagh was really upset because it cut down on their smuggling activities. They found it more difficult to smuggle oil, livestock and whatever else it was that they smuggled. The Republic can stop truckloads of cattle, but it could not stop the truckloads of gunmen who used to murder people and then cross the border to their safe haven in the Irish Republic.

We must also re-examine the Irish Government's position on extradition. The British Government signed the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement on the basis that there would be greater co-operation from the Irish Government on extradition. That co-operation was not forthcoming. It was farcical, and it did not act in the best interests of the community in Northern Ireland.

There was also an incident when the gardaí discovered arms in Donegal. However, instead of announcing that they had uncovered the arms, they placed them in smaller arms dumps so that they could announce a series of arms finds. They wanted the general public to think that they were more proactive in hunting down IRA terrorists than they really were.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you said at the start of the debate that Members could not name individuals. However, there are a number of cases that must be looked at. The murder of Lord Justice Gibson has to be looked at seriously, as do those of Ch Supt Harry Breen and Supt Bob Buchanan.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I made the ruling that, in the interests of caution, there should be no reference to specific cases. I rule the Member out of order.

Mr Poots: I was referring to specific cases, as opposed to individual gardaí who were allegedly involved. Although I have names, I was not going to go down the route of naming those people.

A senior gardaí officer has been appointed to examine some of these cases. I find that strange because when a senior member of the RUC is appointed to investigate a case, that is not good enough. In the case of Rosemary Nelson, for example, others from outside the RUC were brought in. However, that still is not good enough for the SDLP. It wants a public independent inquiry. Yet when we raise a case in the Irish Republic that concerns us, it is all right for a gardaí officer to conduct the investigation. It is not necessary to bring in outsiders, because it is satisfied with what the gardaí will report. The SDLP is being hypocritical and it has double standards on this issue, though, of course, this is not the first time.

Mr A Maginness: This has not been the Assembly's finest hour, in terms of debate. In many ways Members have not addressed the substance of Mr Kennedy's motion. I do not think that he intended the motion to be as wide-ranging as Members have made it, despite my initial criticism of his vagueness in framing it.

There has also been an element of tit for tat, particularly on the Unionist Benches, in addressing the motion and addressing the sort of arguments that I have presented, and I regret that. We have had, of course, the usual rant from Ian Paisley Jnr — we are used to that. He mistakes abuse for substantial argument in many of his contributions. However, I am not deterred by his abuse of me or of my party, for we are used to that.

I regret that we have not received the support of Sinn Féin on the amendment. Mr Maskey has told us that the amendment is of no substance. I believe that it is, because it points out to the House that an investigation is ongoing and that a report is awaited. On the basis of that report, I believe, and my party believes, that we can make a decision sometime in the future. That report should not be long in coming to fruition.

As I have said before, I hope that the report is successful in identifying people who can be prosecuted. If they can be prosecuted, that is the right way in which to deal with the matter — as it is in the Hamill, Nelson and Finucane cases. Prosecutions are more important than anything else.

With regard to Paul Berry's point, the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland is investigating the Hamill case, which we welcome. It is important for that case to be investigated. There is evidence in the Hamill case that — and I do not want to put it any stronger than this, activities — were going on within —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have stated that Members should not mention specific cases.

Mr A Maginness: All I will say is this: in relation to Hamill, there are matters that require investigation, and those matters are more than mere allegations. In this instance, the Garda Síochána is investigating allegations which to date have not produced tangible evidence. And one requires tangible evidence in order to form a *prima facie* case for setting up a public inquiry.

The SDLP has never asked for public inquiries in cases where there has not been some *prima facie* evidence of something wrong that requires to be investigated further, over and above a simple police investigation.

In the South we currently have a number of inquiries that are open, transparent and thorough. It is to the credit of the Southern political system that matters that have caused great public concern should be openly and transparently investigated in the most thorough manner possible. We should be crediting, and not ridiculing, those in the South who have brought that about. That is the type of political culture that we should have here.

If there is any substance to the allegations that have been made, and if it is merited, there will be a public inquiry in the South. However, the first point that I make is that the matter should be thoroughly investigated, and if there is evidence, there should be prosecution. If the evidence is insufficient to allow a proper prosecution, a public inquiry should be conducted.

The ebb and flow of this debate has not been an edifying experience. Allegations have been cast from one side to the other. Mr John Kelly seems to be stuck in an historical time warp.

4.45 pm

Mr Ervine: One presumes that if a Member castigates other Members for making a bad speech, he must believe that his own contribution was wonderful.

Mr A Maginness: I do not believe so. This has not been my finest hour either.

Mr J Kelly: A LeasCheann Comhairle, will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No. At least I addressed the issue and brought forth arguments. Unlike Mr Ervine, I did not indulge in some sort of attack on things that were not said. I do not mind being criticised for things that I say, but I do object to being criticised for things that I do not say.

Mr Ervine has a vivid political imagination, and he exhibited that today. He came up with some of the most fantastical suggestions that even a revisionist historian would refuse to support.

Mr J Kelly: Does the Member agree that if I am in a time warp, Mr Ervine is in an ivory tower?

Mr A Maginness: I think that the two Members have similar problems. They did not address the problem that was raised, quite properly, by Mr Kennedy. Rather, they indulged in historical debate, which was so threadbare that it was of no value to and destructive of good argument in the House.

Mr Ervine: That is unbelievable.

Mr A Maginness: The Member is entitled to his opinion, but he emphasised to the House insubstantial points that could not be justified by any proper historical analysis. Therefore, I rightly criticise the Member.

The amendment is a reasoned one, and the House should find it acceptable to hold its judgement until the result of the gardaí investigation is available. It will provide the basis for a prosecution or a public inquiry.

Mr Ervine: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I understand it, such a naming entitles a Member to a right of reply.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is the case.

Mr Ervine: My opinions are held not only by me, and the historical — or what Mr Maginness might have

described as hysterical — assertions that I am supposed to have made were also made by other Members, some of whom are members of the Republican movement. If references to the Shah of Iran and Salvador Allende constitute historical nonsense, I do not know what is not historical nonsense. The suggestion that they were committed by Governments that are perceived to be decent allows me to believe that another such Government might also behave in a similar way.

Nothing that I said was directed personally towards Mr Maginness or was historical nonsense, as he has unfortunately described it. I will check Hansard — and get it rewritten before it comes out in the morning.

Mr Kennedy: In spite of what Mr Maginness said, Members have had a reasonably informed debate. I am grateful to those Members who made contributions endorsing the motion. I wish to make a number of points about them.

Mr Maginness criticised the motion because there was no specific detail. I was conscious that, given the confines of this important debate, it would be unwise, and not permissible, to engage in naming individuals and referring to specific cases, so it was written in general terms. I do not share Alban Maginness's faith in John O'Donoghue, or in any Minister for Justice in the Irish Republic, who is clearly quite unwilling to authorise a fully impartial and independent review of these matters. The Irish Government clearly stand in the dock. Those who endorse their position stand in the dock with them, and it would appear that the SDLP wants to be there.

An internal inquiry is not an acceptable way to deal with these matters. Mr Maginness said he did not rule out an inquiry and he left it open that at some stage, perhaps the SDLP may press for an inquiry. That is at odds with his party's mandate as the defenders of human rights in Northern Ireland.

This party of defenders of liberty and of saints and scholars — and all manner of things — is clearly exposed today in that it does not, and cannot, accept that there was wrongdoing by members of the Garda Síochána or by senior members of the Irish Government over many years. I am grateful to Ian Paisley Jnr for giving the motion his active support. He brought — *[Interruption]*

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This day has been disrupted continuously by mobile phones going off. I ask for a ruling that mobile phones be left outside in a pigeonhole — with the guns.

Mr Kennedy: Mobile phones ought not to be in the Chamber. They ought to be taken out of service — “decommissioned” is another word for that — and we look forward to that and other matters too.

Ian Paisley Jnr did bear out the point — and the representations made by Nationalists here also bear it out — that they are in denial. Nationalism and the

Nationalist political viewpoint are in denial of much of what took place over the last 25 to 30 years. Republicans remain silent, or at least grudgingly acknowledge their role. If there is criticism of the SDLP — and I must say this very firmly — it is that it appears to be in serious denial of the events that took place in border constituencies. It was mass murder, assisted by rogue members of the Garda Síochána, yet the SDLP will not acknowledge it.

Mr Maskey tried, in some way, to introduce other elements and appeal that there had been wrongdoing for everybody, and so that would have to be investigated. It is a curious irony that any member of Sinn Féin should want an investigation, given their active participation in the murder campaign. I welcome and acknowledge Mr Neeson's acceptance of the concerns raised by the motion, and Mr Roche made a very good case that collusion was ultimately inevitable because of the actions of senior politicians. I can remember the words of Jack Lynch when he said that the Irish Government would not stand idly by. Those words clearly gave a mandate to individuals and members of organisations to put into effect a campaign that resulted in murder, particularly in the border area.

I must warmly commend Mr Ervine's speech. It was a very compelling and valuable contribution, and I suggest that Nationalists and Republicans read and inwardly digest it. I am also grateful for the contribution of Mr Berry; he is aware of the issues in his Newry and Armagh constituency.

Mick Murphy's speech was astonishing. He contradicted not just me but Alex Maskey, his party Colleague, and Hans Christian Andersen would have had difficulty with some of the arguments he brought forward.

John Kelly's confession was even more astonishing. They say that confession is good for the soul. I was not gratified by the confession of his membership of the IRA; that was very regrettable indeed. It is a new departure in boasting, and it is unacceptable that a Member of the House should proclaim — with some pride, it appears — that he was a member of the Provisional IRA, given its contribution to society over the past 30 years. I just wonder whether the register of interests that all Members are required to complete will include that, because it was a very clear admission and was acknowledged by the Chair.

Mr J Kelly: I said, in a jocose way, that I had to declare an interest — that I had been convicted of membership of the IRA. That is a matter of public record, not of any other type of record.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Hansard will show that his words indicated that he was, and is, a member of the Provisional IRA. If that is the case, the Member should reflect upon what he said to the House, and if his words are recorded inaccurately, he should withdraw them.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We will look at Hansard to see exactly what was said.

Mr McNamee: I was sitting quite close to the Member in question, and his words were that he was — was — a member of the Provisional IRA. I understand that Members are required to register their current interests, but that there is no requirement to register interests they had in the past.

Mr Kennedy: I am inclined to say that the Member for Newry and Armagh has compounded the earlier boast made by Mr John Kelly by confirming what Mr Kelly said, but no doubt Hansard will bear that out.

I share Mr Poots's criticism of the gardaí. While they have found arms and ammunition on many occasions, they have apprehended few terrorists, and that has been a concern for many years. They were happy enough to find the stuff, but they did not want to find anybody who might have been in charge of it.

Mr Maginness, in his winding-up speech, said that it was not the Assembly's finest hour. I share his view. It was not his finest hour. Given the confines of the debate, we could not deal with specific cases. I look forward to observing the SDLP's continuing interest in the findings of John O'Donoghue and to seeing how active it will be in the vanguard of public appeals for an independent tribunal or review.

5.00 pm

I want to say one thing regarding Mr Alban Maginness's reference to the Hamill case. It was an unfortunate contribution given the legal position of that case. Alban Maginness wanted *prima facie* evidence. I can produce no greater evidence than the blatant murder, with the collusion of rogue garda officers, of RUC men, UDR men, RIR men, senior members of the Northern Ireland judiciary and private citizens from both the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. That seems to be enough *prima facie* evidence to warrant a full independent inquiry. I believe that a compelling case has been made.

Clearly the evidence is available, and it must be seen to be dealt with in an open and impartial way. We should endorse the call for a full public inquiry, an international inquiry, headed by acknowledged experts. That should be established quickly, and it should be a priority for the new Secretary of State. In framing this motion, I am glad that I did not name the Secretary of State. That would have been unfortunate, given the run of events this week. It is incumbent on the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to address this issue seriously. Until this matter is fully exposed, it will never be possible to trust completely the security authorities in the Irish Republic.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Kennedy: Wrongdoing by rogue garda officers should not, and must not, be covered up.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At the beginning of this debate you made a ruling about sub judice matters, which set out the parameters for this debate. Are you interpreting the words "all courts"

in the Standing Order as referring to courts beyond this jurisdiction, or are you saying that the sub judice rule applies to courts in the United Kingdom only? From what appears to be your interpretation of the sub judice rule, Members were not allowed to cite cases that are under discussion in another jurisdiction. By your interpretation of that Standing Order, Members were deliberately prevented from raising certain matters. Perhaps you would comment on that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I was referring to all courts in this jurisdiction.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Perhaps you could then tell us why Members were prevented from raising cases that are not before any court in this jurisdiction. The motion does not ask for them to be brought before a court in this jurisdiction; it simply seeks to have an inquiry into issues in another jurisdiction.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That ruling was made in the interests of caution. At some stage those issues may be brought before a court in this jurisdiction.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Surely the ruling you have just given about what might happen in a court has nothing to do with any debate in this House or with any other debate in any other Parliament. This Parliament — or this Assembly, or whatever you want to call it — has only to take care with the sub judice rule when a matter might come to court in this jurisdiction, not anywhere else. For anybody to say that this House cannot discuss what happens in a court of law in France is absolute nonsense.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The rule refers to this jurisdiction. However, there are certain offences — for example, in border areas — which could be brought before this jurisdiction. I will make enquiries and make a ruling later today, or tomorrow if necessary.

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 36; Noes 46.

AYES

Alex Attwood, Eileen Bell, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Seamus Close, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Donovan McClelland, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Eddie McGrady, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Sean Neeson, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, John Tierney.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Fraser Agnew, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Joan Carson, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, David Ervine, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, Derek Hussey, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Maurice Morrow, Dermot Nesbitt, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, George Savage, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly negated.

5.15 pm

Main question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 32.

AYES

Ian Adamson, Fraser Agnew, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Joan Carson, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, David Ervine, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, Derek Hussey, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Maurice Morrow, Dermot Nesbitt, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, George Savage, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Alex Attwood, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Donovan McClelland, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Eddie McGrady, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, John Tierney.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Secretary of State to make representations to the Government of the Republic of Ireland to conduct a public inquiry into suspected collusion between members of the Garda Síochána and the Irish Republican Army in the planning and execution of acts of terrorism.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Mrs E Bell: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Executive to appoint a children's commissioner for Northern Ireland to highlight the interests of children in all aspects of Executive policy.

I said yesterday that my party and I were delighted to hear the ministerial statement that agreed in principle to the appointment of a children's commissioner. I hope that this debate will be looked upon as part of the consultation process that was discussed and will provide information on the need for such an appointment. It is not superfluous to have this debate today. It is necessary.

5.30 pm

The Alliance Party, and other parties, have campaigned for this appointment for some time now — as have nearly all the organisations which deal with various children's issues. Alliance first brought the subject up in 1988. We approved a motion at our party conference last year that urged the Assembly to make such an appointment, and we have asked numerous questions in the House on the topic, as have other parties.

Last year, after an initial meeting with several organisations that deal with children's issues, including Save the Children, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Children Need Fathers and the Parents Advice Centre, we became involved in the establishment of an all-party Committee on children's issues.

That Committee's first meeting was held in early January and was attended by various Assembly Members and representatives from relevant organisations. It was a useful meeting in which we agreed to draw up a plan to lobby on the many issues concerning children that have an impact on the 10 Northern Ireland Departments. We agreed that our eventual target must be a commissioner for children. We pledged to concentrate on a number of priority issues, such as funding and promoting children's basic rights. It was hoped that there would be a programme of essential topics for consideration when the commissioner was appointed. My Colleagues in the Assembly and I are delighted that after only one meeting, there is a good prospect that the commissioner will become a reality.

Why is it imperative to focus on children's rights? First, it is clear that we are failing our children, at all levels, on their quality of life.

During the years of the troubles, there were major efforts to protect children and help them to lead a violence-free life, but this was at times impossible. Nevertheless, a very effective network of children's welfare organisations developed. We can now expect these organisations to continue that commitment to ensure fair treatment for all children.

We can see the aims of the new commissioner as being: to promote the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995; to ensure that children's needs are prioritised in central, regional and local government, civil society, and to improve public attitudes to children; to influence law, policy and practice, both by responding to Governmental and other proposals and actively proposing change; to promote effective co-ordination of Government for children at all levels; to promote effective use of resources for children; to provide a channel for children and to encourage Government and the public to give proper respect to children's views; to encourage the Government to collect adequate data on the situation of children and to publish this data. The way forward must be based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

It must be remembered that the United Kingdom has an abysmal record of compliance with UN Directives on children's rights and has largely ignored the many European reports that have noted its shortcomings. Hence the need for an independent, non-political position. Legislation must include childproofing, and this must be done after child impact studies on all proposed legislation, so that priority is given to childhood needs by all Government Departments.

I am heartened by the Minister's statement that Northern Ireland children deserve no less than those in other countries, including those in the rest of the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland. It has been recognised throughout the civilised world that the safeguarding and upholding of children's rights is absolutely essential to the fabric and future of any community, and we cannot lag behind.

Legislation must be clear and transparent in this respect and should allow Government as a whole the flexibility to oversee individual Departments and their performance. The commissioner must be able to respond to individual complaints and be ready and able to deal with the many varied issues that will emerge from those consultations — child poverty, child abuse, children's health, education, housing conditions, and so on.

The new regime must include the role of an ombudsman for dealing with complaints and comments from children and young people, as well as their parents. In short, any legislation drawn up must be effective, caring and comprehensive. Children must be prime players in informing the commissioner's work and agenda, so that our aim of joined-up government can work in their favour.

The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 represents significant legislative change, and is one of the most important pieces of children's law in Northern Ireland. It brought together, for the first time, the law relating to

the care, protection and raising of children and addressed a wide range of issues from protection from sexual and physical abuse to providing support to keep families together in particularly difficult times. The Order is primarily concerned with the welfare of children and the help that state intervention can bring. Any new legislation should be drafted to complement this Order.

Unfortunately, Westminster has been slow in taking action, but has made some lofty comments. It said that the Government agree that it is desirable to have mechanisms that will keep issues of children's rights and safeguards clearly and firmly on the collective agenda, and that they will ensure that this important dimension continues to be emphasised in the policies of local authorities and all other agencies with responsibility for children, particularly when they are living away from home. In spite of those wonderful words, they went on to say that it would not be desirable to create a separate mechanism for children. Dare I say it again — Tony Blair and his Government are all mouth and trousers.

A Private Member's Bill for a children's rights commissioner has been introduced twice in Westminster, and I hope that that will be successful. The Scottish Parliament is considering a commissioner, and we are hopeful of that outcome, and similarly with the Welsh Assembly. In the Republic, the Dáil has drawn up a national strategy for children which calls for an independent commissioner and ombudsman.

Funding is important with any legislation. It is essential that the commissioner should have sufficient resources to carry out the many tasks within his or her remit. Up to now children's services have been short-changed. Moneys were not ring-fenced and were used to fund other schemes.

The children's fund has been mentioned, but it is hoped that specific funds will be allocated in line with the remit of the commissioner and the policies and actions that will have to be agreed. A comprehensive and relevant national agenda should be drawn up and the policies of that agenda should allow for the input of children. A formula for drawing up recommendations to the Executive should also form part of the commissioner's responsibilities, and the development of policies and practices for children should be clearly outlined.

I appreciate the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister's statement yesterday. It was significant, and it is hoped that the consultative process will be in line with proposals outlined in their statement and not take too long. It is also hoped that the consultative process will include the all-party Committee's comments on children's issues, as I detailed earlier. That would be a good way to start the consultative process.

We must ensure that children and young people form part of our vision for the future government and that

their rights and needs are included in all Government Departments' programmes. I am sure that the Assembly will press and influence, as the statement said, the direction that the Executive take on this issue, and today's debate is the first part of that exercise.

The Alliance Party has always considered that children are citizens from the moment they are born. It is hoped that the Assembly and the Executive will also hold that belief and ensure that the legislation is enacted as soon as is practically possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Members are aware that there is an amendment in the name of Mrs Bell.

Amendment proposed: Delete all after "Assembly" and add

"welcomes the intention of the Executive to bring forward legislation and to establish an independent commissioner for children for Northern Ireland, and believes that the responsibilities of such a commissioner should include responding to individual complaints, the formulation of policy to promote the welfare of children and carrying out child impact studies on all proposed legislation." — [Mrs E Bell]

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a short statement, and I am also grateful to my Colleague Patricia Lewsley for allowing me to speak in her turn.

It is not out of any disrespect to Mrs Bell or other Members who have a strong commitment to children's issues that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is not represented in the Chamber. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are out of the country visiting three countries in Europe, and that is why they are not here.

My Colleague Dermot Nesbitt and myself were not informed that this debate would go ahead. We understood that the motion would be withdrawn, and that is why we filled our diaries. We were unable to alter our commitments, and unfortunately I am unable to stay for the debate. However, I assure my Colleague Eileen Bell and other Members who have contributions to make that I will read Hansard very carefully. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has put a great deal of work into devising a children's strategy, and that work will continue. We are committed to it.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): With regard to the last comments, it is unacceptable that there is no Minister present in the House to respond. There are four Ministers in that Department, and it is not good enough that none of them can give the time to respond to the issue. I ask the Business Committee to examine that.

Many debates cannot be heard in the Assembly because Ministers are not available. Ministers are accountable to the Assembly, and it should be their first port of call. All

other commitments should be secondary to their work in the Assembly.

Mr Neeson: I assure Mr Poots that the Alliance Party did not make any indication that it was going to withdraw the motion.

Mr Wells: Does the Member agree that it is appalling that none of the four Ministers are present to respond to this debate? At least two are in the building and have not even deemed it worth their time to sit and listen to the contributions made. The hon Member for Mid Ulster, Mr Haughey, walked out as soon as he had made his point. He did not even stay to hear what you had to say.

5.45 pm

Ms McWilliams: I would like the Member, and indeed the proposer of the motion, to know that the Business Committee did have this motion on the agenda for today. At no stage was anybody informed that it was withdrawn. The First and Deputy First Ministers, in their absence, could have asked the junior Ministers to stay for this debate. It was on the Order Paper and was not withdrawn.

I think — and I assume that the Member feels the same way — that although there was an announcement by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister yesterday, it was a very limited debate. Undoubtedly, given that announcement, Members wanted to take the opportunity to put forward their views. It is extremely disappointing that the junior Minister is not here for the end of this debate. The Member might agree that that sustains the argument that we should have appointed a minister for children in the first place.

Mr Poots: I thank the Members for their contributions. I think that we are all singing from the same hymn sheet. I ask the Business Committee to look at this in general, because there is a problem with all Ministers not being available to respond to the different motions coming forward on various issues. The fact that there are four Ministers in this Department, yet not one of them is available, highlights that particular issue.

We all want to give our support to the proposal and the amendment on the basis that we are supporting the weakest and most vulnerable in society. The Programme for Government identified equality issues in relation to children and to older people. Children are certainly liable to be abused. They are the weakest, in the sense that many people will not listen to them. If a child makes an accusation against an adult, people tend to believe what the adult says before they believe what the child says.

I am not going to go into cases of sexual, physical and mental abuse. We hear it all on the television and read it all in the newspapers. What we hear and what we read is only the tip of the iceberg. A lot of abuse goes on that is not reported and that nobody is charged for. Those children suffer throughout their lives. Many children are being

brought up in intolerable conditions. The more we move away from the family societies that we had in the past towards situations where many couples are cohabiting, there is different parentage for the children. Young children are being brought up in homes where the father is not their father; the man of the house is not their father. There are more and more cases of abuse as time goes on because of that.

I would like the children's commissioner to have extensive powers. This debate gives Members an opportunity to set out what they believe the role of the children's commissioner should be. Yesterday we had a discussion, and I believe that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister actually moved to pre-empt this debate because they knew that there was a general demand across the parties for a children's commissioner. I believe that they moved to pre-empt it and that not much thought has been given to it.

What was put forward yesterday was that there would be a study of and a report on the appointment of a children's commissioner, and that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister would be looking at that situation with a view to appointing a children's commissioner. There was no substance as to what they themselves actually want to see. They are in listening mode, and have not actually developed anything themselves.

Now is the opportunity for Members of the Assembly to indicate what they want: what resources they want, what role and what powers the commissioner might have. I suggest that the commissioner should have an advisory role to the Ministers. He would have a pre-consultation role, both on legislation and on policies that are being devised by the different Ministers.

Such issues could include adequate play facilities; youth provision; child road safety, including traffic-calming measures, which would fall into the remit of the Regional Development Minister; school transport and safety, which is the responsibility of the Environment and Education Ministers; the amount of baggage acceptable for schoolchildren to carry, as often their health is abused by carrying so much equipment; social services, including paedophile registers and policies on child protection, fostering, adoption and children's homes.

We need to have a voice for children and to provide them with adequate resources. We need to give the office of children's commissioner some teeth — some power. We need a commissioner who will not be taken lightly by the Ministers and whose advice they have a duty to act on. Obviously there are financial implications for the Government of Northern Ireland, but we must investigate how we can provide resources and implement the suggested policies. I commend this amendment and this motion to the Assembly.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At the start of this debate the junior Minister — the

Member for Mid Ulster, Mr Haughey — made a statement. I gave him the benefit of the doubt that perhaps he had to nip out to deal with a message, and that he would return to listen to the rest of this debate. It is quite obvious that both he and Mr Nesbitt are within the precincts of this building but that neither of them has any intention of returning to the Chamber to listen to the other speeches that will be made on this very important issue. I see that as gross disrespect to Members of the House.

Do you, Madam Deputy Speaker, have any powers to compel the junior Ministers to come back into the Chamber and at least have the courtesy to listen to the points that are being made? I fully accept the point that they were not in a position to respond — they explained that — but at least they could come and listen, take notes and report back to the First and Deputy First Ministers.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have no powers to compel any Member to attend the Chamber. However, all the comments made by Members are on the record, including their disappointment and dismay.

Mr O'Neill: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for Members to continue a witch-hunt against junior Minister Haughey, who explained that he thought that this motion was going to be withdrawn? As a result, no provision was made. He then said very clearly that he would listen and read very carefully everything that was said. Can they not accept that, and end this witch-hunt?

Mr Wells: He is not here.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The junior Minister explained why he was unable to be here. However, it is on the record and Members are entitled to express their dismay.

Ms Ramsey: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Did the junior Minister speak before his Colleague Patricia Lewsley as a junior Minister or as a member of the SDLP?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The junior Minister spoke as a junior Minister. It was my choice that he should speak at that time.

Ms Lewsley: I am delighted that the Executive have demonstrated the high priority they place on the care and protection of young people in Northern Ireland with yesterday's announcement about the children's commissioner. Judging by the favourable public reaction, there is little doubt that this measure has been welcomed across the length and breadth of Northern Ireland.

I am also heartened that this announcement has been welcomed by all the main non-governmental organisations specialising in child protection in Northern Ireland. Like many of the parties here, the SDLP has been calling for a commissioner for children for some years. Northern Ireland has a population of approximately 500,000 people

under the age of 18. We need to have an independent body to look after their health, education and housing.

There is an unacceptably high level of child abuse here, and the number of young people affected by mental health problems is increasing. Children are entitled to the highest level of protection that society can offer, and the appointment of a commissioner would ensure that children's rights are given the utmost priority, by acting as a watchdog and compiling statistics specifically on issues affecting children. It is essential not only to ensure the proper protection of our young people, but to protect their human rights and promote their right to equality. The commissioner must be independent of the Government and must have a broad mandate to protect children's interests, thus making them more visible in Government policy structures.

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

Commissioners for children are common in many European countries. One is being established in the South as part of the Republic's national children's strategy. To establish a commissioner in Northern Ireland can only be seen as an investment in the future of our children and young people. We have the opportunity to promote cross-border co-operation on issues affecting children, such as the protection of children from paedophiles, and many of the issues surrounding child abuse. Confidence in the protection of children in —

Mr Shannon: In relation to the present discussion, does the Member agree that it would be an excellent idea for the paedophile register to include people who have been convicted of paedophile activity in the North and the South of Ireland?

Ms Lewsley: I certainly agree. I hope that a commissioner in the South and a commissioner in the North could work together to help in that matter.

Confidence in the protection of children in care has been severely undermined throughout Northern Ireland, following some of the horrific crimes that have taken place here. This new commissioner for children, with the enhanced role as laid out in the legislation, will have a pivotal role in renewing that confidence for future generations of our young people. I quote the First Minister. Yesterday he said:

"The children of Northern Ireland deserve no less."

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the state is obliged to promote the development of, and to protect, the rights of children in the community and in the family. Because of the ratification of the convention by 191 states, the scene has been set for the prioritisation and implementation of a framework of standards for the treatment of children. Children's rights have to be built into the system to develop a human rights culture for the future, and a commissioner for children will help to ensure this.

The commissioner should also act as an ombudsman for children and an advocate for children's rights and concerns. Children and young people are vulnerable, and there is a need for an independent agency to monitor, protect and promote their rights proactively. The commissioner should be independent, should represent children's rights, and should have clearly defined powers and duties. The commissioner would act as a watchdog. He or she would have responsibility to act as adviser to the Government — submitting recommendations and proposals on future legislation, collecting data and producing reports. The effect would be to encourage good practice and to improve the co-ordination of children's services, putting emphasis on the user of a public service, rather than the provider.

In short, yesterday's announcement that Northern Ireland will have a commissioner for children marks another step in the equality and human rights agendas. However, as the Deputy First Minister, Séamus Mallon, pointed out, the establishment of a commissioner for children is not enough. More must be done to ensure that our Administration delivers for young people. That means looking at how the Government can best take into account issues affecting the young. The Administration is already equality-proofing all its policies to ensure that they promote equality for young people.

However, we must also look at the integral workings of the Executive and the Assembly to see how they can best deal with children's issues. The forthcoming strategy for children must do this. We also need to examine how the views of children can best be obtained, and how we can commission research on children's issues.

All these actions contribute to addressing the concerns that Government structures are failing children and to ensuring that the needs of children are met through these structures and permitting the active, responsible participation of children, giving them the opportunity to develop their full potential.

6.00 pm

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is hard to hear the Member who is speaking when there is other speaking going on in the Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is indeed. Thank you.

Ms Lewsley: The effect would be to integrate into the overall structure of Government child-friendly policies and cross-departmental co-ordination on issues affecting children.

Choice and involvement of children in decisions that affect them are important to promote social inclusion and also to show them that their opinions and beliefs are respected and will be taken into consideration at the planning stage of Government policy and legislation, thus giving them parity of esteem.

The initiation by the Executive of a wide-ranging consultation process on a strategy for children is a positive

way to promote the issue and develop public debate. Yesterday's announcement will give children and organisations that represent them the opportunity to present their views and make their voices heard. We have the opportunity to break new ground and establish a precedent by putting the protection of children and young people and the upholding of their rights firmly at the forefront of the political process. It deserves to be welcomed by all.

Although society will never be able to guarantee the complete and total protection of the most vulnerable children and young people in society from being targets of those intent on committing sexual and physical abuse, this legislation now provides the children of Northern Ireland with a fresh start. It also sends a clear signal to those who prey on our children that their evil ways will not be tolerated. I support the motion.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I am disappointed that no one is here from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to take part in the debate. I do not want to get into the issues because I do not think it is deliberate, but it is the message of empty promises that they are sending to our children and us. In registering my disappointment I point out that the motion has been on the Order Paper since last week, so I think it is an oversight.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am having difficulty in hearing you. Can you project your voice?

Ms Ramsey: I am concerned that whatever we are saying today, we are saying to nobody. What is the point in going through with the debate? There is no one from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to answer any questions or queries we may have. I am going to go ahead and ask questions, and I hope that, as Mr Haughey said, he will read Hansard and give us answers.

Ms McWilliams: The Member should recognise that the record could show that the Minister for Regional Development is listening attentively to every word. I am sure that the Minister will take back the core of the debate to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on our behalf.

Mr Wells: Pigs might fly.

Ms Ramsey: I do not think it is fair to put that pressure on the Minister. It is probably the first time Sinn Féin has defended a DUP Minister.

I thank Eileen Bell and David Ford for tabling this motion. Yesterday's announcement by the Executive on the need to establish a children's commissioner for the North could have ended the debate. What it did was to prompt the Alliance Party to table an amendment. My party and I fully support that amendment. I was going to say that I thanked them for ensuring that children's rights are put centre stage, but as you can see there is no one here to answer that.

The need for a children's commissioner has been endorsed and supported by all the parties in the Assembly.

Ms Lewsley pointed out the need for it well. I am not going to go over all those arguments. I place on record my thanks and appreciation. I also congratulate those organisations which have been involved and which have lobbied strongly over the last few years to ensure that the rights of children are to the fore.

During yesterday's debate a number of questions were raised which were relevant to the role and remit of the consultation process and the commissioner. As I pointed out earlier, there is nobody here to answer them, but I hope to get answers in the post over the next couple of days.

One of the questions was about whom the Executive will consult and how quickly we can have a list of those to be consulted. Who will be in the working group? Why will the community/voluntary sector not be included in this group? That concerns me. We should be using the knowledge and expertise that has been gained by workers in this sector over the years, especially in the complex field of children and young people. We should be using that experience instead of ignoring it.

Also mentioned was the importance of the commissioner's powers to investigate and subpoena — unlike the Deputy Speaker, who cannot subpoena Members to come here. Sinn Féin, along with all the other parties, has endorsed the need for this. We endorsed the Putting Children First project, which campaigned on a number of key issues for children. One of these was the need for a commissioner; another was the need for a junior Minister. For the record, during the negotiations that led up to the Good Friday Agreement we lobbied for a Minister dedicated to children alone.

In its first report, the Health Committee dealt with children and young people in care. We heard all sorts of stories and got statistics from everyone. There were many concerns. One of our last, and key, recommendations was for the appointment of a commissioner.

I also pointed out yesterday that there is a need to include the NIO in the remit of this working group, because juvenile justice is a reserved matter. We need to ensure that children in this system come under the remit of the children's commissioner. We also need to point out that the children in the juvenile justice system are missing out on health services and education because they do not fall under the remit of either the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety or the Department of Education.

Yesterday I asked the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister about the Executive's children's fund. I asked when we would get information relating to this fund and was told that they still do not know because they are still finding out exactly what to implement and how to implement it. I note that we were also informed yesterday that the office of the commissioner would cost approximately £800,000 a year. Will this money come out of the fund? If not, where will it come from?

Finally, will the Executive ensure that until the children's commissioner is appointed, all departmental policies are child-proofed? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms McWilliams: We know the answers to some questions about provision for our children, but the Executive still cannot produce answers to others. Other Members have pointed out that unfortunately we are at the top of the ladder in relation to the number of children abused in the United Kingdom. That is a terrible indictment of Northern Ireland. What we do not know is the number of children who live in poverty in Northern Ireland. If we are able to keep data on the number of children who have been abused, we should extend the word "abuse" to include not just sexual abuse but financial abuse as well. We all know that the start you get in life determines the quality and dignity in which you will live thereafter. That, of course, is one of the things that the children's commissioner could attend to.

Also, our children still have no advocate within Government structures. We heard yesterday, and again today, that other regions of the UK, and indeed the Republic of Ireland, have moved fast and effectively to do something about this. It is still unfortunately the case that young people are being admitted to adult psychiatric wards. Although the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety announced in response to a question I asked that there would be 10 extra beds for children and young people who suffer from mental health problems, she has still not decided where those beds will be.

There is a great deal of uncertainty with regard to the specialised staff necessary for these beds, and, as they are not currently in place, it is not good enough to make an announcement and leave it at that. If there were a commissioner with oversight responsibilities, that person would be driving that policy forward. That is an abuse of young people's rights.

I have said before that there is a 15-year-old girl in prison in Northern Ireland. That is not a good message to send around the world — the fact that there are no juvenile detention centres for young girls here. Young girls in residential care who offend are admitted to a special unit in Maghaberry prison. They are held there, mostly on their own, since the numbers are low. It is time we provided proper juvenile justice centres for girls as well as boys. I have written to Adam Ingram about this matter, and he says that he intends to provide small, independent units for girls in Rathgael in the future, based on a Scottish model, although he has not set a timescale for this.

I agree with Sue Ramsey that we need to bring the responsibilities of the Northern Ireland Office and criminal and juvenile justice into any interdepartmental working group that is established. I add my voice to those concerns.

We have a devolved Administration. Before we came into this Assembly, we were asked if we would do things

differently, and if we would enter into partnerships with outside groups. We were also asked whether, if task forces were established in the future, we would bring in the expertise of civic society, particularly community and children's organisations such as the NSPCC, Barnardo's, the Children's Law Centre, Save the Children and the Guardians Ad Litem Agency. Who else but people in those organisations has the necessary depth of knowledge? However, we heard yesterday that they are not to be included in the interdepartmental working group. I suppose we must assume that this group will be made up of civil servants. I have no wish to disparage the expertise of civil servants, but on their own, they do not have an adequate knowledge of children in Northern Ireland. The interdepartmental working group should be expanded to include the voluntary organisations — known as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) — and community groups that work with children on the ground. Over 30 years of the troubles, they have built up a knowledge of children that is second to none.

I have said before that if it had not been for these people coming together across the sectarian divide to work on issues of commonality in relation to children, there would have been a Kosovo-like situation in Northern Ireland. They know more than most, as do the young people themselves, who should also be included on that committee. They could add a wonderful voice of difference to the decisions being taken forward. Authorship is ownership, and if they are not present from the beginning, there is no point in our asking them to implement policies on our behalf once the decision-making processes have been completed.

The Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee tasked itself with an inquiry into residential and secure accommodation. I was a Member of that Committee, and we were so alarmed at what we heard that at times, we believed we were holding an inquiry into insecure accommodation and a lack of care. This is not a reflection on the staff but on the lack of resources and the levels of absconding children, who come in one door and go out the other. Indeed, staff were under such stress that they went out on strike to get their message heard. Representatives from NIPSA gave evidence to that effect, saying that they were concerned about how they would attract social workers in the future, as levels of stress and sickness were so high that people were walking away from the profession. This is the type of job that any commissioner could take forward.

Yesterday we put down a Private Member's Bill on a children's commissioner, because we were concerned that the statement made by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister might never be forthcoming. I warmly welcomed the statement, but it does need legislative teeth.

For the purposes of this debate, I would like to add my voice to those of Patricia Lewsley and Eileen Bell, who

have outlined some of the powers of that commissioner. These powers should go further. However, I do not like to talk in terms of naming and shaming, but sometimes action is taken only after that takes place. When someone fails to comply with a recommendation, the commissioner should be required to respond to the Assembly and state which Department was the guilty party. The Assembly would then respond accordingly.

That commissioner should establish a register of compliance notices and have the power to require a person to whom a recommendation is directed to furnish any information needed to do the job more effectively.

6.15 pm

We also asked about investigative powers. There have been many debates about the powers of the Police Ombudsman. Often the question is asked "Are her powers sufficient to enable her to carry out a good investigation?" If we are to establish a children's commissioner, that person should have no less powers. The power of investigation should extend beyond the production of relevant documents. It should enable the commissioner to subpoena individuals to give evidence and to prepare and publish a report on any investigation required to be carried out.

The Welsh experience tells us — indeed, the very title of the report 'Lost in Care' suggests it — that had a commissioner been in place, with such powers of investigation, the recommendations might not have been so damning of the system. Likewise the Republic of Ireland — and Members have already commented on the excellent national children's strategy entitled 'Our Children, Their Lives' — has also published recommendations that require a formal investigation to be carried out by a director or a commissioner for children.

A further power should be a children's impact statement, in line with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, about which we hear so much. When we audit or carry out an "MOT" on particular policies that we are asked to equality proof, too often we do not think about children. If a separate children's impact statement were required, that would task minds to think in future "If I were to carry out this policy in future, what impact would it have on children in the community?" The Minister for Regional Development might give thought to what a children's impact statement might look like in his own Department. Indeed, Mr Poots, from the same party, actually addressed that issue with regard to road safety and planning.

In many communities we did not think about the necessary infrastructure for children, such as play facilities. I attended a residents' association meeting last night in Belvoir estate. Two primary schoolchildren and two children from Newtownbreda High were in attendance, and they added a wonderful voice of difference to the meeting. They pointed out to us — the adults — that they had no outdoor play provision in a large public housing estate of 2,500 families. The estate was not

built with children and young people in mind. This has often been said about the housing estates in Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland. A children's impact statement on any future planning proposals would be an extremely important proposal and power of the commissioner.

The commissioner should also have the power — and this has come to my attention as I have attended a number of court cases recently — to appoint someone to be the child's representative in a legal context. We have the Guardian Ad Litem Agency, but unfortunately it does not have the legal power to represent children in their own right. Either we amend our civil and family law to allow legal children's representatives to be the voice of the child in the court, or we give that power to the children's commissioner. In the absence of that, our children are losing out. The legal context is very difficult for them to understand, and they do not have someone there speaking solely for them. The Guardian Ad Litem Agency would be the first to point out that that is not its responsibility, although it has a care and a duty to ensure that the children's concerns are prioritised. The legal responsibility for a child's representative is not empowered in Northern Ireland currently.

Finally, an extra power that also should be in place is that the commissioner should be able to make representations at inquiries being carried out by Ministers or public bodies.

The Norwegian ombudsman addressed Assembly Members in the Long Gallery. He told us that, from time to time, he is called to address the Norwegian Parliament on children's issues, and to point out where legal responsibilities are falling down or where new policies need to be developed. I would be concerned if Mr Poots's recommendation, that this commissioner should simply have advisory responsibilities, was to stop short of that; that "advisory" was simply to be regarded as a type of therapeutic or consultative role. If this commissioner is to take on board the serious responsibilities of being the voice of our children, he needs to have much more extensive powers than that.

I thank Mrs Bell for putting forward the motion and for amending it in light of yesterday's announcement. I hope it will not be too long before legislation comes before the Assembly to put the commissioner into place.

Mr Ford: Although the debate has not attracted the attention of many Members — especially those from the Ulster Unionist Party — it has been timely and worthwhile. As regards the way the debate has been structured, we certainly endeavoured, through our amendment, to address the gaps we perceived in yesterday's statement by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Mr Poots said that we were in the situation where Ministers were listening rather than giving a detailed format for the consultation. Those who have taken the opportunity to speak feel it is appropriate to put some flesh on the bones of that consultation.

First, I must refer to the issue of the lack of attendance by any Minister. Almost everybody who has spoken has commented on that, varying from the mildly expressed disappointment from Ms Ramsey to the slightly more active participation by Mr Poots and Mr Wells.

I want to put a very simple statement on the record of the House. At no time did Mrs Eileen Bell or I ever give any indication to any person that we proposed to withdraw the motion. Of course, there are more than four Ministers with responsibilities in this area, although it would be for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to co-ordinate any Minister's response. However, at no time did any Minister — or any person representing any Minister — approach us about withdrawing the motion.

Although I appreciate that some Members have felt the need to temper their remarks by defending Ministers, the reality is that if Ministers wanted to know what was going on, we have not been far from this Building in the last two days. It would appear that Ministers are incapable of consulting. I trust that they are slightly better at reading Hansard than they are at attending the Chamber. They seem to be learning some of the lessons of Westminster, where senior Ministers rarely attend the Chamber. I trust that our Ministers will not be importing that bad habit. It is something we have to deal with and I hope that Ministers will have a little more courtesy and will pay a little more attention to such matters in the future.

I am sure Members will not want me to rehash everything that was said. However, I want to refer briefly to some of the main themes as I saw them. We have been looking at a variety of the problems that children experience in their everyday lives. The issue of child protection tended to flow through almost everyone's contribution.

Mr Poots gave us a useful contribution — although I noticed that the Minister for Regional Development did not take the opportunity to talk about traffic calming. Mr Poots's contribution certainly outlined the fact that if we are looking for a commissioner for children, it would not just be for abused or deprived children. It is about having a commissioner who will look at the totality of children's lives.

Juvenile justice has also been highlighted. There is a major issue as to how the Northern Ireland Office relates to that. Perhaps the Secretary of State should read Hansard as well. Perhaps the First Minister will give him a copy.

Ms McWilliams talked about things such as poverty and child psychiatry services, which we are drastically lacking compared with other parts of the UK.

Ms Lewsley talked about yesterday's announcement demonstrating that we were making the needs of children the highest priority. She is right — if that statement, this debate and the consultation lead to early legislation. At the moment, I remain to be convinced that it is a high

priority and not just an attempt to bring the matter into the debate yesterday because we had this motion down for today. That would be particularly ironic, because we did not push for a debate last week. It was delayed because Ministers were not present.

Several of the issues that have been highlighted go beyond the simple issue of the children's commissioner. Those issues must be examined. Ms Sue Ramsey raised the issue of the role of non-governmental organisations in the consultation process. I think that it was Mr Poots who made the suggestion that the children themselves should be consulted. The appointment of a minister for children was suggested; that is a matter for the Executive. Perhaps we should have an Assembly committee for children. We should return to all those issues after the consultation period. Another issue highlighted was the role of the guardian *ad litem*, which already exists in the legal system.

Such matters need to be addressed seriously, but there was no evidence from yesterday's statement that that was being considered. We need to examine the need for powers of investigation, subpoena and reporting — "naming and shaming", as Ms McWilliams put it. The amendment would address three points that have not been covered. Other Members have highlighted the issues that they feel have been missed.

We should examine the question of the complaints procedure. I detected a suggestion in yesterday's statement that decisions on complaints procedures would draw on the Welsh experience and the Waterhouse Report, which was concerned with the abuse of children in care. We must be sure that any procedure for investigating individual complaints goes wider than just the justice or care system.

Advising and assisting Ministers in the formulation of policy should be an essential role for the commissioner, perhaps in a role similar to that of the Civic Forum. The commissioner's independent role would make consultation with children and with children's organisations much easier.

One or two Members referred specifically to child impact studies. We have grown used to the idea that equality and human rights are contained in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. We have adopted ideas such as rural proofing, but unless we start to address the needs of our most vulnerable children in every aspect of legislation — not merely when someone remembers about them — we will not be able properly to address children's needs.

A remark was made yesterday about not wanting to rush the process. That gave me some slight cause for concern. We do not want to rush the process, and we should make time available to get things right. However, the message from our debate must be that we want to get it right as quickly as possible. The fact that there was so little detail in yesterday's statement, compared with today's debate, justifies the tabling of the motion and the amendment and the contribution of every Member who

spoke. I trust that the motion, as amended, will be supported unanimously.

Dr Adamson: Will the Member take a point of information?

Mr Deputy Speaker: As the Member has sat down, it is too late.

Question, That the amendment be made put and agreed to.

Main question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the intention of the Executive to bring forward legislation and to establish an independent commissioner for children for Northern Ireland, and believes that the responsibilities of such a commissioner should include responding to individual complaints, the formulation of policy to promote the welfare of children and carrying out child impact studies on all proposed legislation.

Motion made:

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

TRAFFIC CONGESTION (BALLYNAHINCH)

Mr Wells: The A24 is one of the main arterial routes through the South Down constituency and passes through Ballynahinch. The majority of those using the road are commuting to and from towns such as Kilkeel, Newcastle, Dundrum and Castlewellan. It is also an important route for those travelling between Lisburn and Downpatrick. The majority of people using the route are not actually going to Ballynahinch. They have to go through the town, and, frankly, they wish that they did not.

The most recent statistics available, which were collected in September 1998, show that 15,000 to 16,500 vehicles pass through Ballynahinch each day.

6.30 pm

The only alternative route for people who want to commute from South Down to the Greater Belfast area is to travel via Clough from the south or Crossgar from the north along the A7 through Downpatrick. The problem is that that brings them through the second great bottleneck for traffic congestion in South Down — Downpatrick. As far as the people of South Down are concerned, there really is no alternative to travelling through the bottleneck on the A7.

It is no exaggeration to say that the economic development of a large part of South Down is being severely hampered by congestion in Ballynahinch. Undoubtedly, the situation is going to get much worse. The Ards and Down area plan projects that an additional 7,500 houses will be built in the Down District Council area over the next 15 years. Many of these houses will be built in towns such as Ballynahinch, Newcastle and Castlewellan, which will generate more traffic through Ballynahinch. Even before the plan was published in draft form, planning permissions were granted for the village of Dundrum that will double the number of houses in that small village over the next 10 years. The Department has indicated that it expects traffic growth in Northern Ireland of between 2% and 3% per annum, so even if there were to be no further development, that would have an impact on South Down.

Finally, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is putting tremendous effort into improving tourism throughout Northern Ireland. Newcastle and the South Down coast are important tourist spots and, as tourism grows, it will inevitably lead to further traffic congestion in Ballynahinch. Some of the worst examples of traffic congestion in Ballynahinch can be seen on

summer weekends when many people try to make their way through the town to go to their caravans or to the seaside for leisure activities. In peak hours the town is extremely congested.

I appreciate the fact that the Minister will be sitting through this entire debate, given that he has already sat through the last one. He has obviously come briefed to answer the questions I will be raising, unlike other Ministers who would rather have their tea than come to listen to subjects being discussed that are relevant to their Departments. The Minister has also written to me promising that he will visit Ballynahinch, and I know that all the district councillors there will be very keen to meet him and point out the problems that congestion is causing for the town.

During the morning rush hour in Ballynahinch it is not unusual for traffic to be queued right back to the junction with the road to Downpatrick, the B2. If the Minister were to visit Ballynahinch between 5.30 pm and 5.45 pm, he would find the traffic tailed back to Carlisle's garage, or it may even tail back to the junction with the Saintfield Road, the A21. Unless hon Members have had experience of sitting in such queues, it is very difficult for them to understand how frustrating it is for people who are trying to get home.

This is having a dramatic impact on trade in Ballynahinch because many shoppers refuse to go there; because of the delays, they go elsewhere. It is simply not worthwhile sitting in a queue of traffic waiting to get through the town to go shopping. That has a knock-on effect on the town of Newcastle. Many people are dissuaded from going there because they know that no matter what way they travel, they are going to face a traffic bottleneck.

For the people who live in Ballynahinch — fortunately, people still live in the centre of the town — the environmental impacts are significant. In addition to the obvious noise and congestion, exhaust fumes cause pollution. The environmental impact of the large number of vehicles travelling through the town makes life unpleasant for the residents.

The Minister is aware that there is a simple and obvious solution to this problem, and it is summed up by one word — “bypass”. A bypass should be built to take traffic around Ballynahinch. A bypass from the junctions of the Castlwellan Road and Downpatrick Road with the main Newcastle Road, sweeping around the town to come on via the Crossgar Road to the Belfast Road, would eliminate a huge proportion of the congestion in Ballynahinch.

Unlike other congested areas in Northern Ireland, in Ballynahinch the land for a bypass is available. There is no problem with land acquisition. Not only is the land available, but there would be almost unanimous support for a bypass among the Ballynahinch community. It would not be another Twyford Down situation where

people would be chaining themselves to the bulldozers or camping out in trees. The people of Ballynahinch want a bypass and would give the Minister full support when he came to cut the ribbon.

The projected cost of a bypass is in the region of £5 to £6 million. That is not a lot of money compared with other major schemes. That amount is quite small in relation to the overall budget at the disposal of the Minister for Regional Development. It is vital that the bypass be included in the major works preparation pool. There is a list of schemes that, subject to funding — and the Minister is always quick to add that caveat — will go ahead. It is unfortunate that the Ballynahinch bypass does not feature in that programme. Will the Minister explain why the bypass has not been included?

I also ask the Minister — wearing another of his hats — to ensure that when the development plan for Ards and Down goes to the draft stage, the land for the Ballynahinch bypass is clearly zoned and marked on the appropriate map so that there is no doubt as to where it could go. There is a lot of land available but it is important that the route is defined on the map in the area plan. It is also important that that is put into the area plan as a policy so that it becomes imperative upon the Department to ensure that it goes ahead.

I am concerned that when the area plan team recently consulted with the residents of Ballynahinch and Downpatrick they used phrases like “The plan will offer the people of Down district an opportunity to explore solutions to traffic congestion problems in Ballynahinch.” The residents of Down district do not want an opportunity to explore congestion; they want the congestion relieved. They want a bypass to take away the enormous problems that the town is facing.

Mr Poots: Does my hon Friend accept that that does not only affect the residents of the Down District Council area? I represent the neighbouring constituency of Lagan Valley, and many people from my constituency travel through Ballynahinch to reach the services that are available in the Down district, particularly in Downpatrick where there is a Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency office, an agriculture office and a planning office. The congestion problems are not solely the bailiwick of people who live in the Down district but also of the people who travel from the Lagan Valley constituency.

Given his comments on the development that is due to take place in the Down area, would the Member consider private finance for that scheme? There may be an opportunity to have builders and developers donate money to get the road scheme off the ground.

Mr Wells: I thank the hon Member for his intervention. He is correct. The snarl-up of traffic that exists in Ballynahinch not only affects the Down district, but also those who are travelling to and from Downpatrick or Lisburn. Anyone coming from Lisburn who wants to go

to the southern part of County Down is more or less bound to use Ballynahinch.

I am keen to retain services in Downpatrick, and I have asked the Minister a written question about his proposal to remove the street lighting section's design and consultancy service from Downpatrick. I am keen to ensure that services are not centralised away from Downpatrick to the Greater Belfast area. However, that is a difficult argument to sustain when people say that they would love to establish in South Down but the snarl-up of traffic is a major problem. That is off-putting to employees and potential investors. I think that we have to crack this particular problem.

The third request I make of the Minister is that we gather accurate statistics on the number of vehicles using Ballynahinch town centre. I have quoted statistics collected in September 1998 and there is a great deal of variation between what is claimed by councillors who represent Ballynahinch and by the Department. I have quoted the more conservative figures, but others maintain that the figures are much higher. I understand that the Department has recently gathered more statistics and I made efforts to try to obtain those today, but for some mysterious reason — and I am not suggesting for one moment that anything underhand is going on — those statistics were not available for the debate. I am sure that the Minister will make them available to other Members and myself through a written question that I have tabled to him on this important subject.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has shown an interest in this matter and we are making preparations for his visit to Ballynahinch to see the problem at first hand. He will be met by a very strong cross-community delegation of people with all shades of opinions, who are awaiting his visit with bated breath.

One of the difficulties with Ballynahinch is that unless you live in the area and have to travel to South Down and back on a regular basis, you will not be aware of the problem. However, once you have experienced it, and once you have had the privilege of waiting for 40 minutes to get through the town on a wet winter's night, you will know just how great a difficulty this is. I am saying to the Minister that £5 million or £6 million will not put a huge hole in his capital programme, but it will do an awful lot to make life much better for the people of South Down.

Mr O'Neill: The plight of the people of Ballynahinch is very real every day. It is so obvious that even a passing motorist would see it — and, as Mr Wells has outlined, a passing motorist would have plenty of time to see it because he would be sitting there for many minutes.

The people of Ballynahinch face that ordeal daily — the ordeal of serious traffic congestion, which creates great disruption to their lives. There is constant and increasing pressure from heavy vehicles — some huge

transporters — on what is, essentially, a fine old market town with many good historic buildings, and I would like to return to that particular aspect a little bit later.

Consequently, I am very disappointed that again there is no provision for a ring road for Ballynahinch, or indeed any scheme earmarked for South Down, in the Department for Regional Development's recently published preparation pool for planning. We have lobbied long and hard for road improvements, and the Minister has replied to several of my queries on this issue.

I am not sure whether the historical background to the situation in South Down, and in Down district in particular, is fully appreciated. Members might be interested to know that the old Down County Council had a very parsimonious attitude to road development. Consequently, they would only enter into schemes they had the money for, whereas other county councils would borrow money and keep the schemes going. The result was that Down, as a county, had difficulty catching up with modern road improvements.

6.45 pm

All those points about the development of roads in our district were put together by Down District Council in a thorough presentation that has been with the Department for some time. The council's report should be examined again, and we should consider the effects of the road infrastructure deficit. The Minister recently agreed to receive a cross-party delegation from Down Council on the issue. I hope that sympathetic consideration will be given to our plight.

Today we are talking particularly about the bypass at Ballynahinch. I thank Mr Wells for bringing the matter before us. It is obvious that he has learned much about the difficulties that we face in the Ballynahinch area. The bypass is an absolute necessity. The present situation poses a serious threat to the social and economic future of our area. It is not just a bottleneck; it is a noose around the economic neck of the district south of Ballynahinch.

The problem is all the more significant because of the effort and resources that have been put into promoting tourism in the area south of Ballynahinch, particularly the greater Newcastle area. We have a ridiculous situation in which one arm of Government is trying to encourage economic development through tourism, while another arm constricts that development with an inefficient road system. The most important thing in tourism marketing is giving customers easy access to attractions. If families are forced to sit in the car on a hot summer's day, while the traffic moves slowly through Ballynahinch, they will hardly be encouraged to return.

Statistics show that Newcastle and its hinterland depend not just on Edwin Poots's people coming on official business — I agree with him that there are many such people — but on day trippers who come from

Lisburn, as well as Belfast, into the area. The situation must be experienced if it is to be appreciated; I think that Jim Wells made the same point. The problem is there any day during peak times, but during the summer the amount of Sunday traffic in Ballynahinch is unbelievable. There are tailbacks of many miles in the morning and the evening. We talk about joined-up government, but we need to get our act together and make sure that investment in tourism is matched by investment in the roads.

I mentioned my concern about the effect on the busy historic market town of Ballynahinch. A recent survey revealed that 15,800 vehicles travelled through the town in one 24-hour period. The Minister provided me with that information some time ago. If one compares the daily traffic figures for Toome, these are not that far away. I do not wish to mention that in particular, knowing your interest there, Mr Deputy Speaker — but why not? And yet, by general acclaim, there is a necessity for a ring road there. Why are we not getting the attention that we need in the Ballynahinch area?

I recognise the attempts by the Department for Regional Development to help the situation. Some of those have been imaginative. Everybody would agree that the most recent — the one-way system — has helped traffic circulation and the general traffic flow. It has not cured the problem, and it has created problems of pedestrian access and road crossing — but it has improved the overall situation. However, it does nothing to address the noise and air pollution mentioned by Jim Wells. That inevitably results in a deterioration in the quality of life.

The stability of the old buildings is another issue, and I do not exaggerate when I draw attention to that. From experience, Members will know that road hauliers are using larger and larger trucks to transport their goods. When these large vehicles come thundering through the narrow streets of Ballynahinch, the effect on old buildings is bound to be serious. I make this point in connection with the excellent work done by the Ballynahinch Regeneration Company in its attempt to restore the quality and fabric of the town centre. We should all pay tribute to those people who give up so much of their time to try to improve things. Battling against the odds, they have been very successful. If it is for no other reason than to assist and encourage the efforts of such a group, we should be able to persuade the Minister and his Department to do something to help with this roads problem.

It is unfair to ask this one town to bear the brunt of this whole heavy demand. I believe — as does Down District Council, unanimously — that the only real solution is to direct traffic away from Ballynahinch by way of a ring road.

I urge the Minister, in the light of our plea today, to re-examine his decision not to include this scheme in the forthcoming work preparations pool.

With regard to the excellent point made by Jim Wells, the land is available for this, and it is estimated to be at a reasonable cost. It is also clearly outlined on a map in the possession of both the planners and the Department for Regional Development. It has been earmarked as a possible route. There is therefore nothing to prevent this project from going ahead except two very important things — the will and the finance.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support Jim Wells in bringing this matter to the attention of the House. It is a timely debate. I congratulate the Minister for attending this evening to listen to three people speaking on the subject. I appreciate his coming, and I hope that other Ministers will take a leaf out of his book.

The traffic flow scheme currently in place in Ballynahinch is incapable of coping with the level of traffic going through the town, and it causes the greatest inconvenience. The town is further brought to a halt, and is chaotic, each Thursday when the market-day traffic arrives.

My concern is that this not only hampers business, but is a serious risk to people's safety. With a population of approximately 6,500, Ballynahinch is entitled to an adequate traffic flow scheme to ease the current congestion and put an end to serious disruption. The problem is detracting from the positive appeal of the town, as people do not want to come to Ballynahinch to sit in traffic jams.

I am sorry to hear that Ballynahinch is not in the Department's plan for improvement, and I hope that the Minister will give the matter further consideration. A range of options are open, the simplest of which is to create more parking spaces. That would help the flow of traffic. However, that is only a short-term policy. A more thorough proposal would be to provide a bypass, as mentioned by Mr Wells and Mr O'Neill. That would increase the number of vehicles and provide better access to the business community.

I propose that in looking at this plan the Minister should consider the reinstatement of the rail link from Belfast to Newcastle. That would be an alternative to a bypass and would be a great help to the town of Ballynahinch. It would also relieve the traffic congestion on the Saintfield Road to and from Belfast in the early mornings and evenings.

What about the tourist traffic into Newcastle in the summer months? I am sure that each and every one of us has experienced at some time or another sitting for perhaps an hour or two hours in the traffic into Newcastle. That includes people coming to and from their business. It has to be experienced for one to fully realise the problem.

My proposal for reinstating the rail link would not only ease that traffic problem but also be of benefit to the businesses of Ballynahinch and Newcastle, help the flow of tourism and also help the environment.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): I am happy to respond to and deal with the issues raised.

Ballynahinch is a town on the highway network formed by the intersection of the A24, which runs north/south between Belfast and South Down, and other routes which traverse County Down in an east/west direction, for example, Lisburn to Downpatrick. Ballynahinch is a market town that serves a large rural hinterland and, like many others in Northern Ireland, has grown in size and population in recent years.

The traffic moving into and through the town has also increased significantly. It is generally acknowledged that at certain times of the day and week, drivers have experienced delays in approaching and travelling through Ballynahinch. This situation has existed for some time, with traffic progression frustrated by both the very large seasonal fluctuations, generated mostly by summer traffic destined for Newcastle, and the interaction of through and local traffic. It is further exacerbated by the presence of a number of secondary schools and on-street car parking.

In recognition of the traffic management problems in Ballynahinch, in 1996 Roads Service developed a strategy of short-, medium- and long-term objectives to improve traffic conditions in Ballynahinch. A review of waiting restrictions in the town centre was undertaken and modifications introduced to overcome localised problems caused primarily by on-street parking. A feasibility study of a one-way system around the town centre to improve traffic progression was assessed and the local community received the proposal favourably.

7.00 pm

Following completion of the necessary statutory procedures and construction work, the one-way traffic system was introduced in the town centre in March 2000. I understand that this scheme has been reasonably successful in improving traffic progression and reducing queue lengths. I acknowledge Mr O'Neill's comments in that respect. I hope that everyone who is local to the area agrees that congestion has at least been reduced by the introduction of the one-way system.

Statutory procedures are currently ongoing for the introduction of noise pollution measures to eligible residential properties along the line of the one-way system. Concerns have been expressed about the speed of traffic using the one-way system and the implications for road safety. Of course, that would be when there are not massive tailbacks on the road. However, the accident records available for Ballynahinch indicate that in the three months prior to the introduction of the one-way system, three traffic accidents resulting in personal injury occurred, while in the six months since the introduction of the system, there has been one such accident. It is acknowledged that at off-peak times, the one-way system does increase opportunities for speeding.

It is the opinion of Roads Service that the one-way system offers traffic management benefits in the medium term, but that ultimately these will be reduced by the continuing growth in traffic volumes. The long-term aim for traffic management in Ballynahinch is for the construction of a bypass to remove through traffic from the town centre. As Members will be aware, Roads Service has, for a number of years, considered the provision of a bypass for Ballynahinch. At this stage, a detailed design of the proposal has not been undertaken, but an indicative route to the eastern side of the town has been identified. As has been said, the proposal for the bypass was contained in the Roads Service six-to-15-year major works programme while that was the policy of Roads Service.

Since the introduction of the major works preparation pool in July last year, there is an intention to consider schemes for inclusion in what is considered as the forward planning schedule for major road schemes.

At this point I wish to refer to the remarks made by each of those who have spoken regarding the Ballynahinch bypass and its position, or lack of it, in respect of its being considered by Roads Service. As I said, the forward planning schedule is being considered, and the Ballynahinch bypass will be seriously considered for inclusion in that schedule.

Although traffic volume is not the only criterion for consideration, or justification for such a bypass, the volume of traffic currently travelling through Ballynahinch is estimated to be approximately 15,000 vehicles a day, and the Roads Service has assessed that approximately 10,000 of those would use the bypass. That is the passing-through traffic, which is travelling north/south.

I would like to refer to the figures that Mr Wells mentioned. There appears to have been confusion in some of the local press in the South Down area regarding the figures. Obviously, I cannot be responsible for those who take figures that are given to them and then put a construction upon them. The figure that was supplied to Mr O'Neill is the figure that Roads Service currently has available to it, namely 15,000 vehicles a day. Some of the South Down newspapers mentioned a figure as high as 30,000 vehicles. It would appear, however, that there were a number of roads for which a series of numbers of vehicles a day was given, and that — and I could not possibly accuse someone of using journalistic licence — someone has added the total users of various roads together and assumed that 15,000 on one road and 15,000 on another may have meant that 30,000 vehicles were going to be using the bypass.

Mr Wells: I accept the hon Member's point. Does he accept that the figures I quoted of between 14,900 and 16,400 are similar to what he is suggesting? Mr O'Neill's recent figure is also in the same ballpark. That being the case, traffic going through Ballynahinch town centre is

on a par with other areas in the preparation pool. People in South Down want to know why Ballynahinch is outside the preparation pool when other similar — or less deserving — cases are being included.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for his comment. I referred to the numbers not because Mr Wells or any other Member had mentioned the higher figure, but a glance at local newspaper coverage of the Ballynahinch bypass issue indicated that the figures have been misunderstood. Mr Wells's and Mr O'Neill's figures, and those mentioned in the House, are accurate, broadly speaking. The number of vehicles is approximately 15,000 per day. Mr Wells and the other Members are correct in saying that Ballynahinch ought to be considered.

I repeat what I said earlier: the forward planning schedule for major road schemes is currently being considered and the Ballynahinch bypass will be considered seriously. The schedule has not been prepared yet and the bypass has not been excluded from it. Until we see the final schedule, no road is automatically included. When the final schedule is available it will be clear which schemes are in and which are not.

When a scheme such as the Ballynahinch bypass is considered, it — like all other schemes — is measured against five criteria as outlined in the 'Moving Forward' transport policy statement. These are integration, safety, economy, environment and accessibility. On that basis, a cost-benefit analysis will be carried out. The South Down representatives will say that Ballynahinch scores highly on each of these criteria. My problem as Minister for Regional Development is that almost every other scheme for which there are campaigns will also score highly. That is a problem I will have to consider.

There will also need to be consideration of the scheme in the context of new Down and Ards area plans which are currently being developed.

The standard of design that the Roads Service would consider appropriate would be for a single carriageway construction approximately 3.5 km in length. At the moment, building costs for that would be approximately £5.5 million. The issue of cost was raised and it was referred to as a comparatively small amount. I can understand why Members would consider £5.5 million to be a comparatively small amount. If I did not have a whole series of road schemes to build, all of which would individually cost a comparatively small amount, my task would be easier.

In introducing the one-way system last year, the Roads Service was keen to provide pedestrian facilities in the town. This was done in two particular areas when the scheme was introduced. However, due to further pedestrian demand an additional pelican crossing was provided at the leisure centre on Windmill Street on Friday 26 January 2001. A further pedestrian refuge will be provided at the Windmill Street/Harmony Road junction, close to a large new store. I hope and trust that this will be of benefit to the pedestrians in Ballynahinch and will also enhance road safety.

Of course, I am always keen to build and improve the infrastructure in Northern Ireland. Most obviously, this can be done through improvements in the road network. However, as my predecessors and I have made clear on many occasions, that has to be achieved through a finite budget. In his closing comments Mr O'Neill said that the two things that were required were the will and the finance. I can assure him that the will is here and will continue to be present.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Campbell: I am about to conclude.

As everybody in this Chamber knows, I have been awarded a roads budget — effectively for year one, and indicatively for years two and three — within which I have to try and deliver road schemes. You could argue that that has no direct impact on Ballynahinch, as it is not currently in the five-year building programme. However, the schemes currently in that programme have a higher priority than Ballynahinch. That would not change if delays were imposed on the earlier schemes. The knock-on effect would mean that there would be delays right down the line. As I have said on many occasions, to build roads I need the appropriate level of funding. I hope that Members remember that when they next have an opportunity to consider budget levels.

I understand the frustration faced by those in the Ballynahinch area and those who wish to travel through it, and I will repeat the remarks made during the debate. The will is most definitely there in respect of Ballynahinch — the finance is something that I have to negotiate and argue for. I hope and expect to receive the support of Members in endeavouring to obtain the necessary finance.

Adjourned at 7.12 pm.

Committee Stage Records

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**FINANCE AND PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 12 December 2000

**GOVERNMENT RESOURCES
AND ACCOUNTS BILL
(NIA 6/00)**

The Chairperson (Mr Molloy): I welcome Mr Durkan, Minister of Finance and Personnel, and Dr McCormick, Mr McNaughton and Mr Delaney from the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Minister, are you happy with the amendment that has been put forward?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): As I have said before to this Committee and, indeed, to the joint meeting of the Audit Committee and the Public Accounts Committee, I fully support the objective of the proposal and regard it as generally acceptable. We need to give further consideration to the technical wording, and legislative counsel will have to advise us on that. I do not want anybody to be in any doubt about the commitment to accountability processes, whether delivered through public or private sector audit mechanisms. That is something that we want to take forward and work on with this Committee and, in particular, with the Public Accounts Committee.

I think that some of the matters that are concerning members more rightfully belong in the context of the audit reorganisation Bill, rather than the Government Resources and Accounts Bill. In deciding how we make the progress that we need to make, and how we make the improvements that we need to make, in these areas, we need to be mindful of the fact that there are perspectives on this other than our own. Different interests manage different aspects of public money.

We want to make suitable progress now, in the context of the Bill that we have in front of us, and then make further progress in the context of the audit reorganisation Bill. That will allow us to take in the sort of consultation process that we need in relation to other interests and concerns that may be affected or just plain interested in the issues of broader access and inspection.

The Chairperson: So you are happy with the amendment, subject to the legislative people looking at the wording of it.

The second issue relates to the commitments to follow on with the audit reorganisation Bill. Are you happy to give the Comptroller and Auditor General the audit facility, and will that come up in the next Bill that comes forward?

Mr Durkan: We are all agreed that there needs to be proper auditing of public money in the various uses to which it is put and the various mechanisms through which it flows. We want to ensure that that is there. The audit reorganisation Bill will further improve that, so that people are satisfied in that regard. We will want to consult as to the best means of doing that, and make sure that we solve the problem we are trying to solve without creating any other unnecessary or additional problems.

We have all experienced enough in the course of devolution to know that different proposals generate different issues and problems that may not be seen at the outset, but which come in from particular points of view. We want to take these things forward in the context of the audit reorganisation Bill. That should afford us the consultation cycle that we need.

The Chairperson: Do you agree that the Comptroller and Auditor General should be given statutory responsibility for auditing departmental performance measures in the audit reorganisation Bill?

Mr Durkan: That raises wider issues that go beyond my brief as Minister of Finance and Personnel. I would only be able to advise you of a definitive position on that on the basis of further Executive consideration. Obviously, it relates to the work and interests of other Colleagues and other Departments, including, but not limited to, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

To return to the point that I made earlier, we are trying to take forward the Government Resources and Accounts Bill to cover the issues that are appropriate there; issues that are actually about accounts, rather than about auditing and accountability. The audit reorganisation Bill will concentrate on those important issues.

As to the application of that to performance measures, we want to consult with this Committee and with the other Committees that have a stake in this. I will also have to reflect the views of the Executive Committee, and at this stage the Executive Committee has not taken a view on the issue.

The Chairperson: The main reason that we are pushing it is that an amendment to the Bill would provide a mechanism, as long as we can see that the follow-on mechanism would also be in place. Billy Bell, Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, might want to come in with particular questions on that.

Mr B Bell: I am reasonably satisfied with the letter that the Minister sent me, particularly in relation to the Public Accounts Committee amendment. At our last meeting, members felt that that was not strong enough, and consequently this new wording has been produced. My concern was that this rewording would have the capacity to delay the whole thing. We do not want any delay. I do not think that you dealt with that in your answer.

The Chairperson: The words “has received significant public funds” were in addition to what the Public Accounts Committee sought.

Mr B Bell: I would be happy enough with the new wording, but my concern is that it might cause problems.

Mr P Robinson: Why?

Mr B Bell: That is what I am asking the Minister.

Mr Durkan: We are not raising any points to try to cause delay. It is the same as when the Committee seeks to take more time on a matter that it is considering — it is not for the sake of causing delay. It is simply part of due diligence, and we want to make sure that we get the wording right. In particular, where wording might be of a fairly general nature, we want to make sure that it is competent and definitive.

If you use a phrase such as “significant public funds,” a number of bodies will be very quick to ask “Does that mean us?” Significant amounts of public money flow through various sectors, including the community and voluntary sector, and people already complain about the current reporting and audit trails.

That is why we need due consultation so that we all know what it is that we are talking about. I think that we are all agreed that we want to see this, but we might not be all agreed on how we would explain or define it to a public body, community group or voluntary group. We all need to be clear on that.

The Chairperson: Mr Peter Robinson suggested the additional words.

Mr P Robinson: I used a couple of examples simply because they were topical at the time. Michael McGimpsey had raised an issue about football clubs receiving millions of pounds for improvements to their grounds. Crusaders Football Club very honestly came forward and said “We were to provide 15%, but we have not got it and, therefore, we are not going to draw down any funds.” Other clubs could well be in the position where they do not have the 15%, but they draw down the money anyway, with an inflated bill for the work which includes their 15%. Effectively, the Government end up paying it all.

Have we, or the Comptroller and Auditor General, the power to go in and look at that? The Department may well be able to have a peep at what is going on, but

the Comptroller and Auditor General would not, even under the amended wording that came from the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Durkan: I will not be tempted to refer to level playing fields or anything like that. *[Laughter]*. That is a useful example, giving both sides of the argument. We want to make sure that public money is being used for its proper purposes. If particular criteria are attached to the allocation of public money, we want to ensure that those criteria are being honoured and upheld in all allocations.

We want to achieve that, but we also have to take into account the fact that public money is often used as part of a mix of funding. We might get into a situation where there would be potential implications for the bodies or interests concerned, and also for the Comptroller and Auditor General. We might end up with the Comptroller and Auditor General actually auditing football clubs, simply because bodies or organisations may or may not put together, and present, their funding arrangements in a particular way. People might need to go further into things. What do you think?

Mr P Robinson: It is a power of inspection, rather than a requirement to audit. They are very different things.

Mr Durkan: That is as far as the power of inspection is concerned, but there is an argument for taking it to the level of audit. I am not saying that there should be no-go areas for the Comptroller and Auditor General, not least in terms of inspection and, in particular, where audit work has already been undertaken. I take Mr Peter Robinson’s point on the power of inspection. That is not the only case that has been made. We all need to be clear that we are talking about the same thing when we agree and bring forward the amendments.

Mr Close: Bearing in mind the time constraints on the Bill — I think the closing date is the end of January — when can we get your assurances on the two latter points in the letter? We could take on a lot of amendments, but effectively we are saying that we appear to be relatively satisfied with the amendment proposed by the Public Accounts Committee, subject to the wording being corrected by legislative counsel. Providing we get assurances from you, we can work to the deadline, but if we are held back in getting the assurances, it will have a ripple effect as to when we can sign off the Bill. When can we get the assurances?

Mr Durkan: It is not in my interests to delay the Committee or the Assembly from signing off the Bill. However, we want to engage with legislative counsel on this matter, and we also need to consult on other matters such as the Comptroller and Auditor General. We need to be satisfied on those points. We need to have enough for the purposes of the current Bill, and to ensure that there will be no inconsistencies with the proposed audit reorganisation

legislation. I will endeavour, through other consultations, to respond to the Committee as soon as possible.

Mr B Bell: Next week?

The Chairperson: As soon as possible, so that we can get the amendments into it.

The other matter relates to the Financial Reporting Advisory Board (FRAB). You stated in your letter to Mr Bell that you were reasonably happy, but you would investigate it further.

Mr Durkan: There are other points that we need to check through. I do not foresee any major difficulties, but I do not want to say that there are no difficulties and that it is all straightforward. It is a matter of due diligence so that we get it right, but I am in broad sympathy with the approach, so there is no problem.

The Chairperson: Are you bringing forward an amendment on FRAB, and would that be part of the Bill?

Mr Durkan: Yes, I said that we would be bringing it forward at the Second Stage.

The Chairperson: If members are happy, we will move to the next stage.

The penny product was the other matter that was raised. How will that apply, and what effects will it have? Is that out of line? Is there nothing further to add on the penny product and the revised Estimates?

Mr Durkan: Apparently there is no friend for me to phone on this one. Are you referring to the error from some time ago that came to light last week?

The Chairperson: That is right. How will that affect the councils in particular? Will it mean that they will be short of money?

Mr Durkan: We are working on that with the local government branch of the Department of the Environment. They want to wait until they have all the information before we meet. Last week the Rate Collection Agency wrote to the chief executives of the councils to make them aware of the issue and, secondly, to give them the relevant information for this year.

[The Minister left the meeting.]

Mr Leslie: The letter of 8 December that discusses the penny product calculations is exquisite in its vagueness. It finally concludes by saying that the difference is less than 1%. I do not know the nature or impact of the error. Is the difference more in earlier years and less in the more recent years? It would be helpful to have more precise information than that in this letter.

Dr McCormick: I will refer that to those who are responsible for it. We can pass that on and ensure that the Committee's questions are answered.

Mr B Bell: I would like to refer to Mr P Robinson's question about Executive infrastructure funding. This

morning I asked why private money was not involved in that. When the Minister is answering the letter, could he address that issue? It is a shame that we cannot have these projects — we can start them, but we cannot finish them. I had hoped to say that to the Minister before he went; perhaps you could convey it to him.

Dr McCormick: I understand that the use of the infrastructure capital renewal fund is likely to include encouragement of private finance initiatives and public-private partnership arrangements as part of what would be relevant to consideration for that fund. That issue is on their minds.

Mr B Bell: This Assembly will not succeed unless it gets results. If we continue as we are, we will not get results.

The Chairperson: We will move on to the Government Resources and Accounts Bill. We can consider the details of the responses.

Mr P Robinson: The Minister did not have much time to listen to the point about making sure the Department knows our case as regards the amendment. He appeared confused about audit and inspection. The amendment refers specifically to the right of inspection. The Comptroller and Auditor General has the right to inspect, which he may not wish to avail of in all circumstances. There is no requirement to audit. I do not think that anybody in the Committee has any attachment to the wording. We wish to have that effect. It might be possible to do it by keeping the original wording and adding "or in any financial year is entirely or substantially funded from public money." If a significant amount of money were put into that kind of project, it would be substantially funded from public money in that year. However, it might not be funded from public money overall.

Dr McCormick: As the Minister said, there is no difficulty or issue of principle. It is simply a matter of trying to find the best way to implement and make effective the kind of arrangements that this Committee and the Public Accounts Committee are seeking. We will work with the Comptroller and Auditor General to find the best way to formulate this. That is the purpose. We take the point entirely about the distinction between inspection and audit.

Mr Delaney: We have not as yet passed it to the parliamentary draftsman, and until he looks at the particular wording, it is not appropriate at this stage for the Minister —

Mr P Robinson: Had he looked at the original wording?

Mr Delaney: No, he has not had a look at the wording at all. There is a difference between audit and inspection, but we do not know if the parliamentary draftsman will see it in those terms. He might suggest better wording to achieve the same objective and purpose.

Mr B Bell: I emphasise the point that Peter Robinson made. We want to have inspection, not necessarily audit.

The Chairperson: These issues are dealt with in the prospective audit reorganisation Bill.

Mr Delaney: We did not want to prejudice the language of the parliamentary draftsmen.

Mr B Bell: Send them in here sometime to see us.

Mr Dodds: When the parliamentary draftsmen look at it from a technical legal point of view, they may not like a particular form of words. It is the intent behind them that is important. They might perhaps come up with something more appropriate in terms of technical legal language. We are keen to see the loopholes closed.

The Chairperson: The only reason that we are rushing the situation is that if this were not possible, then the Committee would have to formulate other amendments. It is to speed up the process.

The Committee Clerk: The next stage is the detailed clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill. Members have in front of them a document that will help us to do that. It is entitled 'Schedule of Clauses (1 - 17).' We are — perhaps somewhat optimistically — hoping to get through that today, but we may not.

The first page is a simple introduction. At the top of the second page, we have a rehearsal of the issues that we have already discussed. The first bullet point is the proposed amendment to clause 18 from the Public Accounts Committee. The second bullet point deals with the two issues put to the Minister, asking him to give consideration to possible undertakings or assurances to the Committee. As a result of the discussion today, the Minister will look at what assurances he can give. The third bullet point is the oversight of guidance provided by the Department. Again, the indication is that the Minister will provide an amendment which would bring in oversight by FRAB.

Point two is a short explanation of the fact that Mr Des McConaghy has brought various concerns to the Committee, and the Committee has taken them on board. They largely relate to the issues that we have been talking about, namely the role of the Comptroller and Auditor General, the extension of his powers and performance measurement. That is certainly one of the issues which the Committee has asked the Minister to consider for introduction in a future Bill.

If we turn over the page, we can commence consideration of the Bill itself.

Long title

The long title specifies that the Bill will make provision about Government resources and accounts and for connected purposes. The Committee did not have any concerns about the long title and did not put any points to the Department.

Long title agreed to.

Clause 1 (The Consolidated Fund Account)

The Committee Clerk: The purpose of clause 1 is to modernise the provisions in section 1 of the Exchequer and Audit Act (Northern Ireland) 1921 and to repeal that part of the older legislation.

Members raised two concerns about this clause. First, they referred to subsection 1 and asked who was the responsible person within "the Department" — defined in the Bill as the Department of Finance and Personnel — mentioned at line 5 on page 1. The Department replied that power rests with the Minister. In practice, some decisions are delegated to the permanent secretary and other officials, within policies and approaches approved by the Minister.

Secondly, members questioned the use of the term "the Bank" at page 1, line 5 of the Bill. Members asked what bank would be used. The Department's response was that any bank could be considered but, in practice, a bank is selected on the basis of a commercial tendering exercise.

Mr Close: In practice, the powers delegated in clause 1 are essentially going to the permanent secretary. Are there any situations in which it would be the Minister?

Dr McCormick: In determining what bank to use, a commercial tendering process would take place. If an issue were raised, the Minister would be made aware of it. The process would depend on whether there were any problematic issues arising. If not, then it would be straightforward.

Mr Delaney: In legislative terms, tendering is a decision for the Minister, although he would be intimately involved in the process of tendering.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (The Consolidated Fund)

The Committee Clerk: The purpose of clause 2 is to modernise the provisions of section 2 of the Exchequer and Audit Act (Northern Ireland) 1921 and repeal that part of the older legislation.

The Committee had two concerns. Members referred to subsection 3, which can be found at page 2, lines 5-6, and asked why the exercise of judgement is being given to the Department of Finance and Personnel rather than to the spending Departments. The Department's response is that it is responsible for the efficient and effective management of the consolidated fund. In fulfilling this role, it is important to keep cash advances to a minimum in order to reduce the cost of borrowing to the public sector. In practice, the Department monitors the requests from Departments, together with their existing cash balances, to ensure that there is no build-up of surplus cash.

The second point related to the definition of "current payments" at page 2, line 6 of the Bill. The Department indicated that the definition depends on the individual

Department. Each Department requires sufficient cash resources to satisfy demands for payment as they fall due. The nature of the business of each Department will determine the frequency and volume of cash required to satisfy current demands. Some Departments make requests for cash on a daily basis while others request cash weekly.

Mr Maskey: Would there ever be a situation where the Department of Finance and Personnel would dispute the nature of current cash demands or needs?

Dr McCormick: I find that hard to imagine.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Clause 3 (Payment out of Consolidated Fund: standing services)

The Committee Clerk: The purpose of clause 3 is to modernise the provisions of section 4 of the Exchequer and Audit Act (Northern Ireland) 1921 and to repeal that part of the older legislation. The clause deals with payments out of the consolidated fund under any statutory function. Member raised four concerns.

First, members referred to the phrase “the Comptroller and Auditor General shall” in subsection 2. They asked why the Comptroller and Auditor General did not have discretion to grant a credit on the consolidated fund account, and whether that represented a change in practice. The Department replied that clause 3 deals with payments for services out of the consolidated fund which have been specifically cited by statute. These payments are therefore made independently of the annual authorisation of supply. Assuming that the Comptroller and Auditor General receives a correct requisition, he has no option but to grant the credit to the consolidated fund in order to comply with statute. This clause modernises section 4 of the 1921 Act and is intended to replicate existing practice.

Secondly, the Committee asked whether the Comptroller and Auditor General has greater flexibility under the current legislation and, if so, what does it allow him to do? The Department of Finance and Personnel indicated that there is no greater flexibility, as stated above. The clause is intended to replicate the current legislation in up-to-date terms.

Thirdly, members asked what the phrase “where a credit has been granted” in subsection 3 means in practice. The Department replied that, in practice, the Comptroller and Auditor General will authorise cash to be credited to the consolidated fund. The Department of Finance and Personnel will then issue the cash to the relevant Department, body or person as specified by statute.

Finally, the Committee referred to subsection 7 and asked whether any powers under section 4 of the 1921 Act would cease to have effect. The Department said that the powers under section 4 of the 1921 Act are replicated in modern form by clause 3.

Mr Close: Give an example, so that I am clear on the understanding of it. Statute decides what goes into the consolidated fund. That is an annual thing — is that correct? Then a requisition is made and the Comptroller and Auditor General gives a credit to a particular Department. Is that what it is about?

Dr McCormick: Yes.

Clause 3 agreed to.

Clause 4 (Payment out of Consolidated Fund: sums authorised by Act of the Assembly)

The Committee Clerk: The purpose of clause 4 is to modernise the provisions of section 6 of the Exchequer and Audit Act (Northern Ireland) 1921 and to repeal that part of the older legislation. The clause deals with payments out of the consolidated fund that are authorised by an Act of the Assembly. Members raised three concerns.

First, members referred to subsection 1, and asked to whom the phrase “This section applies in respect of sums which the Assembly has authorised by Act” applies in practice, and how it differs from payments made under clause 3(1). The Department replied that, in practice, this clause deals with payments out of the consolidated fund on the basis of the annual Appropriation Acts passed by the Assembly. These Acts determine the level of supply for Departments for a particular financial year. In contrast, payments decided by statute are automatic and paid directly from the consolidated fund. There is no requirement for annual approval by the Assembly.

The second point related to subsection 3. The Committee asked about the extent of the current powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General and whether his hand could be strengthened. The Department replied that the current powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General to authorise a credit to the consolidated fund on the basis of an Act of the Assembly are retained and reflected in the clause. Provided the Department of Finance and Personnel makes a correct requisition in accordance with an Act approved by the Assembly, the Comptroller and Auditor General must grant a credit to the consolidated fund in line with the wishes of the Assembly.

The third and final point referred to subsection 8. The Committee asked about the powers provided under section 6 of the 1921 Act. The Department replied that the powers under section 6 of the 1921 Act are replicated in modern form by clause 4.

Mr Leslie: I have a practical question. We are getting familiar with what is paid under the Appropriation Acts. What, as a matter of practice, is paid under statute?

Mr Delaney: A simple example is payments to MLAs. They are under an Act, and they are also covered in the Appropriation Act, so they could be covered under both requirements. The salaries of civil servants, the salaries of —

Dr McCormick: There are specific examples that are not covered by the Appropriation Acts, and one very simple one is the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General. Would it help if we could provide some more examples?

Mr Delaney: There would be obligations under law, for instance, to pay compensation. I would need to check if that is caught within that wording, but it would not be within an Appropriation Act. It would be an obligation under law, as distinct from an obligation under an Appropriation Act. If a court order were made, that would not be under an Appropriation Act — it would be an obligation under law. I think that we need to call in the legal people.

Dr McCormick: It might be better if we came back with a note with some examples of the standing charges covered by clause 3 as opposed to clause 4. Is that the best way?

Mr Leslie: The clear implication is that the Appropriation Acts cover most of the money, but it would be instructive to know what else there is, and where it is accounted for.

Dr McCormick: It still forms part of the accounts covered in the resource budgeting process. The money will have to be found, but it will be outside the Vote and, therefore, recorded separately in the consolidated fund accounts. There is a separate account of the consolidated fund itself, as well as the appropriation accounts, so there is full coverage in accountability terms.

The Assembly has provided a power in which it is saying that there are some things which it wants to see funded routinely and permanently, without the need for them to be brought forward annually by the Executive. Those items are very much an exception.

Mr Close: When a Department presents a requisition, does it apply initially to the Department of Finance and Personnel? Is the onus then on the Department of Finance and Personnel to make a correct requisition? Does it check that the requisition is correct, and then authorise it with the Comptroller and Auditor General?

Mr Delaney: Yes. It is a fairly straightforward process.

Mr Close: Does the responsibility for the correct requisition lie with the Department of Finance and Personnel or does it lie with individual Departments? What are the powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General in the process? Does he just accept the Department of Finance and Personnel's word?

Mr Delaney: As with everything that the Comptroller and Auditor General does within his constitutional position, we cannot prescribe what he does. Within his function, he can audit anything and comment as to how that process is working. He will satisfy himself that the process is working satisfactorily. He audits the Department of Finance and Personnel, just like any other Department.

Mr Close: I accept that. However, I was concerned with the specific question of a requisition. If it has been approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel, does the Comptroller and Auditor General honour it automatically?

Mr Delaney: He is obliged to do that. Yes.

Mr Close: There is, therefore, a responsibility on the Department of Finance and Personnel, is there not, to assure itself that the requisition from the spending Department is correct?

Dr McCormick: Yes. That is in relation to cash management and is governed by the framework of the Estimates, and approved in both terms. That was approved under the Appropriation Acts, so that is what the Department of Finance and Personnel works under. It checks and ensures before passing it on to the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Mr Delaney: In clauses 1 to 4, the Comptroller and Auditor General is approving the bank transactions, or at least having to comply with them. He is not in the position of auditing them. That is putting it simply. It is quite archaic.

Mr Close: Even at that level, there is still a responsibility on the Department of Finance and Personnel to get it right.

The Chairperson: Are Members happy with the clause, or do they want to wait for a response from the Department?

Mr Leslie: I do not have any problem with the way it is set out.

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clause 5 (Application of sums issued)

Mr Dodds: We have the papers in front of us, and there are 11 different objections to clause 7, for example. Rather than having them read out by the Clerk, I suggest that Committee members read them themselves and then raise any points. That might be a quicker, more efficient way.

The Committee Clerk: It is for Members to decide. The only benefit of doing it this way is that it is then in the Hansard record. The letters from the Department of Finance and Personnel will be part of our own record.

Mr Weir: Would it not be sufficient from the point of view of the Hansard record to say that, relative to whatever clause it is, listed below are the concerns raised and the responses to them? If it is purely a matter of getting the issues on record, members can look at the clauses and, if necessary, raise specific points.

The Committee Clerk: It would certainly speed things along.

The Chairperson: OK. We will move to clause 5 and try it and see.

Mr Maskey: If we have any objections we should say what they are.

The Committee Clerk: I was just going to say that there was one concern raised on clause 5.

The Chairperson: Are members happy with the response?

Clause 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (Appropriation in aid)

The Committee Clerk: Clause 6 deals with appropriation in aid. There were two issues, one at page 3, lines 30 to 31, and the second at page 4, lines 10 to 11.

The Chairperson: You all have the response from the Department of Finance and Personnel. Is everyone happy with that response, or are there any questions?

Mr Leslie: An example of that is Forest Service receipts. At the moment, the mechanism by which those are retained by the Department is the Exchequer and Audit Act (Northern Ireland) 1921. We are simply replacing that.

Dr McCormick: Actually, it is the Exchequer and Financial Provisions Act (Northern Ireland) 1950.

Clause 6 agreed to.

Clause 7 (Resource accounts: preparation)

The Committee Clerk: As Mr Dodds pointed out, there are 12 issues. The first is at page 4, line 27. The second issue raised is at page 4, lines 33 to 34. The third issue was raised at page 4, lines 37 to 39. The next issue was number four, raised at page 4, lines 40 to 42. The next issue was raised at page 5, line 3. Issue number 7 was raised at page 5, lines 2 to 3. Issues 8 and 9 were raised in respect of subsection (6). Issue 10 was raised in respect of subsection (7)(a). The final issue, number 11, was raised in respect of subsection (8).

Mr Weir: Why is there no number 6? Is that just a typo?

The Committee Clerk: Yes, that is true. There were obviously ten issues, then.

Mr P Robinson: Psychologically, there must be something there.

The Chairperson: Are we happy with the responses from the Department of Finance and Personnel? I know that there has been some discussion on the appointment of the accounting officer in different Departments. Is it the Department of Finance and Personnel that appoints the accounting officers?

Dr McCormick: It is the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel to appoint the accounting officers who are responsible for Votes. There are also accounting officers for smaller agencies that are part of departmental responsibilities, and it is the principal accounting officer of the Department concerned who

appoints that kind of accounting officer. The role of the Department of Finance and Personnel is confined to appointing permanent secretaries as overall accounting officers over Votes.

Mr P Robinson: The accounting officer is the permanent secretary — you do not appoint permanent secretaries.

Dr McCormick: After someone has been selected as permanent secretary, they then receive a letter from the Department of Finance and Personnel that confirms their status as accounting officer.

Mr P Robinson: But it always follows, like thunder and lightning.

Mr Weir: Presumably you could not just take a notion to appoint somebody else.

Mr Dodds: I am concerned about point 4 — the question of dates being prescribed in the Bill. The response from the Department of Finance and Personnel was that concern had been raised about the ability of Departments to meet those dates. It is currently discussing this issue with Departments, and it may be more appropriate to amend the dates than the Bill itself. Have you addressed that any further?

Dr McCormick: We also need to have further discussions with the Comptroller and Auditor General, because this affects the schedule of work of the Audit Office, as well as having implications for how Departments work and produce accounts. The schedule of work of the Audit Office also needs further exploration. We will deal with this as quickly as possible so it can be brought to a sensible conclusion.

Mr Dodds: This could be an area where an amendment may be forthcoming.

Mr Maskey: Point 1 refers to clause 7(3)(c). It mentions disclosing explanations supplementary to, rather than being part of, the formal accounts direction. Is that something extra?

Mr Delaney: We could issue a direction to say that accounting officers have to put some extra information into their accounts. That is what clause 7(3) says, and that could be as a result of a specific activity that a body is involved in.

Mr Leslie: I thought that FRAB had a role in scrutinising the accounting practice that was being used.

The Committee Clerk: The Minister proposed the introduction of a new clause to deal with inspection by FRAB.

Dr McCormick: This deals with guidance being issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel. It is possible, and our intention would be, to introduce a separate clause that would provide for oversight of that guidance. The two issues can be interrelated, but the formulation here is creating the power to give the

guidance that can then be overarched by a requirement that the guidance be subject to independent scrutiny by FRAB.

Mr Delaney: Subsection (2) is the one that says we can issue directions. Subsection (3) is putting those additional conditions on those directions and saying that the accounts at the end of the day, on whatever directions we issue, must be showing a true and fair view and conform to generally accepted accounting practice (GAAP) principles.

The additional point about explanation of the difference in an item in the accounts has the overall purpose of ensuring that the information is robust. It is a due diligence test on any directions that the Department of Finance and Personnel might issue.

Mr Leslie: I have several concerns. "Generally accepted accounting practice" is quite a flexible term. The accountancy profession is in the practice of bending the accounting practice to suit the circumstances. It is a question of who is vetting what a generally accepted accounting practice is.

The other point is that the basis on which the accounts are prepared may change. How is the Assembly going to scrutinise what has happened? How is it going to compare the new basis to the old basis? How is it going to satisfy itself that what is being done is not a "smoke and mirrors" exercise?

Our concern is driven by what we know has happened in Westminster, which is quite the opposite of what I have just said. They have managed to retain a situation where Parliament has virtually no ability to find out what is going on in the accounts. This was in the teeth of objection during its passage through Parliament, but it was whipped through. Although we have less scope for abuse because we are dealing with an absolute amount of money that is prescribed by someone else, the Assembly needs to be sure that it can understand and see clearly what is going on in the preparation of the accounts.

Obviously the Department will assure us that everything will be entirely transparent, but I am not sure whether that is necessarily good enough if we are to do our job properly.

Mr Delaney: That clause puts an obligation on the Department to ensure that it takes account of generally accepted accounting practice, and I agree that it is like moving sand. The sand is moving to improve accountability in the accounting profession, locally, nationally and internationally, and that is what GAAP is supposed to achieve. The FRAB amendment is an additional safeguard to ensure that any accounts directions that we issue are following generally accepted accounting practices — however those are defined.

Mr Leslie: Could somebody remind me what FRAB stands for.

Mr Delaney: Financial Reporting Advisory Board.

Mr Leslie: Who is on the board, and how is it constituted?

Mr Delaney: There are two nominations from the Treasury. The head of the accounting profession nominates one, and half a dozen other people are nominated onto it. It comprises mainly professionals from Departments. It is a professional, technical accounting body, as distinct from an accountability mechanism, and that is why we talk about this Bill dealing with accounting rather than accountability. It is made up of professional-style accountants. The National Audit Office is on it with the Assistant Comptroller and Auditor General, Caroline Mawood. The Audit Commission is also represented. FRAB is advised by people such as Ernst & Young, Deloitte & Touche and PricewaterhouseCoopers. They seem to go on in rotation.

The Chairperson: Are we generally happy with clause 7?

Mr Leslie: Subject to seeing this amendment.

Mr Dodds: The dates?

Mr Leslie: No, the Financial Reporting Advisory Board.

Mr Weir: In relation to the point about dates, there is still consultation going on as to what may come out of it. It is also subject to the change made in clause 7.

The Committee Clerk: There is one technical point, and that is at point 5. The Committee asked whether the word "Department" should read "department" with a lower case "d".

Mr P Robinson: That is a very important point, otherwise the only people who could become permanent secretaries would be people who worked in the Department of Finance and Personnel.

The Committee Clerk: I was assuming that the Department had no malicious intent. On advice from the Clerk of Bills, that type of correction is deemed to be a technical one and would be taken on board by the Department as a typing correction. It does not require an amendment proposed by the Committee.

I suggest that final consideration of the clause be deferred until the two further issues are clarified to the Committee.

Mr P Robinson: Are we sure that we are right in that? It is not technical in the sense that if it stays with a capital "D", it means the Department of Finance and Personnel, and if it stays with a small "d" it means any other Department. If it means the Department of Finance and Personnel, it is appointing people from its own number. That is not technical; that is a major change in the Bill.

The Chairperson: Just for the record, can we state what it actually is?

Dr McCormick: There was no intent to use a capital “D” in this context.

The Chairperson: It is the small “d” that we are talking about?

Dr McCormick: As indicated by Mr Robinson, the small “d” is correct.

The Chairperson: Are members content that this clause be referred back while we wait for the explanations?

Clause referred for further consideration.

Clause 8 (Resource accounts: scrutiny)

The Committee Clerk: Clause 8 deals with the scrutiny of resource accounts.

The Chairperson: We will discuss each point individually.

The Committee Clerk: There are six concerns. The first relates to subsection (1). This can be found on page 5, lines 19 and 20.

The Chairperson: On the first point, are there any questions? Are members satisfied with the response?

Mr Maskey: Can we discuss the three bullet points found in subsection (1)? Would any of those factors preclude another, or is one or other of those bullet points required? For example, take the situation of a public events company. In the context of “any relevant statutory provision” or “any agreement made between the relevant department and the body” could the words “any agreement made between the relevant department and the body” exclude any relevant statutory provision?

Mr Delaney: Taking bullet point one, you could have a statutory provision that the Assembly wishes to pass that would exclude the Comptroller and Auditor General from having access.

Mr Maskey: From a public body getting public money?

Mr Delaney: In theory, this is what has been covered in that bullet point. This includes matters such as any relevant statutory provision.

Mr Maskey: Would that not run against the thrust of the earlier clauses?

Mr Delaney: It is theoretical that you could pass that and say that the Comptroller and Auditor General does not have access rights. Therefore we are explaining the clause rather than applying it. That is why that is there. It refers to that single bullet point.

Mr Maskey: If there were any such body established, and if there were any public funding going into it, you would need to have the protection that that body would be fully accessible for scrutiny. Does this leave a loophole?

Dr McCormick: This section mostly provides the basic powers with regard to the audit of departmental

resource accounts. The wider issue of dealing with companies will need to be addressed, as it is not easily dealt with in this context. It would need the kind of separate amendment that we have been talking about to provide the right balance of inspection, access and other such rights for the Comptroller and Auditor General. That will be dealt with through the issues of principle. It is difficult to weave it into the wording of this part. That is why this specifically focuses on resource accounts.

Mr Delaney: With an organisation such as the Fire Authority or the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, which the Comptroller and Auditor General does not have access to, it is possible, when the clause proposed by the Public Accounts Committee has been looked at, that the Department of Finance and Personnel may wish to consider the appropriateness of that clause in this Bill or in the audit reorganisation Bill. Each of those organisations has its own auditors, its own audit committee and processes for measuring value for money. It may be important to consider whether it is carried out by the Comptroller and Auditor General — public audit — or by private-style audit. Furthermore, with regard to local government audit, would you wish the Comptroller and Auditor General to be duplicating the work of the local government auditor so that he has access rights? A body could effectively be audited several times over. Therefore the clause needs to be looked at in detail. The discussion with the Comptroller and Auditor General is important regarding the extent and scope of that particular clause. We have undertaken to come back to you on those issues after we have had that consultation and discussion.

The Chairperson: Mr Maskey, do you want to come back to that?

Mr Maskey: No. If it is coming back for further consideration, clause 8 will be deferred on that basis — although it is probably OK.

The Committee Clerk: The second point was raised in relation to subsection (1)(d). It can be found at page 5, lines 27 and 28.

The Chairperson: Is everyone happy with that? Let us move on to point 3.

The Committee Clerk: Point 3, which related to subsection (2), can be found at page 5, lines 29 and 30.

The Chairperson: Is everyone happy with the response? Let us move on to point 4.

The Committee Clerk: The fourth concern, which also concerned subsection (2), can be found at page 5, line 30.

The Chairperson: This relates to the material use of resources.

Mr Leslie: I do not know whether the clause makes sense. I am looking at line 30.

The Chairperson: Is there any further explanation?

Dr McCormick: This deals with what should be a very unusual situation.

Mr Leslie: I am not worried about that. It feels as though there is a word missing in the phrase “to suggest that a material use of resources required”. Should it not be “was required” or “be required”?

Mr Dodds: What is meant is that it required the authority of the Department, but did not receive it.

Mr P Robinson: The “material use of resources required but did not receive the authority of the Department”.

Dr McCormick: The kind of case we are dealing with is where, either under statute or through Government accounting, a certain item of expenditure should have come for Department of Finance and Personnel approval — something which is material and a use of resources. The clause tries to address cases where that approval was not obtained.

The Chairperson: Let us move on.

The Committee Clerk: The next concern, number 5, related to subsection (2)(b), and it can be found at page 5, lines 33 and 34.

The Chairperson: Is everyone content?

The Committee Clerk: The final point, which related to subsection (5), can be found at page 6, lines 4 and 5. For the assistance of members, I should perhaps say that the term “vouchers” does not appear in this Bill but in the initial Exchequer and Audit Act (Northern Ireland) 1921.

The Chairperson: Are we happy? It is a modern way of expressing it.

Mr Delaney: It is an audit term. One “vouches” expenditure.

Mr P Robinson: Is it normal for your repeals to be taken at that stage of the Bill, rather than in the schedule with the rest of the Bills?

Mr McNaughton: Yes. That is standard, and they are also repeated in detail at the back.

The Chairperson: We will have to return to that. Are Members agreed that that clause can be referred back to enable the first point of concern raised to be examined?

Clause referred for further consideration.

Clause 9 (Other departmental accounts)

The Committee Clerk: Clause 9 relates to other departmental accounts. There were seven concerns, and the first relates to subsection (1) — the relevant point is on page 6, line 7.

The second point relates to subsection (1). It can be found on page 6, line 8.

The Chairperson: This was the issue about bodies.

The Committee Clerk: Point three relates to subsection (2). It can be found on page 6, line 10.

Point four relates to subsection (4). It can be found on page 6, line 21.

Point five again relates to subsection (4).

The Chairperson: Therefore it is the same issue.

The Committee Clerk: Point six relates to subsection (5). It is on page 6, lines 27 to 30.

The final point of concern relates to subsection (6). It can be found on page 6, lines 31 and 32. Again, that is about modernisation.

Are there any questions?

The Chairperson: Are members happy with the responses?

Clause 9 agreed to.

Clause 10 (Comptroller and Auditor General: access to information)

The Committee Clerk: Clause 10 relates to the Comptroller and Auditor General’s access to information. You will be delighted to hear that there are two concerns. The first relates to subsection (1). It can be found on page 6, line 35.

The Chairperson: This was the issue about certifying. Are Members happy with the response? Is everyone agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee Clerk: The second point relates to subsection (1)(a). It can be found on page 6, line 36.

Mr P Robinson: I think we should go to the wall on this one. Why do we have the words “at all reasonable times” if that is unlikely to happen? Why not allow access at any time? If you believe that he is going to act responsibly and reasonably, why do you require this caveat, which you can use at a later stage if it does not suit you?

Mr Delaney: The counter-argument is that, if you expect him to act reasonably, why not put the word in. It is one of these decisions about whether you insert it or not. It is acting reasonably.

The Chairperson: Are there any other points members want to discuss?

Mr Dodds: It is not just a question of acting reasonably “regarding” time. It cannot be the case that, just because it is 5 o’clock, and the security man is off, that access should be denied.

Mr Delaney: If there were a difficulty with a body, it would preclude the ability to state a time that was not reasonable. Access time has to be reasonable — for instance, not after 9 o’clock in the evening.

Dr McCormick: It provides scope for what we have done by agreement.

Mr Dodds: Do you knock off early?

Dr McCormick: Not often.

Mr P Robinson: I suspect that the Comptroller and Auditor General does not really want to be sniffing around after 9 o'clock in the evening either.

Mr Delaney: No, but it is saying that he is entitled to be given access at reasonable times by a Department.

Mr P Robinson: We are not talking about "Mr Awkward". We are talking about somebody who will want to do his business in a reasonable fashion at any time. He might sometimes need, for some important matter, to get in outside working hours. He may have a time limit applying to him for some reason that we cannot now foresee. Why can he not say to the Department that he needs to get in to have a look at this matter, for he has to report the following morning? Will you tell him that he can only get in at reasonable times and that you do not consider this to be reasonable?

Dr McCormick: It would be reasonable in context. If the issue were urgent, then that would be at a reasonable time. I find it hard to see where the Department would in any sense resist, unless it had a very good reason. If the information is needed to facilitate the Comptroller and Auditor General's work, then the Department would need to have a chance to get the required material together. Then, if the Comptroller and Auditor General comes in, all the information is there.

There is no question in my mind as to where the power and weight lie. Departments know that they will be held to account on how they respond to this. They will look at this very seriously. They take audit issues and Public Accounts Committee inquiries very seriously. All these issues concentrate accounting officers' minds. They would respond reasonably. There is nothing lost from the Assembly's point of view to have this in.

Mr P Robinson: Just to take you back a step, let us say something has gone wrong in one of the Government Departments. Fraud is believed to have taken place. The C&AG wants access to get hold of those books straight away. In those circumstances, this clause could be used by the person who is allegedly responsible for the fraud to hold the C&AG back from going in while work is done to make it more difficult for him to find anything.

Dr McCormick: If the C&AG finds any hint of fraud, he will be blowing whistles to the most senior officers in the Department.

Mr Weir: In any form of legislation, you want to have as much clarity and certainty as possible in order to avoid potential disputes. If the phrase "at all reasonable times" is left out of the clause, it is clear that there

would be an absolute right of access. Leaving out the phrase would create more clarity than leaving it in.

The Chairperson: What difficulty would the Department have in leaving those words out?

Mr Delaney: Perhaps I might add something to the case study that has been mentioned. If there were a case of fraud, one would expect the departmental accounting officer to call the police.

Mr Weir: What happens if it is the departmental accounting officers who are perpetrating the fraud?

Mr Delaney: It would not be a matter for the Comptroller and Auditor General to decide how to get through locks and bolts in order to secure documentation. That would be outside his remit. It would be for him to follow up the matter of whether it was done.

The Chairperson: Is there a need for a right of access at all reasonable times? Where does the clause lose power from the Department's point of view? Why can the Department not assume that the Comptroller and Auditor General is a reasonable person and would only request access at reasonable times?

Mr P Robinson: He would be going cap in hand under these circumstances. He would be in control if you removed that word. Is that what you are resisting?

Dr McCormick: Departments would never see the Comptroller and Auditor General as coming to them cap in hand. If he wants information, attention is paid, and a response is made. The word "reasonable" is included to cover the remote possibility that the officers of the Comptroller and Auditor General might act unreasonably. It is theoretically possible that an overzealous member of staff in the Audit Office might act unreasonably. However, if it were an issue of fraud, then the Department would want to stamp down on that very quickly. That is what all Departments do in practice. The word is to cover overzealous and unreasonable behaviour, which is a theoretical possibility. I do not see any harm in including it.

Mr P Robinson: In this context it is not simply a case of what one person might consider reasonable. It could involve Departments applying different standards of what is reasonable.

Dr McCormick: If there were any doubts as to what is reasonable, the burden of proof would be with the Department resisting access. The right of access would lie mainly with the Comptroller and Auditor General. However, if his office were behaving very unreasonably, and the Department could show that this was so, this clause would be applicable.

Mr P Robinson: That contradicts what you are trying to achieve. You are saying that, in all of these circumstances, you would, on balance, run with the C&AG. Why not include that in the legislation?

The Chairperson: Perhaps the best way for the Committee to move forward is by deciding to make an amendment. We can then debate the matter in the Chamber.

Dr McCormick: We could also talk to the C&AG about it.

The Chairperson: Does the Committee want to make an amendment to drop those four words?

Dr McCormick: The Comptroller and Auditor General is happy with this as it is.

Mr P Robinson: That may well be, but the person in post now may not be the same person in post in a week's time.

Mr Weir: Another factor in this was highlighted by the amendment concerning the Public Accounts Committee. The Comptroller and Auditor General was generally happy with the Bill and the amendment. However, when we pressed him about the additional words in the Public Accounts Committee amendment, we found that there were situations that he had just not considered.

To take one example, even if it is just on a very technical point, the C&AG's office said that it had looked at the legislation from a technical perspective and was broadly happy. We were questioning — albeit a small point — whether the word “department” should have a capital “D”, which was something that the staff of the Comptroller's office had not applied their minds to.

Due to the length of this legislation, it is obvious that particular things can occur to the Committee which have been forgotten about, or have not been realised, by the C&AG.

The Chairperson: Does the Committee want to make an amendment?

Mr Dodds: I think we should be proceeding. I do not know whether we need to do it formally now. Do we?

Mr P Robinson: It is the removal of the word “reasonable”.

Mr Dodds: That would certainly be our mind at this stage, unless there is something else.

The Chairperson: So we are suggesting the removal of the word “reasonable”. Are we saying that the C&AG should have access at all times?

Mr P Robinson: Yes.

Mr Dodds: I suppose you could have a right of access to any of the documents without any reference to time.

Dr McCormick: Are we saying that departmental staff will have to be on duty 24 hours a day?

Mr Weir: Would it not be better if the four words were removed?

Dr McCormick: What notice would the C&AG have to give for access? Would it be an hour's notice, or a day's notice?

Mr P Robinson: What notice does he have to give under the existing clause? You did not have to have it itemised there, so why must you have it itemised here?

Dr McCormick: It is because the clause is stating reasonable times. If the Committee suggests removing that, it would, for instance, have to say if it wanted the C&AG to have access at 1 am.

Mr Dodds: Is that likely?

Dr McCormick: I know it is not likely, but that would be included in the term “reasonable time”.

Mr Dodds: I prefer “He shall have a right of access to any of the documents”, without any reference to time. It is unusual to get time references in an Act. All these things, if challenged, would be subject to the general test of reasonableness, which takes more than the simple issue of timing into account.

The Chairperson: Access to any documents relating to the Department's account.

Amendment proposed: In page 6, line 36, after “access” delete “at all reasonable times”.

Proposed amendment agreed to.

Clause 10, as amended, agreed to.

Clause 11 (Resource accounts: non-departmental bodies and other persons)

The Committee Clerk: Clause 11 relates to resource accounts, non-departmental bodies and other persons. No issues were raised with the Department.

The Chairperson: There are no new issues to be raised.

Clause 11 agreed to.

Clause 12 (Preparation)

The Chairperson: Let us move on to clause 12, about which there are a number of issues.

The Committee Clerk: Indeed. The clause deals with preparation, and there are six concerns. The first of these relates to subsection (1), to be found at page 7, line 14.

The Chairperson: Is point one agreed? Any questions?

Mr P Robinson: Is this a cut-and-paste exercise, or is original thought required?

Dr McCormick: This is a developing area where the Treasury is still finding its way. The preparation of the Whole of Government Accounts needs a considerable amount of work, both at Treasury level in Whitehall and here, as it rolls forward. This section of the Bill is to provide the enabling powers. It will require a great deal of work to make more sense of it — so that it is not

merely an assemblage of information but begins to provide a better picture of what is happening, looking at the financial aspects of the whole of government. To provide meaningful and helpful information is a considerable task.

We shall need to look at the implications of the application of accounting policies by different organisations, bringing them together where there are differences — which may exist for very good reasons related to the context and purpose of individual organisations. However, if accounting policies differ, bringing that together to give an overview will be a good deal of work. The intention is to provide something more sensible and helpful. There are also issues about transactions in the public sector where there are grants or loans of various kinds going out of Departments, or between Departments or other bodies within the scope of the Whole of Government Accounts. We need to think through what emerges as the right picture of government accounts.

Mr P Robinson: Is this a case of more desks in the Department or more work for those there? Do you need more resources?

Dr McCormick: We probably need more resources to do this properly. There are questions to be asked of the Treasury regarding the speed and nature of this process. It is an ideal to have the Whole of Government Accounts and clarity of accountability in those terms, but the practicalities and details are quite significant.

The Chairperson: Are members satisfied with that response?

The Committee Clerk: The second point relates to subsection (1) and can be found on page 7, line 15.

The Chairperson: This brings us back to the bodies.

Mr Delaney: The boundaries of government need to be addressed under the Sharman review. What forms part of the Whole of Government Accounts is a key issue for the Assembly. It is also of key importance regarding consultation with the public bodies involved.

The Chairperson: Are members satisfied with the response?

The Committee Clerk: Part three relates to subsection (2)(b) and can be found on page 7, line 21.

The Chairperson: This raises the same issues.

The Committee Clerk: Point four relates to subsection (3) and can be found at page 7, lines 32 and 33.

The Chairperson: Are members agreed?

The Committee Clerk: Part five relates to clause 12(4) and can be found at page 7, lines 24 and 25.

The Chairperson: Is this a definition of “true and fair”?

Are we agreed?

Those are all the items raised.

The Committee Clerk: An issue relating to the Accounting Standards Board was raised, but it is identical to one raised earlier.

Clause 12 agreed to.

Clause 13 (Obtaining information)

The Committee Clerk: Clause 13 relates to obtaining information in relation to the Whole of Government Accounts. There were no concerns raised by the Committee with the Department, so it is now a matter of members satisfying themselves that there are no further issues.

Clause 13 agreed to.

Clause 14 (Scrutiny)

The Committee Clerk: There was one minor concern with clause 14, which deals with scrutiny. It relates to subsection (1) and is on page 8, line 22.

Clause 14 agreed to.

Clause 15 (Supplies by departments)

The Committee Clerk: There were one or two concerns about clause 15. The first relates to subsection (1) and can be found at page 9, lines 3 to 5.

The Chairperson: Any questions?

Mr P Robinson: What we wanted was an example of what this is talking about.

Clause 15 agreed to.

Clauses 16 and 17 agreed to.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**FINANCE AND PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 19 December 2000

**GOVERNMENT RESOURCES
AND ACCOUNTS BILL
(NIA 6/00)**

Clause 7 (Resource accounts preparation)

The Committee Clerk: We asked for clarification of several points last week. The first related to clause 7 and the Financial Reporting Advisory Board's (FRAB) oversight of guidance issued by the Department. The Department's response is set out in the paper and explains the process for the type of oversight that is needed. It also comments on the suitability of FRAB. It is interesting to note the expectation that FRAB would prepare an annual report to the Assembly. Finally, the Department suggests that the new clause be relocated in the "miscellaneous" part of the Bill.

The Chairperson (Mr Molloy): Is it advisable to write FRAB into the Bill? If there is a change of organisation, that would affect the regulations. Is there another way of putting it?

Dr McCormick: The Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000 refers to a suitable advisory group; it does not specify a named organisation. FRAB is the organisation that fulfils the function, but the terms of the Bill are more general. It would make sense to take that approach.

The Chairperson: We should leave it more general. A different organisation may be relevant to a different time.

Dr McCormick: Times may move on, and there may be need to change. FRAB is a relatively recent creation. It is best for the Assembly to have the latitude to change.

The Committee Clerk: On page 5, line 3, there is a reference to the "department". The Committee reached the conclusion that it should read "Department". We promised to see whether that required a formal amendment or a simple typing correction. The advice from the Office of the Legislative Counsel is that this would be a substantive change. We would be changing the word from the "Department", meaning the Department of Finance and Personnel, to a "department". In the light of

that advice, we must recommend an amendment in our report, if Members are happy to do so.

The Chairperson: Are Members content that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that clause 7 should be amended as follows: in page 5, line 3, delete "Department" and insert "department"?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are Members content that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the Minister of Finance and Personnel introduce an amendment to require the Department to consult FRAB — perhaps we should say "or some such body"?

Dr McCormick: We could say "a body of people with appropriate experience".

The Chairperson: We need not name the body. Are Members content that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the Minister introduce an amendment to the Bill to require the Department to consult a body of people with appropriate experience of financial reporting principles and standards before issuing guidance on preparing resource and Whole of Government accounts to ensure that any departure from generally acceptable accountancy practice are justified?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 7, as amended, agreed to.

Clause 8 (Resource accounts: scrutiny)

The Committee Clerk: Mr Maskey raised an issue relating to clause 8. He wanted to know whether the amendment proposed by the Public Accounts Committee and, at least at this stage, informally adopted by this Committee would have any effect on how clause 8 will operate. The Department's response says

"The proposed amendment to clause 18 suggested by the Committee should have no direct impact on the provisions of clause 8, which deal specifically with the audit scrutiny of departmental resource accounts."

Members may recall that the proposed amendment deals with the inspection powers for the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The Chairperson: Is the Committee happy to report to the Assembly that it is content with clause 8?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clause 12 (Preparation)

The Committee Clerk: Clause 12(3) makes reference to "such forms as the Department thinks fit."

We discussed replacing the phrase "thinks fit" with "may determine" or something that reflects the process behind it. The Committee suggested that to the Department, although not in writing.

The Chairperson: Can we agree an alternative set of words?

Mr McNaughton: A couple of alternatives were suggested including “may reasonably determine”.

The Chairperson: Are Members content that we should suggest an amendment — on page 7, line 23, omit “thinks fit” and insert “will reasonably determine”?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 12, as amended, agreed to.

Clause 18 (Examinations by Comptroller and Auditor General)

The Committee Clerk: Clause 18 is the clause to which the proposed Public Accounts Committee amendment relates. The proposed amendment is supported by the Audit Committee and, I believe, by this Committee. We asked the Department to comment, and it said

“The Department welcomes the draft amendment proposed by the Public Accounts Committee and supports the extension of the C & AG’s inspection rights, where this would be appropriate. The Department is therefore currently considering the implications of the proposed amendment and we will need to put advice to the Minister on this and provide a detailed response in due course.”

It has been suggested that the amendment might be best inserted after subsection (10). There is one possible course of action. The Minister may seek advice from the Office of Legislative Counsel on its precise wording to ensure that it does not interfere in any way with the operation of the Bill. Nonetheless, the Committee must make a recommendation to the Assembly. At some point, the Minister may suggest a modification and propose his own amendment. However, the amendment from the Public Accounts Committee also has the support of the Audit Committee.

Mr B Bell: Yes. It does, but I was under the impression that we had amended the amendment, because it was not strong enough. Is that correct?

Mr Weir: This is the amended amendment. It includes the reference to “significant public funds”. It is not the original Public Accounts Committee amendment, but an amended version.

Mr B Bell: That is OK. I was just seeking clarification.

Dr McCormick: This is the heart of the issue. We thought about it carefully and had further discussions with Mr Dowdall. We have not yet been able to get the Minister’s opinion. All we can do today is try to understand the Committee’s points, convey our perspective and explain why the original proposal was as it was. We must think carefully before we advise the Minister on how best to proceed.

I am not sure that we can capture fully the implications of either the original amendment or the amended amendment. There are questions about the precise definitions of “functions of a public nature” and

“significant public funds” — those are very wide ranging, and it is entirely right that the scope of the audit trail that the Comptroller and Auditor General can follow be open.

The phrase “significant public funds” is capable of a very wide interpretation. Would it be appropriate to proceed with that power without consulting the bodies that would be affected? The phrase “significant public funds” would embrace a wide range of bodies in the private and voluntary sectors and involve large and small companies in receipt of such funds.

The main principle, which still obtains in Whitehall, is that the Comptroller and Auditor General pursues how Departments manage their funds and what checks and balances they apply. If a Department is paying grants to private or voluntary-sector organisations, it must have controls and conditions of grant. Departments are accountable for that to the Public Accounts Committee. How far that applies to the private sector is another issue, but is it proper to proceed without consulting those bodies who would be directly and immediately affected?

The amendment would give the Comptroller and Auditor General a very wide range of powers immediately on the enacting of the legislation. There would be no forewarning, be it to football clubs, voluntary-sector organisations or large consultancy firms. Will the Comptroller and Auditor General have access to records anywhere? The reference to “significant public funds” is wide-ranging. The Committee should consider if this is the best way to secure the right level of accountability in the Bill.

Mr Weir: We are considering inspection powers rather than audit powers. If a body is receiving public money, we should be able to ensure that it is used as was intended. Examples were given and, to be fair to the Comptroller and Auditor General, he had not thought of some of them: he acknowledged that. The principle in the amended amendment is the same as in the original. All we are doing is, probably, lowering the threshold. For instance, a private company could be substantially funded by public money, and that brings in the point about consultation with private companies or voluntary bodies. All that could be covered by reference to substantial funding, but we are talking about “significant public funds”. There is no change in principle; we are just changing the number of bodies that could be covered by the Bill.

Mr Close: I concur with Mr Weir: we are talking about inspection not audit. Secondly, I cannot envisage any circumstances in which publicly funded bodies would not be subject to inspection. We do not need to consult them before introducing or extending such powers. If you make a distinction for grant-aided bodies, there could be a point to some consultation. As Mr Weir said, that could be dealt with by lowering the threshold in clause 18 through our amendment.

Dr McCormick: Instead of decisions on granting inspection rights being in the Department's power, as proposed in the Bill, such rights would be general and automatic. That is a shift of principle.

Mr Weir: Would it be a shift of principle whichever amendment we go for?

Dr McCormick: Proceeding in this fashion may, for some reason, not be in the public interest. If so, the Department could help the Committee and the Public Accounts Committee to ensure that the final outcome is in the best interests of all concerned and, especially, in the interests of accountability. There are other public interest considerations that we need to draw out.

There are two points: will the right be directly given by the Bill, which would be the effect of either amendment; and what is the breadth and extent of the right? A much wider range of bodies could be covered by the phrase "significant public funds", which could include organisations whose small percentage of public money was, for some reason, significant. It could mean a big contract for a very large company. What does the word "significant" imply? Is this the right way for us to proceed, or is it possible to proceed in another way?

The focus of the Bill is to introduce resource accounting and budgeting. The proposed audit reorganisation Bill will cover audit matters. That Bill, as the Minister said in his letter some time ago, will enable us to look at those matters more fully, make sure that the definitions are considered more fully, allow the Sharman review to take its course and let us deal with the implications from that. That is an alternative course that the Committee may want to consider.

Mr Weir: First, I would not be happy with the matter's being put on the long finger. Secondly, Dr McCormick spoke about a large company's receiving significant funds, which might be a small part of the company's overall turnover, compared with those of other companies who might receive proportionally higher funding, in percentage terms. In that context, the quantum would be more important than the percentage.

From the Comptroller and Auditor General's point of view, which of the two types of funding would be more important, in terms of making sure that funds were being properly spent? Would it be a contract giving £5 million of public money to a very large company, or would it be a small contract involving a £20,000 grant, which might be the entire budget of a particular body? If we want to ensure that Government resources are used properly, the £5 million grant to the large company is much more important than the £20,000, which might represent 100% funding for a smaller body. The converse must also be looked at.

Dr McCormick: The way to keep that fully under control is through the contract with the private-sector

body and the conditions of grant or whatever that govern the payment. Arrangements must be tight and procedures and procurement rules followed to ensure that the gateway is right. The Comptroller and Auditor General would not be involved in examining a large company's books. If one part of a world-wide company receives a grant from a Northern Ireland agency, our Comptroller and Auditor General can hardly have the right to inspect its books anywhere in the world.

Mr Weir: That is speculative. However, if somebody such as the Comptroller and Auditor General had been able to intervene sooner, would something like the De Lorean case have been spotted earlier? De Lorean was not public body, and it was not entirely funded by public money or, it may be argued, substantially funded by public money, but it certainly received significant funding.

Dr McCormick: As the Comptroller and Auditor General said last week at the Public Accounts Committee, he does not have powers in anticipation. His powers are to inspect and audit after an event.

Mr Weir: The case could be ongoing. He should act to stop more money going down the drain.

Mr Close: My ears pricked up when I heard the name "Sharman" and the suggestion — I hope I am not doing Dr McCormick a disservice here — that our proposed amendment should be kicked aside for another day, because it might be more extensive than he had hoped. I would oppose that.

The Committee is trying to ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General has access to public-sector bodies, at least by way of inspection rights. There is nothing about that that we should shy away from or be concerned about in the slightest. In fact, the opposite is the case. The Committee's responsibilities have been firmly laid down by the Assembly. As far as I am concerned, any attempt to say "Well, another day will do" should be strongly resisted.

Mr B Bell: I agree with Mr Close on that. I am concerned about the delay, and I pointed that out at the time. What will the delay be? Will there be a delay in any case whether we accept the original Public Accounts Committee's amendment or this Committee's new amendment?

Dr McCormick: The powers would exist immediately if either of the amendments were accepted. The alternative scenarios would not involve any delay in anything that would matter to this Committee or to the Public Accounts Committee. Even if we ran with the Bill as it is, or with some other modifications, if the Public Accounts Committee really wanted something to happen in a particular case, the Department could make an order to provide inspection rights.

The Bill already provides a right of inspection, and I do not know what more we can do. We could ensure that

if the Public Accounts Committee or this Committee wanted the Comptroller and Auditor General to have an inspection right for good reasons, such a request was responded to directly, as proposed in the Bill in sub-sections (6) and (8). There need be no delay in that, and I would be astonished if the Minister was not prepared to give whatever reassurance is necessary to confirm that the Department is not here to resist such rights of inspection.

Mr Weir: Would either amendment delay the Bill?

Dr McCormick: No, but we need workable definitions of the phrases “functions of a public nature”, “significant public funds” and “substantively funded from public money”.

Mr Weir: Is it fair to say that it will create additional work but will not affect the timescale?

Dr McCormick: That depends on whether there is to be consultation with bodies that would be affected. That would delay the process.

Mr Weir: No matter which amendment is chosen?

Dr McCormick: That is correct.

Mr Close: You mentioned clause 18(6).

Dr McCormick: I apologise. Clause 18(6) is connected with audit rather than inspection. I meant 18(8).

Mr Close: This puts the inspection functions of the Comptroller and Auditor General totally at the discretion of the Department. To exaggerate a little, the Comptroller and Auditor General can only operate at the discretion of the Department, and that is not what we are trying to achieve.

Dr McCormick: The Department is also trying to secure inspection rights where they are needed. We have a common interest in that.

Mr Delaney: Under this clause, the Comptroller and Auditor General is accountable to the Department. The Department is accountable to the Assembly and is required to come to the Committee and explain its actions. Indeed, the Comptroller and Auditor General can go to the Public Accounts Committee. The amended clause would give unfettered discretion. Constitutional issues may be raised if prerogative power is granted to someone who is not accountable. In that case, we would have to justify invoking the clause to the Public Accounts or this Committee. The Comptroller and Auditor General should be able to invoke the power of inspection without recourse to anyone, but the Minister may not be happy with that, which is why we are discussing it today.

With regard to timing and consultation, accountability has to be accepted by bodies. If we put this clause in place without consultation, individuals, partners and directors in those bodies might say that the clause and the accountability had been put in place without consultation,

which would undermine the objectives of having an accountability arrangement.

Mr Maskey: Issues raised by the Committee have been well aired. Judging from the Department's responses, the Minister may have issues to raise too. We have put forward our queries, and the Department has responded. We are not in agreement. The Department is identifying some questions that the Minister may have about constitutional legislation and so on.

Mr Close: The kernel of the matter is the absolute independence of the Comptroller and Auditor General, and that is a virtue. We should try to avoid making that independence discretionary. Let us keep a tight rein on that. I am not questioning motives, but we want to break those shackles.

Dr McCormick: The Assembly and the Committee want to do what is best in the public interest. Accountability is a massive consideration, but it is not the only one. If what is being proposed were to create a situation in which companies felt that there was a more rigorous, intrusive approach to inspection here than in other areas, they might not want to do business because of a misunderstanding of what is intended or a misapprehension about how the practice might be developed by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

I am not saying that this is a massive consideration, but it is worth thinking about it before adopting what is a very wide-ranging power. I want an alternative which can achieve the same end, full inspection rights. That alternative is to retain the status quo whereby the Department makes an order not as a result of discretion or whim but on the basis of defined and relevant considerations. Could we say that in considering what inspection rights to provide, the Department must have regard for the views of the Public Accounts Committee?

Mr Close: My preference is to look at lowering the threshold that Mr Weir referred to in the amendment that we are considering. For public-sector bodies, I would advocate lowering the threshold as an additional clause rather than add a discretionary right for the Department to clause 18(8).

The Chairperson: Returning to the point that Mr Bell raised, is the Department saying that the original amendment that came from the Public Accounts Committee is acceptable as it stands?

Dr McCormick: We need to advise the Minister on the relevant considerations and come back to you on that.

The Chairperson: So there is really no difference between the two amendments. That is the point.

Dr McCormick: The difference is the reference to “significant public funds”, which widens it considerably.

The Chairperson: The Committee has to decide whether it wants the additional words included or whether it is happy to run with the Public Accounts Committee's amendment on its own, which seems to be more acceptable to the Department.

Mr Weir: It seems that the bulk of complaints concerns the unfettered power of the Comptroller and Auditor General and consultation. I do not know whether we have to make a decision today. There were indications that the Minister had not, as yet, produced a view, and it may be worth waiting to hear what he has to say. Presumably, he will have a view by the date of the next meeting, before we take a final decision on what version, if any, we should accept.

The Chairperson: The only difficulty is that we have to write the report before 26 January. Maybe we should leave the matter as it is and ask the Minister to come back with a report. We can make changes then.

Mr B Bell: If our amendment included the words "public-sector bodies only" that at least would extend the Comptroller and Auditor General's powers. I support the amendment, in spite of the delay. Our concern is that he will not have powers to deal with all public-sector bodies, and we want that redressed. The amendment will extend his powers as we can see from Mr P Robinson's examples.

The delay concerns me. The Public Accounts Committee wants the Comptroller and Auditor General to have power to deal with all public bodies. That is what we were asking, for but the Committee rightly decided that was not good enough, given those examples. That is fine, and I would still go for an amendment, but if it going to delay the process, we would be as well doing something along the lines that Mr Close suggested about a separate clause.

Dr McCormick: I do not see any difficulty with including the words "inspection of any public-sector body". That does not seem to require any check by departmental order being made to the subsection in the form which referred to public-sector bodies.

Mr B Bell: The Comptroller and Auditor General does not have that power at the moment.

The Chairperson: Do we have a copy of the original proposal?

The Committee Clerk: I think the original Public Accounts Committee proposal said:

"The accounts of an authority or body which are not otherwise required to be examined and certified by the Comptroller and Auditor General should be open to his inspection if the body exercises functions of a public nature or is entirely or substantively funded from public money."

Dr McCormick: Those phrases, especially "functions of a public nature", are certainly more open to interpretation. The phrase "public sector" is more capable of a straightforward and tight definition. If the key issue is

avoiding delay, a quick resolution is possible. I hesitate to say that "functions of a public nature" could be finally and satisfactorily defined within the timetable of this Bill.

The Chairperson: Those words already appear in clause 18 (7)(a).

Dr McCormick: Yes, I appreciate that, but because the power does not come into effect until there is an order by the Department we have time for the definition to be dealt with. If we do it this way, then, as soon as the Bill receives Royal Assent, the phrase is there, whether it has been thought through or not.

Mr Maskey: I accept the need to get this sorted out, but I am very reluctant to give an unfair advantage to organisations in receipt of very substantial sums of public money who would not be subject to the same scrutiny as public-sector bodies. Anyone who gets public money should be subject to scrutiny.

I agree about not wanting to be intrusive. You can put an organisation off by too much scrutiny. Any community organisation will tell you that it spends at least a quarter of its time meeting such demands. I would like to hear more of the Minister's arguments. I have not heard them yet.

Mr Attwood: I have some sympathy with what Mr Maskey is saying. You really need legislative counsel to tell you what one of the possible amendments means. If only one word or term was open to interpretation, we might agree to proceed. However, a number of terms require clarification and some very good advice.

Secondly, we have not heard the Minister's view, which might be able to narrow significantly the difference between us, something I sense is the officials' wish. I do not know if that is feasible, but we should give the Minister and his officials time to speak on that.

I do not agree with Mr Maskey about scrutiny. Officials in the North have said for too long that fair employment legislation makes unfair demands of employers and is a disincentive to investment. You can say the same about health and safety regulations. Now we are saying it about the auditing of public moneys. That argument is a reason for not doing something. However, I heard what the officials said. We should not decide today on one amendment or another.

The Chairperson: When working with the partnership board, I heard many community groups say that European funding is not worth the hassle, because there are so many forms to fill in. That is where the issue of more monitoring comes in. I would like to tie this down. It would be good if Dr McCormick could come back to us with wording for clause 18 and the views of legislative counsel and the Minister by 9 January 2001. The Committee staff can write up the report on the Bill, excluding clause 18.

Mr Close: Time is of the essence, and the time strictures are not of our making. We have been prepared to consider one sensible amendment to allow us to proceed without holding the Bill up for other consultation. I emphasise that point. I also draw attention to the assurances we require, preferably in writing, on auditing performance measures, including those of bodies set up as limited companies by the Government. We need assurances that those two matters will be covered by future legislation.

Dr McCormick: We do not have the Minister's view on these points. Advice has been provided by the Treasury on this to the effect that it would have the effect of making the Comptroller and Auditor General a Companies Act auditor. The legal issues in this context are not straightforward, and the Treasury has said that the Government will require details of Lord Sharman's review on this. There are genuine complexities here. The inspection rights of the Comptroller and Auditor General, within the companies legislation, are clear and automatic. A company established by the Government is regarded as being in the public sector, and inspection is straightforward, but whether it is right for the Comptroller and Auditor General to act as the auditor of such companies requires further consideration. Legal matters are not straightforward. There are issues here of —

Mr Close: Of accountancy qualifications?

Mr Delaney: Yes. This powerful appointment ought to be made by an accountancy body, which would certify the person as a recognised auditor. Everyone by company law must be recognised in that way. A constitutional challenge immediately comes into play here.

Mr B Bell: The object of the exercise was to prevent us having to wait for the Sharman report. Unfortunately, it seems that we will now have to wait for it.

The Chairperson: In what manner does the Scottish legislation covers this matter?

Mr Delaney: Under general company law — not only in Scotland — it is compulsory that the person is a qualified accountant so the accountancy body must be a recognised supervisory body. You have to submit to its training, discipline and educational requirements. That principle applies in UK company law, across Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales and also in the South of Ireland. Company law in the South of Ireland mirrors the exact accountancy qualifications of a common body in the British Isles. The sections and subsections may be differently numbered, but they say the same. To audit a limited company, a person must be a member of a recognised supervisory body, as that body determines individual eligibility by way of its registration, training, discipline and quality assurance process. It is also necessary to submit information such as pay reviews. However, this does not happen for the Comptroller and Auditor General's function in the UK.

Dr McCormick: Does this place a certain rider on the independence of the Comptroller and Auditor General? I am not confident about giving assurances on that now. There is a fully effective audit and accountability arrangement to ensure that bodies are genuinely established limited companies. However, I am uncertain about how that is achieved.

Mr Delaney: There is a nervousness with the Sharman process. Legislation may be passed that permits the appointment of people to be company law auditors, in spite of their not having succumbed to the process of a regulated supervisory body with regard to information such as eligibility criteria and pay reviews. This may attract criticism of the accountability mechanisms that may be put in place and are being developed. There is an accounting profession view of this as well as a Treasury one.

Dr McCormick: I shall proceed with audit performance measures, which came up in the informal discussion with the Public Accounts Committee last week. We support fully independent validation of performance and information. It is in the public interest that, as Mr Dallat said then, we are not in a situation in which the standard of measurement is in a Department. Public service agreements would not be expected to be effective if that were so. I hesitate to link that to financial audit and to a situation where it is part of a very rigorous accountability process. That could scare the horses and make Departments take a cautious approach to developing performance measurement.

Last week, the Comptroller and Auditor General mentioned the Rates Collection Agency. He found evidence that the process there could be better. I am unfamiliar with the detail, but the principle is there. Another example is schools performance, already a controversial matter, and cause and effect are difficult to define. For instance, what extra pound made what difference to teaching standards and, in turn, to school performance. That is a complex chain.

Suddenly to make that a matter for financial audit on which an accounting officer can be called before the Public Accounts Committee to account if that element of expenditure has not been fully effective in achieving performance targets is setting the bar of accountability at a very high level. It is where we all need to want to go. However, is the high jump training sufficiently advanced for people to take that leap? I hesitate over that. We need to develop effective external validation, but I wonder if people will feel put off when it is part of financial audit.

Mr Close: I hear what is being said, but in our short experience some Departments set their targets and the bar at extremely low levels and then proceed to give themselves a pat on the back because of improvements they make which are clearly superficial. I am not concerned about the worries of Departments; I am worried about accountability which has to start with performance targets.

If Departments set silly performance targets we should know about it and be prepared to state categorically that such targets are wrong and must be improved, but not in an antagonistic way.

Dr McCormick: That option is already open to the Comptroller and Auditor General with value-for-money audits. There is nothing to stop him examining such matters and commenting on them in a value-for-money context. The extra step that I am hesitating over is bringing them into the financial-market context, which is more precise and detailed. That context introduces a concept of true and fair view, et cetera. It asks if something is fully rigorous. The value-for-money context asks if it is fit for a purpose. The financial-market context introduces a wider ranging scope.

In financial audits the bar for the standard of detailed information is very high. Supporting information requires an audit trail to draw out all the links between expenditure and outcome, something the public sector has not got used to. This is genuinely complex and difficult. It is also highly controversial in certain contexts.

The Chairperson: We are going to have to end the debate on this part of Clause 18. If the Minister can reply by 9 January 2001 and if you can come back with written amendments for us to look at, that will be the best way forward. However, that may not be possible. We could look at the variations and see if they are legally competent. Are Members happy with that?

Clause 18 referred for further consideration.

Clause 19 (Reports of Comptroller and Auditor General)

The Committee Clerk: Members will be glad to know that no substantive items are outstanding on any of the other clauses. A minor issue was raised concerning

line 29 on page 10 and the phrase “as soon as possible”. Members must decide if they are happy to leave it as it is or whether they would prefer some alternative. The alternatives were “without delay” or “as soon as is reasonable.” Is the Committee happy to report to the Assembly that it is content with clause 19?

Clause 19 agreed to.

Clause 20 agreed to.

Clause 21 (Interpretation)

The Committee Clerk: A small issue was raised about the definitions of the words “inspection” “examination” and “certified”. The Department has taken this to legislative counsel and has been told that the words have normal dictionary meanings and nothing more than. Is the Committee happy to report to the Assembly that it is content with clause 21?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 21 agreed to.

Clause 22 agreed to.

Clause 23 agreed to.

Clause 24 agreed to.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Schedule 2 agreed to.

The Committee Clerk: If Members agree, the Deputy Clerk and I will draft a report for the Committee. We know the Committee’s considerations, and I hope we will be able to finalise clause 18 and the report.

The Chairperson: We will meet again on Tuesday 9 January 2001. Thank you very much.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
FINANCE AND PERSONNEL**

Tuesday 9 January 2001

**GOVERNMENT RESOURCES AND
ACCOUNTS BILL
(NIA 6/00)**

(The Chairperson [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I am grateful for the invitation to attend the Committee session, but more importantly I appreciate the work that the Committee has done in its consideration of the Government Resources and Accounts Bill and the significant progress that has been made. However, there are some issues that remain outstanding and I appreciate the opportunity to discuss those.

The Chairperson wrote to me outlining some of the Committee's considerations and concerns in relation to the Bill. In my reply I said that I concur with many of the points made by the Committee.

I have also received helpful reports from officials on the sessions that took place before Christmas. In light of the considerations involved, I have no problems with the other amendments proposed by the Committee, other than those that are still the subject of outstanding issues. The three Committees that we have spoken to have agreed on the remit of the Financial Reporting Advisory Board (FRAB). I welcome that, but some points remain outstanding. Clause 18 is an obvious one. I am content that the Bill be amended to give the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) a right of access to all public-sector bodies. We need to achieve a satisfactory working definition of that term, and we will have to work with the Office of Legislative Counsel to achieve the right outcome.

I would still hesitate to accept the proposition that I accept immediate access rights to any wider definition of classes of organisation, such as those in receipt of significant public funds or those exercising functions of a public nature. I am not averse to the intent and motive behind such suggestions, but I want to make sure that we get things right. In reality, the inclusion of such wide phrases would radically widen the scope of the

provisions to include many private-sector firms and many grant-aided bodies, large and small. That would have implications for them and would make a significant difference. We have not had the level of consultation that might have been expected by many bodies or those whose interests are affected.

I am not averse to the intent or the approach, but we must be cautious in order to ensure that we get the language and procedures right. Wider consultation is needed, given the extent to which this could alter the scope of arrangements. If the Department sponsored such a change, the various bodies would expect it to undertake much wider consultation. They would also expect those sorts of proposals to have been included in any initial consultation on this subject, but that did not happen.

From our point of view, the intention of the Bill is to facilitate, rather than impede, accountability. I have also suggested that we oblige the Department of Finance and Personnel, in clause 18(10) of the Bill, to have regard to the views of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in respect of any order made under clause 18(6) or 18(8). The result of this would be that if the PAC wished to break through a restriction of the C&AG's access, the Department of Finance and Personnel would make an order to that effect. That would be the case unless a major issue of public interest dictated otherwise, but I cannot anticipate or even give an example of such an issue at this point. The likely effect is that access would be given where it is sought.

The combination of those changes should prevent any delay in widening the C&AG's access to information. If the Committee is content with that approach, I will instruct the Office of Legislative Counsel to prepare and refine the necessary clauses.

I intend to look at all of these issues more fully within the Audit Reorganisation Bill, and that will give us further opportunity to consider the Sharman review's findings. I intend to bring forward proposals to complete what we are beginning in the Government Resources and Accounts Bill (GRAB), which is a widening of the powers of the C&AG to ensure stronger accountability. However, it would be premature to commit to precise policy in advance of the outcome of the Sharman review. I am not saying that we are tied to the recommendations of that review or to the responses that may come from Whitehall or Westminster level to those recommendations. We are making sure that we will be taking decisions when we are in possession of all the information.

Mr Weir: As regards the amendment that the Committee put forward concerning clause 18, you are objecting to the phrases "in receipt of significant public funds" or "exercising functions of a public nature",

which you say are not particularly well-defined. Do you prefer the phrase “public sector”?

Mr Durkan: Yes. I would add the caveat that we need to make sure that we get the definition of public-sector bodies correct.

Mr Weir: You are saying that you are objecting to the Committee’s wording because of lack of definition?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Weir: Why then is the phrase “exercise functions of a public nature” good enough in clauses 12(1) and 18(7)(a)?

Mr Durkan: We are talking about a different function in clause 18.

Mr Weir: Surely the question of clarity is exactly the same? If there is a judgement to be made about whether a body exercises a function of a public nature, which the Department is to make a judgement on in clauses 12(1) and 18(7), why does that, from the point of view of definition, provide difficulty in our amendment?

Mr Durkan: Although the language used is the same, we are talking about different functions and purposes.

Let us look at what we are dealing with in clause 18. At previous meetings, examples were given of what might be meant, and football clubs were cited. We need to be clear and precise about what we mean. We are not giving the C&AG a role in relation to matters that go further than the basic intent that we all share. We all want to ensure that the C&AG is in a stronger, readier position to follow what is happening to public money regardless of the purpose for which it is given. The problem with the current wording of the Committee’s amendment is that it sets no limits. It does not confine the C&AG’s interests to the public sector and we need to come up with a tighter definition.

A number of companies receive public money and the wording of the Committee’s amendment — as it stands — raises the question of whether those companies are to be open for audit by the C&AG. We also have the issue of grant-aided bodies. The Committee has heard previously from bodies and groups responsible for handling European funding and the concerns they have regarding existing obligations in terms of reporting, audit trails, et cetera.

We must be careful to bring forward measures in this Bill which we can stand by. There is little point in our presenting legislative measures which appear to give the C&AG a role in circumstances where we will subsequently be trying to reassure bodies that the changes will not affect them in any untoward way.

Mr Weir: Do you mean assuring them that they will not be investigated?

Mr Durkan: Not beyond their use of the relevant moneys. While there are issues to be addressed, I do not feel that we are in fundamental disagreement about the desired outcome. The question is really whether this is the best wording and whether this is the best Bill in which to cover the point. We must have proper consultation on whatever provisions we make, because a number of interests are affected. I cannot anticipate all the possible issues or complications, but a number of bodies in receipt of public funding, be they private firms in the course of contract work or other bodies receiving grant aid or European funding, would appreciate involvement in a proper round of consultation on legislative proposals which could have implications for their operational arrangements.

Mr Dodds: You also mentioned consultation as a reason. You suggested that, if we did not proceed with this amendment, you could bring about a change to subsection 18(10) in order to emphasise that the intention of the Bill is to facilitate rather than impede. What consultation have you undertaken in relation to such a change? Are you suggesting that, if no consultation has taken place on a particular issue, it is not the role of any Assembly Committee considering a Bill to suggest what should be added or removed or that some change should be made? The whole purpose of our examination of this Bill is to suggest changes and improvements. Your engagement with the Committee on this issue is as valid as any other element.

You mentioned the example of a football club that receives substantial amounts of public money, a point which has been raised before. You asked if we were suggesting that such football clubs be audited. As has been said before, no one has suggested that their accounts be audited, only that their accounts be open to inspection. Where a significant amount of public money has been given to an organisation, for instance a football club, it is right and proper that there should be some means whereby the C&AG can investigate how that money has been used.

Mr Durkan: There was no consultation on the original Bill, because the provisions were of a relatively technical nature and the same as similar legislation brought forward at Westminster. I explained that to the Committee. What is before us now would take the Bill in a different direction and make a potentially radical change to it. To that extent, it is an area for which I should have thought advance consultation would be appropriate. I am not saying that legislation brought before this or any other Committee cannot be subject to sensible and appropriate amendment or that there can be no novelty at this stage. However, this is markedly different and would contradict the reasons and the justification I gave as to why we were presenting the Bill without the sort of advance consultation which happens with other legislation. In trying to bring these

issues into the context of the Audit Reorganisation Bill, we can accommodate a fuller round of consultation should it prove necessary.

Some of these issues are as relevant to the Audit Reorganisation Bill as they are to this piece of legislation. As we know, this legislation is time-sensitive, because we have to get it through before this financial year finishes.

Our proposal in relation to clause 18(10) differs from what is in the Bill. It is a novelty, but I do not regard it as being radically different from current provisions, because it does not offer a sweeping power that raises issues in advance of any other action. These powers are conferred only after a Department takes action. Therefore, the provision serves to address the concerns that have been voiced by this Committee, the PAC and the Audit Committee. It is an attempt to reassure, because even though there is hesitancy over the Committee's suggested changes to clause 18, we are not trying to unnecessarily limit or fetter the C&AG's access to information.

Legal advice must be sought before a decision is made on the exact phrasing of the powers of access and the nature of that access. The Office of Legislative Counsel has already said that we have to be clear about what we mean, even when employing such a term as "inspection". Legally, this term can mean different things in different circumstances, such as when referring to powers relating to Customs and Excise. Further groundwork must be carried out on all of these issues. I am not making a statement of opposition in principle to what people are seeking, but I am saying that we should take care to ensure that we use the most appropriate terms in the most appropriate Bill.

Mr Leslie: I want to raise a couple of points that reinforce the comments made by Mr Weir and Mr Dodds. We are seeking an inspection power, not an audit power. I am not sure that to kick some of the difficult issues in the direction of the Audit Reorganisation Bill would be an effective solution. That Bill could be about audit and not about inspection. Without knowing how that Bill is framed, I am not persuaded that we can comfortably sweep any outstanding issues into it.

Furthermore, the GRAB is a substantial Bill which deals with how to frame accounts in the future and the mechanics of spending public money. During the process of spending public money, one must be sure that mechanisms exist to ensure that that money has been spent appropriately and to best advantage. In circular terms, one then returns to this Committee's efforts to seek a method which will allow it to gain retrospective confirmation that that has been the case, through the use of this inspection power.

I can see a difficulty with the wording, "body exercises functions of a public nature". Clearly, if one

privatises a railway, the company operating it is exercising functions of a public nature, but the C&AG would have no business in examining its books. On reflection I can see that that particular phrase probably does not work.

However, receiving significant public funds is a substantial matter. One of our major horrors is that money, usually grant aid, is paid out and does not appear to have been spent to best advantage or in the manner intended. The question is how this activity can be uncovered, how it can be policed and how the Admiral Byng principle can be applied to ensure that it does not happen again. I am not happy that you are responding to the general thrust of the Committee's concern, namely the stewardship of money that has gone beyond the obvious central Government Departments.

Mr Durkan: Mr Leslie suggested that the Audit Reorganisation Bill was not particularly appropriate for the accommodation of some of these points. It could be argued that that Bill is as appropriate, if not more appropriate, than GRAB because it is more directly related to audit and inspection, whereas GRAB is more about departmental accounts. It is valid and appropriate to take these points up in the Audit Reorganisation Bill. It is also helpful to know that, in looking at these issues in the context of GRAB, the Audit Reorganisation Bill is soon to be examined. Given that Sharman has not come through in the timescale we had hoped, there are other points that we can pick up there. The fact that the Audit Reorganisation Bill is coming forward gives us, at least, a legislative vehicle for picking up on these issues and carrying them forward.

To that extent we must be clear that there is no fundamental difference of opinion between the Committee and myself on this matter. We are looking here at a particular bit of legislation and certain wording has been suggested. We are not saying that there should not be a clause in this area of the Bill. We have merely indicated hesitancy in relation to certain language. Members will be aware that we broadly agree with the PAC's suggested amendment in this area, but we want to get the language right. We understand exactly what lies behind the thrust of the further amendments suggested by this Committee and we are sharing with you our caution, which is based on legal advice from the Office of Legislative Counsel.

I am sure that the Committee shares with me, as Minister, the concern to make sure that legislation is as right and as tight as possible. I am trying to take on board the views of this and other Committees that have a stake in it, but I also have to consider the legal advice I am being given and I must share that with the Committee. The amendments we have offered in respect of Clause 18(10) are there partly to respond to the concerns and interests of the Committee. They do not go far enough, and therefore we will want to pick up on the

remaining issues in the Audit Reorganisation Bill. Nobody is saying that this is the end of the issue.

Mr B Bell: The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) produced this amendment and I generally support your comments but, from the point of view of the PAC, you do not go far enough at this stage. In your letter to the Committee of Finance and Personnel you say that

“the Public Accounts Committee wishes to ensure that, without delay, the C&AG has inspection rights in respect of the accounts of all public sector bodies. I would be content for the Bill to be amended to that effect.”

The PAC would welcome this, but only as an interim measure. I am reassured by your comments on that in your previous response. However, this measure stops short of accepting the immediate inspection rights relating to the other bodies mentioned earlier.

Given the time constraints — and I did point this out at another Committee session — there is difficulty in carrying out broad consultation. I recognise that it may not be possible for the Department of Finance and Personnel to expect legislative provision for inspection of these wider bodies at this stage. However, we need to look at this again and make sure that these are included in any future legislation.

You also state in your letter that you

“hesitate to accept an immediate inspection right in respect of any wider definition of classes of organisation, such as ‘in receipt of public funds’ or ‘carrying out functions of a public nature’ as these are less readily defined in the term, ‘public sector.’”

You then add:

“I suggest that as well as an amendment in the form proposed by the PAC and the Committee for Finance and Personnel (using ‘public sector’ as the operative phrase), we might place on the Department of Finance and Personnel an obligation to have regard for the views of the PAC in clause 18 (10) in respect of any order made under clause 18 (6) or (8).”

It is wrong, in principle, that this Assembly’s inspection powers should be subject to the Department of Finance and Personnel. On behalf of the PAC, I accept this provision because of the time constraints and the fact that wider consultation is needed. However, the issue cannot rest here — it must be dealt with.

The Chairperson: I interpreted clause 18 in a different way. I thought that the idea was simply to take on board the concerns of the PAC, and that these would then be implemented. Am I reading that correctly?

Mr B Bell: Yes, but that is not happening.

Mr Durkan: Are you referring to the amendment we suggested? It is there simply because the Department of Finance and Personnel has certain legally held functions. In this amendment, we are suggesting that in respect of certain functions in this particular area, we should have particular regard for the views of the PAC. Among the PAC’s concerns was the fact that the

Assembly’s rights of access and scrutiny are more circumscribed than people want them to be, as pointed out by Mr Bell.

Given the concern that has been registered in this particular area, we are trying to ensure that the Department of Finance and Personnel will exercise its powers and duties with particular regard to the PAC. We will have particular regard for the PAC, which is really the key agent of the Assembly, as far as this issue is concerned.

We have not offered this solution as an absolute “end of the affair”. We recognise, as we have before, that other issues must be picked up, including those concerning ourselves and those emerging from the Sharman review. However, neither the time constraints nor the intended scope of the Bill allow us to deal with all these matters, because some of these matters must be subject to further consultation within the Assembly and outside.

As Mr Bell quoted from my letter earlier, we did use hesitant language — we were not absolute or categorical. In principle, there is no argument between us about what we want to achieve.

The Assembly has the key responsibility in controlling spending. Alongside resources and the Budget, it will also be controlling the stock of assets, et cetera. I want to make sure that the public, the people whose money is involved, feel that that is being done as fully and as properly as it can be done, not least using the good offices of the C&AG. We need to make sure that the terms that we bring forward are well thought through and well considered.

Mr B Bell: I have given the Minister credit for that, as was said previously. The PAC was set up by the Assembly to scrutinise public bodies, and we can only do that through the C&AG. It is wrong in principle to rely on a system that obliges us to seek permission to scrutinise any issue from the Department of Finance and Personnel. I know the Minister is trying to be helpful, but the PAC actually scrutinises Departments as well, and it would be nonsensical for us to be in a position where we have to seek permission to scrutinise a Department from that same Department. You said that this is merely an interim measure — the PAC believes that this must be the case.

Mr Durkan: We have indicated that we are happy to accept the sort of amendment proposed by the PAC, and we made the point about using the language of the public sector, because we thought that that would be easier to find. There are also definitional ambiguities, but in broader terms it is easier to define. We are therefore talking about both that amendment and the other one that we have suggested. In suggesting that other amendment, we are not trying to fetter the PAC or impose any sort of Department of Finance and

Personnel vet or veto on what the PAC might do. We are trying, in response to the concerns that are there, to actually lend a power which is currently held by the Department of Finance and Personnel to the interest that the PAC has expressed. There might be types of expenditure that give cause to the C&AG or to the PAC to want to see further inspection. If such issues arise and are not automatically covered in the Bill, the powers that the Department of Finance and Personnel has will be lent to the case that the PAC wants to make. It will be there to facilitate access, rather than to prevent it.

Mr B Bell: I know he is trying to be helpful, Chairperson.

Mr Close: I also think the Minister is trying to be helpful. He has disclosed what he got for Christmas — a big departmental defensive shield. I think that is obvious from the fact that certain language has been suggested as perfectly acceptable, as pointed out by colleagues across the floor. It is perfectly acceptable to use such phrases in certain paragraphs in clause 18 when it is giving power and authority to the Department to exercise, but it is totally wrong to give it to the C&AG. I see that as a defensive mechanism by the Department, and that is further added to by the suggestion — which is intended to be helpful — about your amendments to 18(10). The Chairperson of the PAC is absolutely right on this matter.

Essentially, it is a fact — and it will be seen to be so — that the C&AG operates at the discretion of the Department, and that, in my book, is fundamentally wrong in principle. It is fettering the right. Inspection rights are all that we are talking about here. Certainly, from this side of the table, we have accepted the difference between audit and inspection. The extensions that we were looking for were for inspection rights in relation to substantial sums of public money, and to be able to follow that money through. The amendment is suggesting that that would be OK: “We give you an undertaking that we will do that and we will give an order”. Now, that is discretionary, and in principle I am absolutely opposed to that.

If I can use another cliché, the road to hell is paved with fantastic intentions. We have here a series of wonderful intentions of what is to happen and what we should be looking forward to. With the greatest respect, I remind the Minister of where we started off in this. There were a number of other potential amendments that we would like to have made to this Bill in order to increase and enhance accountability. That is what we were after, but because of time restraints it was pointed out that we could not. Therefore, we restricted what we were going to do to the amendment to clause 18, which is in front of us.

We also sought two assurances — not waiting to see what Sharman says or what the Audit Reorganisation

Bill might bring forward — from you, Minister, that the proper accountability and opportunities to trace and follow through and to have inspection rights would be followed through into, for example, public service agreements (PSAs). We now find that effectively we are getting very little of that. We are getting a watered-down agreement to an amendment and defensive mechanisms introduced through subsections 18(6), (8) and (10) where discretion will lie with the Department.

While we may intend to be doing all the right things, we must set an example through this Committee and the Audit Committee that the role of the Northern Ireland Assembly is going to be different to that which has pertained through the Treasury for generations, where they have selfishly protected their own little self-interests and in many respects made it virtually impossible for proper audit trails to be followed. We want to change that and get away from that, and defensive mechanisms do not help in assuring us that we are on the same wavelength.

Mr Durkan: There are a number of points there. First, I want to pick up on Mr Close’s comment about a “big departmental defensive shield”. He also used language that implied that the Department or I was saying that something was totally wrong. He said that we were saying that some wording is all right in relation to one clause but that we were saying that it is totally wrong and that trying to widen access for the C&AG is totally wrong. I have not said that anything is totally wrong in relation to what this Committee or individual members of this Committee have suggested.

I have underlined that I am hesitant to embrace that particular wording when the legal advice to me is that there are problems with it and that the wording does not achieve the purposes or ends that people want. I have indicated a commitment to embrace wording that we believe is competent and workable and the need to further address the issues. I know that that does not fully cover all the rightful concerns of this Committee, or of other relevant Committees of the Assembly.

In the letter that I sent to you, Mr Chairperson, I indicated my acceptance of much of what the Committee has been saying and doing in relation to the Bill. We have indicated that we are happy to accept the amendment that came forward from the PAC. We have gone further by saying that as well as that amendment — and not as an alternative to that amendment — we have offered this other amendment in relation to the PAC that would add to access.

One must remember that, even as things stand, it goes further than what applies at Westminster, being stronger than what is available to its Public Accounts Committee or the National Audit Office. In these areas we are not absolutely confining ourselves either to what has gone before at the Treasury and in Whitehall or to what

comes next there in the light of the Sharman review. In the amendments we are offering, we show that we are prepared to take different courses in response to convincing points made. However, while accepting the validity of points from this Committee and others, I receive equally valid advice from the Office of the Legislative Counsel about certain matters not being so straightforward. We want to ensure that we have a viable legal outcome and the right provisions expressed through the correct terms and wording in the right Bill.

The Chairperson: Can you confirm that you are satisfied with the wording of the original PAC amendment?

Mr Durkan: Yes, with the couching on public sector bodies.

The Chairperson: That is except the point about the public sector body. I shall ask the Committee Clerk to read it so that we can clarify matters.

The Committee Clerk: The original PAC amendment read

“The accounts of an authority or body which are not otherwise required to be examined and certified by the Comptroller and Auditor General should be open to his inspection if that body exercises functions of a public nature, has received significant public funds or is entirely or substantially funded from public money.”

The Chairperson: You were using the words “public function” instead of “public nature”.

Mr Durkan: Yes. As in the letter, we have warned that we wish first to agree the thrust. We must work on the precise language, for legal advice says that not all the terms we use for one purpose are understood in relation to it alone. We must therefore tighten up on the use of words like “authority” and “function”.

Mr Hussey: I first need a clarification. In your letter you said, “I hesitate to accept an immediate inspection right”. I presume the problem is the word “immediate” and that you do not hesitate to accept the inspection right itself.

Mr Durkan: No.

Mr Hussey: Since that is the case and you accept inspection rights, why have you said “We do not have an example of such a consideration, and the likely effect of this proposal would be that inspection rights would be given where they are sought”? Why can you not give us greater assurance on the proposal’s actual effect — that inspection rights will be given where they are sought — rather than merely its likely effect?

Mr Durkan: Had I been even more categorical in my language, people might have understood it wrongly and thought I was offering that as the sum total of what had to be done in this area. I believe that Billy Bell used the phrase “an interim position”. If I had said that it would guarantee certain things, people would have

decided it was my conclusive offer in the area and that I believed no more needed to be done or examined. However, more must be looked at and done, not only for reasons covered in the deliberations of this and other Committees, but to take account of other developments and factors.

Mr Hussey: Perhaps one might say, “to ensure that one of the effects of this proposal would be”?

Mr Durkan: I would then be asked the other effects. It might go in another direction. We might have been firmer in the wording, but, whether in the letter or anywhere else, I certainly do not wish to “hype” what we are saying or make it appear to be the end of our thinking and consideration on the issue.

My point is that we all need to think further about this. We need to consult on the further provisions that we would make to ensure that no untoward and unintentional consequences of the approaches we take are inevitably built into the legislation. I make the point in relation to other work that I do and I am sure that the Committee does. We hear from people who are in receipt of public moneys, not least through European funds, about the problems of existing provisions concerning reportage and audit trails, et cetera.

People have many apprehensions about how things will operate in future. We need to make sure that people do not feel that they are being blindsided by a significant alteration that we make. We therefore need to consult with people, not only so that they are aware of the possible implications of what we are doing, but so that they can make us aware of any such implications, in order that they can make sure that we do our job legislatively in a sound and competent way and, in turn, that we can properly equip the C&AG to do his job on behalf of the Assembly.

Mr Dodds: I am concerned, as are other members of the Committee, that the C&AG should have inspection powers which are not just in relation to public bodies or bodies exercising the functions of the public sector. He himself admitted to us that he thought it would be appropriate that if those bodies are getting public money — taxpayers’ money — he should have the right of inspection.

You have admitted, Minister, that in principle you have no problem with that. You say that it is appropriate to put that in the next Bill. Since the heading for clause 18 is “Examinations by Comptroller and Auditor General”, that is the very point at which we could deal with it. We are getting down to nit-picking as to reasons we should not give the C&AG something which he agrees would be useful and which would give the public great reassurance that when significant amounts of public money are given to organisations, they are open to inspection by the C&AG.

You say, Minister, that it may not achieve the end that we want. From what you say it certainly would achieve that end, but you are perhaps worried that it might go a bit further. If it is only a question of wording, let us sit down with the appropriate legal draughtsmen and draw up the wording. Would you not agree with the Committee that our purpose is to give the C&AG — as part of this Bill — the necessary powers, wherever significant amounts of public money are being given to some organisation or body, to inspect their accounts and see how that money is being spent? Is that not sensible?

Mr Durkan: Again I make the point that I am not here to argue against the C&AG's having adequate and properly enhanced powers of inspection in relation to public moneys. I have said before that I am not in the business of declaring no-go areas. Nigel Dodds has stated that I said that we should not go down this road. I have not said that. I say that we should not expect to cover the distance in this particular bit of legislation, given that it is focused on particular provisions. That was part of the justification for not having subjected it to advance consultation. We know there are time constraints on it. We do not want to come to rushed conclusions in the context of processing this legislation. If we were to rush, we might find that there are particular corners on that road that we should not take too fast and that there are other users of that road for whom we must have due care.

That is why we need proper consultation on this. I am not setting my face or the face of the Department or the Executive against these things. I am simply saying we need to get it right for the right reasons, which include all the basic concerns that have motivated the amendments and suggestions that have come forward from this and other Committees.

Mr Maskey: Is the Department suggesting that we go with the minimal requirement as an interim measure and then come back to further legislation after this consultation? Is that what you are suggesting, Minister?

Mr Durkan: That is what we need to do. These issues have turned out to be a strong trailer for a lot of the issues that we will have to examine in the Audit Reorganisation Bill. This Bill has not said "absolutely none of these issues can be accommodated or picked up on in this Bill". We have tried to respond where possible within the constraints of this Bill. We are sharing with the Committee our concerns about some of the wording. We are not arguing against these approaches on principle — we want to pick them up.

The Department and the Committee can work together for the good of both our interests in this whole area and our shared legislative duty. We want to make legitimate provisions in the right legislation so we can arrive at the point where we are able to make good the deficiencies in the existing Bill without the risk of some

of the difficulties we are discussing. That is what we are doing. By agreeing with the amendments and coming forward ourselves with what we hope will be helpful amendments, we are saying this business has to be picked up further in the context of the other Bill.

The Chairperson: Do you intend to come forward with an amendment that includes that?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

The Chairperson: Do you have a draft of that yet?

Mr Durkan: No.

The Chairperson: Are you saying to the Committee that you will have an amendment covering the issues dealt with here? The Committee may then be satisfied with that amendment or it may want to make its own, or an amalgamation of both.

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Dodds: Will that amendment be tabled in the Assembly or to the Bill presented here?

The Chairperson: It will go the Assembly, because we have to finalise today.

Mr Dodds: In that case, if we did not agree with it or wanted to change it, would we have to table a further amendment?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Dodds: I would like to refer to a couple of points. The letter we received on 5 January 2001 states that

"subject to final consideration of precise wording I am content with the other amendments."

You also discuss your intention to make the C&AG the auditor of companies established by Departments, although you cannot give assurances. In both those cases are you saying you agree with it and you intend to proceed, but for technical reasons you are not in a position to do so — as it has to be cleared by the appropriate legal channels?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Dodds: Apart from that, have you any other concerns?

Mr Durkan: No, we are only concerned that we get it right and do not raise any unnecessary difficulties.

The Chairperson: My interpretation of the issue of the auditor of companies is that if the C&AG inspected and found a problem, he would have the right to call for an auditor or go for an audit. The C&AG would not be the auditor of companies in general. There are different interpretations of that role. We have agreed that the inspection should be in place, but by extension he would have the right to audit a particular company, but not as a general auditor of companies. Whereas, in your letter, Minister, you state that the C&AG will be "the auditor of companies established by Departments".

Mr Durkan: I accept your clarification as to what is intended there. That just reinforces the point in all of this that we need to know what the implications of the provisions we make are really going to be. I doubt that the C&AG wants to take on powers to audit companies. We need to make sure that the provisions made, even in terms of inspection, are square with any other relevant legislation, such as Companies Acts, et cetera.

We can say what we do not mean in relation to these. I have been able to say what we do not mean and members in the Committee have been able to say what we do not mean. But while we can all say anecdotally what we do not mean, we need to be clear that we all understand what the legislation will mean. We need to be careful on that point, but I appreciate the clarification.

The Chairperson: The other issue is the audit of performance information. While you are saying that it would be premature at this stage, the Committee was actually looking for that to be established.

Mr Durkan: There are reasons for judging it to be premature at this stage. We are only bringing forward PSAs in the context of the debates we had on the Budget and on the Programme for Government. Some Assembly Members, including some members of this Committee, were critical, saying, "You are bringing forward a Budget and you are referring to PSAs but we have not seen them yet," and so on.

First, we need to have PSAs brought forward and have them challenged and scrutinised in the Assembly with regard to their direct terms and their quality. What we are bringing forward across the Departments as PSAs, indicating actions, targets and outcomes, may not be what the Assembly would accept as being valid and worthwhile.

If we came forward with fairly conclusive provisions as regards the auditing of departmental performance measures relating to PSAs, I would be open to the same criticism that I received on the Budget. It was said that I had assumed that people accepted the nature and quality of these PSAs. There is further work for the Assembly and the Departments to do regarding PSAs.

I accept that independent validation of information on departmental performance and on outcomes and outputs would be valuable. PSAs are meant to be an aid to the Assembly and to the wider public interest. But — and we have been hearing this from Departments, and I am sure other departmental Committees are hearing it from their Departments — there are some inherent difficulties with regard to performance setting and to monitoring.

You cannot always trace a precise cause-and-effect relationship. In some areas there is obviously a very significant time lag between investments and actual outcomes; for example, investing in teacher training or

in health promotion. Not everything is readily measurable and quantifiable. Given that we are dealing with some very different issues here, we should not try to take the premature shortcut, at this stage, of somebody making this part of the financial audit role of the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

In relation to performance measures, not only does the Assembly need to look at ways of enhancing the Audit Office's contribution to monitoring performance measures, but also the Assembly and the Committees must be enabled to make a more significant contribution in that area. That needs wider consideration in the Assembly.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office can comment on performance management through value for money studies, et cetera. It is not as if there is no reach for the Northern Ireland Audit Office with regards to performance. However, I am hesitant to try to cover those sorts of policy-sensitive performance issues in an area of a Bill that deals with financial audit.

The Chairperson: The Committee intended that performance measures would be dealt with in the Audit Reorganisation Bill. Our letter was simply marking that up.

Mr Close: We are not getting any assurances, yet I appreciate what the Minister is saying. I have sympathy with a lot of it, and I underline that. However, an argument should be made that the best way to get those matters right is to have the audit from day one. That is the type of thing that we are looking for through the audit reorganisation.

Mr Durkan: I accept Mr Close's point and I appreciate the sympathy that he has for me on this point. I cannot give a unilateral or categorical commitment on this issue because it would have implications across all Government Departments. We are in the process of trying to bring forward PSAs. I cannot say how much the Finance and Personnel Committee, the Assembly or the other departmental Committees will appreciate the nature and quality of them, but we need to establish that.

The Assembly needs to be careful that it does not short-circuit the important opportunities that are opening up to it with regard to PSAs. If we, at this stage, took the shortcut of lumping an audit of performance measures into financial audit procedures, we might reduce the development potential that PSAs offer the Assembly. We do not want to discourage Departments from coming forward with robust and progressive PSAs setting out the actions, targets and outcomes that they want to achieve and the outputs that they will be measuring. By saying, at this early stage, that we will automatically cover that by way of financial audit, we might end up encouraging a much more conservative approach by Departments. They might think that it

would be safe to come up with broad targets and go for PSAs that are in lowest common denominator land.

We have a shared interest in trying to ensure that PSAs are of the desired quality and reliability, and we have a shared interest in audit. However, we must ensure that our concern to see one reflected in a particular way does not undermine our concern to see another developed in another way.

Mr Close: I would like to believe that the scrutiny committees would rule out one of your fears, namely that of going for the lowest common denominator in the agreement. Otherwise, the scrutiny committees would not be doing their job. We are looking at a layer above that.

Mr Durkan: Those scrutiny committees play a key role in so far as auditing and scrutinising performance is concerned. Furthermore, the key role of Committees also includes performance areas. We require further consideration by the Assembly at large in relation to this. I do not want those provisions that are made in respect of auditing arrangements and performance measures to be interpreted as somehow precluding a direct role for each departmental Committee to look at how effective performance actually was.

The Chairperson: Committees may also become bogged down on the legislation that they do not have time to scrutinise.

Mr Close: Are we leaving today's meeting at a point where we are to produce a report? If so, are we producing that report in the expectation of following our own line of an amendment and, as a consequence, rejecting amendments to subsections 18(6), (8) and (10)? Are we to be presented with an amendment on the Floor of the House by the Minister?

The Chairperson: First, we must obtain an assurance from the Minister that he is coming forward with an amendment that covers the issues that we have raised. The Committee will then decide whether it feels that that is sufficient or whether it will require its own amendment. We have an assurance that there is to be an amendment dealing with the issues brought forward by the Minister.

Mr Durkan: Yes, there will be amendments.

Mr Maskey: Could there be further amendments after this legislation has been processed and completed?

Mr Durkan: There could be further provisions in the Audit Reorganisation Bill.

Mr Maskey: In particular, with regards to clause 18?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Weir: When are we to sign off the report?

The Committee Clerk: The report has to be with the Business Office on 26 January. The Assistant Clerk and myself have to write a report by 16 January.

Mr Weir: Do we need to sign this off next week?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Weir: Can the Minister assure us that any amendments that he brings forward will be ready by 16 January? We must consider whether we are to go ahead with our amendments or accept the amendments from the Minister.

Mr Durkan: I do not know when I will receive the final advice from the Office of the Legislative Counsel. Therefore, I cannot give an absolute assurance of a particular date. I have shared thoughts in relation to what we are trying to achieve in this Bill, and I am keeping the option open to further build on that in the future Bill. I have indicated why I see problems with some of the wording that has been suggested here, and I will attempt to come up with an amendment that will not have those wording problems, taking into account the advice that is given to me. Certainly, this Committee is free to follow its own counsel after that.

The Chairperson: It would be helpful for the Committee to have that before the final draft of its response to the report — if possible, for next Tuesday's meeting. If that is not possible, then the Committee will have to look at the situation at that particular time. However, it would give us some more time if the amendment were received from the Minister.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES
AND PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE**

Wednesday 24 January 2001

**ADOPTION (INTERCOUNTRY
ASPECTS) BILL
(NIA 8/00)**

The Chairperson (Dr Hendron): I would like to welcome Mr John Clarke, Dr Hilary Harrison and Mr Alan Sharp from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. If we do not have enough time to finish our discussion today, we may ask you to come back again on 7 February.

The Committee and others are concerned about the case of the attempted adoption of the twins via the Internet. Our Colleagues and the public want to know if this Bill covers that sort of thing.

Mr Clarke: My opening comment was going to be about this case. As I left my office to come here, I received a communication from London. I have only glanced through it, but there is a meeting about this issue at official level tomorrow in London. Even before I received this communication, I would have asked if the proposed Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Bill addresses this issue and if the corresponding Act in England and Wales covers all aspects of the issue? From my preliminary reading of the Bill, there are one or two concerns that it does not address.

The Chairperson: That is an important point.

Mr Clarke: This issue is currently under scrutiny. There are provisions in the Bill that deal with bringing children into the country and ensuring that all assessments of couples are carried out by approved adoption agencies. That is a partial response to the issue that this case has raised. Having said that, there are difficulties and concerns that there could still be circumstances in which something could happen — not necessarily similar to what has happened in this case — which the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act may not cover. That has been mentioned in statements that have already been made in the House of Commons.

The Chairperson: Can we assume that the Minister and the Department will examine this closely and will submit an amendment?

Mr Clarke: This situation could be good and bad, in that the legislation is still in Bill form.

The Chairperson: Will you examine that matter closely?

Mr Clarke: Yes. We will have to.

Mr J Kelly: Vetting seems to be the critical issue.

Mr Clarke: The approval of the adoptive parents is critical. The Bill, as presently drafted, addressed that to some extent. The home-study report must be carried out by an approved adoption agency. In this case a start has been made in implementing that in England and Wales, but it was not started at the operative moment, and it was pre-dated by the home-study report, so the legislation could not be operated retrospectively.

The Chairperson: Can we assume that you will put forward an amendment? The Committee will consider whether it should put forward an amendment.

Mr Clarke: You are putting me in a difficult position. We will have to consider that closely and quickly.

The Chairperson: Surely there is enough time between now and 7 February to have that clarified beyond all doubt?

Mr Clarke: Yes. I would like to be a little more confident about it.

The Chairperson: Are Colleagues happy with that?

Members indicated assent.

We move on to the Bill, which we will deal with clause by clause.

Clause 1 (Regulations giving effect to Convention)

This clause enables the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make regulations giving effect in Northern Ireland to the Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, which was concluded at The Hague on 29 May 1993, and is known as the “Hague Convention”.

Mr Clarke: This is a wide-ranging regulation-making power, but it is constrained — indeed, the Bill is constrained — regarding the amendments to adoption legislation and regulations. It would permit them only for the purposes of giving effect to the Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption.

The equivalent provision in the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 in England and Wales has not been put into effect, and a huge body of regulations would be required to support that. The regulations have to be subject to negative resolution, so there will be consultation.

People are now feeling constrained because they want to move ahead in this area, but we still have to consult with the Committee and others, particularly the agencies involved. I expect that this set of regulations will be

substantial and, in a sense, this section is simply paving the way for the real substance of much of what the legislation would be doing.

The Chairperson: Would the regulations be subordinate legislation?

Mr Clarke: Yes.

Ms Ramsey: Are you saying that this Bill comes from the Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption?

Mr Clarke: The Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 in Great Britain stems from that. In order to ratify and implement the Convention, the UK would have to have the appropriate legislation to carry out domestic law.

Ms Ramsey: Has that taken us eight years?

Mr Clarke: Yes, it has taken the United Kingdom that length of time.

Mr McFarland: Is it true that for ignoring any of these regulations, one can be punished with the “massive” imprisonment of three months? That is an amazing deterrent for someone who is desperate for a child and wishes to circumvent the regulations. Is that the tariff in Great Britain for such an offence?

Mr Clarke: It would be a similar tariff.

Mr McFarland: Is it not a bit light, given that anyone who is likely to wish to skirt these regulations is someone who probably has been refused, or has had difficulty getting, permission and is therefore trying to bring children in without authority? As you know, in some cases the situation is one of desperation. Do you think that threatening someone by saying, “Behave yourself; do not do that or you will get three months in jail” is likely to be a deterrent, given the amounts of money and the effort involved?

Mr Clarke: There is always an issue about the severity of penalties, and I will point to an issue that may be related. This is broadly equivalent to other parts of the United Kingdom. We would be making it an offence to bring a child into Northern Ireland in contravention of the convention. For example, if the whole thing were effective in the United Kingdom, a child could be brought in through England and Wales. There would be practical issues if there were differences in penalties because there would be a way around that also.

Mr McFarland: I was not questioning whether it should be different from England and Wales, but rather whether no one had wondered to themselves how effective a deterrent of three months’ imprisonment be on the sort of people who are likely to offend. The question is: has the Department raised this matter with the Department of Health in England to suggest that, on reflection, waving the finger at someone and threatening him or her with three months’ imprisonment might not deter someone who wishes to circumvent these regulations?

Mr Sharp: The Bill tries to focus mostly on the interests of the child and not on the punishment of the offender.

Mr Clarke: We have not considered whether the present penalty is severe enough. There is now an opportunity, in the broader context, to ask whether any consideration is being given to the tightening of the law in this area. The question of whether any consideration is being given to it is one that I can certainly ask at tomorrow’s meeting. It is one we might have difficulty operating independently, but I take your point.

Dr Harrison: The ramification of three months’ imprisonment would be that the welfare of the child would also have to be considered, with steps having to be taken to secure his or her welfare. That would therefore be a deterrent in itself, since a child could not remain with parents who had been imprisoned.

Rev Robert Coulter: Returning to the issue of the three-month penalty, will the fine deter a repeat offender in the same way as a three-month sentence?

Mr Clarke: Under the Bill, one could receive the maximum prison sentence and fine. Are you asking if the deterrent is adequate?

Rev Robert Coulter: No. The point I am making is that three months in prison would automatically bar someone from repeating the offence, but would the fine be an equal deterrent?

Mr Clarke: It would be a conviction for the offence, and the penalty could be either a fine, a prison sentence or both. However, those are the maximum penalties. One could perhaps say that the deterrent effect of a large fine, given that it is already an expensive operation overall, might not be so great.

Rev Robert Coulter: Will the fine be on their record in the same way as a prison term would be?

Mr Clarke: Yes. The conviction would be on their record.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (Central Authority and accredited bodies)

The Chairperson: For the purpose of article 6 of the Hague Convention, subsection 1 provides for the functions of a central authority in Northern Ireland to be discharged by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Clarke: The concept of central authority is basic to the whole operation between countries. At present all intercountry adoption cases pass through the Department of Health in London. Home-study reports carried out on people living here will be passed through our Department to the central authority. In effect, although it is not designated as such, our Department operates as a conduit to the central authority in London. This clause puts the

existing procedures into law and establishes a central authority in London.

In cases of prospective adopters living here, the home-study reports would be carried out by an adoption agency here, passed to the Department, and the Department would pass those on. This sounds very convoluted, but one of the historical reasons for it is that there has to be assurance that the home-study report is carried out by an approved adoption agency. Other countries would not take home-study reports directly from agencies. The Department already receives the home-study reports, and they are loosely scrutinised by the Social Services Inspectorate for equality issues. We are there to assure the central authority in London that these have been produced by an approved adoption society.

Mr J Kelly: Does this apply to adoption within the island of Ireland?

Mr Clarke: That is a slightly wider subject. Under the Bill, legally, the South of Ireland is a foreign adoption. It is a designated country and those adoptions would be recognised in the UK. We should bear in mind that intercountry adoption already takes place. This concerns regulations and statutory measures. Intercountry adoption between the South and us is more likely to be in a family situation, in which case, other factors apply. Adoptions within the family are set aside from the adoption agency, and that is simply a practical approach.

Mr Gallagher: Is an adoption application made to the central authority in England then passed back to a central authority in Northern Ireland?

Mr Clarke: Prospective adopters seek approval. They get a home-study report by an adoption agency here — it could be a trust or one of the voluntary organisations — and they get approval.

Mr Sharp: The application comes from the trust to the Department. Once we have satisfied ourselves that everything has been done according to the rules, we pass it to the Department of Health in London. They attach to it a certificate of eligibility, which is what foreign countries are looking for. It has to be approved by the Department of Health, which accepts that we have vetted it and that everything is in order. It goes from us to the Department of Health in London and then to the other country.

Mr Clarke: It is a procedural point.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Clause 3 (Convention adoption orders)

Clause 3 agreed to.

Clause 4 (Effect of Convention adoptions)

The Chairperson: Clause 4 amends article 39(1) of the 1987 Order to clarify the position with regard to convention adoptions made outside the UK, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. It is concerned with the

legal status in Northern Ireland of children who are the subject of such adoptions.

Mr Clarke: It is understood that adoption, under our domestic law, severs the birth ties and the legal links between a child and his or her birth parents. In effect the clause creates the same legal status for those children as those who are conventionally adopted. The legal position of the child is the same as if the adoption had been made within the jurisdiction.

Unfortunately, some countries have adoptions that are sometimes called “simple adoptions”, which are a type of halfway house. Under this legislation, those simple adoptions would be recognised here, provided nobody challenges them or raises any questions. Powers are granted to the High Court later in the Order to deal with any potential challenges.

I do not know whether we quoted any situations in the explanatory document, but one that I can remember is whether it is disadvantageous to the child to sever all connections — legal, financial or otherwise — with his or her birth parents. That child could be disadvantaged by us recognising a complete separation if he or she can, for example, inherit money. Powers are given to the High Court to deal with this. The article states that simple adoptions are automatically recognised here, but that safeguards are provided.

Mr J Kelly: Expanding on your last statement, are you saying that all birth ties will be severed?

Mr Clarke: In this country, and most Western European countries, adoption is viewed as the severing of all ties with the birth parents.

Mr J Kelly: To return to your point about the birth parents' nationality. You talked about legal matters where there might be an inheritance. If a child from Vietnam or the Far East is adopted and subsequently discovers that a relative has left him or her an inheritance, does the legislation affect that kind of situation?

Mr Clarke: It is slightly unclear. That is our adoption law. Adoption in this country means a complete break. I know in the modern world —

Mr J Kelly: You go on to talk about inheritance —

Mr Clarke: What I am saying is that the first part of that section states that those convention adoption orders are just the same as our adoption orders. Their legal effect is exactly the same as ours. The piece at the end is a safeguard because if it were a halfway house-type adoption of other countries, that could disadvantage the child. If the child had stayed at home he or she could have inherited money, if he or she comes here, the inheritance could be blocked; so it is a safeguard.

Ms Hanna: You may have answered my question. Does the child take on the nationality of the host country?

Mr Clarke: The entry clearance that one receives to bring the child here for adoption is part and parcel of that sort of immigration.

Ms Hanna: There is no question of dual citizenship?

Mr Clarke: Not under the adoption law. I am not an expert — it could happen under other circumstances.

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clause 5. (Annulment, etc., of Convention adoptions, etc.)

The Chairperson: Clause 5 inserts a new article 55A into the 1987 Order. This permits the High Court to annul, on application, a convention adoption or a convention adoption order on the grounds that the particular adoption or order is contrary to public policy, or that the authority, which purported to authorise the adoption, was not so authorised.

Mr Clarke: This is a limited power to set aside overseas adoption. It is a safeguard for the child's origins, in the sense that the convention sets out many issues and the consents of various parties to the adoption. If it is challenged, the High Court can make a ruling, but it is a limited power to set aside an overseas adoption. This could be quite a serious matter because we are setting aside an adoption under the convention, which would normally be recognised, and it is the High Court that will consider this matter.

The article continues:

"Except as provided by this Article the validity of a Convention adoption, a Convention adoption order, an overseas adoption or a determination shall not be impugned in proceedings in any court in Northern Ireland."

As previously mentioned, those convention adoptions have the full validity of law. The article provides limited power with which to challenge them. The person raising the challenge would have to establish that the adoption was contrary to public policy. If one asks what a contravention of public policy is, that would have to be raised before the court. There is no clear line on that at present. One would have to demonstrate to the court that something had not been done in accordance with the convention. If it has been done according to the convention, and all the approvals are there, the court does not examine any further. The High Court does not rehear the whole case. It merely examines whether the procedures were appropriate.

Ms Ramsey: Does that mean that the court has limited power with which to set aside parts of the convention?

Mr Clarke: No. That is a limited power and to set aside even a single adoption made under the convention would be a serious step. It would be a justifiable step if it were decided that the authority had authorised the adoption, or made the determination, was incompetent, or if there was something wrong procedurally.

Ms Ramsey: Can you give us an example?

Mr Clarke: We are relying on several things — for example, the authority in the foreign country that completes the home-study report, or the court in the foreign country that makes some order or determination. Either may not have the appropriate power, and that could be demonstrated at a High Court here. This power is quite limited. It does not provide for a case to be reheard, because that could be disastrous if the child is adopted in another country. He or she would have to go through the whole process again. The situation is more likely to be raised when there is real concern about the child. However, as yet there has been no practice of operating that, either here or in England. One has to apply to the court, therefore, one would presume that an issue has been raised in an application before the court and that something has gone disastrously wrong. The court would scrutinise whether all the procedures were in accordance with the convention.

Mr McFarland: I want to enquire about article 55B, paragraph (2), which states that the High Court has no right to judge on this matter unless the child and the adoptive parents "habitually reside" in Northern Ireland. If I were rich, I could have my house in Dubai, my place in the Bahamas and my place here. What does "habitually reside" mean, because today people have homes all over the world? Some have summer houses in Majorca and so forth.

How do we judge what comes under the authority of the High Court here? If someone lives in Majorca for one half of the year, and here for half the other year, does that constitute "habitually" living here?

Mr Clarke: I suspect that the court would have to determine whether someone's application gave rise to that issue.

Mr McFarland: It says that the High Court cannot consider the application unless the people "habitually reside" in Northern Ireland.

Mr Sharp: "Habitually reside" is similar to the term "public policy". It has not been defined. There have been many arguments in court about what habitual residence is, depending on the circumstances of a particular case.

Mr Clarke: I cannot give you a definitive answer. I suspect that each case would have to be considered separately and the meaning of "habitually resides" determined. I doubt whether the relevant period can be specified as six months, four months or whatever.

Mr McFarland: That seems to be quite a loose description for a piece of legislation.

Mr Clarke: I could say that someone was "habitually" resident here if they lived here for one year but did not live here another year.

Mr McFarland: That is the point that I am trying to raise — the term seems loose. Should we consider putting in something firmer? Most people who live in

Northern Ireland are on the electoral register — whether they like it or not, whether they vote or not. That means that they have an address and determines whether they are habitually here. The term is loose, given that it could decide whether the High Court is even allowed to consider an application.

Mr Sharp: It would be difficult to define it too tightly. Circumstances can vary so much from case to case, and the person's intentions are an important factor.

The Chairperson: Does European law cover it?

Mr Clarke: We could consider whether there is something that we could put in.

Rev Robert Coulter: The definition used in the Isle of Man is that people can be considered as residents if they are off the island for 90 days a year only.

The Chairperson: That is an interesting definition. The Committee will return to that issue. Mr Clarke, would you examine that important point and any European dimension?

Mr Clarke: Yes.

Clause 6 (Meaning of “Convention adoption” and related expressions in 1987 Order)

Mr Clarke: The clause inserts into article 2(2) of the 1987 Order the definitions relating to the convention. The definition of “the convention” is self-evident. “Convention adoption” is an adoption made outside the United Kingdom. “Convention adoption order” refers to orders that are made here, as opposed to those made abroad, which are simply called “convention adoptions”. “Convention country” is defined as a country in which the convention is in force.

Clause 6 agreed to.

Clause 7 (Adoption Service to include intercountry adoptions etc.)

The Chairperson: Clause 7 inserts a new paragraph (2A) in article 3 of the 1987 Order.

Mr Clarke: Under the 1987 Order, as presently drafted, the trusts have a responsibility to provide an adoption service. That is a fairly general statement. This amendment simply brings the intercountry adoptions into the same raft of provisions. The wording is designed to include foreign adoptions and not simply convention adoptions — otherwise that would create an anomaly because there is still the possibility of adoptions outside the convention. That is why there is this form of words and not the convention adoption form of words.

Ms Ramsey: It says that each trust is to maintain an adoption service for its area. My experience of trusts is that some provide a better service than others. Will there be a financial problem for trusts, or will they provide a better adoption service than there is at present?

Mr Clarke: I do not want to comment too much on the quality of trusts' service, because it would widen the debate too far. The adoption service is already in the 1987 Order, with regard to domestic adoptions. This states that intercountry adoption work comes within it. Intercountry adoptions are already there and trusts already perform these functions. This states that it should form part of their adoption service, so that the same standards apply. There are intercountry dimensions, but basically they should be providing the same service. It is simply a recognition that the same standards should apply in relation to the work that they do.

With regard to your query on resources and whether this creates a requirement for additional resources, that is quite a tricky question to answer because they already perform the functions. It is already being done and this legislation gives it recognition in statute.

The Chairperson: Some trusts or boards charge, and some do not. I have been involved in cases where the cost was £3,000. Are we talking about boards or trusts?

Mr Clarke: Trusts.

The Chairperson: Does the Department have a role here? Should something be included in the Bill about it? It seems unfair that the costs can vary from £3,000 to nothing across the trusts.

Mr Clarke: That would arguably be ultra vires. Perhaps Dr Harrison could talk about the charges.

Dr Harrison: As you know, trusts may charge for any service they deliver. The intercountry adoption service is the first children's services charges to be introduced. It was done because trusts did not have the resources to carry out intercountry adoption services on top of their existing domestic services. As far as I am aware, the current position is that trusts in three of the health and social services boards have introduced charges of £3,000. One board is still considering whether or not it will charge. It is a difficult issue that raises questions about equality of access to services. Members of the Committee will probably know that intercountry adoption is a very expensive process. All sorts of costs have to be met, not least the cost of visiting the country. Trusts are within their statutory rights in charging for this service.

The Chairperson: It is difficult to do anything about costs to other countries. I accept your point about the statutory rights of trusts. Is there not a role for the Minister to produce guidance in order to get uniformity across trusts?

Mr Clarke: There would be a guidance role. Obviously, the legislation has yet to be implemented. The special commission has made recommendations about itemised costs. Your point, Chairman, is about standardisation across trusts.

The Chairperson: That is absolutely correct — uniformity is essential.

Mr Clarke: These things are expensive, but standardisation across trusts is essential.

The Chairperson: That may not be an issue for the Bill itself, and we are moving outside the remit of the Bill. I have been involved in at least three cases over the past two years in which this issue has come up. It causes a lot of annoyance. In the relationship between the Department and the boards and trusts it is difficult to do any audit tracking. Obviously, you will have to think about that.

Mr Clarke: You have written to us about it. It has been raised before and we have an idea on how it should be addressed in the implementation of the guidelines.

The Chairperson: Could you take that on board and come back to us?

Mrs I Robinson: I think it would be appropriate for the Committee to deal directly with the Minister on that issue. In the costings she should set down the necessity for uniformity across the four health boards. It would be unfair for a couple to discover that they paid £8,000 for an adoption and that someone else in another part of the Province paid £3,000. That would be scandalous. The issue in Northern Ireland is geography. It is better to have a heart attack in one locality as opposed to anywhere else in the Province. Those ambiguities and inequalities exist. As a Committee, we should deal with the issue quickly and put down our marker.

The Chairperson: That is a fair point.

Mr Gallagher: Is there an equality dimension to the Bill? Has the issue arisen under that heading?

Mr Clarke: The Bill is about the regulation of activity. It does not promote it. It is possible that there is an equality issue between different charges and so forth. However, that is slightly outside the context in which I can speak today.

Mr J Kelly: Do you know why different rates exist?

The Chairperson: It is probably to do with funding and the fact that each trust may have more or less money than the others. They have a statutory right to charge. However, the difference does not seem morally right. Obviously, mistakes were made.

Mr Clarke: It was pointed out to me that some local authorities charge more than our average. Equality is the key issue. The special commission linked to the convention suggested ensuring that adopters received an itemised statement. That is one way to find out what you are paying for. You can see that everyone is paying for the same type of thing.

The Chairperson: The Committee will make a decision about the involvement of the Minister. If you can clarify any of those matters, perhaps you would let us know before you return on 7 February.

Dr Harrison: The charging anomaly emerged because of the volume of enquiries in certain trusts in comparison with others. For example, trusts that currently do not charge have the least number of people seeking intercountry adoption and they are able to fit them into their standard agenda. That is most likely to change with the trends in intercountry adoption.

Clause 7 agreed to.

Clause 8 (Registration of adoption societies to provide intercountry adoption services)

The Chairperson: Clause 8 amends article 4 of the Order.

Mr Clarke: Clause 8 provides a vehicle whereby the Department can approve voluntary adoption agencies for the purposes of intercountry adoption. It is a check on standards, so that the other country can be assured that the agency carrying out these functions has official approval. It splits general adoptions and intercountry adoptions. It will enable voluntary adoption agencies — there are only two in Northern Ireland at present — to carry out intercountry adoptions, if they apply and are approved.

The Chairperson: It has been pointed out to me that in Britain you can have independent assessors. What is the position regarding the Bill?

Mr Sharp: Could you clarify what you mean by independent assessors, as we are not familiar with that term?

The Chairperson: I cannot clarify it.

Mr Sharp: That term came up in your consultations. We examined it but were not quite sure what it was.

The Chairperson: There seems to be such a thing and I am seeking information from you.

Dr Harrison: Private individuals in England have carried out adoption assessments — perhaps that is what you are referring to. This Bill will do away with that. In future, all adoption assessments will be carried out by approved adoption agencies.

Mr Clarke: That brings us back to the issue that we talked about earlier.

The Chairperson: Is that similar to what is happening in England, only we are now doing away with that system?

Dr Harrison: Northern Ireland has never had that system.

The Chairperson: Does England still have it or has it been done away with there?

Mr Clarke: In relation to intercountry adoptions, English agencies would be prevented from having that. This provision will address the present difficulty.

The Chairperson: They cannot do it for intercountry adoptions, but they can do it for adoptions within the country. Is that right?

Mr Clarke: I cannot speak authoritatively for England, but I suspect that that is the case. I probably heard that there are independent people.

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clause 9 (Six months residence required for certain intercountry adoptions)

The Chairperson: Clause 9 inserts a new paragraph in article 13 of the Order. It provides that when a child who is habitually resident outside the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man is to be adopted in Northern Ireland by an adoption order other than a convention adoption order, the child is required to have had his or her home with the prospective adopters for a period of at least six months before an adoption order may be made. The period of six months is only to apply to those cases where the placement of the child was made by an adoption agency.

Mr Clarke: That is to ensure that the child is placed with the prospective adopters for a period of time before the adoption process can be completed. In any adoption there has to be a time for bedding in.

Mr McFarland: Forgive me, I am a little dozy, but can you explain the last two lines of clause 9 which state that:

“paragraph (1) shall have effect as if the reference to the preceding 13 weeks were a reference to the preceding 6 months.”

In what context does the 13-week term apply? All other references are to periods of 12 or six months.

Mr Clarke: The period of residence which applies in the Adoption (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 is 13 weeks. The trouble with this legislation is that it necessitates the amendment of other pieces of legislation. I can read the Order now, because I have it in front of me.

Mr McFarland: Can you explain the clause?

Mr Clarke: I appreciate your confusion. I find it necessary to cross-reference between the pieces of legislation. The 1987 Order stipulates that an adoption order shall not be made unless the child has, at all times during the preceding 13 weeks, had his home with the applicants, or one of them. That is where the period of 13 weeks comes from.

Mr McFarland: Does the clause then state that the words “six months” are to be inserted where the term “13 weeks” appears?

Mr Clarke: Yes.

Mr McFarland: Is there not an easier way to make that clear?

Mr Clarke: That is a drafting issue. I am not sure if there is an easier way of expressing that. When other pieces of legislation are being amended, it is sorely tempting to try to rewrite everything, and to keep it all together.

Clause 9 agreed to.

Clause 10 (Registration of certain intercountry adoptions)

The Chairperson: Clause 10 provides for the registrar general to keep records of certain intercountry adoptions. Subsection (1) provides for an amendment to article 50 of the 1987 Order which, in addition to entries currently made pursuant to adoption orders, will require the registrar general to make such entries in the Adopted Children Register as may be required under article 53 of the Order as amended by clause 10(2).

Mr Clarke: This provision is largely concerned with procedure. It relates to the records kept by the registrar general and the entries made in his register. The underlying aim is to allow people, at a later stage in their lives, to find out about their birth parents. Openness in adoption is taking increasing priority. The clause is designed to ensure that the records and the registrar general's office are helpful to those seeking this type of information.

Clause 10 agreed to.

Clause 11 (Construction of certain references)

The Chairperson: Clause 11 inserts two new paragraphs in article 2 of the 1987 Order. Paragraph (3A) extends the interpretation of the 1987 Order on arrangements for adoption.

Mr Clarke: This is a key provision, and I am glad we have the opportunity to discuss it. The key words are:

“references to arrangements for the adoption of a child include references to arrangements for an assessment for the purpose of indicating whether a person is suitable to adopt a child or not.”

That links in with the requirement that assessment for the purposes of adoption must be carried out by an adoption agency. At present, under the 1987 Order, a domestic adoption may only be carried out by an adoption agency, with exceptions made in the case of relatives. The insertion of this provision clarifies the arrangements for assessment.

In the 1987 Order

“arrangements for the adoption of a child”

are words that already exist. The Bill spells out that

“arrangements for the adoption of a child include references to arrangements for an assessment for the purpose of indicating whether a person is suitable to adopt a child or not.”

That is essentially the home-study report and its inclusion is a key part of the legislation. It ensures that any home-study reports are carried out by approved adoption agencies. It incorporates the existing legislation. I may not have explained that — it is a rather convoluted matter unless the pieces of legislation can be seen simultaneously.

Ms Ramsey: I would like to return to the issue of the twins who are currently in the news. If we take on board the fact that people have to overcome many complex issues in order to adopt, can a person go to America or

wherever, adopt a child and come back here without the Department's knowledge?

Mr Clarke: Legally they could not do that.

Mr Sharp: They could, but they would need entry clearance. That would be the issue.

Mr Clarke: We do not want to become too involved in the details of the case. The couple went to the United States armed with a home-study report, which had been produced, not by an approved adoption agency in accordance with the legislation, but through a loophole in the law. The relevant provisions of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 had not yet been adopted in England. If the Act were in place, its provision would impact on that type of case, in that persons would be known to the UK authorities because they would have had a home-study report done.

Mrs I Robinson: Alan Sharp dealt with prison sentences meted out to people who have bypassed the legal procedures. Can he clarify whether it is a matter of policy that the child, having been taken into care, does not go back to parents who have been in jail? Moreover, can those same parents go through the proper channels next time to apply for an adoption, or are they deemed unsuitable and struck off the register?

Dr Harrison: That is a difficult question. I am sure you appreciate that each case must be examined on its own merits. In the event of parents going to prison, the trust would have to act to secure the welfare of the children. Whether or not the child would automatically be taken from them would depend on their circumstances. The trust would need to investigate a range of issues. Whether the parents would be prevented from going through the proper channels again, we could not say. They would be entitled to be assessed as suitable adopters, and their circumstances would be examined carefully.

Mrs I Robinson: My concern is that people who have bypassed the legal procedures may not be suitable parents. They may have avoided the system because they would never be deemed suitable.

Dr Harrison: Absolutely. However, the fact that they bypassed the system does not necessarily mean that they would not be suitable parents. You are quite right to have concern about people bypassing the system and their reasons for doing so. In some cases it is ignorance.

Mrs I Robinson: That would tell you something about the applications and would be taken into consideration.

Mr Clarke: If you are faced with the dilemma in a particular case where the child has formed a relationship with the family, you cannot simply say the parents are not suitable to adopt. The particular case should be examined. The courts would be involved.

Dr Harrison: It would depend on the individual circumstances.

Mr McFarland: There was the recent case of a couple who fostered two children with whom they had developed a bond. Social services then decided to move the children. The family ran away to Ireland, and the children were taken from the foster parents. However, they are now united as a fully adopted family. That is a happy story despite social services' best efforts.

Ms Ramsey: If the child's rights are paramount and the child and the foster family have bonded, some foster parents might say that paying a fine or serving a six-month jail sentence might be worthwhile. What do you think about that?

Mr Clarke: Complex human relationships could underlie all those aspects. As Dr Harrison has already mentioned, that would be a matter for the courts to decide. Sending a parent to prison for three months may have a detrimental effect on the child. Human relationships underpin all those circumstances. Hard and fast rules are sometimes best left to the courts.

Dr Harrison: There are highly individual circumstances in each case that require the courts' determination. It is a difficult area.

Clause 11 agreed to.

Clause 12 (Restriction on bringing children into the United Kingdom for adoption)

The Chairperson: Clause 12 inserts an additional article 58ZA into the 1987 Order. The new article makes it a criminal offence for a person habitually resident in the British Islands to bring to the United Kingdom, for the purpose of adoption, a child who is habitually resident outside those islands unless they comply with requirements to be prescribed by regulations. The term "British Islands" is defined as meaning the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

Mr Clarke: This is one of the more direct provisions. It makes it an offence to bring a child into the country in contravention of the regulations, which will be copious and which are undoubtedly currently being examined in the context of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 in England and Wales. I imagine that full restrictions will be tight.

Mr McFarland: Clauses 11 and 13 mention the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. However, for some reason clause 12 elects to use "the British Islands" and its definition in 58ZA is:

"a person habitually resident in the British Islands who at any time brings into the United Kingdom...".

Why does clause 12 not say the person habitually resident in the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, who at any time brings into the United Kingdom for the purpose of the adoption of a child? If a person is habitually resident in the United Kingdom, he or she would not be bringing a child into it. I do not understand why "the United

Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man” was used on one page and then “the British Islands” is introduced. The British Islands could be confused with British Isles, but you set out its definition. It is more a drafting question than a legal question.

Mr Clarke: We are talking about the creation of an offence. The Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Bill can only address offences in Northern Ireland. It would be incongruous to say that it was an offence to bring a child into Northern Ireland in contravention of the regulations without mentioning the other parts of the United Kingdom. In cases where there is freedom of movement, for instance between Great Britain and here, the child could be brought into England and then brought over here. But that is creating an offence in Northern Ireland. That offence already exists under legislation in Great Britain. By bringing a child into the United Kingdom, the offence is being created in Northern Ireland. The emphasis is not on where the child is coming in. The offence is committed in Northern Ireland by whoever is bringing the child to the British Islands.

Mr McFarland: The United Kingdom is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In clause 12 should “United Kingdom” read “Great Britain, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man”? Northern Ireland is in the United Kingdom.

Mr Clarke: It is a technical and legal matter, but I will try to explain it. If someone brings a child into England, the child enters the United Kingdom in England. The Bill makes it an offence in Northern Ireland for the person who brought the child into, for example, England. If it were not couched in that way, the person would not have committed an offence if he or she had brought the child into England first and then came to Northern Ireland. It is to do with where the offence is being created.

Mr McFarland: Until now, the clauses have referred to bringing a child into the United Kingdom. Clause 11 specifies the United Kingdom, which is Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. I thought that the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands were part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Clarke: They are not.

Mr McFarland: Why have the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man not been mentioned elsewhere in the Bill when the United Kingdom has been mentioned? Clause 11 is the first time you have moved away from the term “United Kingdom” and specified it as “the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man”. Northern Ireland is in the United Kingdom and if you are resident there, you are not bringing a child in anywhere.

The Chairperson: Mr McFarland has a point that needs to be resolved. It does seem a bit odd. The terms “British Islands” and “British Isles” are confusing.

Mr Berry: That matter must be cleared up.

Mr McFarland: I would like this matter parked until the Committee gets clarification on it.

Having mentioned the United Kingdom elsewhere in the Bill, why have the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man been introduced? Perhaps they should have been referred to when the United Kingdom was mentioned previously.

Clause 11 mentions the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. Clause 12 then introduces a new definition of “the British Islands”. Why is the phrase “United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man” acceptable in clause 11 but not in clause 12? It is close enough to the term the British Isles, which includes Ireland — although some would dispute that — to be confusing. “Isles” is a Scottish word. Someone from abroad using correct English might refer to the British Islands rather than the British Isles. There is a potential for confusion.

Like all legal matters, the clearer you can make this the better, so that nobody from the far end of the world is in any doubt as to what it is they are reading. I am not having a go at you, but could you please have a look at this? Can you explain why, in clauses 11 and 13, it is all right to refer to something, while clause 12 introduces a new terminology, which is confusing?

Mr Clarke: I can. I do not want to take up too much of your time talking about this matter.

The Chairperson: We will park this until next time.

Mr Berry: The issue that Alan McFarland raised will be parked, and we will wait until Mr Clarke comes back to us with clarification.

Have there been many criminal offences in Northern Ireland?

Mr Clarke: There is no offence at the moment, so by definition there have been none. If you are asking whether we are aware of any incidents, we have anecdotal evidence.

Dr Harrison: Children have been brought into Northern Ireland by people who are not approved adopters.

Mr Berry: What has happened?

Dr Harrison: The trust has been notified and has had to approve them retrospectively — in every case, I think. Obviously this is not desirable.

Mr Berry: This clause deals with that issue.

Mr J Kelly: I am confused by Alan McFarland’s intervention. I do not know whether he is making a political point or —

Mr McFarland: No, not at all. The drafting is confusing.

The Chairperson: We are parking that anyway.

Mr J Kelly: Clause 12(5) states:

“In this Article ‘the British Islands’ means the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.”

Clause 11 states:

“Under the law of a country or territory outside the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.”

It is fairly clear to me.

The Chairperson: We are coming back to that matter.

Rev Robert Coulter: What is the legal basis for the difference in the penalty for the offence between clause 1 and clause 12?

Mr Clarke: You have raised a point that is worth going over. This is linked to the provision in the existing Adoption (Northern Ireland) Order 1987. A new article will be inserted into the 1987 Order. The 1987 Order already incorporates the offence of taking a child out of the jurisdiction, with a corresponding penalty. This is the other way round and creates a new offence of bringing a child into the jurisdiction. The penalty for that offence is consistent with the one that sits alongside the 1987 Order. That is the straightforward answer. The penalty for the first one is consistent with an existing provision in the law. I do not know whether that is a conclusive argument.

Rev Robert Coulter: It is not, because it says in clause 1(3)(b):

“provide that any person who contravenes any provision of the regulations is to be guilty”

and the penalty is there.

Mr Clarke: That means the regulations made under clause 1. You have raised an interesting issue. The line we have taken in clause 12 is to be consistent with the existing adoption law, which is why that offence is stated there. There is a consistency issue. We would be amending our own adoption law in relation to something that is not covered by this.

The Chairperson: We are parking clause 12 until 7 February. This link with clause 1 is very important.

Mr McFarland: If we discover something like this, which is confusing and affects a clause that we have passed already, is there not logic to parking that clause? Clause 1 should be parked temporarily until this issue is resolved, because the Committee may recommend altering clause 1 to “six months”.

Mr Clarke: You have raised an anomaly on the offence issue.

The Chairperson: We have agreed to clause 1, but I have consulted with the Committee Clerk and we can park clause 1 along with clause 12. It is somewhat unusual to agree a clause and go back on it, but it is important that we have clarification.

Clause 12 referred for further consideration.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE OF THE CENTRE

Wednesday 24 January 2001

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS BILL (NIA 9/00)

The Chairperson (Mr Poots): I should like to welcome Prof Vincent, Mr Wright and Mr Shanks from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to our meeting. Initially I shall ask Prof Vincent if he would like to give a brief overview of the Bill, setting out its general purpose and main vision. Members may then ask general questions. Any detailed questions in relation to the specific clauses and schedules should await the detailed scrutiny of those parts of the Bill.

Prof Vincent: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is nice to be back. I welcomed the opportunity to listen to Mr Hugh Widdis give the background, and found it very useful to hear his input.

I shall pick up on certain things Mr Widdis said. First, the target of 100% of services being available electronically by 2005 in Northern Ireland has not yet been agreed. We shall be putting a paper to the Executive Committee. In fact, my colleague Mr Wright is working on that paper now.

When the Departments start looking at the services they are to deliver electronically, that will drive the subsidiary legislation they must bring forward, such as licensing cars, applying for benefits or making council information available electronically. That will be the driver for Departments, either from the bottom up, based on services required, or from the top down, when Ministers and officials determine what needs to be done.

My second point concerns the competitive position of Northern Ireland. It is vitally important that we do not take our eye off the ball or lose our position, for other Administrations are moving forward in the area. The legislation we have before us matches what is going on in other parts of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland — I read last night that Australia prided itself on being first in this area in 1999, so we are slightly behind.

Two key words came to mind while I listened, the first being choice. It is not a matter of forcing people to use electronic services. It is about giving people the choice.

Local councillors, for example, can decide whether they still want information on paper or prefer it electronically. The other key word was trust. How do we ensure that information transmitted electronically does not get hijacked or corrupted en route? This is what the enabling legislation is about.

It is remiss of me not to introduce my colleagues, Mr Wright and Mr Shanks. They are the two people who have been in the engine room delivering this piece of legislation for the Assembly.

Those are the key drivers to which Mr Widdis was referring, but there are others such as the European dimension. The United Kingdom Electronic Communications Act 2000 was brought forward because of the two European Directives already in existence, with which member states must comply in one case by January 2002. They are also the key drivers for us to bring our legislation into line. The first one is the EU Directive on Electronic Signatures, which establishes the common legal framework, and the second is the EU Directive on Electronic Commerce. Member states have to comply with it by January 2002.

I should like to move on from our enabling legislation to the legislation which will follow, for example, from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. This is what will start to drive the subsequent legislation coming before the Assembly and other Committees.

That is in essence the genesis of the United Kingdom Electronic Communications Act 2000. It concerns the legal standing of an electronic signature, making it equivalent to a signature on paper. When we sign cheques or application forms, that gives the imprimatur to a document that we have legally signed it. This legislation gives the same standing to an electronic signature as a conventional signature.

We are aware that the powers of the United Kingdom Act did not apply to Northern Ireland because the Assembly was either in suspension or did not exist when it was going through the major Whitehall processes. This Bill is intended to remedy that position, bringing us into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. With those brief introductory remarks, I should like to hand over to Ray Wright, who will take us through the Bill.

The Chairperson: Were you going to take us through the Bill clause by clause?

Mr Wright: Yes, if that is your requirement.

The Chairperson: Do you first wish to give an overview, or will you take questions from us as you go through the Bill?

Mr Wright: I shall take questions as I go through it, if that suits you.

The Chairperson: Do Members first have any general questions they wish to ask, as opposed to questions relating to individual clauses?

Mr Gibson: You mentioned meeting deadlines. Is there anything in this Bill, in its generality, that would in any way inhibit a Government Department providing the alternative choice? Is it totally enabling in its nature, without any inhibitors which might prevent the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for example, getting itself geared up electronically?

Prof Vincent: I believe there are two issues, the first being that this is enabling legislation. Without this Bill, the Departments cannot move forward. It gives the power to Ministers to bring forward or change legislation.

How Ministers actually do that is their decision. They can either look at individual pieces of legislation and individual services, or they may choose encompassing legislation giving equivalence to an electronic signature anywhere a signature is mentioned, for example, in the health sector. That would be a choice for Ministers.

Mr Shannon: Prof Vincent, have you set your targets yet? If so, how do you see yourselves achieving them? Do you envisage their being achieved within the timescale? Are you setting the timescale, or will someone else do it for you?

Prof Vincent: What we have said and shall be saying in the paper to the Executive is that the electronic provision of Government services — we should be honest that we are dealing with such — should be delivered no less speedily than in any other part of the United Kingdom. England, Scotland and Wales have signed up to providing 25% of services electronically by 2002 and 100% by 2005. I see no difficulty in achieving the 25% figure by 2002.

However, while the Prime Minister said 100% of all services by 2005, we — the royal “we” — have taken the view that this second figure might not be realistic. Let us focus our minds on the services that our customers regard as being key. As you might expect, there is an element of cost benefit. We could spend a fortune on delivering a service electronically only for no one to use it. We have distinguished what we regard as very high-volume services, the first being vehicle registration and the second the MOT. We know what the top services are, for we have done some measurement.

Along with high-volume services come those with a high value. What are those services which we in Government provide to citizens? What services do the citizens regard as being of very high value in the context of electronic delivery? That decision is not for us but for the Departments who provide the services. We have mentioned local government once or twice. One of the things I should like to see is the extension of the targets to it, for it also delivers some services on behalf of the centre.

Mr Shannon: How will the targets you are setting compare with the targets set on the United Kingdom mainland, where they may be looking for a much higher figure? I agree you have been realistic in your interpretation and I believe we must be so. However, if we tend to lag behind the United Kingdom mainland and perhaps also the Irish Republic, where will they be in relation to the services?

Prof Vincent: In fairness, I do not think we lag at all. Our citizens do not care if the figure is 90%, 89% or 99%. Provided we deliver electronically the services that we, as public servants, believe that they want, we shall have met the targets. Targets are a very blunt instrument. If you recall, the last time I was here I talked of the “silos”, saying that targets could reinforce what we currently do. That is not what we wish to do. We wish to pump the mind of the customer for the Government and say “Do you really want a joined-up service when you get your MOT? Do you want your MOT certificate from the Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency without having to send a piece of paper to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency?” Let us think from the customer’s perspective and deliver the real services. I believe we must deliver 100% of the services our customers want, which is entirely different —

Mr Shannon: That is the whole issue: that services are customer-led and customer-centred.

Dr Birnie: You have said several times that the power is “enabling”. That means that Departments are not obliged to act. Perhaps this is an unfair question or one which you cannot answer. Do you foresee any difficulties or resistance at departmental level? Is it part of your remit to be a sort of champion for this, to push, or shove or encourage? If so, how?

Prof Vincent: You are absolutely right to say that the legislation is enabling. It is enabling. When this Bill is passed, it will enable the other departmental Ministers to bring forward legislation. I find that, when I talk to Departments, I am pushing at open doors, for the Departments actually want this. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment wants it. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is waiting for it to facilitate some of its work — we are doing some work in Greenmount Agricultural College — so I do not believe we shall have to do much leaning on Departments to get this brought forward. Ray Wright will talk later about some work in which he is involved.

Mrs E Bell: That was my question, for I am very keen to look as closely as possible at joined-up government. I should obviously look to your Department, as Esmond Birnie said, to encourage it and lobby for it. This Bill will do that.

As I look through the Bill, it seems essential that we deliver services people want, rather than give them something which sounds wonderful but which they do

not need. Does the Bill help bring this about? We said the last time that there would be a great deal of education. What will you be doing?

Prof Vincent: I spend much of my time educating people, as you know. After this meeting, I am heading to somewhere in Bushmills to talk to a Newtownabbey Council away-day.

There is a legislative requirement in the EU Electronic Commerce Directive. As Dr Birnie said, by January next year we must be compliant. Targets are starting to move Departments. Ray Wright heads an interdepartmental group steering legislative co-ordinators, who at this very moment are identifying those pieces of legislation in their Departments that mention the word “signature”. We shall therefore have a compendium of pieces of legislation which exist today in the health sector, in the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment, in the agriculture sector and so on which require paper and signature. That will then pose the question of what we need to do first. Taking the alternative I mentioned, is it a matter of all-embracing legislation which says that anywhere in a given sector it says “do this”, one should do something else? That is an issue for Ministers, and the question is part of my educational process.

Mrs E Bell: You may not be able to answer this. Do you think that the reduction in paper for example, in the Health Service, will reduce staff and help increase efficiency, perhaps getting more money to where it is needed?

Prof Vincent: It is an excellent question, and I am delighted that it has come on the table. The key driver for this, from my perspective — and thankfully from that of the Departments I have spoken to — is about improving the quality of the services we deliver. Most of the major Government initiatives I have been involved in during my career have been about driving down cost, or about efficiency mechanisms. This is more important, being about choice and quality of service. Cost is involved, and I mentioned cost benefit. We must keep that in mind, but it is not the primary driver. We are not forcing people to go down the route of electronic government to try to reduce cost.

We are trying to enable the small shopkeeper to do VAT returns at 8.00pm on a Friday night, not Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm. Cost is important, but it is not the key driver.

Mr Beggs: You said that individual Departments would have a choice of whether or not to use all-embracing legislation to widen the use of electronic services. Would it be possible to have one piece of all-encompassing legislation, or must each Department have its own? What happened in England in Wales?

Mr Shanks: The powers in the Bill are given to the appropriate Department. Under clause 2, the appropriate

Department is defined as the Department with responsibility for that particular area of business. Each Department will have to amend the legislation in its own field. We cannot have an all-embracing interdepartmental amending instrument.

For instance, the Department of Social Development might choose — although the decision would be the Minister’s — to have an all-embracing amending instrument for social security which would cover everything in the existing legislation. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, on the other hand, is so diverse that it might not be useful to the users of legislation to batch it all under one particular instrument. Practical reasons will determine how Departments handle it.

Mr Beggs: What happened in England and Wales?

Mr Shanks: Very little. One or two things have happened, but England and Wales are still in the process of bringing forward their legislation. They are still sifting.

Prof Vincent: There are two levels. They have enabling legislation and clause-editing legislation, as I believe it is called. I saw one of them in the press last week. Company law states that communication between directors and shareholders must be on paper. The Bill being brought forward proposes that they have the choice of doing it electronically. Those are the two levels.

Mr Wright: I can confirm that English legislation is being taken forward by several Departments.

The Chairperson: We move to clause 1 of the Bill, and I shall ask Mr Wright to give us a brief overview. Members will then have an opportunity to ask questions about the clause.

Mr Wright: Clause 1(1) of the Bill provides the powers to the appropriate Department to amend any of its statutory rules or legislation, and to amend any provision contained in any given scheme for the award of a licence, an authorisation or a grant. Clause 1(2) of the Bill spells out the functions which are currently carried out in writing, and which would be allowed to take place through electronic means in future. These include the giving of evidence in writing, authorising a document, sealing and witnessing a document, giving an oath, making a statutory declaration and keeping accounts and records.

Clause 1(3) requires that in cases where we provide the powers to conduct all of these transactions electronically, we must be satisfied that the records of those transactions will be no less satisfactory than current conventional records.

Clause 1(4) deals with the array of provisions which may be made in any legislation passed subsequent to the Bill. When Departments bring forward their own amending legislation, they can define certain elements. These include the definition of the electronic form which a communication must take; they can impose

conditions on the acceptance of such a form; they can refuse to accept the receipt of the form if it has not been done in the appropriate fashion. If, for example, application forms are posted on a website, the proper electronic application form must be used. Those are the sort of conditions which the Departments will want to specify as they amend their own legislation.

It goes on to allow certain provisions for the carrying out of functions on storing information. That may be to require people to archive material in a certain fashion or for a certain period, or to allow access to it in certain circumstances.

It allows such legislation to be couched in terms that the requirements to apply for any particular service may be specified by an individual identified within subordinate legislation. Therefore, Departments can state that this shall be conducted in accordance with the rules set down by an individual, and that those rules can be added subsequently.

The Bill provides that any criminal or other liabilities which could attach to a written communication, will similarly attach to that communication if carried out in electronic form.

It can require persons to prepare and keep records, and to produce the contents of those records for the particular business in hand. It may also require that such records be produced at the insistence and at the legal suit of a named individual.

Clause 1(5) specifies certain matters in relation to subsection (4)(g), which states that certain matters may need to be determined in relation to a transaction. Those matters might include whether the transaction has been completed electronically; the time and date on which the transaction took place; the place where it was transacted; the person who completed the transaction; and the contents, authenticity and integrity of the data contained in the transaction. Those are the matters that can be specified. Departments can say how those things will be decided when we are making subsequent legislation.

Clause 1(6) is pertinent to the opening discussion. No compulsory use can be stipulated in any legislation concerning the development of electronic services. The traditional means of conducting the service must still be available under the terms of this Bill. Those who do not have access to electronic means will still be able to conduct business in the same fashion. The one proviso is that where someone gives an undertaking to conduct business electronically, then before they can alter that decision, or withdraw from conducting business in that way, they may be required to give a period of notice. That is something, which a Department can include in its legislation.

The Chairperson: I wish to raise an issue concerning clause 1(3), which refers to, “electronic storage for any purpose”. Is this subsection enforceable insofar as that

electronic communication has satisfactory storage facilities? Can you give the same guarantees in relation to storage facilities for electronic communication, bearing in mind that the Inland Revenue lost approximately 2 million of its cases recently? Are we in a position to give those guarantees, thereby allowing this legislation to move forward in real terms?

Prof Vincent: There are two issues. The first involves the technical storage facilities capability and the second is the management of the electronic record. Both have to come together. We can manage. Our colleagues in the financial services industry have a legal requirement to retain records of debits for 10 years and credits for seven years. They have been doing this quite effectively for some time, bearing in mind the scope for human error. Technically, it is feasible.

The Chairperson: Is this possible, despite the problem of computer viruses, which can wipe out significant parts of a computer’s memory?

Prof Vincent: There can be no guarantees — we live in the real world. As far as technical feasibility is concerned, it can be done.

The Chairperson: Is the Bill not negated by the fact that you cannot give guarantees? Clause (1)3 states that:

“The appropriate department shall not make an order under this section authorising the use of electronic communications or electronic storage for any purpose, unless it considers that the authorisation is such that the extent (if any) to which records of things done for that purpose will be available will be no less satisfactory in cases where use is made of electronic communications or electronic storage than in other cases.”

Prof Vincent: In fairness, I do not think that you would get guarantees that paper will be available 10 years from now. There are floods, and there are fires. I worked in a bank for some years, and we lost significant records in a flood.

Mr Shannon: You did not lose the records of my overdraft, anyway. *[Laughter]*

Prof Vincent: The key phrase is “no less satisfactory” than traditional means.

The Chairperson: Subsection (5) contains the wording, “whether a thing has been done”, “where a thing done” and “by whom such a thing was done”. Is there no better terminology that could be used there?

Mr Wright: Far be it from me to second-guess the legislative draftsman. These are the recommendations we have from our legal colleagues on how these matters should be couched.

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr Gibson: I want to return to the issue of storage. I live in the real world, and I wish the income tax people would lose all their records. *[Laughter]* If existing legislation requires a Department to store for, say, 20

years, will that legislation still apply? If farming records currently have to be kept for 10 years, I assume that the existing legislation will continue to cover that.

Prof Vincent: Correct. It will apply to areas such as the population census, which is carried out once every 10 years, and the agriculture census, which is carried out four times a year. They will be held for a period so that trends can be examined. The way in which electronic records are held must be no less satisfactory than records on paper.

Mr Gibson: Barring fire, accident and mayhem.

The Chairperson: Have members any further questions on clause 1?

Clause 1 agreed to.

The Chairperson: Mr Wright will give an overview of clause 2 before any questions are posed.

Mr Wright: Clause 2 states that “the appropriate department” permitted to make changes to its legislation in relation to any matter means “the Northern Ireland Department which is responsible for that matter.” However, in cases where the matter involves more than one Northern Ireland Department, any reference to the appropriate Department is a reference to all those Departments engaged in that business.

Subsection (3) says that

“Subject to subsection (4), an order under section 1 shall be subject to negative resolution.”

We are not yet aware of the entire volume of legislation that will require to be changed, but I suspect that it would be impracticable for it all to come through under an affirmative process. However, it will be subject to a resolution of the Assembly, and Members can make it an affirmative matter should they so wish. Subsection (4) relates to cases where a draft Order is taken through by the affirmative process. Subsection (5) says that an Order may provide for any conditions or requirements imposed to be framed by a reference to the directions of other individuals.

Mr Gibson: “Such persons” seems to be a casual style of wording. Would “other individuals” not be a better alternative?

Mr Wright: The wording is

“such persons as may be specified in or determined in accordance with the order”.

The Order will set down the conditions by which the individual will be specified. Paragraph (b) provides that any condition or requirement to be satisfied may be done to the requirement of that specified person.

That person will be the arbiter of whether certain things have been carried out in an appropriate fashion. Subsection 6 says that, under any legislation brought under section 1 — which is primarily about allowing the

use of electronic communication rather than written forms — other amendments may be made to a particular scheme or service. The vehicle used to amend the aspect relating to electronic communication may also be used to amend other aspects of a particular scheme.

Mr Beggs: Subsection 1 refers to the Northern Ireland Departments. Can you clarify the position in relation to other areas of the public sector in Northern Ireland, as regards to reserved matters? Are they already enabled by legislation?

Mr Wright: Any legislation relating to reserved matters will be dealt with by the Secretary of State.

Mr Beggs: Is that still to be dealt with?

Mr Wright: Yes.

The Chairperson: Are there any further questions?

Dr Birnie: Are non-departmental public bodies dealt with by the relevant Department?

Mr Wright: Yes. We would expect the sponsoring Departments to look at the legislation regarding those bodies.

The Chairperson: Are there any further questions? OK.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Mr Wright: Clause 3 concerns the prohibition on key escrow requirements. We discussed the implications of this earlier in the meeting. Key escrow, if introduced in the subsequent legislation, would have required that the key to encrypted information be deposited with a third party. This clause prohibits that activity. However, subsection (2)(a) stipulates that subsection (1) shall not prohibit the proper deposit of an electronic key with the intended recipient of an electronic document. That is because you would be unable to actually read the document that was intended for you.

Paragraph (b) applies in cases where the original key becomes unusable, either because it has been lost or corrupted — bearing in mind that it is a software-based key. In these circumstances, other arrangements may be made.

Subsection (3) explains what an electronic key is. It is a password, an algorithm, to allow access to data, and facilitate putting a data in an intelligible form.

The Chairperson: Do the members have any questions?

Clause 3 agreed to.

Mr Wright: Clause 4 is the interpretation of terms contained in the Bill. I hope that the detail is self-evident. I will be happy to take any questions on that.

The Chairperson: Do the members have any question?

Clause 4 agreed to.

Mr Wright: Clause 5 is the short title of the Bill. It may be cited as the Electronic Communications Act (Northern Ireland) 2001.

The Chairperson: I assume that there are no questions.

Clause 5 agreed to.

The Chairperson: This completes the Committee Stage of the Bill. I thank Prof Vincent and his colleagues for their assistance. The draft report will be presented to the Committee for consideration at its next meeting on 31 January.

Mrs E Bell: I am pleased that this meeting has taken place, because we need to push ourselves and develop this issue. I am concerned, however, about how this will be implemented. Problems may arise during this process and we, as Assembly Members, need to know what these problems might be.

Prof Vincent: Some members of this Committee also sit on others, and I suspect that some of this business will come before those other Assembly Committees. The real push will have to be made by these Committees.

Mr Wright: I am the chairman of the inter-departmental committee of legislative co-ordinators, in which each of the Northern Ireland Departments is represented. That committee reports to the inter-departmental e-government project board. The Members of my working group are currently looking at the array of legislation which exists across all of the Departments, which will need to be amended. We are meeting in three weeks to take a look at the first sift of that. We will also discuss efficient methods of channelling that legislation through the legislative process of the Assembly. We will also be setting some priorities, because there will be a need to comply with the Directive on e-commerce, therefore Bills relevant to this will receive priority.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**FINANCE AND
PERSONNEL COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 30 January 2001

**DEFECTIVE PREMISES
(LANDLORD'S LIABILITY) BILL
(NIA 5/00)**

The Acting Chairperson (Mr B Bell): I welcome Mr John Corkey and Mr Dan Kennedy from the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health.

Mr Kennedy: I shall make a brief introduction and then hand over to my colleague for the main presentation. I am chairman of the Northern Ireland Centre of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH). I am here to support Mr Corkey and to give a brief introduction to the institute.

The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health is made up of 9,000 members throughout the UK who, by and large, work in local authorities to enforce public health and environmental health legislation. The main aim of the Chartered Institute is to enhance, promote and maintain environmental and public health. To that end, the Chartered Institute's professional body lobbies the Government and drafts responses to consultation documents issued by the various Government Departments in England and Wales, and its sister organisation does the same in Scotland. The Northern Ireland Centre is one of 17 branches and centres throughout the UK. Environmental health officers work mainly in local authorities. Some, however, work in the private sector or in central Government.

We thank the Committee for allowing the Northern Ireland Centre the opportunity to give evidence. We would welcome further opportunities to help the Assembly where possible in its endeavours.

Mr Corkey: I stress that these comments are solely the views of the Northern Ireland Centre of the CIEH. The Chartered Institute broadly welcomes the proposals in the draft Bill and feels that it is appropriate to remove the immunity currently afforded to landlords in their duty of care to their tenants and to others. We feel that this course of action is of particular importance because of the limited repair options available in Northern Ireland compared with England and Wales. I will expand on this point later if you wish me to.

The Acting Chairperson: For the benefit of the Committee, could you let us know to which clauses of the Bill you are referring?

Mr Corkey: We are interested in clause 3; it is the only clause to which we will refer.

The Chartered Institute is concerned that protected tenancies have been excluded from the Bill. I am referring to regulated and restricted tenancies as covered by the Rent (Northern Ireland) Order 1978. We note from paragraph 9 of the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum that the Department alleges that landlords of protected tenancies would

“face an onerous duty if the legislation was applied to them”.

Apart from the fact that this focuses on the needs of the landlord rather than those of the tenant, the Chartered Institute feels that that is an exaggeration and may be inaccurate. Although rents in the protected sector are controlled by the Government, people living in regulated tenancies can request the district council to serve a certificate of disrepair on the landlord for which the landlord can claim a non-means-tested repairs grant of 90%. I stress that that facility is not available to any other landlords in the private rented sector.

With regard to restricted tenancies, the Chartered Institute acknowledges that the legally recoverable rent cannot provide any meaningful return for the landlord. However, there does not appear to be any significant legislative or financial impediment that would prevent a landlord from transferring his property from a restricted tenancy to a regulated tenancy. By way of explanation, I should say that where a dwelling let under a restricted tenancy is fit for human habitation under the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, as amended, the landlord may apply to the district council at no charge, and the dwelling will automatically be regulated. If, on the other hand, the house is unfit for human habitation, the landlord will automatically qualify for a grant from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to make it fit.

If restricted tenancies are excluded from the Bill, it will be a further disincentive for landlords to carry out essential repairs to properties. Paragraph 3.4.3 of the Law Reform Advisory Committee report 7/98, whose recommendations the Department seeks to implement in the Bill, states that most protected tenants would be

“unlikely to welcome the extensive disruption involved in carrying out the work”.

Although it is not clear whether the Department took that comment into account when deciding to exclude protected tenancies from the Bill, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health considers that there is no evidence to suggest that protected tenants are less likely to want repairs carried out to their properties than other people living in the private rented sector.

It might be helpful if I were to explain the views of the Chartered Institute on the proposals from a practical perspective. The CIEH believes that it is unfair, indeed iniquitous, that, for example, an affluent person renting a modern apartment should have access to such civil protection, while an elderly widow living in a terraced house as either a regulated or restricted tenant should be denied it. The CIEH therefore requests that the Committee make representations to the Department that the Bill apply to both regulated and restricted tenancies.

The Acting Chairperson: Are there any questions from the Committee?

Mr Dodds: You referred to the Law Reform Advisory Committee's report, and I agree that it is odd to suggest that tenants would not welcome disruption caused by improvement to their living conditions. What is the rationale for the exclusion of protected tenancies? Where does it come from? From a common-sense point of view, it does not seem from what you are saying that there is much rationale or sense behind it.

Mr Corkey: The rationale, as I understand it, is that it would be perceived to be onerous on landlords because the rent in such properties is controlled. That

would appear to be the only basis. In restricted tenancies, the rent is controlled by what would have been the value in 1978, which is little or nothing. At first look, it would appear to be inappropriate to restricted tenancies. However, there is nothing to stop a restricted tenancy being made a regulated tenancy, if a landlord so desires. A regulated tenancy is still under statutory control, but the rent is more in line with Housing Executive rent and provides the landlord with a more meaningful return on his property.

Mr Dodds: You referred to the fact that landlords have access to a 90% mandatory repairs grant from the Housing Executive. The Department for Social Development is bringing forward proposals for a new housing Bill. Will that access change as a result of that Bill? Do you have any knowledge of that?

Mr Corkey: We have not yet seen the proposals. Legislation is moving towards a discretionary grant. I cannot say how that will relate to the repairs grant, which relates specifically to certificates of disrepair and public health notices.

The Acting Chairperson: I see that there are no more questions. Thank you very much for coming along.

Written Answers

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 15 December 2000

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Special Advisers

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail what discussions took place with their special advisers prior to answering AQW 471/00 on 6 November. (AQW 673/00)

Reply [*holding answer 30 November 2000*]: In preparing the answer to AQW 471/00 on 6 November, we satisfied ourselves that all those employed in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister as Special Advisers had complied with their terms and conditions of employment. In accordance with normal practice, details of internal advice and discussions are not made available.

New TSN

Mr Poots asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the steps being taken to ensure that commercially run-down areas are not disadvantaged by New TSN. (AQW 757/00)

Reply: New TSN aims to tackle social need and social exclusion by targeting efforts and available resources on people, groups and areas objectively defined as being in greatest social need. New TSN targeting will benefit rather than disadvantage commercially run down areas.

The Department of the Environment's New TSN Action Plan includes objectives to alleviate social, economic and environmental need in disadvantaged areas, including commercially run down areas. The Planning Service is committed to assessing the New TSN impact of development plans and to ensuring that new Development Plans reflect New TSN principles. The Planning Service is currently identifying built up areas where there is potential for development with the aim of promoting greater use of brownfield sites.

From a spatial planning policy point of view, the Department for Regional Development's Regional Development Strategy seeks to achieve both targeting of social need and the renewal of commercially run-down areas.

The Department for Social Development's Belfast, Londonderry and Regional Development Offices, through New TSN-compatible programmes, already target considerable resources on run-down commercial areas. In line with New TSN, the Department will bring forward new regeneration strategies for the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, including some run-down commercial areas

Victims: Support Programmes

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement about Government programmes for the support of victims.

(AQW 767/00)

Reply: The draft Programme for Government recognises that meeting the needs of victims will require co-ordinated and concerted action across Departments. It contains a number of actions to achieve this aim, including a commitment to put in place, by April 2001, a cross-departmental strategy for ensuring that the needs of victims are met through effective, high quality help and services. This will be facilitated by an inter-departmental working group on victims chaired by the junior Ministers.

OFMDFM received an allocation of £200,000 for the Victims Unit in the year 2000/01 following the October expenditure monitoring round. Ministers will seek further in-year resources in the December monitoring round.

In addition, whilst details of the European Peace II Operational Programme have yet to be finalised, it is intended that projects to assist victims of violence will receive substantial resources under the programme.

Children's Fund

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to advise on which government department will be taking responsibility for the recently announced Children's Fund and to outline the mechanisms and criteria for fund allocation.

(AQW 879/00)

Reply: The Children's Fund will provide support for children in need and young people at risk. The arrangements for the management and distribution of the fund are currently being considered.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Cost of Veterinary Products

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she last reviewed the costs of veterinary products available to farmers. (AQW 809/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) is conducting an investigation into certain aspects of the pricing of veterinary medicines in the UK. The OFT will consider whether there is any evidence of anti-competitive practices. In addition, as part of the Government's strategy for agriculture, a review group has been established to consider the dispensing of prescription-only medicines by veterinary surgeons. The review group has been asked to submit a report to Ministers by 31 March 2001.

Steering Committee on Cross Border Rural Development: costs

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the set up and running costs of the Steering Committee on Cross Border Rural Development (SCBRD). (AQW 813/00)

Ms Rodgers: There are no set up costs for the steering committee. The committee has been in existence since 1991 and was reconstituted at the North/South Ministerial Conference in June 2000. The running costs will be minimal as the steering group is made up of officials who meet quarterly on an alternate North/South basis. My Department's costs per annum are approximately £2,400 made up as follows:

1 x Assistant Secretary @ 2 days	£820
1 x Grade 7 @ 2 days	£550
1 x Deputy Principal @ 2 days	£430
Administrative support (AO) @ 2 days	£200
Miscellaneous costs	£400
Total	£2400

Pig Industry: joint study

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will recommend that the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee has access to the preliminary findings of the joint study of the pig industry. (AQW 814/00)

Ms Rodgers: Given that the report is nearing completion and I will wish to consult the Committee on its final conclusions there would be little point in providing the Committee with draft preliminary findings at this stage.

Pig Industry: Cross-border Study

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) what progress has been made by the joint study of the pig industry (b) who are the officials appointed to this study and (c) when it will be completed. (AQW 815/00)

Ms Rodgers: I am advised that good progress has been made by the consultants appointed to carry out the cross-border study of the pig industry. The consultants have been assisted in their task by a steering group composed of industry representatives and relevant Government officials from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The Northern Ireland representatives have included officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and IDB. I am hopeful that the report will be finalised before the end of this month.

Dairy Industry: Future

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her policy for the future of the dairy industry with particular reference to milk quotas. (AQW 822/00)

Ms Rodgers: The dairy industry makes an important contribution to the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland. Although I await the recommendations of the Vision Group I can say that my aim will be to ensure that the dairy sector remains competitive and continues to bring benefit to the local economy, particularly in rural areas. A study of the operation of milk quotas in the UK is being commissioned. I will be interested to see the findings of that study, which will help to inform UK Ministers in advance of the EU review of the milk quota system in 2003. I will be working in full consultation with industry organisations for an outcome that is in the best long term interests of the local industry.

Bovine Herd: Tuberculosis

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make a statement on tuberculosis in the bovine herd. (AQW 823/00)

Ms Rodgers: Although there has been a tuberculosis (TB) eradication scheme in operation in Northern Ireland for some years, the disease remains a problem.

The number of reactor and negative in contact animals identified and slaughtered has risen from 3,424 in 1995-96 to 8,630 in 1999-2000. This represents an increase from 0.147% to 0.344% in disease incidence, that is reactors as a percentage of the number of animal tests carried out. The disease incidence has risen to 0.45% in the period April 2000 to September 2000 and the problem does not look like diminishing in the near future.

The increase in the disease has inevitably meant an increase in the amount of TB compensation, which has risen from £2.2 million in 1995/1996 to £5.8 million in 1999/2000. I am concerned at this continuing rise in the level of compensation.

The increase in TB here is similar to the situation in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. TB spread occurs through small farms with numerous neighbouring farms and farm units leading to high levels of cattle contact across boundaries. There is also evidence to suggest that badgers may play a more significant role in the spread of TB in cattle. In Great Britain a large-scale experiment is currently in place to evaluate the effectiveness of different badger control strategies. Although we are not conducting any badger cull here in Northern Ireland we will take account of any measures that emerge from the work in Great Britain.

Research work is also continuing on the development of a blood-sampling test as a replacement for the current TB skin test. Results to date indicate that we are still some way away from replacing the current TB skin test.

At this time we are making considerable efforts to eliminate infection in Northern Ireland and will intensify these in the incoming year. There is a TB policy review underway to look at all aspects of control measures to consider if further or different measures might be introduced.

Forests: Recreational Use

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to expand the current recreational use of forests without compromising their sustainability. (AQW 843/00)

Ms Rodgers: The Forest Service manages 75,000 hectares of land. The service has operated an open access policy for many years and the public is encouraged to make use of the forest estate for a variety of recreational and educational activities. In most cases access is free, but in those areas where specific facilities are provided a charge is made to help recover costs.

This year I have set the Forest Service a target of achieving 440,000 paying visitors. In 1999/00 there were 405,000 paying visitors, out of an overall total of two million visits to forests. A marketing strategy is currently being prepared and this will help in the promotion of forest recreation throughout Northern Ireland next year.

A study is also underway to assess the quality and accessibility of existing recreation facilities and to assess whether public needs and expectations are being met. In particular, this seeks to identify potential user groups that are presently under-represented.

Earlier this year the Forest Service management of Northern Ireland's forests was certified against the UK Woodland Assurance Standard. This provides independent reassurance of sustainable forest management through third party auditing. The Forest Service has successfully met the requirements of this standard, which requires that access to forests is encouraged in a sustainable manner and vulnerable sites or species are not compromised.

Imported Cattle Embryos and Semen

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures are in place to ensure that imported cattle embryos and semen do not present risk to the health of the Northern Ireland herd.

(AQW 849/00)

Ms Rodgers: Imports of cattle embryos and semen from EU Member States are governed by the Animals and Animal Products (Import and Export) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, which require imports to be in accordance with EU Directives 89/556 and 88/407 respectively. These Directives lay down rules regarding the collection, processing and storage of embryos and semen and provide that all imports must be accompanied by a veterinary certificate confirming the disease status of the donor animal.

Imports of cattle embryos and semen from Great Britain are subject to licensing under the Artificial Reproduction of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1975 which ensures the material poses no disease risk to Northern Ireland.

Imports of cattle embryos and semen from outside the EU are subject to import licences under the Landing of Carcases Order (Northern Ireland) 1985 which ensure that the imports must comply with EU rules including controls on the collection, processing and storage of the genetic material.

All imports of genetic material landing at Belfast port or airport from third countries are checked by the Department's veterinary service, while random checks are carried out on imports from Member States. Once imported into Northern Ireland the genetic material must enter an approved main store where six-monthly checks are carried out by the Department's veterinary service.

Common Agricultural Policy: Simplification

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how new initiatives to simplify the common agriculture policy are affecting the work of her Department and impacting on local farmers; and if she will make a statement. (AQW 892/00)

Ms Rodgers: EU discussions relating to the possible simplification of the Common Agricultural Policy are still at a relatively early stage. The topic was raised at a

meeting of the EU Agriculture Council on 23 October, where there was unanimous support for simplification and for the creation of an Ad Hoc Working Group to take this initiative forward. The group will consider matters such as:

- Greater flexibility regarding scheme penalties;
- A simplified system of payments for small farmers;
- Allowing field inspections to be done for several schemes simultaneously;
- Reviewing some of the arable aid rules;
- More radical options could also be considered, such as more delegation to Member States, or more decoupling of payments from production.

In principle, I welcome any proposals that would reduce the complexity and bureaucratic burden of the Common Agricultural Policy. However, I will wish to ensure that no disadvantage may accrue to Northern Ireland producers as a consequence, and I will be examining all proposals closely at the appropriate time.

At present, the possible simplification of the policy is having minimal effect on the work of my Department and none on local farmers, but this will alter as concrete proposals emerge and the detail of implementation needs to be considered.

Loughgall Plant Breeding Station

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the contractual arrangements of her Department that give exclusive rights of propagation and marketing for all new grass seed and potato varieties bred by the Loughgall Plant Breeding Station to commercial companies outside Northern Ireland and if she will detail the full financial commitment of her Department associated with these contracts. (AQW 896/00)

Ms Rodgers: I confirm that the Department has contractual arrangements with Barenbrug Holdings with regard to grass seed varieties, and Agrolon Ltd with regard to potato varieties. These arrangements date back to 1991 and 1993 respectively and were entered into following an open tender procedure to identify a suitable commercial partner for the commercialisation and marketing of varieties bred at the Loughgall Plant Breeding Station. In both cases Northern Ireland interests were able to submit tenders, but those who did were considered to be less advantageous than the successful bidders. I would point out that the fact that the commercial partners in each case are based outside Northern Ireland does not disadvantage the Northern Ireland agricultural industry.

The financial details of the contracts are commercial in-confidence matters and it would not be appropriate to disclose these.

Brown Rot

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to comment on the plant health implications in respect of small ware potatoes being imported from Great Britain for planting, and if she will detail what steps she and her Great Britain counterpart are taking to stop this illegal trade in light of the brown rot findings in England and Scotland. (AQW 898/00)

Ms Rodgers: Small ware potatoes illegally imported from Great Britain and planted in Northern Ireland would present a plant health risk on two counts as they may be infested with potato cyst nematode, as well as potentially carrying *Ralstonia solanacearum*, the bacterium that causes brown rot.

We are not complacent on this matter but it is my assessment that the risk for the industry in this respect is very small as there is no evidence of significant trade in illegal seed potatoes.

Inspectors in my Department are extremely vigilant in checking for illegal imports and apply a very robust enforcement policy, which includes taking legal action where appropriate. Only two cases of illegally imported material were revealed last year. A consignment of English cc grade seed, which is not permitted to be planted in Northern Ireland, was found prior to planting and the importer was required to return it to its source in England. The other case involved an old variety of which no basic seed was available in the UK and a small amount was imported and planted. This was discovered by an inspector in the middle of the growing season and the Department took appropriate action.

With regard to preventative measures, UK Agriculture Departments fully comply with the EU rules on plant health and similar statutory checks on disease controls are undertaken throughout the UK. In Northern Ireland all seed and ware farms are inspected annually and inspectors check on seed being planted and the source of that seed. Other measures taken to maintain the good plant health status of local potato production include sample checking on imports and inspection of registered potato businesses including importers, processors and packers. Also, Department scientists test random samples of ware and seed potatoes in Northern Ireland, and water from rivers, to detect any signs of brown rot.

In June 2000, the Department issued a guidance note to the potato industry providing information on brown rot, how it spreads, and the measures put in place by the Department to prevent the spread of the disease in Northern Ireland. The guidance also outlined what the industry can do to help. It is vitally important that growers safeguard their industry by ensuring that all seed is obtained from reliable and safe sources.

I take this opportunity to stress that if anyone in the potato industry has information on illegal imports from Great Britain it should be passed to the Department so that action can be taken.

Brown Rot

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to reduce the risk of brown rot contamination of agricultural land by the spreading of sludge from water treatment works into which waste water from potato processing plants has been discharged. (AQW 899/00)

Ms Rodgers: Although the spreading of sludge from water treatment plants may seem a potential source for increased risk of disease spread, in reality very little sludge from public water treatment works in Northern Ireland is now spread on agricultural land, and none of this originates from potato processing plants. Only three potato processing plants discharge to treatment works here and none of the sludge from these plants goes for spreading. Sludge is incinerated or put in landfill sites, as spreading has never been popular amongst farmers.

Even were spreading to occur, the risk of spread of infection is considered to be very low as a recent study by scientists at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food showed that in the anaerobic sewage digestion process, the bacterium that causes brown rot survives no more than 24 hours. As it normally takes one to two weeks for sludge to pass through sewage processing there appears to be no risk of the bacterium surviving in sludge and contaminating land onto which the sludge might be spread.

Staff in my Department's quality assurance and applied plant science divisions are currently assessing the plant health risks involved with disposal of waste from a potato processing plant, with a view to formulation of guidelines for safe disposal. As soon as this work is finalised detailed advice will be issued to the industry and growers.

Brown Rot

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consultations she has had with officials from Scotland and England in relation to the recent flooding of potato growing lands adjacent to brown rot infected rivers in both countries and if she will detail the steps she intends to take in the 2001 growing season to stop seed and ware potatoes from such areas being imported to Northern Ireland. (AQW 900/00)

Ms Rodgers: In view of the importance of this issue officials in my Department are in contact with their counterparts in Scotland and England about all aspects

concerning brown rot disease on an ongoing basis. This liaison takes place both informally and through structured meetings so that there is continuous appraisal of disease risk factors.

In relation to flooding in potato-growing areas in England, an assessment has been made by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food of the potential risk for disease spread. All the crops involved in the brown rot outbreaks had been irrigated with surface water contaminated by the bacterium. Some, but not all, of those crops had been flooded or waterlogged during the growing season. While flooding would potentially lead to increased contact between contaminated water and potato roots where infection occurs, the risk of infection would vary depending on timing and would be lower later in the growing season. Lower temperatures are less conducive to infection and symptom development in potato plants.

Given that the serious flooding took place in a cold period at the end of the growing season, and that scientific investigation has shown that the bacterium dies out in soil over winter, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food considers that there has been no significant impact on the risk of potato brown rot spread.

In Scotland no certified seed potato crops were irrigated from the contaminated river system in Perthshire, and laboratory testing has indicated that the bacterium has not spread to potatoes. Only one field of seed potatoes has been affected by flooding from this river system. Tubers from the flooded land will be disposed of under statutory notice.

With regard to next year's growing season, EU rules prohibit putting restrictions on imports of potatoes as long as the EU plant health rules are observed. It is too early to say if any changes will be necessary to the measures currently being deployed to safeguard against the disease. As I stated above, the matter is kept under continuous review and any further actions considered justified will be taken.

Northern Ireland Potato Industry

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of staff and the running costs to the Northern Ireland potato industry for each of the establishments at the plant breeding station, the plant testing station and the scientific laboratories at Newforge Lane. (AQW 909/00)

Ms Rodgers:

Establishment	No. of staff (full time equivalents)
NI Horticultural & Plant Breeding Station	11
Plant Testing Station	3
Newforge (Applied Plant Sciences Division)	17

There are no associated running costs to the Northern Ireland potato industry for this departmentally funded scientific work. However, the industry is charged an occasional fee of £118 plus VAT for brown rot testing — three to four instances per year.

Imported Ware and Seed Potatoes: Health Check Inspections

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of plant health check inspections performed on imported ware and seed potatoes (b) the percentage of total throughput checked (c) the number of consignments failing to meet European Community and Northern Ireland Plant Health Regulations and (d) the number of tuber samples sent for laboratory examination to confirm presence of brown rot from each to the European Community border control posts at Larne, Belfast, Londonderry and Warrenpoint for the last 5 years. (AQW 910/00)

Ms Rodgers: There have been no direct imports from non-EU countries in the past five years to any of the ports in the question or indeed to any other NI ports. Potatoes from outside the EU enter via other UK ports and are subject to the relevant controls there. It follows, having regard to the points raised in the question, that (a) there have been no inspections of such imports at any of these European Community border control posts; and therefore that (b), (c) and (d) do not arise.

However, in line with the relevant EU Council Directive potatoes arriving in Northern Ireland from within the EU are subject to a system of official plant health checks and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development inspectors undertake random checks in compliance with these provisions. These arrangements, however, exclude specific controls at borders between Member States because the Directive places the primary responsibility for plant health inspection on the authorities in the EU country of origin. Provided that the EU plant health rules are observed, there must be no hindrance to the movement of potatoes within the Community.

Counselling Fund

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) how the recently announced £150,000 counselling fund will be administered (b) what criteria will be used for its allocation and (c) how much will be allocated to each constituency. (AQW 915/00)

Ms Rodgers: My officials have consulted with industry representatives and health personnel working in this topic area and are currently finalising our proposals.

A number of organisations are already involved in projects to help farmers and their families and I envisage

that a main strand of this additional funding will be to build on and expand these initiatives while encouraging new initiatives from other local groups in Northern Ireland. Allocation will be by assessment of the bids for funds from these groups against set criteria such as how their proposal will help those needing support in the farming community.

Funds will also be allocated to the provision of general information on stress and coping with change including sources of help in local areas.

Allocation will not be by constituency. The programme will be aiming to cover all of Northern Ireland through local group initiatives and distribution of general information.

Agrifood Development Service: Running Costs

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of staff and the running costs to the Northern Ireland potato industry in respect of policy division, the technology and business, supply chain and quality assurance divisions of the agrifood development service. (AQW 916/00)

Ms Rodgers: No staff costs or other running costs are passed on directly to the potato industry for any of the areas of work referred to in the question. Thirty-eight staff — 28 in the agrifood development service (AFDS) and 10 in farm policy division — are involved in these areas but this figure is not meaningful as potato industry work is combined with other activities relating to different sectors of agriculture.

However, certain statutory fees must be charged to the industry for potato inspections undertaken by the quality assurance division and for the administration of health “passports”. In the financial year 1999/2000 the fees for this work totaled £121,914 but £62,958 was rebated in respect of potatoes exported. The rebate figure is not a directly comparable figure as rebates may be made in respect of the previous year whilst other rebates due in-year may not be made until the following year.

Waste Disposal Facilities

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm the number of potato processors and pre-packers who have sought approval for waste disposal facilities and been approved by her Department in the last five years and if she will detail what steps she is taking to ensure all such premises importing potatoes from brown rot infected regions in Great Britain meet the required standards to stop brown rot contamination of rivers and arable land in Northern Ireland; and if she will make a statement. (AQW 917/00)

Ms Rodgers: Only one potato processor has applied for approval for waste disposal facilities and the Department, after inspection, refused to grant approval because the necessary conditions could not be fulfilled. Processing of potatoes from Egypt and regions of the EU known to be affected by brown rot can only be approved when certain conditions have been met. The solid waste from processing must be disposed at an approved landfill site, heat treated to 70°C for 30 minutes or incinerated. Likewise the liquid waste from processing should be treated to 70°C for 30 minutes or discharged into an estuary or tidal water. At present no potato processor or packer in Northern Ireland can meet these conditions.

The handling and disposal of potatoes from brown rot demarcation zones in Great Britain must satisfy the relevant EC Directive and it is the responsibility of the competent authority, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, to implement the Directive in full. The Directive stipulates that these potatoes must only be processed at a site with approved facilities so that there is no risk of brown rot spreading. As no processor in Northern Ireland can satisfy these requirements we have been assured by our counterparts in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food that none of this high risk material has been imported into Northern Ireland. This is borne out by the fact that none of the imported material sampled by inspectors at processing plants has shown any signs of brown rot on visual inspection or by laboratory test.

I am satisfied that the checks undertaken by inspectors from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are proving to be effective.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Irish Language

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what percentage of his Department's budget has been allocated specifically for Irish language projects and groups and what percentage has been allocated to other language and cultural groups. (AQW 873/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): My Department funds the North/South Language Body which through its two agencies, Foras na Gaeilge and Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch, may promote and support activity related to language and culture.

Foras na Gaeilge's specific functions include promotion of the Irish language.

Indicative funding of £7.2 million is available to Foras na Gaeilge in the start-up year of operation. My Department will provide £1.8 million of that. This represents 2.8% of the Department's budget this year. Indicative funding

for Foras na Gaeilge in 2001/2002 is £10.12 million, of which my Department will provide £2.53 million. This represents 3.53% of the draft budget.

Indicative funding of £667,000 is available to Tha Boord of Ulster-Scotch in the start-up year of operation and my Department will provide £500,000 of that. This represents 0.8% of the Department's budget this year. Indicative funding for Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch in 2001/2002 is £1.29 million, of which my Department will provide £970,000. This represents 1.35% of the draft Budget.

Funding to promote cultural activity generally is made available through a range of programmes for which my Department is responsible.

The Department's funding in support of the arts in Northern Ireland is largely channelled through the Arts Council, which has considerable independence in determining the allocation of resources in line with its artistic judgement. The level of expenditure by the council on Irish language and Ulster-Scots arts activities has risen significantly in recent years. In the last year for which current figures are available 1999/2000, approximately £102,000 has been provided for Irish language arts and £15,000 for Ulster-Scots language arts — this means arts projects or organisations with an important Irish language or Ulster-Scots dimension.

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland has, through its cultural diversity panel, sought to give recognition to the work of ethnic minority voluntary groups. Ongoing project funding has assisted the development of festivals, events, and other cultural projects organised by and for ethnic minority groups.

The Department does not allocate any of its arts budget specifically for Irish language projects and groups or other language and cultural groups.

EDUCATION

Integrated Education: Bullying

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to address incidents of bullying within the integrated education sector. (AQW 828/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Every school is required to have a written discipline policy, which must promote self-discipline among the pupils, good behaviour and respect for others. Parents get a free copy of that policy statement. My Department has advised schools in its booklet 'Pastoral Care in Schools: Child Protection', issued under cover of circular 1999/10, that they should have a clear, whole-school anti-bullying policy statement within their pastoral care and discipline policies. This should set out what measures the school will take

to prevent bullying, and how they will tackle it when it happens. My Department also issues, on a regular basis, guidance on bullying produced by other statutory and voluntary agencies such as the NSPCC.

All guidance issued goes to all grant-aided schools, including integrated schools.

I intend to strengthen this by taking the next available legislative opportunity to make it a mandatory requirement upon every school to have an anti-bullying policy in place.

My Department is also preparing substantial guidance to schools on the promotion of good behaviour. This guidance will have a major section on combating bullying, and practical advice on how to deal with bullies and victims. A major piece of research into bullying in Northern Ireland has also been commissioned from the University of Ulster. The report is due next summer. Among other things it will be reporting on good practice and suggesting practical strategies which schools can use to tackle bullying.

My Department is also working with a consortium of voluntary and statutory agencies to develop a strategy for promoting an anti-bullying culture in schools.

Integrated Education, Strangford and South Down: Bullying

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of incidents of bullying in the integrated education sector in the Strangford and South Down areas in each of the last three years. (AQW 830/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is not available. Data on incidents of bullying are not collected by my Department or the education and library boards.

Schools Amalgamation: Dungannon

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education if he or his Department have (a) been involved at any stage in the proposed amalgamation of the Boys' Academy and Girls' Academy in Dungannon in order to obtain new buildings, (b) given any undertaking to the board of trustees of the two schools that new buildings will only be provided if an amalgamation takes place, and (c) been made aware of the serious concerns parents from both schools have about the proposed amalgamation. (AQW 831/00)

Mr M McGuinness: At the request of the trustees my Department carried out an economic appraisal to determine how best to provide for the educational needs of the pupils in St Patrick's Boys' and Girls' academies. The recommended option in the appraisal is to provide a new co-educational school to replace the two existing schools. My Department accepts that the accommodation deficiencies at the two schools must be addressed regardless of whether or not the amalgamation proceeds. The school

trustees have embarked on a consultation process with parents and other interested parties and my Department is aware that concerns have been expressed during this process. If the trustees decide to proceed with the amalgamation a statutory development proposal will be required. This provides for a two-month period during which representations may be made to my Department. At the end of that period a decision on the proposal will be taken having regard to the views expressed, including representations from the parents of pupils at the two schools.

Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to detail the amounts paid to the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) for 1999/2000 under each of paragraphs 11, 13, 14 and 15 of schedule 8 of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. (AQW 877/00)

Mr M McGuinness: All grant aid from the Department of Education to the CCMS is payable under paragraph 15 of schedule 8 of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989.

The amounts paid in the financial year 1999/2000 in respect of expenditure by the council on (i) staff salaries and (ii) members emoluments, and in respect of (iii) total recurrent expenditure and (iv) total capital expenditure were as follows:

	£
(i) Staff Salaries	1,422,126
(ii) Members Emoluments	32,194
(iii) Total Recurrent Expenditure	1,946,760
(iv) Total Capital Expenditure	57,970

Full Time Non-Teaching Posts

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education how many full-time non-teaching posts are provided for in the budget of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). (AQW 878/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I am advised by the council that it currently has 55 full-time non-teaching staff, divided between council headquarters and diocesan education officers.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Textiles and Clothing Sector

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to explain why the Strangford constituency

area was omitted from the initial review of the textiles and clothing sector in the light of the recent large job losses in this industry. (AQW 826/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The remit of the review, which I announced earlier this year, was to develop an effective strategy for the future development of the textiles and clothing sector throughout Northern Ireland. In undertaking the assignment the consultants covered a range of activities including interviews with selected companies that represented the key products and markets supplied by the sector and workshops to which all companies in the sector were invited. A number of companies located in the Strangford constituency participated in that process.

Ards, Down and Castlereagh: Visits by Potential Investors

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of visits to Ards, Down and Castlereagh council areas by potential investors in the last two years and (b) how many investors relocated to other council areas. (AQW 829/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The attached table provides details of visits by potential inward investors to Ards, Down and Castlereagh district council areas arranged by the IDB between April 1998 and March 2000. From the 29 recorded visits 2 companies to date have located in other council areas.

	1998/99	1999/2000	Total
Ards	4	4	8
Down	5	3	8
Castlereagh	7	6	13
Total	16	13	29

Aviation Industry

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the impact of the aviation industry in Northern Ireland. (AQW 832/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The aviation industry makes a valuable contribution to the economy in Northern Ireland. Few sectors contribute more to wealth creation. The aerospace sector in Northern Ireland offers international standards of performance, an export focus, advanced technologies with close university linkages, durable and quality jobs and more business with local suppliers. Our companies supply products and expertise to virtually all the global aerospace leaders, including Boeing, Airbus, Bombardier, BAE Systems and TRW/ Lucas Aerospace.

Shipbuilding: Future

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the future of shipbuilding in Northern Ireland. (AQW 833/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The shipbuilding industry in Northern Ireland is exemplified mainly by Harland and Wolff. The company has been facing considerable difficulty in recent months in securing new shipbuilding orders. A number of prospects, including the recently announced roll on/roll off vessels for the Ministry of Defence, are currently at various stages of negotiation and officials in my Department are working very closely with the company in this regard. The Harland and Wolff task force, established by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister following the redundancy situation in October, is also maintaining close contact with the company to assess how support can best be given in a number of key areas. This includes alternative employment opportunities for redundant employees and developing sales/marketing prospects for Harland and Wolff as it seeks to position itself in new market sectors.

Employment Trends in Northern Ireland

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will make a statement on employment trends in Northern Ireland. (AQW 835/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Estimates of the number of employee jobs in Northern Ireland are available from the quarterly employment survey (QES), and the latest available estimates relate to June 2000. At that date there were 625,740 employee jobs in Northern Ireland.

In the past five years Northern Ireland has experienced continued growth in the number of employee jobs, particularly in the service sector. Since June 1995 the number of employee jobs in NI has increased by 52,320 — +9.1%. This compares favourably with the rise in the UK as a whole — +8.3%.

Details of the employee jobs series for Northern Ireland and the UK can be found on the attached table.

EMPLOYEE JOBS¹, NI & UK, 1995 – 2000

Year ²	NI	UK	% Change	NI	UK
1995	573,420	22,453,900	Over 5 years	+9.1%	+8.3%
1996	577,640	22,731,700			
1997	596,100	23,267,900	Over 3 years	+5.0%	+4.5%
1998	609,170	23,764,000			
1999	617,800	24,043,300	Over 1 year	+1.3%	+1.2%
2000	625,740	24,323,800			

¹ NI figures are rounded to the nearest 10, UK figures to the nearest 100.

² Figures are at June of each year.

Essential Users Rebate

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will consider extending the essential users rebate for vehicle fuel tax across Northern Ireland. (AQW 836/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The Chancellor of the Exchequer determines the application and variation of fuel duties. These are therefore deemed reserved matters and do not fall under the remit of the Northern Ireland Executive.

Strategy 2010

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) what the current position is regarding Strategy 2010 (b) what aspects of Strategy 2010 have been implemented and (c) what outstanding issues have yet to be resolved. (AQW 857/00)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) The Strategy 2010 report, published in March 1999, has since been considered in detail by the economic development forum, which has provided comment and advice to Ministers. It has also been the subject of extensive public debate. Most recently the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee has conducted an inquiry on Strategy 2010 and its report is expected shortly.
- (b) Of the 62 recommendations in the Strategy 2010 report, progress has been made on 55, including six which have been implemented in full. No action has yet been taken on 7 recommendations. Examples of particular actions taken include the establishment of the economic development forum and the information age initiative, together with significant progress in relation to equality and the knowledge-based economy themes.
- (c) The Strategy 2010 report was produced to inform the Assembly and to stimulate debate about future economic development policy options. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee's report will provide a formal response to Strategy 2010 and inform debate on the Programme for Government and my Department's corporate plan.

New Start Programmes: Delay in Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to address the delay in funding for new-start programmes issued by LEDU. (AQW 863/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I understand Mr Shannon is referring to the business start programme, jointly funded by LEDU and district councils, utilising EU moneys. Due to a delay

in securing EU money for this programme, LEDU is providing interim funding to ensure continuity of assistance to businesses whilst the issue is being resolved.

Ards, Down and Castlereagh: Potential Investors

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of visits by potential investors, organised by the Industrial Development Board for Northern Ireland, to the Ards, Down and Castlereagh Council Areas in each of the last five years. (AQW 864/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The attached table provides details of visits to Ards, Down and Castlereagh Council areas promoted by IDB over the past five years.

	1995	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	Total
ADC	3	10	1	4	4	22
DDC	2	3	4	5	3	17
CDC	8	6	2	7	6	29
Total	13	19	7	16	13	68

New TSN: Designated Areas

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to specify what regions are considered designated areas for inward investment by the IDB for Northern Ireland. (AQW 885/00)

Sir Reg Empey: IDB markets the whole of Northern Ireland to potential investors. In doing so, IDB pays specific attention to those council areas and areas of Belfast designated within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's New TSN action plan as part of the Government's New TSN initiative.

Within the action plan, the IDB will target at least 75% of first-time visits and new greenfield investments to New TSN areas.

This action plan together with all other departmental action plans will be published shortly by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and will contain details of the areas designated for New TSN purposes.

New TSN: Designated Areas

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm that the Strangford constituency is a designated area as defined by the IDB for Northern Ireland. (AQW 886/00)

Sir Reg Empey: IDB does not 'designate' areas of Northern Ireland for its activities but rather pays special attention to those council areas and areas of Belfast designated within the Department of Enterprise Trade

and Investment's New TSN action plan as part of the Government's New TSN initiative. The Strangford constituency comprises parts of Down, Castlereagh and Ards council areas. These council areas do not exhibit overall high levels of disadvantage compared to other council areas, using either the Robson indices alone, or supplemented by data on the unemployed. Consequently they are not designated for New TSN purposes by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

However, the Department has acknowledged the specific issues faced by non-designated council areas that contain pockets of deprivation. It is committed to working with these councils and local enterprise development agencies to help identify how they can use economic development resources at their disposal to complement the activity of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment.

LINK

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how much Northern Ireland business has benefited from the British research and development support scheme, "LINK", and to make a statement on how he envisages Northern Ireland business benefiting from the EC's approval of "LINK" continuance to 2004/05. (AQW 893/00)

Sir Reg Empey: LINK is a UK-wide scheme for supporting research partnerships between industry and the research base.

Information on the geographical location of LINK participants has not been routinely collected. However, I am aware of the involvement of seven Northern Ireland-based companies, the two Northern Ireland universities and two other Northern Ireland bodies in 20 LINK projects worth a total of over £13 million. Of course, the real benefit to companies involved in LINK lies not in the amount of Government grant obtained but in the development of new technologies, which the companies can then use as the basis for developing new and improved products and processes.

Following EU approval Northern Ireland business and universities will continue to be eligible to participate in all LINK programmes that are open for new project proposals.

Textile and Clothing Trades: Deregulation

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the impact on local businesses through the adoption by the EU of measures to deregulate the textile and clothing trades. (AQW 918/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The de-regulation proposals put forward by the World Trade Organisation contain a number of measures to open up global markets. It is expected that while this might bring more competition to commodity textile and clothing producers it will also bring new opportunities to local manufacturers by enabling entry to markets not previously accessible to them. The Department of Trade and Industry, which is the lead department in such matters, will continue to work closely with the industry representative bodies and the European Commission to promote the interests of indigenous manufacturers.

The impact of the changes will depend on the preparedness of manufacturers. IDB through its strategy of 'Competing Globally' has been assisting textile and clothing companies prepare by encouraging them to invest in the development of their businesses. IDB has also encouraged them to form close relationships with customers and commodity suppliers so that they can offer a competitively priced portfolio of products consisting of home produced high value niche-market products, technology-based customer services, good design, rapid response and sourced goods.

I am confident that, provided the industry uses the resources made available to it and responds positively to the changes, new opportunities will arise.

Consumer Protection: Regulation

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans to provide stronger consumer protection by way of regulation. (AQW 949/00)

Sir Reg Empey: My overall objective is to ensure that the level of protection afforded to consumers in Northern Ireland is at least on a par with that afforded to their counterparts in Great Britain.

My immediate plans are to consider the adequacy of consumer protection in areas such as home-working, rogue trading and price marking.

An assessment of the level of risk, the costs involved and alternative ways of achieving the desired result, such as voluntary codes of practice, will always be considered before embarking on regulation. I will however provide for legislation in those areas where adequate levels of consumer protection cannot be achieved by other means.

Quarrying Industry

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of people employed in the quarrying/extraction industry in Northern Ireland by constituency. (AQW 970/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Estimates of the number of employee jobs below Northern Ireland level are only available from the census of employment and the most up to date figures relate to September 1997. Employee jobs estimates for mining and quarrying at this date for each constituency area within Northern Ireland can be found in the following table.

NI EMPLOYEE JOBS IN MINING AND QUARRYING BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREAS (PCA'S)

Parliamentary Constituency Area	Employee Jobs
Belfast East	*
Belfast North	*
Belfast South	*
Belfast West	*
East Antrim	*
East Londonderry	170
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	174
Foyle	*
Lagan Valley	210
Mid-Ulster	441
Newry & Armagh	144
North Antrim	156
North Down	*
South Antrim	79
South Down	85
Strangford	112
Upper Bann	*
West Tyrone	165
Northern Ireland	1,938

* Not Shown Due To Either No Employees Or Confidentiality Constraints.

Knockmore Hill Industrial Estate

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many companies the IDB for Northern Ireland have brought to view the Knockmore site.
(AQO 452/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Between April 1996 and March 2000 the IDB arranged 13 visits by potential inward investor companies to Knockmore Hill Industrial Estate.

Economic Development Agencies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if, in reviewing the role of the Economic Development Agencies, he will ensure that consideration is given to examining the contribution from the local enterprise development companies and agencies and how they may continue their role in the future.
(AQO 484/00)

Sir Reg Empey: As part of my review of economic development structures I hope to implement an organising framework for the totality of enterprise and small business policy in Northern Ireland. This will provide the opportunity for the local enterprise agency network to deliver quality business services and to play a key strategic role in small business development at the local level.

Northern Ireland Business Venture Capital Fund

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will undertake to create a Northern Ireland business venture capital fund to further economic development in the region and if he will make a statement.
(AQO 482/00)

Sir Reg Empey: There are already two business venture capital funds – crescent capital and enterprise equity – which are active in Northern Ireland. These funds service in the main medium to larger-sized investments, and I am actively seeking to introduce a new fund to cater for lower level of investment funding. In addition, IDB has commissioned new fundamental research into sources of private sector funding available in Northern Ireland to assist the growth of small to medium sized companies.

North/South Gas Pipeline

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the provisions he is making for the extension of the North/South gas pipeline to the south-east of Northern Ireland.
(AQO 447/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I refer the Member to my response to his earlier question (AQW 280/00) on this matter. I am still keen for the natural gas industry to be extended to the south-east of Northern Ireland, however it is for the private sector to put forward commercially viable proposals.

Angling: Tourist Attraction

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to encourage and develop angling as a tourist attraction.
(AQO 445/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board markets and promotes the angling product through a variety of channels employing publications, exhibitions, advertising, media, tour operators and specialised events. The establishment of an angling product marketing group ensures representation of angling interests from throughout Northern Ireland and creates increased opportunities for marketing.

North/South Tourist Company

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the strategic importance of the new publicly owned North/South tourist company, to confirm that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is equipped to represent the best interests of Northern Ireland.

(AQO 450/00)

Sir Reg Empey: As co-owner of the new company, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) will be involved in the company's strategic all-Ireland marketing remit and also will be responsible for regional marketing initiatives for Northern Ireland which will be delivered normally through the company. The NITB will continue to be resourced to meet these and its other statutory requirements effectively.

North/South Gas Pipeline

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give a report on progress towards establishing a North/South gas pipeline. (AQO 473/00)

Sir Reg Empey: It is for the private sector to put forward commercially viable proposals to construct a North/South gas pipeline. Two companies have expressed an interest in constructing a North/South pipeline but have also indicated that before they would be able to proceed it will be necessary to sign up large gas users in the Republic of Ireland in order to make a pipeline economically viable. At present there are a number of difficulties working against a North/South gas interconnector project.

Broadband Accessibility

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the importance of broadband accessibility to future economic growth in Northern Ireland. (AQO 480/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Future economic growth in Northern Ireland will depend on a wide range of disparate factors. In order to compete effectively in the global economy, local businesses need access to a modern telecommunications infrastructure and access to broadband telecommunications services will be important to the progressive development of knowledge intensive businesses.

ENVIRONMENT

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to indicate how legislation similar to the Countryside

and Rights of Ways (CROW) Bill at Westminster would help increase the status of the Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) designation here. (AQW 816/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): My officials have been considering whether additional measures — including legislation similar to some parts of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act — are required here to ensure that Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) are effectively protected and managed. I expect them to bring forward proposals shortly on possible means of strengthening the existing legislation. I will consult widely on any such proposals.

Wildlife Protection Laws

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his proposals to amend wildlife protection laws. (AQW 817/00)

Mr Foster: My officials have been considering whether additional measures are required to ensure that wildlife and habitats are effectively protected and managed. I expect them to bring forward proposals shortly on possible means of strengthening the existing legislation. I will consult widely on any such proposals.

Countryside and Rights of Way Bill

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment if he will confirm that the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill at Westminster will not apply to Northern Ireland and indicate the steps he is taking to implement similar measures within Northern Ireland. (AQW 818/00)

Mr Foster: The Countryside and Rights of Way Act does not apply to Northern Ireland.

My officials have been considering whether additional measures — including legislation similar to some parts of the CROW Act — are required here to ensure that Areas of Special Scientific Interest are effectively protected and managed. I expect them to bring forward proposals shortly on possible means of strengthening the existing legislation. I will consult widely on any such proposals.

Conservation Areas

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the conservation areas and areas of townscape character in Belfast and to outline the criteria for the designation of such areas. (AQW 846/00)

Mr Foster: There are now 13 conservation areas and 19 areas of townscape character in Belfast and these are set out in the attached schedule.

The Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 included proposals to protect the built heritage of the city by the designation

of conservation areas and the identification of areas of townscape character.

Conservation areas are designated under article 50 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. This provides that the Department, after consultation with the Historic Buildings Council and the local district council, may designate as conservation areas, areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance. The Order further provides that within designated conservation areas, buildings cannot be demolished without the consent of the Department.

The Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 provided for the protection of areas of townscape character – areas of fine townscape not regarded at the time as priority contenders for conservation area designation. Policy C3 of the Belfast Urban Area Plan provides that the Department may prepare supplementary guidance for the control of development within areas of townscape character. There is no control over demolition in these areas.

The identification of conservation areas and areas of townscape character in Belfast emerged from a study by Queen's University that was commissioned by the Department in preparation for the urban area plan. While all areas identified were regarded as contenders for conservation area status, not all areas were seen to be of the same sensitivity and they varied in the extent to which they were exposed to development pressure. The programme of conservation area designation proposed in the Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 concentrated on the most important areas. The position is kept under review.

With the growing threat in recent years to the built heritage in Belfast's Victorian and Edwardian suburbs, the Department has acted to designate as conservation areas a number of areas previously identified as areas of townscape character. The five new conservation areas are Malone, Cyprus Avenue, Knockdene, Kings Road and Somerton. The most significant change resulting from this designation is to bring demolition of existing property under planning control.

Belfast Conservation Areas	Year Designated
1. Linen Conservation Area	1992
2. Cathedral Conservation Area	1990
3. Belfast City Centre Conservation Area	1998
4. Merville Garden Village Conservation Area	1995
5. McMaster Street Conservation Area	1994
6. Malone Park/Adelaide Park Conservation Areas	1993
7. Queen's Conservation Area	1987
8. Stranmillis Conservation Area	1996
9. Malone Conservation Area	2000
10. Cyprus Avenue Conservation Area	2000
11. Knockdene Conservation Area	2000
12. King's Road Conservation Area	2000
13. Somerton Conservation Area	2000

Areas of Townscape Character

- Cherryvalley area of townscape character
- Circular Road area of townscape character
- Cliftonville area of townscape character
- Cregagh area of townscape character
- Donegall Park Avenue area of townscape character
- Hampton Park area of townscape character
- Hazelbank/Abbeylands area of townscape character
- Holyland area of townscape character
- Lenamore area of townscape character
- Lenamore (extension) area of townscape character
- North/South Parade and Park Road area of townscape character
- Rosetta area of townscape character
- Rugby Road area of townscape character
- Rushpark area of townscape character
- Sunningdale area of townscape character
- Thiepval area of townscape character
- Twaddell area of townscape character
- Upper Malone area of townscape character
- Wandsworth area of townscape character

Road Accidents

Mr Adams asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of child pedestrians killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents per 100,000 of the population in Northern Ireland and Great Britain in each of the last three years. (AQW 860/00)

Mr Foster: The information currently available on the number of child pedestrians (under 16 years of age) killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents per 100,000 of the population is as follows:

	NI	GB
1997	36.6	33.8
1998	34.6	32.0
1999	Not Available	29.5

Information for Northern Ireland for 1999 is not yet available.

The collection of road casualty statistics in Northern Ireland is carried out by the RUC. As policing is a reserved matter, my Department accesses this information through the Police Division of the Northern Ireland Office. It has not been possible to obtain the information for 1999 in the time available. I will write to the Member as soon as my Department receives these figures.

Lack of Play Facilities

Mr Adams asked the Minister of the Environment if the lack of accessible play facilities is a contributing factor to child pedestrian deaths and serious injuries in road traffic accidents and if he will make a statement.

(AQW 861/00)

Mr Foster: It is not possible from the available statistics to determine the extent to which the availability of accessible play facilities may be a contributing factor to child pedestrian deaths and serious injuries in road traffic accidents.

Road casualty statistics are collected by the RUC who have advised me that information on the availability of play facilities in the vicinity of child pedestrian road traffic accidents is not recorded.

Hares: Rathlin Island

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to prevent the capture and transfer of hares from Rathlin Island. (AQW 865/00)

Mr Foster: Permits to take hares from the wild for coursing are issued by the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department.

The permits have not hitherto specified the locations within Northern Ireland from which the hares may be taken.

I have asked the service to attach a condition to future permits to preclude capture of hares on islands so as to protect small populations.

Northern Ireland Biodiversity Convention

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to (a) confirm the establishment of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group (b) detail each member appointed and the date appointed and (c) outline his assessment of the Biodiversity Convention.

(AQW 872/00)

Mr Foster: The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group (NIBG) was established in late 1996.

THE MEMBERSHIP OF NIBG IS AS FOLLOWS:

Mr Richard Rogers (Chairman)	Department of the Environment (DOE)
Dr Bob Brown	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
Mr Philip Doughty	Ulster Museum
Dr David Erwin	Ulster Wildlife Trust
Mr Ronnie Farrell	Ulster Farmers' Union
Dr John Faulkner	DOE
Mr Ken Forbes	Banbridge District Council
Dr Harry Gracey	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mrs Pat Hunter	Confederation of British Industry
Dr Paul Johnston	Consultant (Fisheries)
Mr Wilfred Mitchell	Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association
Mr Ian McKee	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Mervyn Rankin	Ballymena Borough Council
Dr Howard Platt	DOE
Mrs Jo Whatmough	The National Trust

In 1994 The UK Government ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity and produced the UK biodiversity action plan based on the principles of the convention. Northern Ireland continues to contribute to the implementation of the UK biodiversity action plan. I intend to publish a biodiversity strategy for Northern Ireland during 2001.

Northern Ireland Biodiversity Convention

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what policies are contained within the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Convention with regard to priority species and if the granting of licenses to capture hares is compatible with the Convention. (AQW 880/00)

Mr Foster: Recommendations for a Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy were submitted to my Department on 4 October 2000 by the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group. These recommendations are currently being considered by Departments. Their purpose is to enable Northern Ireland to fulfil its responsibilities as a part of the UK, which is a signatory to the international Convention on Biological Diversity.

The recommendations propose that action plans should be put in place and implemented for some 36 wild species, one of which is the Irish Hare.

An action plan for the Irish Hare was published by the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department, also on 4 October 2000. This plan identifies the main threats to the survival of the Irish Hare. The capture of hares for coursing purposes is not identified as one of these main threats, largely because under Irish Coursing

Club rules the hares are rarely killed in coursing and are released back into the wild.

The granting of a limited number of licences to capture hares, with appropriate conditions, is therefore compatible with the Biodiversity Group's recommendations. However, I will wish to keep this and other aspects of biodiversity under review as work on the Strategy and on implementation of the plan proceeds.

Telecommunications

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment if he will make a statement on the operation of planning controls on telecommunications masts. (AQW 902/00)

Mr Foster: On 10 November 2000 I issued a consultation paper on proposals to amend planning legislation relating to telecommunications development and on a draft Planning Policy Statement. The closing date for responses to the consultation paper is 15 January 2001.

Until such times as changes are made to the legislation and policy, my Department will process applications for telecommunications development in accordance with existing law and policy.

Assisting Local Authorities

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the action he is taking to assist local authorities to deal with illegal dumping and abandoned animal carcasses. (AQW 906/00)

Mr Foster: Under the Pollution Control and Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, district councils have powers to require landowners to remove illegally deposited waste or to remove it themselves and recover their costs.

To assist local authorities a guidance document on tackling fly tipping was published in March 1999 by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service. Regulations under the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 recently introduced requirements for waste carriers to be registered. I also plan to consult early in 2001 on new provisions to impose a duty of care on waste producers. These requirements should combine to further limit illegal activities.

Fallen animals are classified as agricultural waste and district councils have the necessary powers under the 1978 Order to remove them.

Planning Enforcement Notices

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail how many planning enforcement notices have

been served for breach of planning regulations and how many have been enforced in the current financial year.

(AQW 921/00)

Mr Foster: Since 1 April 2000 my Department has served 36 enforcement notices in respect of breaches of planning control. During the same period, 16 enforcement cases have resulted in formal court action for non-compliance with enforcement notices previously served.

Regional Shopping Centres

Mr Poots asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the criteria that regional shopping centres need to meet, and to list the centres that currently meet these criteria. (AQO 510/00)

Mr Foster: From a retail planning perspective, a regional shopping centre should occupy a location and comprise a type and scale of provision such as to serve a wide catchment area in a regional context.

As identified within Planning Policy Statement 5 entitled 'Retailing and Town Centres', Northern Ireland currently has three such regional shopping centres. These are Belfast city centre, the city centre of Londonderry, which serves the north-west region, and one purpose-built, out-of-town centre at Sprucefield.

Sewage Pollution: Glenavy River

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of occasions there have been reports of sewage pollution in the Glenavy River. (AQO 494/00)

Mr Foster: Since 1995 there have been 14 reports made to Environment and Heritage Service regarding sewage in the Glenavy River. Eight of the incidents were attributable to the Water Service, five were from domestic sources such as private sewage works, septic tanks and cesspools, and one was from an industrial site. The table below shows the distribution of incidents by year and source.

Year	Water Service	Domestic	Industrial
1995	1	1	1
1996	0	1	0
1997	1	0	0
1998	2	0	0
1999	2	2	0
2000 (to date)	2	1	0

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Barnett Formula

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what recent discussion he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer relating to the operation of the Barnett formula. (AQW 834/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I have not had any discussions with the Chancellor relating to the operation of the Barnett formula recently. However, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and myself met with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to press for changes in relation to the Barnett formula.

My officials have also had a series of meetings with Treasury officials during the spending review process to discuss Northern Ireland's Barnett-determined funding allocations.

In response to these representations the Treasury agreed to a number of changes to the operation of the Barnett formula. These changes are worth £40 million extra per year to Northern Ireland over the 2000 spending review period. The Treasury also agreed to provide additional CAP funding for modulation payments of £3 million, £4 million and £4.5 million over the 2000 spending review period.

Civil Service Jobs: Omagh and Strabane

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has any plans that will impact on the number of civil service jobs in (a) Omagh District Council area and (b) Strabane District Council area. (AQW 839/00)

Mr Durkan: The number of civil servants employed on a function, or in a geographical area, depends on the business needs of Departments, which are subject to change from time to time. The only plans of which I am aware at present, and which would impact significantly on the number of civil service jobs currently located in the Strabane and Omagh district council areas, relate to the jobseekers' allowance joint working initiative. This involves the Social Security Agency and the Training and Employment Agency working together for the benefit of their customers and could result in up to 12 additional jobs in Omagh towards the end of 2001 with a similar number in Strabane in 2002.

In line with the commitments made in the draft Programme for Government and in the context of an accommodation review, I intend to examine the scope for decentralisation of civil service jobs. It would be wrong to prejudge the outcome of this work or to speculate as to the precise locations that might be involved in any decentralisation exercise. Factors to be taken into account

include the current number of civil service jobs in an area in relation to the local workforce; New TSN indicators; the regional planning strategy; the effects on equality of opportunity and not least service delivery, business efficiency and cost.

Civil Service Jobs: Omagh and Strabane

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to state the proportion of civil service jobs in (a) Strabane District Council area and (b) Omagh District Council area as a proportion of the number of people living in each of these areas. (AQW 840/00)

Mr Durkan: The proportion of civil service jobs to the population of working age in Strabane and Omagh district council's areas is 0.7% and 2.8% respectively.

Civil Service Personnel: Working outside Omagh and Strabane areas

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to state the number of civil servants, and their grades, resident in (a) Strabane District Council area and (b) Omagh District Council area who work outside their respective council area. (AQW 841/00)

Mr Durkan: Reliable and comprehensive information on where civil servants reside is not available centrally. I have asked my officials to examine urgently how such data might be compiled and kept up to date and will write to you on the outcome.

Civil Service Jobs: Omagh and Strabane

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to state the number of civil service jobs in (a) Omagh District Council area and (b) Strabane District Council area - together with the grade of those jobs and their respective Government Departments/Agencies. (AQW 842/00)

Mr Durkan: The information is set out in the attached tables. [see page 18]

North/South Ministerial Council: Legal Action

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that no public money is expended by the Executive or any Department on legal action related to North/South Ministerial Council meetings. (AQW 847/00)

Mr Durkan: In most circumstances, the Departmental Solicitor's Office will provide legal support to Departments and Ministers in the discharge of their official functions. In cases that have implications for Ministers in their

TABLE 1 NUMBER OF NI CIVIL SERVANTS WORKING IN STRABANE DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA (1ST JANUARY 2000)¹

Department	Grade Level ²						Total
	Deputy Principal	Staff Officer	Executive Officer	Admin Officer	Admin Assistant	Other Grades ³	
Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment	1	1	11	5	2	2	22
Regional Development	1	1	6	2	1	45	56
Social Development	0	1	17	28	6	9	61
RUC Civilian staff	0	0	1	12	8	0	21
Total	2	3	35	47	17	56	160

TABLE 2 NUMBER OF NI CIVIL SERVANTS WORKING IN OMAGH DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA (1ST JANUARY 2000)¹

Department	Grade Level ²							Total
	Senior/ Principal	Deputy Principal	Staff Officer	Executive Officer	Admin Officer	Admin Assistant	Other Grades ³	
Agriculture and Rural Development	12	9	17	46	21	29	105	239
Culture, Arts and Leisure	0	0	1	11	0	0	0	12
Environment	3	6	14	21	20	8	2	74
Finance and Personnel	2	4	5	11	15	5	1	43
Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment	0	1	3	25	8	1	6	44
Regional Development	4	11	24	70	21	8	123	261
Social Development	0	0	2	33	40	11	10	96
NIO	0	0	2	5	4	2	0	13
RUC Civilian staff	0	0	0	2	18	5	0	25
Total	21	31	68	224	147	69	247	807

¹ Permanent and casual, Industrial and Non-Industrial staff on a headcount basis.

² The grade structure listed in the table is that for General Service grades, but the figures reported include other non-industrial staff working at equivalent grade levels outside the General Service.

³ Other grades include industrial and casual staff.

official position, and where a conflict of interest could arise, or the Minister deems it necessary, the Ministerial Code allows for the commissioning of independent legal advice. Accounting officers will ensure that there are controls on any expenditure that might be incurred, and final payment will be subject to review and advice by the Departmental Solicitor.

Legal Advisers and Costs

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) who is the solicitor acting on behalf of the Minister of Education in the case against the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, (b) was this solicitor previously registered to act on behalf of the Department of Education and what is the estimated fee (c) who is the barrister acting on behalf of the Minister of Education against the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (d) was this barrister previously registered to act for the Department of Education (e) what fee this barrister is charging per day and what is the estimated preparation fee and (f) how long the case is predicted to last.

(AQW 911/00)

Mr Durkan: The information requested is as follows:-

- The solicitors acting on behalf of the Minister of Education in the case against the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are Messrs P J McGrory and Co.
- These solicitors do not act for the Department of Education, nor have they previously acted for that Department. The solicitors' fees will be subject to the approval of the Departmental Solicitor.
- The barristers acting on behalf of the Minister of Education in the case against the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are Mr Michael Lavery QC and Mr John Larkin BL.
- I have no knowledge of either barrister acting previously for the Department of Education.
- The barristers' fees will be subject to the approval of the Departmental Solicitor. The case is listed for 15 December and is predicted to last 1 day.

Legal Advisers and Costs

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) who is the solicitor acting on behalf of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the case against the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, (b) was this solicitor previously registered to act on behalf of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and what is the estimated fee (c) who is the barrister acting on behalf of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety against the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, (d) was this barrister previously registered to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (e) what fee is the barrister charging per day and what is the estimated preparation fee and (f) how long the case is predicted to last. (AQW 912/00)

Mr Durkan: The information requested is as follows:-

- (a) The solicitors acting on behalf of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the case against the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are Messrs Madden and Finucane.
- (b) These solicitors do not act for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, nor have they previously acted for that Department. The solicitors' fees will be subject to the approval of the Departmental Solicitor.
- (c) The barristers acting on behalf of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the case against the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are Mr Seamus Treacy QC and Mr Martin O'Rourke BL.
- (d) I have no knowledge of either barrister acting previously for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.
- (e) The barristers' fees will be subject to the approval of the Departmental Solicitor. The case is listed for 15 December and is predicted to last one day.

Legal Advisers and Costs

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) who is the solicitor acting on behalf of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in the case against them by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, (b) how much is the estimated fee (c) who is the barrister acting on behalf of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in the cases brought by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (d) how much is the barrister charging per day and what is the estimated preparation fee and how (e) long the case is predicted to last. (AQW 913/00)

Mr Durkan: The information requested is as follows:-

- (a) The solicitors acting on behalf of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in the cases against them by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are, respectively, Messrs King and Gowdy and Messrs Rory McShane and Co.
- (b) The solicitors' fees will be subject to the approval of the Departmental Solicitor.
- (c) The barristers acting on behalf of the First Minister are Mr Declan Morgan QC, and Mr Patrick Good BL. The barristers acting on behalf of the Deputy First Minister are Mr Peter Smith QC and Mr Michael Keogh BL.
- (d) The barristers' fees will be subject to the approval of the Departmental Solicitor. The cases are listed for 15 December and are predicted to last one day.

INTERREG III

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his current proposals for funding under INTERREG III. (AQW 925/00)

Mr Durkan: The draft programme proposals for INTERREG III, strand A were drawn up by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) following a comprehensive consultation process. The proposals were approved by the Executive Committee and the North/South Ministerial Council prior to their submission to the European Commission on 22 November, as a basis for negotiations over the next five months. Formal negotiations will begin as soon as the Commission approves the admissibility of the programme proposals. Total funding available for the new programme will be approximately £75 million.

The INTERREG programme will be managed by the SEUPB, which will be involved in the negotiations of the draft programme proposals with the European Commission, and will report regularly to the North/South Ministerial Council. SEUPB will also prepare the programme complement which details the measures in the programme, the financial allocations to those measures and identifies the most appropriate delivery mechanisms to be used to implement the programme. The programme complement will be approved by the joint monitoring committee established to oversee implementation of the programme.

Rate Collection Agency: Review

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has for a review of the Rate Collection Agency. (AQW 1105/00)

Mr Durkan: My Department will shortly start a review of the Rate Collection Agency. Consultants will support the review group, whose membership includes customers

of the Agency and staff representatives. The group will evaluate the organisational options for carrying out the Agency's functions in the future, its performance and the operation of its relationships with the Department of Finance and Personnel. It is planned that the review will be completed by the end of March 2001.

An informal market sounding exercise is also underway to explore how potential suppliers would propose to meet the Agency's future need for an integrated computer system. The emerging findings from this exercise will be considered as part of the review.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Ulster Hospital: Accident and Emergency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients treated at the accident and emergency department at the Ulster Hospital in each of the last three years and how do these figures compare with other accident and emergency departments in Belfast. (AQW 827/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Information on the number of accident and emergency attendances at the Ulster Hospital is detailed in the table below. Comparative figures for accident and emergency departments in other Belfast hospitals are also shown.

	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
Ulster	60,143	68,824	68,661
Belfast City Hospital	53,210	51,956	50,823
Royal Victoria	75,969	77,650	76,805
Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children	28,836	29,606	30,414
Mater Infirmorum	44,950	43,070	45,190
Total	263,108	271,106	271,893

Tá sonraí ar líon na bhfreastal ar an Roinn Timpistí agus Éigeandála ag Otharlann Uladh tugtha sa tábla thíos. Taispeántar figiúirí comparáideacha don Roinn Timpistí agus Éigeandála in otharlanna eile chomh maith.

	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
Otharlann Uladh	60,143	68,824	68,661
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	53,210	51,956	50,823
Otharlann Ríoga Victoria	75,969	77,650	76,805
Otharlann Ríoga Bhéal Feirste do Pháistí Tinne	28,836	29,606	30,414
Otharlann Mater	44,950	43,070	45,190
Iomlán	263,108	271,106	271,893

Budget Increase

Ms Armitage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what percentage of the 7.2% budget increase received by her Department she will allocate to the independent sector. (AQW 850/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department will not be allocating a specific amount of the budget increase to the independent sector, as the purchase of health care provision is the proper domain of health and social services boards. However, the independent sector, as part of the local health and social care community may, according to local needs and priorities, benefit from this improved financial position.

Ní bheidh mo Roinn ag dáileadh suim ar leith den mhéadú buiséid ar an earnáil neamhspleách, mar baineann ceannach sholáthar chúram sláinte leis na Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta. Mar sin féin, thig leis an earnáil neamhspleách, mar chuid den chomhphobal sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta áitiúil, de réir riachtanas agus tosaíochtaí áitiúla, sochar a bhaint as an fheabhas seo sa staid airgeadais.

Fees Paid to Independent Sector

Ms Armitage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how she proposes to agree the fees paid to the independent sector for the provision of nursing and residential care for the elderly for the years 2001/02 and 2002/03 in respect of the minimum care specification. (AQW 851/00)

Ms de Brún: It is the responsibility of health and social services boards to agree with providers the fees to be paid for places in independent sector nursing and residential care homes. The rates are reviewed each year in light of prevailing circumstances and priorities and my department is currently considering, with boards, the approach for 2001/2002.

Is í freagracht na mBord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta na táillí atá le híoc as áiteanna in árais altranaís agus cúraim chónaithe de chuid na hearnála neamhspleáiche a shocrú le soláthraithe. Déantar athbhreithniú ar na rátaí gach bliain de réir na dtosca agus na dtosaíochtaí atá ann ag an am agus tá an cur chuige do 2001/2002 á mhachnamh faoi láthair ag mo Roinn i bpáirt leis na Boird.

Ulster Hospital: Accident and Emergency Waiting Times

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to reduce waiting times at the accident and emergency department at the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 852/00)

Ms de Brún: The Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust has taken some steps recently to improve its accident

and emergency service and waiting times. Within the past month 22 nurses from the Philippines have been appointed to relieve pressures in various departments in the hospital. Two of these are presently working in the accident and emergency department. By the end of January 2001, the trust intends to have at least another six nurses over and above its present establishment in accident and emergency. The minor injuries units set up by the trust a few years ago, in Bangor and Ards community hospitals, with telemedicine links to the Ulster, are continuing to provide a valuable service to patients in those areas and to take some of the pressure off the Ulster's accident and emergency department.

Ghlac Iontaobhas Ospidéal agus Pobail Uladh roinnt céimeanna ar na mallaibh lena seirbhísí agus amanna feithimh taisme agus éigeandála a fheabhsú. Le mí anuas, ceapadh 22 altra ó na Filipíneacha leis an bhrú a laghdú i ranna éagsúla san ospidéal. Faoi láthair tá beirt acu ag obair sa roinn T&É. Faoi dheireadh Mhí Eanáir 2001, tá rún ag an Iontaobhas seisear altra eile ar a laghad, de bhreis ar an líon atá ann anois, a bheith aige sa roinn T&É. Tá seirbhís luachmhar á cur ar fáil go fóill ag na hAonaid Mhionghortuithe a chuir an tIontaobhas ar bun roinnt blianta ó shin in Ospidéal Phobail Bheannchair agus na hArda d'othair sna ceantair sin, le naisc teileleighis le hOspidéal Uladh, agus tá na seirbhísí sin ag baint cuid den bhrú ó Roinn T&É Ospidéal Uladh.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Waiting Times

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if, pursuant to AQW 603/00, she will detail the average waiting time for accident and emergency departments at all hospitals in Northern Ireland. (AQW 853/00)

Ms de Brún: The information is not available in the form requested.

Níl eolas ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh.

Nurses Prescribing Medicines

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her policy on the role of nurses in prescribing medicines. (AQW 881/00)

Ms de Brún: The initiative to extend prescribing rights to nurses was one of the recommendations in the 'Review of Prescribing, Supply and Administration of Medicines' report (the Crown Report) published in 1989. The recommendations in the Crown Report were generally welcomed here and prescribing by nurses was introduced on a phased basis from 1998/99. The final Crown Report published in March 1999 recommended extending prescribing to a wider range of nurses and from an expanded nurse prescribers' formulary.

My Department has recently issued a consultation paper, prepared by the Department of Health in London, to interested parties inviting comments on the proposals to extend nurse prescribing. Comments are required by 15 January 2001 and decisions on the way forward will be taken as soon as possible after that.

Bhí an tionscnamh chun cearta ordaithe oideas a leathnú d'altraí ar na moltaí sa Tuairisc ar an Athbhreithniú ar Ordú, Sholáthar agus Riarachán Cógas (Tuairisc an Dr. Crown) a foilsíodh i 1989. Fearadh fáilte fhorleathan anseo roimh na moltaí i dtuairisc an Dr. Crown agus tugadh ceart d'altraí oidis a ordú ar bhonn céimithe ó 1998/99. Mhol tuairisc dheireanach an Dr. Crown, a foilsíodh i Márta 1999, go leathnófaí cearta ordaithe oideas do réimse níos leithne altraí agus ó Leabhar Foirmli méadaithe d'Altraí Ceadaithe chun Oidís a Ordú.

D'eisigh mo Roinn páipéar comhairliúcháin ar na mallaibh, ullmhaithe ag an Roinn Sláinte i Londain, do pháirtithe leasmhara ag iarraidh orthu a mbarúlacha a nochtadh ar na moltaí chun cearta ordaithe oideas a thabhairt d'altraí a leathnú. Caithfidh barúlacha a bheith istigh roimh 15 Eanáir 2001 agus déanfar socruithe ar an bhealach chun tosaigh chomh luath agus is féidir ina dhiaidh sin.

Long-Term Care

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the financial implications of implementing the findings of the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care. (AQW 882/00)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQO 210/00. Work is continuing on proposals for the provision of long-term care here and I will make a statement when this is completed. An initial bid for additional resources to implement options on long-term care was made within this year's spending review. If a need for further funding arises this will be considered in the context of the next spending review.

Dirim aird an Teachta ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar AQO 210/00. Tá obair ag dul ar aghaidh ar mholtaí maidir le soláthar cúraim fhadtéarmaigh anseo agus déanfaidh mé ráiteas nuair a chuirfear críoch leis an obair seo. Rinneadh tairiscint tosaigh ag iarraidh acmhainní breise le roghanna ar an chúram fadtéarmach a chur i gcrích in Athbhreithniú Caiteachais na bliana seo. Má tharlaíonn go bhfuil gá le tuilleadh maoinithe, déanfar machnamh air sin i gcomhthéacs an chéad Athbhreithnithe Caiteachais eile.

Nurses Authorised to Prescribe Drugs

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many nurses are authorised to prescribe drugs. (AQW 883/00)

Ms de Brún: Nurses working in community trusts, or for GPs as practice nurses who hold the district nurse or health visitor qualification and who have successfully completed an approved nurse prescribing course are legally entitled to prescribe. The number of nurses authorised to prescribe will be 293 by the end of 2000. It is anticipated that an additional 273 nurses will be authorised to prescribe by the end of 2001.

Altraí ag obair in Iontaobhais Phobail nó le liachleachtóirí mar altraí cleachtais a bhfuil cáilíochtaí mar Altra Ceantair nó Chuairteoir Sláinte acu agus a bhfuil cúrsa ceadaithe d'altraí ar oidis a ordú déanta acu atá i dteideal oidis a ordú de réir dlí. 293 an líon altraí a mbeidh údarás acu oidis a ordú faoi dheireadh 2000. Táthar ag dúil go n-údarófar 273 altra sa bhreis le hoidis a ordú faoi dheireadh 2001.

Royal Commission on Long-Term Care

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she intends to implement the findings of the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care in line with the decision of the Scottish Executive. (AQW 884/00)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQO 210/00. It is imperative that any proposals that I may bring to the Executive for changes to long-term care are founded on the needs of older people here. Work is continuing on proposals for the provision of long-term care and I will make a statement when I have completed my consideration.

Dirím aird an Teachta ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar AQO 210/00. Ní mór go bhfuil aon mholtaí a chuirfinn os comhair an Fheidhmeannais maidir le hathruithe sa chúram fadtéarmach bunaithe ar riachtanais daoine níos sine anseo. Tá obair ag dul ar aghaidh i rith an ama ar mholtaí le haghaidh sholáthar cúraim fhadtéarmaigh agus déanfaidh mé ráiteas nuair atá machnamh déanta agam air.

Maternity Services

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what further steps she is taking with regard to maternity services in Belfast in the light of the high court ruling of 29 November 2000. (AQW 907/00)

Ms de Brún: I am considering advice from my legal advisors in assessing the full implications of the recent judicial review and determining what actions need to be taken in the light of the judgement. I expect to make a statement shortly.

In arriving at any conclusions, my continuing concern is to ensure the future of safe and effective maternity services in the interest of women, mothers and babies.

Tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh ar chomhairle ó mo chomhairleoirí dlí ag measúnú impleachtaí uilig an Athbhreithnithe Bhreithniúnaigh agus ag cinneadh cad é na bearta a ba chóir a dhéanamh i dtaca leis an bhreithiúnas. Tá mé ag dúil le ráiteas a dhéanamh gan mhoill.

Is é an cúram is mó a atá agam agus mé ag teacht ar aon chonclúidí a chinntiú go mbeidh seirbhísí máithreachais atá sábháilte, éifeachtach ann sa todhchaí ar mhaithe le mná, máithreacha agus leanaí.

Trusts: Parity

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will (a) confirm that trusts in Great Britain are treated differently to those in Northern Ireland and (b) take steps to ensure parity for all trusts in Northern Ireland. (AQW 914/00)

Ms de Brún: I understand that this question refers to the treatment of the financial deficits of trusts. I can confirm that trusts, here and in England, have to comply with the statutory duty to break even over a rolling three-year period, and in exceptional circumstances, over a five-year period. Where trusts, here and in England, experience financial deficits, they are required to produce a financial recovery plan in order to recover the deficit position. With regard to these matters trusts here are dealt with in the same way as in Great Britain.

All trusts for which my Department has responsibility must comply with the same statutory duties and follow the Departmental recovery plan guidance. I can ensure you that these recovery plans will be evaluated and agreed on a consistent basis, following the same approach, to ensure parity for all trusts.

Tuigim go mbaineann an cheist seo leis an dóigh ar caitheadh le heaspaí airgeadais Iontaobhas. Is féidir liom a dhearbhu go gcaithfidh Iontaobhais, anseo agus i Sasana araon, cloí leis an dualgas reachtúil gan gnóthú ná cailleadh thar thréimse trí bliana as a chéile, agus i gcásanna ar leith, thar thréimhse cúig bliana. Nuair a bhíonn deacrachtaí airgeadais ag Iontaobhais anseo agus i Sasana araon, iarrtar orthu plean téarnaimh airgeadais a sholáthar leis an staid easpa airgeadais a athghabháil. Maidir leis na hábhair seo pléitear le hIontaobhais ar an dóigh chéanna anseo agus sa BM.

Caithfidh na hIontaobhais uile a bhfuil a bhfreagracht ar mo Roinn cloí leis an dualgais reachtúla céanna agus treoir phlean téarnaimh na Roinne a leanúint. Féadaim a dhearbhu duit go ndéanfar meastóireacht agus socrú ar na pleananna téarnaimh seo ar bhonn comhsheasmhach, ag leanúint den chur chuige céanna, le cinntiú go bhfuil cothroime ann do gach Iontaobhas.

Mental Health Care

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline how she is addressing the national service framework for mental health care within Northern Ireland. (AQW 920/00)

Ms de Brún: The national service framework for mental health sets quality standards for England and Wales. My Department is currently reviewing a range of issues for improving the quality of care and treatment within the HPSS. The development of local service frameworks, linked to the Programme for Government and HPSS priorities, is one of the issues under consideration.

Leagann Creatlach na Seirbhíse Náisiúnta don Mheabhairshláinte amach caighdeán cháilíochta do Shasana agus don Bhreatain Bheag. Tá mo Roinn ag déanamh athbhreithniú ar réimse saincheistanna faoi láthair le caighdeán cúraim agus cóireála sa tSláinte agus i Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Pearsanta a fheabhsú. Ar na saincheistanna atá á machnamh tá forbairt chreatlaigh sheirbhíse áitiúla, ceangailte leis an Chlár Rialtais agus le Tosaíochtaí Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Pearsanta.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Private Finance Initiatives

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail (a) current Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) undertaken by his Department (b) his plans for future PFI considerations and (c) if he is satisfied that PFI will in the longer term give value for money. (AQW 848/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren):

(a) Current PFI Projects

- Information Systems/Information Technology (IS/IT) Services – In May 1998, the Training and Employment Agency signed a 10-year PFI contract with ICL (International Computers Limited) for the provision of a range of IS/IT services. This contract is now used to provide IS/IT services to the Department.
- North West Institute of Further and Higher Education – The contract with the private sector contractor, Northwin Limited, was signed in August 1999 and will provide, over 25 years, for 7,500 square metres of accommodation and related services for the North West Institute. The new building will be on the institute's main campus with a target date for occupation of February 2001.

- Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education – The contract with the private sector contractor, Northwin Limited, was signed in July 2000. It will provide a new building on the Millfield Campus to replace the existing Millfield and Ormeau accommodation and will offer, over 25 years, 20,700 square metres of accommodation. The target date for the occupation of the new building is September 2002.

(b) Future Projects

- Omagh and East Tyrone Colleges Project – To provide a new build for Omagh College and a new build at Dungannon for East Tyrone College.
- The scheme, is being taken forward as a single project and is, currently, at outline business case stage. It will go to PFI test if the outline business case is positive and approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel.
- Springvale – The project, is to provide a further education and higher education campus for the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education and the University of Ulster at Springvale in West Belfast. A project board and project team have been established to prepare the outline business case.

(c) Longer Term Value for Money

- This process has in-built mechanisms that provide indicators of whether value for money is achievable in relation to each individual project. The public sector body, as part of its preparatory work, develops an outline business case for pursuing a PFI solution to its requirements. The case includes a fully costed reference project or public sector comparator, which tests whether an affordable investment option exists. Risk assessments of the public sector comparator are undertaken and refined throughout the PFI procurement process to take account of unforeseen changes.

EQUAL

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the criteria in respect of EQUAL and to confirm the number of community and voluntary sector groups who responded to the consultation. (AQW 871/00)

Dr Farren: EQUAL is an EU community initiative designed to test and promote new means of combating all forms of discrimination and inequalities in the workforce affecting the unemployed and those in work. It will be necessary for projects to address an aspect of these issues and that they be undertaken by development partnerships. Such partnerships must be made up of at least two local groups and at least two transnational partners

from within other EU countries or from enlargement countries.

Promoters of projects will be required, at the outset, to identify from the positive outcomes they expect, and to report the results achieved against those targets on a monthly basis.

During June and July this year a written consultation was undertaken of some 150 interested bodies and individuals. Twenty-five replies were from the voluntary and community sector with some of these from umbrella organisations. Three workshops were held to allow special interest groups to outline their views on issues to be addressed by EQUAL. Representatives of community and voluntary sector groups attended these workshops.

Back to Your Future

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment what targets he has set for the 'Back to your Future' campaign.

(AQO 468/00)

Dr Farren: The 'Back to your Future' campaign is the first phase of a campaign to attract experienced people back to Northern Ireland. The experience of a web-based initiative will assist me to set future targets. As 40% of graduates leave Northern Ireland each year there is significant potential for the initiative. Since the launch 14 companies have received a total of 31 job applications.

Basic Skills Strategy

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment what steps he will be taking to implement a basic skills strategy, in light of the recent international adult literacy report, which highlighted levels of adult illiteracy and innumeracy levels in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 465/00)

Dr Farren: I am committed to addressing the problems highlighted in the international adult literacy survey. An important element in this work has been the establishment of the basic skills unit to advise the Department on the development of a set of standards for basic skills; the establishment of a new basic skills curriculum; assessment arrangements corresponding to the new standards; and national standards for tutors and trainers. The unit will also promote research and innovation. Its advice will inform decisions on the most appropriate strategy to be implemented in Northern Ireland.

Adult Learning Facilities

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline the

provision he is making for adult learning facilities in South Down and if he will make a statement.

(AQO 448/00)

Dr Farren: The East Down Institute of Further and Higher Education has five campuses and 32 outreach centres providing a range of vocational and non-vocational training for adults. In addition, planning for provision in South Down is progressing well with East Down Institute and others leading a partnership in the Downpatrick District Council area.

Task Force on Employability

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail his plans to take forward the work of the inter-departmental employability task force.

(AQO 459/00)

Dr Farren: I plan to hold the inaugural meeting of the employability task force, which will comprise representation from Northern Ireland departments, early in the new year. I am in the process of commissioning a scoping study to begin in January. The study, which will review the existing evidence on employability and develop workable definitions of employability, will help inform the work of the task force.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Government Departments: Working Relations

Mr Hay asked the Minister for Regional Development if it is his intention to enter into an agreement with any Government Department in England, Scotland or Wales regarding working relations since devolution.

(AQW 780/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): The Department for Regional Development and the Department of the Environment Transport and the Regions (DETR) have a close working relationship across a wide spectrum of policy issues of common interest. With the advent of devolution it has been considered desirable to place this relationship onto a more formal footing. My Department and the DETR have therefore developed a bi-lateral concordat. The joint document is published today at Westminster and the Assembly. Copies have been placed in the respective libraries.

Traffic Volumes: A4 Route

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) traffic volumes on the A4 route between the end of the M1 motorway and Ballygawley roundabout

in each of the last five years (b) the required level of traffic volume to justify construction of a dual carriageway (c) current proposals for major work schemes to improve the A4 and A5 roads and (d) what other schemes are being considered for possible inclusion in the Road Service's 10 year forward planning schedule. (AQW 812/00)

Mr Campbell:

- (a) The table shows the annual average daily traffic flow in vehicles per day (vpd) on the A4 route between the end of the M1 motorway and Ballygawley roundabout for the period 1995–1999:

Year	Annual Average Daily Traffic(vpd)
1995	11,000
1996	11,500
1997	11,000
1998	11,500
1999	14,000

- (b) If a single carriageway is perceived to be giving less than an acceptable level of service in journey times, reliability, road safety etc, Roads Service will identify and assess options for improving the level of service taking into account factors such as traffic volumes, traffic mix and road alignment. The options may include dualling. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has concluded that a typical single carriageway trunk road will operate satisfactorily with only occasional peak period congestion with a traffic flow of up to approximately 18,000 vehicles per day.
- (c) The following major works schemes on the A4 and A5 routes are currently included in the Roads Service major works preparation pool:
- A4 junction improvement at Eglisli;
 - A4 climbing lane at Cabragh;
 - A5 Strabane bypass (Stage 2);
 - A5 Newtown Stewart bypass; and
 - A5 Omagh throughpass.
- (d) The following schemes on the A4 and A5 routes are being considered for possible inclusion in the Roads Service 10-year forward planning schedule:
- A4 additional lane at Lurgacullion;
 - A4 climbing lane at Killeeshill;
 - A4 road realignment between Augher and Annaghilla;
 - A4 improvement of overtaking opportunities between Augher and Enniskillen;
 - A4 Enniskillen southern bypass;
 - A5 road realignment at Tullyvar;
 - A5 climbing lane at Castletown;
 - A5 additional lane at Folk Park, Omagh;

- A5 road realignment between Grange and Drumgauty;
- A5 climbing lane at Gortaclare;
- A5 climbing lane at Blackhill;
- A5 climbing lane at Ballygawley; and
- A5 Strabane bypass stage 3.

Wastewater Treatment Works, Omagh

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development if, following his visit to Omagh on 27 September to discuss the concerns surrounding the wastewater treatment works at Hunter Crescent, he will outline his plans to address this situation and detail a timetable for action. (AQW 819/00)

Mr Campbell: I was pleased to have had the opportunity to meet with the council and the local residents groups, and to hear at first hand their concerns about the siting of the proposed new wastewater treatment works,

Water Service is giving detailed consideration to the representations made and is presently carrying out further detailed costings and land valuations on the council's preferred site. Consultants, commissioned by Water Service, have been liaising closely with council officials on this aspect.

I wish to consider all of the issues very carefully, in view of the strong feeling expressed by the council and residents about the siting of the works. I hope to be in a position to make an announcement next month on the way ahead.

Road Improvements: A8 Route

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline a time frame for the implementation of the package of road improvements on the A8 Belfast to Larne road between Ballyearl and Kilwaughter. (AQW 824/00)

Mr Campbell: The implementation programme for this package of road improvements is subject to the successful completion of the statutory procedures and to the availability of funding. In this context and on the assumption that there are no major objections to the statutory procedures, work on the first element of the package — the proposed roundabouts at Antiville and Millbrook — is currently scheduled to commence in the Autumn 2001. Work on the other elements will commence in 2002/03.

A8 Trans-European Network

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will give his assessment of the

importance to the Northern Ireland economy of the A8 trans European network between Belfast and Larne and if he will ensure that this route will form an integral part of the 10-year regional transportation strategy.

(AQW 825/00)

Mr Campbell: The A8 Belfast to Larne road links Northern Ireland to external markets in Great Britain and the rest of Europe. As such, it is vital to the local economy where 99% of freight is carried by roads. In recognition of its economic importance, the Department had included in its major works preparation pool a package of measures totalling some £12 million for improvements along the route.

The A8 is part of the upper tier of regionally important routes for rail and road traffic. I can confirm that the regional transportation strategy will reflect the role that these routes play in supporting and developing the Northern Ireland economy.

Road Classification

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the criteria applicable to designation of road classification (a) “A” (b) “B” (c) “C” and (d) “unclassified” roads in Northern Ireland. (AQW 838/00)

Mr Campbell: Road classification dates back a very considerable time — pre-local government reorganisation — and its use today is limited to route identification. Any new road apart from a motorway would be classified on the basis of the comparable route classification in the area.

Roads Service have been unable to find any historic record of how the classification system was determined originally, but it has no relevance to current funding allocations.

Salmon and Eel Migration

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development what contact he has had with the Minister of the Environment to ensure that salmon and eel migration patterns will be given due consideration during the construction of the millennium foot and cycle bridge across the River Bann. (AQW 844/00)

Mr Campbell: Roads Service has informed me that the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment was consulted during the design stage of the project. In particular the migration patterns of salmon and eels were discussed. It was agreed that no excavation works should be carried out between March and August in order to avoid the migration periods. A draft marine construction licence to this effect was issued on 16 December 1999 by the water quality branch of the Environment and Heritage Service. This was followed by the issue of the marine construction licence on 1 November 2000.

The scheme began on 13 November 2000 and work on the river piers will begin in late December 2000 or early January 2001. All river works are due to be completed before the end of February 2001.

Importance of A26 Road

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the importance to the economic and tourist potential of the Coleraine and east Londonderry areas of the A26 road and rail network between Belfast and Coleraine and if he will ensure that this route will be included in the Road Service’s 10-year forward planning schedule.

(AQW 845/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department fully appreciates that efficient transport links between Belfast and Coleraine are vital to the economic prosperity of the areas in question. The importance of the route is recognised by its designation as a key transport corridor in the Department’s draft regional strategic framework. I can confirm that a number of schemes on the A26 are currently being assessed for possible inclusion in the Roads Service 10-year forward planning schedule.

Traffic Volumes B82/B72

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the most recent data available for traffic volumes on the B82/B72 — Enniskillen to Victoria Bridge route by vehicle type. (AQW 866/00)

Mr Campbell: The table shows average daily traffic flows in vehicles per days (vpd) on sections of the B82/B72 route during 1997 and 1998:

Road	1997	1998
B82 Enniskillen to Kesh (north of Trory junction)	5,030 vpd (9% HGV)	5,018 vpd (9% HGV)
B72 Victoria Bridge to Castlederg (west of Victoria Bridge)	2,600 vpd (12% HGV)	2,412 vpd (13% HGV)

The percentage of heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) included in the daily traffic flows is shown in brackets in the table. This is the only information on vehicle types available to Roads Service for these roads.

Road Criteria: B82/B72 Route

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development what proportion of the B82/B72 — Enniskillen to Victoria Bridge route — meets “A” road criteria. (AQW 867/00)

Mr Campbell: The road classification system in Northern Ireland was inherited by Roads Service in 1973 following local government reorganisation. Roads Service

has no records, however, of the criteria formerly used to classify roads and the classifications remaining in use today are largely for route identification purposes. As such, it is not possible to determine what proportion of the B82/B72 route would have met the old "A" class criteria.

Low Water Pressure in Plumbridge

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development if he is aware of a lack of water pressure supply to the Dergbrough Road area, Plumbridge, and to outline his plans to address the situation. (AQW 868/00)

Mr Campbell: Water Service is not currently aware of any problems with water pressure in the Dergbrough Road area of Plumbridge. Only two complaints about water pressure in the area have been received in the past few years and both were satisfactorily resolved. However, investigations are continuing and I will write to the Member with the outcome.

Damaged Bridges: Numbers 181 and 1369

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development when he became aware of infrastructural damage to bridge number 181, on the C677A, and bridge number 1369, on the B50. (AQW 869/00)

Mr Campbell: I assume that the question relates to bridges 60181 and 61369 on the above routes.

My Department's Roads Service inspected the bridges in question in June 1999 as part of its general bridge inspection programme. Defects to the parapet walls on both bridges were identified, otherwise the bridges were found to be in good structural condition.

Damaged Bridges: Numbers 181 and 1369

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail arrangements for repair of infrastructural damage to bridge number 181, on the C677A, and bridge number 1369 on the B50. (AQW 870/00)

Mr Campbell: I assume that the question relates to bridges 60181 and 61369 on the above routes.

Repair work to the parapet walls on both bridges will be carried out as part of a larger scheme to replace a twin bridge culvert in Killen on the B72 Killen to Castlederg road. This work is programmed to commence in February 2001.

Mains Water Supply: Additional Properties Connected

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of additional properties that

have been connected to mains water supply, by constituency, as a result of the increase in financial allowance from £2,900 to £5,000 per property. (AQW 889/00)

Mr Campbell: The reasonable cost allowance for connection of existing properties to the public water supply was increased from £2,900 to £5,000 on 4 May 2000. As a result of this increase 54 additional properties have now been connected. Water Service records of these properties are held on a district council basis and are summarised below.

District Council	No of Properties
Armagh	2
Newry and Mourne	2
Limavady	4
Strabane	1
Omagh	11
Fermanagh	3
Antrim	7
Ballymena	6
Magherafelt	9
Coleraine	3
Moyle	3
Ballymoney	3

Mains Water Supply: Requests for Connection Refused

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, by constituency, the number of requests for connection to mains water supply that have been refused on the basis of finance since 1 January 2000.

(AQW 890/00)

Mr Campbell: Since 1 January 2000, applications to connect 49 existing properties to the public water supply have been refused as the costs involved were in excess of the reasonable cost allowance. Water Service records of these properties are held on a district council basis and are summarised below.

District Council	No of Properties
Banbridge	3
Limavady	4
Derry	3
Strabane	5
Dungannon	4
Omagh	3
Ballymena	8
Magherafelt	5
Moyle	3
Larne	11

Applications for a further 26 properties are currently being considered.

Mains Water Supply: Properties Without Access

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, by constituency, the estimated number of properties not having access to mains water supplies.

(AQW 891/00)

Mr Campbell: The information requested is not available on a constituency basis. Based mainly on census information, Water Service estimates that over 98.5% of households are connected to the public water supply. Approximately 6,000 households are not connected.

Water Service is currently engaged in a study to identify how many properties are not connected in the Omagh District Council area. This study should enable a more accurate figure to be determined for the total number of properties across Northern Ireland that are not connected.

Westlink: Traffic Flow

Mr McNamee asked the Minister for Regional Development what information Roads Service has on traffic flow figures on the Westlink in terms of volume, origin of journey and destination.

(AQW 894/00)

Mr Campbell: Traffic flows are monitored on the M1 /Westlink corridor at a number of locations using automatic traffic counters. The weekday daily traffic flow — two-way — on the Westlink, between the Broadway and Grosvenor Road junctions, is currently in the region of 63,000 vehicles and the two-way peak hour flow is up to 4,500 vehicles.

Roads Service's data on travel patterns is based on information on the M1 close to Westlink. It provides details, in percentage terms, of inbound and outbound traffic in terms of origin and destination during the morning and evening peak periods. For illustrative purposes, this information indicates that over 50% of all journeys, approaching Belfast from the south in the morning peak, originate from the area towards the west of the province, almost 25% originate from the A1 corridor — Banbridge, Newry and beyond — to the south. Approximately 27% of all journeys in the morning peak have a destination of the city centre, while almost 15% terminate in the harbour/docks area.

Transport Investment: Rural Regeneration

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment on the impact on rural regeneration of transport investment.

(AQW 903/00)

Mr Campbell: A key aim of the regional development strategy is to guide future development in ways that

promote a balanced and equitable pattern of sustainable regeneration across Northern Ireland. To facilitate this, the strategy identifies a new core strategic transport network. This network provides the skeletal framework for the future development of the whole region connecting all the main centres of economic and social activity. The enhancement of the strategic network will play a fundamental part in strengthening the attractiveness of rural towns as centres for regeneration and related investment and services for their wider rural communities.

In addition to improving the accessibility of rural settlements the strategy also recommends examining initiatives to develop rural transport services to raise the quality of rural bus connections and partnerships between community transport and public transport providers especially for disadvantaged remoter areas.

The regional transportation strategy will assess the consequences of adopting alternative transport strategies with differing levels of investment. The strategy will include an assessment of the broad impacts on rural areas.

Already the Department's rural transport fund is supporting improvements to public transport in rural areas. The objective of the fund is to reduce social exclusion by improving transport opportunities for people with reduced mobility. Grant aid has been provided to Ulsterbus for the purchase of 10 new minibuses for use in rural areas and the fund is currently subsidising services on 28 new routes operated by Ulsterbus. With assistance from the fund, 12 rural community transport partnerships, located across Northern Ireland, are operating services using 20 fully accessible minibuses, provided by the Department. Proposals submitted by another five partnerships are being examined by the Department.

Road Repairs: Backlog

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to address the backlog of road repairs.

(AQW 904/00)

Mr Campbell: I am very conscious that I have inherited a significant road maintenance backlog and that existing levels of funding fall far short of what is required. This has been confirmed by the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report on structural maintenance. My Department has only 50% of the funds necessary to maintain the roads and a backlog of £100 million. The structural integrity of the road network is one of my top departmental priorities and I will continue to press for additional funding for road maintenance at every opportunity.

Roads Service Major Works

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail those schemes in the Roads Service major

works preparation pool that will not commence in order of priority due to a shortfall in funding. (AQW 919/00)

Mr Campbell: My statement on 15 November 2000 about the availability of funding for major road schemes was simply to alert the public that although the draft Budget had proposed sufficient resources for such schemes in the financial year 2001/02, the schemes would require certainty of funding to be completed in the subsequent two years. It would appear from the indicative budgets for the following two years that some schemes may have to be deferred. I can assure you, however, that my Department's Roads Service is continuing to progress the schemes included in the major works preparation pool through their necessary statutory processes. The order in which schemes will be admitted to the construction programme will be dependent on their relative priorities and the funding available at the time the statutory processes are completed. At this stage, it is not possible to identify the specific schemes that might have to be deferred if the funding issue is not resolved.

Carrickfergus Sewerage System Upgrade

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to upgrade the sewer system in the Carrickfergus and Whitehead areas. (AQW 923/00)

Mr Campbell: Water Service is progressing a programme of 105 drainage area studies across Northern Ireland, to determine the extent and cost of improvements to the sewerage network in order to cope with future demands on the system, reduce the risk of flooding, and meet environmental objectives.

A drainage area study of the Carrickfergus sewerage system was completed recently and the proposals are presently being discussed with the Environment and Heritage Service, whose consent is required for discharges from the system to local watercourses and Belfast Lough. A drainage area study of the Whitehead sewerage system is programmed to commence in March 2001 and is expected to be completed by October 2002.

Water Service has to prioritise its capital investment plans to meet its statutory duties and increasing environmental standards arising mainly from EU Directives. Given current funding levels and priorities, it is unlikely that the general upgrading of the sewerage network in the Carrickfergus and Whitehead areas can start before 2006.

Water Service has, however, commissioned consultants to investigate areas, which are susceptible to flooding, to determine if cost-effective interim solutions are possible in advance of any general network upgrading. Seven areas in Carrickfergus and three within Whitehead are covered by the investigation. The consultants are expected to report by April 2001 and it is intended that any solutions identified will be implemented by the end of 2003.

City-Vitality-Sustainability (CIVITAS)

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to make application for funding via the European Commission's "CIVITAS" (City-Vitality-Sustainability) programme. (AQW 926/00)

Mr Campbell: My officials are aware of this new initiative and are currently investigating the opportunities it presents and whether there is scope for the Northern Ireland transport sector to apply for funding. I understand that any city or city region wishing to participate in the initiative is required to commit itself to implementing packages of integrated measures, possibly including access restrictions for polluting vehicles, charging for urban roads, encouraging new types of mobility, and promoting clean and efficient urban public transport. Any proposed package must be capable of achieving a significant change in modal split and in tackling congestion across the whole city.

This is all entirely appropriate to my Department's transportation vision of achieving "a modern, sustainable, safe transport system which benefits society, the regional economy and the environment and which actively contributes to social inclusion and everyone's quality of life". It appears to link with the work already being done to develop a ten-year regional transport strategy for Northern Ireland. Any proposals are required to contain clear evidence of political consensus and support. Selected projects will receive 35% EU funding of the allowable costs, which are clearly linked to the proposed activities, and additional to normal investments and operations. Further investigations will determine whether this initiative is worth pursuing.

Concession Road, Cullaville, Co Armagh

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to improve road safety along Concession Road, Cullaville, Co Armagh. (AQO 514/00)

Mr Campbell: As this is a matter for the Department for Regional Development, your question has been forwarded to me for reply.

My Department's Roads Service proposes to carry out a combined traffic calming/accident remedial scheme along Concession Road, Cullaville. The proposed scheme will include gateway features, carriageway markings and central hatching which will promote reduced vehicular speeds along Concession Road and will also improve junction safety. I understand that preliminary design of the scheme is nearing completion and consultation with elected representatives and local residents is programmed to commence in the near future. The scheme is programmed for 2001/02.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Disabled Adaptations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if he will consider changing the system for those awaiting disabled adaptations and to prioritise those in most need. (AQW 820/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): Yes. A fundamental review of the adaptations service is currently being undertaken by the Housing Executive and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. A preliminary report of the review recommends a number of changes to the system and these are currently under consideration.

Housing Executive Unoccupied Dwellings

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of unoccupied Housing Executive dwellings by housing district in the Greater Belfast area. (AQW 837/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive whose chief executive has advised me that that the information requested is set out in the attached table. It provides the number of vacant dwellings in each Housing Executive district in the Greater Belfast area by reason for vacancy together with a brief synopsis of why the dwellings are vacant. For the purpose of this analysis, Greater Belfast includes all Belfast districts together with the districts at Newtownabbey 1 and 2, Castlereagh and Lisburn Dairy Farm, ie, Twinbrook and Poleglass.

Awaiting re-let

These properties are normally only vacant for a short period of time following the termination of the previous tenancy and are either in the process of being allocated

or are undergoing urgent or minor change of tenancy repairs.

Major Change of Tenancy Repairs

These dwellings are in need of major repairs following the termination of the previous tenancies. The repairs will usually be completed within four to six weeks

Improvement Schemes

Most of these dwellings are currently undergoing major improvement works or are included in schemes, which are about to go on site. The properties are usually vacant for a short period only, prior to the commencement of the works. A smaller number have been earmarked for schemes not due to go on site in the immediate future.

Used for Decanting

These properties are being used to support current improvement schemes by enabling tenants to be temporarily rehoused while works are being carried out.

For Sale

These properties have been placed on market for sale because it has not been possible to let them.

Used by the Security Forces

These are flats that have been secured to facilitate the security forces in the block situated at Divis Tower: Belfast 3.

Difficult to let — normally vacant less than six months. Unlettable/Blocked Up — Normally vacant “A” months

Most of these properties are located in areas with letting difficulties, due to lack of demand, or areas where housing need has been met: those categorised as “unlettable” have been blocked up either to prevent vandalism or as a result of being vandalised.

Unoccupied reason	Housing Executive Districts											
	Belfast 1	Belfast 2	Belfast 3	Belfast 4	Belfast 5	Belfast 6	Belfast 7	T'brook/ Poleglass	C'reagh	N'abbey 1	N'abbey 2	Totals
Awaiting relet	3	20	1	12	9	7	0	1	23	0	5	81
Major COT repairs	9	38	0	10	35	7	65	0	15	0	8	187
Improvement schemes	26	44	10	51	15	15	6	22	19	28	12	248
Used for decanting	3	13	0	0	3	7	3	1	44	18	33	125
For sale	0	11	24	8	3	1	34	0	81	4	0	166
Used by security forces	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
Difficult to let	8	9	0	12	67	8	0	0	59	22	16	201
Unlettable/ blocked up	0	13	0	101	16	127	27	0	38	0	7	329
Pending demolition	10	465	27	212	481	178	30	0	0	80	12	1,495
Totals	59	613	72	406	629	350	165	24	279	152	93	2,842

Essential Travel Costs

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development if he will provide an allowance to those in receipt of income support in rural areas to take account of the essential travel costs that they incur and if he will make a statement. (AQW 854/00)

Mr Morrow: Income support is an income-related benefit intended to help people whose resources are insufficient to meet their daily living expenses. There are no separate amounts for specific items of expenditure, such as travelling expenses included in income support rates. People are free to choose for themselves how they wish to spend their benefit as their individual circumstances require.

For anyone who is getting income support, help with travel costs may be available in certain circumstances, such as attending hospital for treatment or visiting a relative in hospital or residential home. There are no plans to introduce a separate allowance to those in receipt of income support in rural areas to cover travel costs.

Winter Fuel Payment

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Social Development if he has any plans to include people with disabilities in the winter fuel payment scheme. (AQW 855/00)

Mr Morrow: Winter fuel payments are paid to older people who are most at risk from the effects of cold weather. Disabled people who satisfy the qualifying conditions are already included in the scheme. The scheme has been extended this year to include both men and women aged 60 and over and the need to be in receipt of a qualifying benefit has been removed. There are no plans to extend the scheme further.

Disabled people can already receive disability benefits, and the disability premium in income-related benefits, in recognition of their extra costs. Also, cold weather payments are made to vulnerable groups, including people who get disability premium in their income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance regardless of age, when there is severe weather in their area.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Social Development if, in relation to disability living allowance (DLA), he will detail (a) the total number of applications which were made in each month since April 1998 (b) the total number of appeals which were lodged in each month since April 1998 (c) the average length of time taken to process an application in the period since April 1998 (d) the average length of time taken to process appeals against decisions in relation to applications in the period

since April 1998 (e) how many appeals were (i) successful, (ii) unsuccessful and (iii) outstanding, for each month since April 1998 (f) the average estimated cost of processing an appeal and (g) if he will review arrangements relating to the appeals procedure with a view to improving the service for applicants. (AQW 856/00)

Mr Morrow: The total number of applications for disability living allowance, appeals lodged, in each month since April 1998, and the respective average clearance times are outlined in Table 1 attached.

The number of appeals that were successful, unsuccessful and outstanding for each month since April 1998 are shown in Table 2 attached.

The average direct cost of processing a disability living allowance appeal is approximately £275 per case, based on the number of cases cleared in the 1999/00 year. The cost of obtaining the indirect costs would be disproportionately high.

In order to reduce the backlog of disability living allowance appeals, the Social Security Agency have already put in place 19 additional staff, and a further 10 staff are just finishing their training. In addition, overtime working has been undertaken. I understand that the President of the Appeals Service is also making arrangements for the appointment of additional appeal panel members. It is anticipated that these measures will facilitate a significant improvement in the service and a reduction in the backlog of disability living allowance appeals.

TABLE 1: THE NUMBER OF DLA APPLICATIONS AND APPEALS RECEIVED, AND THE AVERAGE CLEARANCE TIMES IN EACH MONTH SINCE APRIL 1998

Month	New Claims		Appeals	
	Number Received	Average Clearance Time in Days	Number Received	Average Clearance Time in Days
Apr 1998	1688	22	185	41
May 1998	1649	40	177	94
June 1998	2174	45	238	86
Jul 1998	1875	51	259	88
Aug 1998	1721	46	154	82
Sep 1998	2134	Not available	208	Not available
Oct 1998	2198	Not available	205	Not available
Nov 1998	2212	55	179	82
Dec 1998	1551	35	149	Not available
Jan 1999	1911	57	208	86
Feb 1999	1921	55	189	83
Mar 1999	2448	Not available	203	Not available

Month	New Claims		Appeals	
	Number Received	Average Clearance Time in Days	Number Received	Average Clearance Time in Days
Apr 1999	2014	52	171	89
May 1999	2147	53	171	77
Jun 1999	2263	Not available	181	Not available
Jul 1999	1636	50	97	84
Aug 1999	1739	40	134	94
Sep 1999	2120	56	158	91
Oct 1999	2153	60	121	92
Nov 1999	2205	Not available	106	Not available
Dec 1999	1371	76	145	129
Jan 2000	1559	59	170	108
Feb 2000	2064	Not available	261	Not available
Mar 2000	2343	60	381	96
Apr 2000	1787	55	427	105
May 2000	1977	42	444	120
Jun 2000	2044	46	250	128
Jul 2000	1432	Not available	109	Not available
Aug 2000	1665	56	888	149
Sep 2000	1861	Not available	388	Not available
Oct 2000	2149	60	504	169

TABLE 2: THE NUMBER OF DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE APPEALS WHICH WERE SUCCESSFUL, UNSUCCESSFUL AND OUTSTANDING, IN EACH MONTH SINCE APRIL 1998.

DLA Appeals			
Month	Number Successful	Number Unsuccessful	Number Outstanding
Apr 1998	85	121	920
May 1998	96	139	841
Jun 1998	105	124	823
Jul 1998	88	108	816
Aug 1998	63	82	784
Sep 1998	81	117	777
Oct 1998	82	138	718
Nov 1998	103	120	657
Dec 1998	56	87	637
Jan 1999	58	105	643
Feb 1999	57	92	635
Mar 1999	68	124	627
Apr 1999	58	70	642

DLA Appeals			
Month	Number Successful	Number Unsuccessful	Number Outstanding
May 1999	52	82	660
Jun 1999	64	90	647
Jul 1999	61	87	601
Aug 1999	43	72	618
Sep 1999	47	66	636
Oct 1999	55	66	695
Nov 1999	60	87	697
Dec 1999	40	53	737
Jan 2000	32	56	1159
Feb 2000	44	92	1530
Mar 2000	34	100	1903
Apr 2000	40	122	2086
May 2000	35	163	2548
Jun 2000	44	156	2720
Jul 2000	25	94	3012
Aug 2000	53	150	3180
Sep 2000	47	148	3606
Oct 2000	53	230	3776

Community Economic Regeneration Schemes

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Social Development to consider the conversion of the community economic regeneration schemes (CERS) loans into grants, to stimulate the development of the recipient organisations. (AQW 874/00)

Mr Morrow: My predecessor, Nigel Dodds, MLA, approved the transfer of the community economic regeneration scheme (CERS) loan book to the Ulster Community Investment Trust (UCIT) on 19 June 2000. UCIT has capital resources and wide-ranging experience in the community, business and banking fields. Its aim will be to apply these assets to the future development of community economic development organisations including those with loans obtained under CERS.

Community Economic Regeneration Schemes

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Social Development, if he will recommend that community economic regeneration schemes (CERS) loans be transferred to the Ulster Community Investment Trust. (AQW 875/00)

Mr Morrow: My predecessor approved the transfer of the Department's share of the community economic regeneration scheme (CERS) loan book, and that of its sister scheme, the community regeneration and improvement special programme (CRISP) to the Ulster Community Investment Trust on 19 June 2000.

Community Economic Regeneration Schemes

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Social Development if he is aware that two of the five community economic regeneration schemes (CERS) are located in North Belfast, namely the Ashton Centre and the Wolfhill Centre, and that any transfer of their outstanding loans to the Ulster Community Investment Trust would be damaging to their future development. (AQW 876/00)

Mr Morrow: There were originally five CERS schemes in Belfast but two have now repaid their loan leaving three schemes where the loans are to be transferred to the Ulster Community Investment Trust (UCIT). Throughout Northern Ireland, there are 12 CERS schemes and 30 schemes under the community regeneration and improvement special programme, all with similar funding arrangements to the Wolfhill and Ashton Centres, making a total of 42 schemes whose loans will be transferred to UCIT. There is no reason to assume that these new arrangements will be detrimental to the organisations concerned. On the contrary, the aim of UCIT is to invest in community economic development projects such as Wolfhill and Ashton, to create jobs, income and wealth in these communities. The capital resources and the wealth of community, banking and business experience which UCIT will bring to bear should provide a major boost to their development.

Housing Executive Owned Homes

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to (a) detail the number of homes currently in Housing Executive ownership (b) give a breakdown of the type of dwelling and (c) detail the total revenue from these rentals. (AQW 922/00)

Mr Morrow:

- (a) There are currently 124,361 houses in Housing Executive ownership.
- (b) The following is a breakdown by dwelling type:-

House Type	Number
Detached House	110
Semi-detached	10,512
Terraced House	65,864
Detached bungalow	925
Semi-detached bungalow	8,151
Terrace bungalow	13,209
Flat	23,281
Maisonette	2,309
Total	124,361

- (c) Gross collectable income from these dwellings is estimated to be £245.7m for 2000/01

Housing Executive Unoccupied Homes

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive homes which are at present unoccupied and how many people are currently regarded as homeless.

(AQW 924/00)

Mr Morrow: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has advised me that:

- (a) the number of unoccupied homes is 6,204, which includes 4,227 houses that are undergoing major works or are awaiting demolition. The remaining houses are in interface properties or areas where there is no demand
- (b) the number of people on the waiting list, at the end of October 2000, who are regarded as homeless, is 3,472.

Additional Community Development Workers

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to identify areas where there is a lack of community sector infrastructure and to outline his plans to provide additional community development workers in areas where there is a shortfall. (AQO 483/00)

Mr Morrow: I am determined to ensure that support is made available to help those areas of social need where community infrastructure is weakest. For that reason, the Department is developing a special measure to address areas of weak community infrastructure as part of the negotiations on the new Peace II Programme.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES)

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Social Development to indicate when his deliberations on the future development of the domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES) will be concluded and if he will make a statement. (AQO 454/00)

Mr Morrow: I would anticipate reaching a final decision on the future development of the domestic energy efficiency scheme towards the end of February 2001 and making a statement shortly thereafter on the details of the new initiative, which will be the main policy for tackling fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 5 January 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Government Services: Electronic Access

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline what progress has been made in achieving Government targets for electronic access to Government services. (AQW 946/00)

Reply: In March 2000 the Prime Minister announced revised targets for the electronic delivery of Government services. Twenty-five per cent of all services are to be capable of being delivered electronically by 2002 and 100% by 2005. The Prime Minister's targets apply to all Whitehall Departments, but each of the devolved Administrations has the latitude to develop its own targets for electronic service delivery.

In the draft Programme for Government, the Executive have given an undertaking to set local targets for electronic service delivery and to monitor progress. Our officials, in consultation with the Northern Ireland Departments, have been considering how appropriate the Whitehall targets are to Northern Ireland. In the new year, the Executive will discuss local targets and a proposed monitoring regime.

We are committed to the principle that public services in Northern Ireland should progress no less speedily than other parts of the UK in delivering Government services electronically.

Mobile Investment

Mr Davis asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the economic policy in place to attract increased mobile investment.

(AQO 519/00)

Reply: The key aim of our inward investment policy must be to attract high quality inward investment which provides not only good quality jobs but also brings

benefits to the wider economy. It can do that through introducing new technologies, bringing in other skills and developing markets for local suppliers.

The IDB is directly responsible for the attraction of inward investment. It does this by marketing Northern Ireland and offering a wide range of financial incentives. Its work will be examined as part of the wider review that Sir Reg Empey is undertaking in light of what has been agreed within the Programme for Government and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee's findings from its inquiry on 'Strategy 2010'.

It is recognised increasingly that the wider economic environment plays an important role in attracting inward investment. This includes the provision of a well-educated and flexible workforce; a solid research and development base; positive attitudes to risk and innovation; efficient planning procedures, and a good physical infrastructure. The need to create these wider conditions for economic growth is a key element in the draft Programme for Government. Many Departments play an important role in this work, and it is essential that they work together within an agreed strategy.

Executive Committee: Drug Strategy

Mr Armstrong asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if any reports from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety were received on the Executive Committee's drugs strategy.

(AQO 516/00)

Reply: The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has submitted a report setting out the current position on the implementation of the Northern Ireland drugs strategy and proposals for taking forward co-operation on drugs issues within the context of the British-Irish Council.

International Fund for Ireland

Mr McGrady asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister when the most recent liaison meeting took place between the chairman and officials of the IFI and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and what issues were discussed.

(AQO 489/00)

Reply: The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has not as yet had a formal liaison meeting with the chairman and officials of the IFI.

Arrangements were made for a meeting. However, due to diary pressures it had to be postponed.

We have met the chairman, Willie McCarter, on a number of occasions, involving the public announcement of fund assisted projects, many of which have been assisted in partnership with Government. The most recent occasion

was on 17 October 2000 at the launch of a community-led project to regenerate the village of Moygashel.

Fair Employment

Mr Neeson asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if there are plans to amend the fair employment monitoring criteria to reflect the wider range of identities in Northern Ireland. (AQO 509/00)

Reply: There are no plans at present to amend the fair employment monitoring criteria. These derive from the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and the Fair Employment (Monitoring) Regulations made under that Order, which makes provision for recording the community background of employees. The issue of whether other characteristics of the workforce should be monitored is likely to be addressed in the consultation on the single equality Bill, which will be initiated next spring.

Human Rights

Mr Poots asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what action is being taken in relation to human rights abuses by paramilitary organisations. (AQO 496/00)

Reply: We condemn all so-called punishment attacks, which, as recent research has shown, are still all too prevalent, at a terrible cost to individuals, families and communities.

There is no place for punishment attacks in a civilised society. There is no acceptable alternative to an accountable police service and a criminal justice system which have the support and confidence of everyone they serve.

While the issues of criminal justice and policing are currently reserved matters, this Administration will do all it can to tackle the underlying social problems that can contribute to crime and to ensure that the needs of victims of violence are met through high-quality, effective services. Many organisations are involved on the ground in attempting to address these issues, and the Executive's commitment to victims is outlined in the draft Programme for Government.

Freedom of Information

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail progress on a Freedom of Information Act for Northern Ireland. (AQO 508/00)

Reply: The Freedom of Information Act, which received Royal Assent on 30 November 2000, extends to Northern Ireland and the intention is that this legislation will be brought into force in Northern Ireland at the same time as in England and Wales.

Freedom of information is a transferred matter and falls within the Assembly's competence to legislate. The reason for extending the Freedom of Information Bill to Northern Ireland is to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged in relation to freedom of information legislation here.

However, the Executive when agreeing that the Freedom of Information Bill should extend to Northern Ireland, decided that further consultation should be carried out on the need or desirability of bringing forward further separate legislation here. It is proposed that a consultation paper will be issued next year to assess the need for dedicated legislation in this jurisdiction.

British-Irish Council

Ms Hanna asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the date, venue and agenda of the next British-Irish Council meeting.

(AQO 502/00)

Reply: The next British-Irish Council meeting will be of the transport sector, which is scheduled for 19 December 2000, in Belfast. The agenda is:

1. Opening remarks
2. Adoption of outline work programme
3. Strategic transport planning
4. Road and rail safety
5. Date of next meeting
6. Draft joint communiqué

Civic Forum

Mr Close asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister why the Civic Forum has not met since October. (AQO 524/00)

Reply: The frequency and timing of meetings of the Civic Forum is the responsibility of the Forum itself rather than of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. We understand that the Civic Forum plans to meet every two months in plenary format. The second such meeting was held on Wednesday, 6 December 2000 in the Burnavon Theatre, Cookstown.

Decommissioning

Mr McFarland asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail any reports it has received on the re-engagement of the Provisional IRA with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. (AQO 528/00)

Reply: The most recent report of the Independent International Commission for Decommissioning to the British and Irish Governments was dated 26th October 2000.

Human Rights Conference

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on recent participation in the conference on human rights.

(AQO 500/00)

Reply: A major ground-breaking conference entitled Protecting and Developing Human Rights on the Island of Ireland in an International Context was held in Dublin Castle on 9 December and 10 December. It brought together for the first time, representatives of: the Governments of Northern Ireland and the Republic; the Northern Ireland Office; the two Human Rights Commissions; the Northern Ireland Equality Commission; the Republic's Equality Authority; leading academics; members of the legal profession; and a broad range of non-Government organisations to discuss key human rights issues.

The junior Ministers, Dennis Haughey and Dermot Nesbitt, represented the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and they addressed the conference. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Ms de Brún, also attended. The conference was highly successful. It has helped to foster closer working relationships between Governments, statutory authorities and social partners, and will pave the way for further valuable dialogue on human rights matters of mutual interest.

Europe: Marketing of Northern Ireland

Mr Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail what plans are in place to stimulate the marketing of Northern Ireland in Europe.

(AQO 498/00)

Reply: At the end of January, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will accompany Sir Reg Empey, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, on a European marketing campaign. It is planned that visits will be made to Paris, Düsseldorf and Berlin.

An office of the Executive will be opened in Brussels in March of next year and staff from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the IDB will be based there. Currently, the IDB and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board actively promote Northern Ireland as an inward investment location and tourist destination through their respective offices in Düsseldorf and Frankfurt. Work is currently underway to develop a co-ordinated and cohesive approach to Europe for the Executive as a whole.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Meat Producers: Compensation

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans to compensate meat producers for the additional costs incurred in adhering to regulations aimed at preventing the spread of BSE.

(AQW 929/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): There are no plans to compensate meat producers for the additional costs in adhering to regulations aimed at preventing the spread of BSE. All the regulations to combat BSE have been introduced on the latest scientific advice available in an effort to protect public safety and restore consumer confidence in the meat industry. As a consequence, the meat industry has had to make changes to its operating practices to adapt to the new circumstances. Recent developments in the rest of the EU have brought about significant changes for other member states, and they are now also having to adapt to changes that have been in place in the UK since 1996.

Pig Producers: Compensation

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans to provide compensation payments to pig producers.

(AQW 930/00)

Ms Rodgers: Mr Nick Brown, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, has now announced the opening of the outgoers element of the pig industry restructuring scheme, which is designed to help pig producers throughout the UK. I am delighted that the Commission has finally agreed our proposals with regard to outgoers and trust that formal clearance for the whole scheme — outgoers and ongoers — will follow shortly.

The two main elements of the scheme are:

- the outgoers element, aimed at pig breeders who wish to end their involvement with pig production; and
- an 'ongoers' element for those who wish to remain in pig production and want to restructure their business to ensure its viability in the longer term. This element will provide compensation allowing a reduction in costs, thus helping to overcome competitive disadvantage and restore long-term viability.
- The purpose of outgoers element is to reduce the breeding capacity of the UK by 16% of the June 1998 figure and to compensate producers whose cessation contributes to achieving this reduction.

- The ongoers element has been designed to assist those remaining in the industry by providing a rebate equivalent to five percentage points on the interest payable to banks or other lending institutions over the next two years on borrowings used to deliver a business plan agreed with the said institutions. Details will be announced once the Commission's approval is obtained.

I very much hope that Northern Ireland pig producers will benefit from the scheme as far as possible. Copies of the explanatory literature on the outgoers element have been placed in the Assembly Library.

BSE in the European Union

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of cases of BSE reported in each EU member state in (a) 1999 and (b) 2000. (AQW 931/00)

Ms Rodgers: There is no centralised official record of the number of BSE cases reported in EU member states in 1999 and 2000. However, the attached table shows the most accurate figures we have to date for member states other than the UK derived from a variety of official and semi-official sources:

Country	1999	2000
Austria	0	0
Belgium	3	9
Denmark	0	1
Finland	0	0
France	31	129
Germany	0	1
Ireland	91	126
Italy	0	0
Luxembourg	0	0
Netherlands	2	1
Portugal	170	104
Spain	0	2
Sweden	0	0

No information is available for Greece

BSE in England, Scotland and Wales

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of BSE cases reported in England, Scotland and Wales in (a) 1999 and (b) 2000. (AQW 932/00)

Ms Rodgers: The number of BSE cases reported in England, Scotland and Wales in 1999 and 2000 are as follows:

Country	1999	2000*
England	2,081	1,070
Wales	156	88
Scotland	37	31

* Figures to 30 Nov 2000

BSE in Northern Ireland

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of cases of BSE reported in Northern Ireland in (a) 1999 and (b) 2000. (AQW 933/00)

Ms Rodgers: The number of BSE cases reported in Northern Ireland in 1999 and 2000 are as follows:

Country	1999	2000*
Northern Ireland	6	21

* Figures to 8 December 2000

Central Administration Budget

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the central administration budget for her Department in each of the last two financial years and to advise the specific functions to which any increase will be allocated; and if she will make a statement. (AQW 942/00)

Ms Rodgers: The table below sets out actual expenditure for 1999-2000, anticipated expenditure for 2000-01 and the estimated budget for 2001-02 for the various functions which are classified as central administration and which form part of the central administration and miscellaneous services in the Budget document.

	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02
Personnel	2.74	2.92	3.13
Finance	1.89	1.95	2.10
Co-ordination (1)	1.21	1.36	1.34
Information Systems (2)	2.33	2.51	2.61
Office Services (3)	2.72	2.72	2.83
Total	10.89	11.46	12.01

- (1) Co-ordination Division — includes Minister's Office and Assembly Business
- (2) Information Systems Division — includes IT software support/licences etc. for all departmental systems
- (3) Office Services Division — includes utilities, telecommunications, postage, stationery, etc. for non-specialised buildings

The 2001-02 budget for central administration set out above provides only for inflation, and no other increases are planned.

As far as the wider Department is concerned overall staff numbers declined from 3,972 in 1993 to 3,331 in 1999. I am satisfied that the recent increase in staff numbers – now standing at 3415 – is fully justified and follows rigorous assessment of need. There continue to be workload pressures in areas such as BSE, brucellosis and TB in cattle, devolution, Agenda 2000 reforms, education and training and rural development, and this means unavoidable increases in front-line staff.

Farm Support Group

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the assistance she has given to farm support groups to help farm workers cope with the pressure and stress associated with farm debt, (b) how many such groups will benefit from this assistance, (c) where they will be located and (d) if the aid will be targeted in accordance with targeting social need.

(AQW 952/00)

Ms Rodgers: On 20 November I announced the allocation of up to £150,000 to provide additional information, guidance and counselling for farmers and their families to help alleviate stress due to the difficult financial situation. My officials have consulted industry representatives and health personnel working in this area and are currently finalising our proposals.

A number of organisations are already involved in projects to help farmers and their families, and it is probable that a main strand of this additional funding will be to build on and expand these initiatives and encourage new initiatives from other local groups.

The assistance available through this additional funding will be offered to all farmers and their families throughout Northern Ireland who feel they might benefit from such help. It will be administered through local group initiatives and by the distribution of general information.

In addition under Agenda for Government the Department has introduced an introductory business management training programme for farmers in the less favoured areas of Northern Ireland.

This will help farmers with filling in forms, maintaining herd registers and keeping basic records, which will help them better cope with the changes in farming and the development of their businesses.

River Courses

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to record river courses that have not as yet been designated and when present records will be updated.

(AQW 989/00)

Ms Rodgers: The Rivers Agency of my Department maintains a current database detailing the upstream and downstream limits of all designated watercourses. Those watercourses, and sections of watercourses, not included on this database can be identified as “undesigned”. There are no plans to establish separate records in respect of watercourses that are not designated.

Watercourses are only designated for maintenance at public expense in circumstances where a drainage need is identified and relevant key criteria are met. Any benefits derived from designation and associated works must outweigh the costs involved. In consequence, the designation process is not based on a “rolling programme” designed to encompass all watercourses. Rather, the number of new designations in any year is relatively small.

The Drainage Council for Northern Ireland, an independent statutory body, decides whether a watercourse should be designated and maintained by the Rivers Agency at public expense. The council will consider representations from the public as well as Government Departments for designation of specific watercourses.

Better Regulation Task Force

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if (a) she is aware of the Better Regulation Task Force report into EU regulations, (b) she will give her assessment of its recommendations and (c) she intends to implement them. (AQW 995/00)

Ms Rodgers: I am assuming that the question refers to the Better Regulation Task Force which is chaired by Lord Haskins and which has recently reported on ‘Environmental Regulations and Farmers’. The report in question was published in November 2000, and copies should be available in the Assembly Library.

The majority of the report’s recommendations relate directly to the responsibility of Minister Sam Foster, as, in Northern Ireland, the Department of the Environment is the Department with the main responsibility for environmental regulation.

Although the focus of the report is mainly on the situation in England, I am also anxious, where possible, to reduce the regulatory burden on the farming industry here and will be anxious to adopt any new measures relating to agriculture which may help in doing this.

In Northern Ireland there is close co-operation and co-ordination between officials of the Department of

Agriculture and Rural Development and officials of the Department of the Environment. Both Departments also engage in close and regular contact with the farming unions and non-governmental bodies concerned with the protection of the environment.

The report included suggestions that the level of record keeping required be reduced and that the complexity of UK integrated administration and control system (IACS) claim forms be reduced. Unfortunately, many regulatory burdens are imposed by EU regulations, and we have no discretion to do other than implement them. Again, IACS is a national scheme with UK-wide legislation, and any amendment to it will have to be introduced on that basis.

A comprehensive reply to the Better Regulation Task Force report is currently being prepared. This exercise is being led by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions. My Department, along with others, will have input to this exercise, which will not be completed for some weeks yet. However, I shall be considering what deregulatory action we should take as a consequence.

Definitions of “Urban” and “Rural”

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the definition of (a) “urban” and (b) “rural” used within her Department.

(AQW 1003/00)

Ms Rodgers: While most people will have an intuitive sense of what is meant by the terms “urban” and “rural”, there are no universally accepted definitions of the terms that the Department is able to apply to its activities. As a result, the Department has had to devise its own definitions where it is necessary to draw a distinction between urban and rural.

One of the areas where it has been necessary to define “rural” areas has been in the rural development programme. For the purposes of that programme, “rural” areas are defined as all parts of Northern Ireland outside the Belfast metropolitan area, the city of Derry/Londonderry and towns with populations greater than 5,000. However, the rural development programme will retain the flexibility to support projects located in more urban settings in cases where the projects will benefit rural areas and it makes sense that they should be located in a town.

Farmers: Early Retirement Scheme

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) what assessment she has made of an early retirement scheme for farmers, (b) what assessment she has made of any similar scheme

in the EU and (c) what policy she intends to follow on this issue. (AQW 1010/00)

Ms Rodgers: I have decided to commission a study of early retirement and new entrants schemes, including an assessment of the available evidence on such schemes in other EU member states and have written to a number of institutions inviting them to bid to carry out the study. I would like to have someone appointed to carry out the study early in the new year and hope to have it completed before the end of February 2001.

Until I see the results of the study, and any views that the vision group may have on this issue, I will not make a decision on whether to introduce such schemes. While I understand the interest of farmers in these schemes, the evidence for their effectiveness is mixed, and this is why I would like to have an independent appraisal.

Fishing Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make it her policy not to implement EU regulations relating to the fishing industry ahead of other EU states. (AQW 1015/00)

Ms Rodgers: The EU Council and Commission regulations are binding in their entirety and directly applicable in all member states. The question of the timing of local implementation does not therefore arise.

EU Directives: Fishing Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if, in relation to the local fishing industry, she will make it her policy not to implement EU Directives. (AQW 1016/00)

Ms Rodgers: Whilst Directives leave the choice of means of implementation to national Administrations, they are legally binding instruments addressed to member states. It follows, therefore, that there is a need for their introduction as soon as possible.

Bovine Brucellosis/Tuberculosis: Compensation

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the highest level of compensation paid out to date in respect of any one animal rejected as result of bovine tuberculosis or brucellosis and (b) the highest level of compensation paid out to date in respect of any one herd as a result of tuberculosis or brucellosis. (AQW 1070/00)

Ms Rodgers: The highest level of compensation paid out in respect of any one animal slaughtered was £50,000 paid in respect of a pedigree Charolais bull in a brucellosis breakdown herd.

The highest level of compensation paid out to date in respect of any one herd was £1,213,092.50 in respect of brucellosis. The herd consisted of 39 reactor animals and 777 negative in contacts.

Brucellosis

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of Northern Ireland herds affected by brucellosis in each of the last five years (b) the amount of compensation paid out in respect of brucellosis outbreaks in each of the last five years and (c) the amount of compensation paid out in respect of brucellosis outbreaks in each of the 18 constituencies in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1071/00)

Ms Rodgers: The following table sets out the number of NI herds affected by brucellosis in each of the last five years and also the amount of compensation paid.

Year	No of Herds with Reactor Animals	Amount of Compensation Paid (£)
1999/2000	172	6.5m
1998/1999	65	3.7m
1997/1998	45	2.3m
1996/1997	7	217k
1995/1996	3	18k

In relation to part (c) information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of Northern Ireland herds affected by bovine tuberculosis in each of the last five years (b) the amount of compensation paid out in respect of bovine tuberculosis outbreaks in each of the last five years and (c) the amount of compensation paid out in respect of bovine tuberculosis in each of the 18 constituencies in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1072/00)

Ms Rodgers: The following table sets out the number of NI herds affected by tuberculosis in each of the last five years and also the amount of compensation paid.

Year	No of Herds with Reactor Animals	Amount of Compensation Paid (£)
1999/2000	2601	5.8m
1998/1999	2468	4.9m
1997/1998	1511	2.9m
1996/1997	1538	2.3m
1995/1996	1578	2.2m

In relation to part (c) information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

West Tyrone: Buildings and Amenities

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to (a) detail all buildings and amenities within her responsibility in the constituency of West Tyrone, (b) outline the percentage of her budget that has been allocated to the West Tyrone constituency and (c) explain how this compares with the previous budget. (AQW 1083/00)

Ms Rodgers:

- Within the constituency of West Tyrone, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development staff are located mainly in four properties, all of which are in the Omagh area – Sperrin House (which houses the Divisional Veterinary Office and Agri-Food Development Service), Hospital Road (Rural Development Division), Woodside Avenue (Rivers Agency) and the Veterinary Inspection Centre. The Forest Service operates the Gortin Forest Park amenity. The maintenance and upkeep of the office accommodation estate is the responsibility of Department of Finance and Personnel, and my Department is responsible for the specialised buildings and for the Gortin Forest Park amenities.
- It has not been the practice of Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments to retain budgetary information or maintain records of expenditure on a constituency basis. To obtain or provide such information would incur disproportionate effort and cost.
- In light of (b), information for previous years is not available.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Northern Ireland Schools' Football Association Under-15 Side

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans to acknowledge the success of the Northern Ireland Schools' Football Association under-15 side, which recently won the Victory Shield Home International Tournament. (AQW 927/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I have issued a letter of congratulation recently to the secretary of the Northern Ireland Schools' Football Association, Mr Brian Gilliland, offering my wholehearted congratulations to the management team

and the players on their magnificent achievement of winning the Victory Shield for the first time for Northern Ireland. I am also planning to host a reception in recognition of the team's success in the new year.

Home International Soccer Tournament

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will actively support the reintroduction of the home international football tournament at full international level; and if he will make a statement.

(AQW 928/00)

Mr McGimpsey: I am very much in favour of the reintroduction of the home international tournament, but I should stress that this is a matter for the four football associations concerned. I am well aware of the disappointment felt by the IFA and local supporters when the tournament was lost in 1983-84. The opportunity that the competition provided for local people to see the stars of the English and Scottish leagues in regular competitive competition coupled with the regular revenue generated has never been replaced. The tournament also provided a regular and profitable focus for international soccer in Belfast. Its reinstatement would also complement the efforts being made to modernize and strengthen the sport through the process that I announced recently for the development of a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland.

Central Administration Budget

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the central administration budget for his Department in each of the last two financial years and to advise the specific functions to which any increase will be allocated; and if he will make a statement.

(AQW 938/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure was only created in December 1999, and therefore budget figures are not available for the 1999-2000 financial year.

The total DRC provision for the financial years 2000-01 and 2001-02 is £11.6 million and £12.5 million respectively.

The increase of £900,000 will be used mainly to meet the cost of the additional staff that were recruited to enable the Department to deliver the full range of services for which it has responsibility, which was £560,000, and to undertake a programme of research/consultancy, costing £250,000, to help my Department focus its programme of activity in the coming years. The remainder will be used to meet any other increases in expenditure that may arise — for example, salary increases, inflation, and so on.

My Department has been tasked with a number of new activities, as well as the existing ones that transferred from other Departments, and it is essential that it is adequately staffed to carry out all of these duties effectively and efficiently.

North Belfast: Sports Funding

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the funding made available to (a) soccer, (b) Gaelic games, (c) rugby and (d) other sports in North Belfast in each of the last five years.

(AQW 962/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Funding for sport in Northern Ireland is made available through the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. The figures for the North Belfast constituency area are as follows:

Soccer				
1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
Nil	Nil	£38,595	Nil	£47,814
Gaelic Games				
1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
Nil	Nil	£12,808	£215,856	£70,000
Rugby				
1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
All Other Sports				
1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
£89,543	Nil	£151,885	£11,168	£170,000

The figures quoted above are comprised of Lottery Capital and Lottery Revenue funds.

New Library Facilities (Strabane and Castlederg)

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his position with regard to the provision of new library facilities in (a) Strabane and (b) Castlederg.

(AQW 971/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Since taking over policy responsibility for the public library service, I have announced the building of a new library for Strabane as part of the Strabane 2000 initiative. The planning of this is advancing, and the aim is that building should commence in May 2001 with a view to completion in July 2002.

The need for a new library in Castlederg has been recognised for many years, but funding has not been available. I am making efforts to secure additional resources for library capital projects, and my Department is working on the details of a capital development

programme. I hope to be in a position to make an announcement early in the new year.

First Division Football Clubs: Upgrading

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if, in relation to the upgrading of first division football clubs, he will (a) detail what criteria will be used for the allocation of funds and (b) outline how much funding will be available. (AQW 987/00)

Mr McGimpsey: (a) First division clubs are eligible to apply for funding for urgent health and safety works and safety management. The following criteria for allocating funds have been used across both programmes, except where specifically indicated:

Safety

Applicants must identify the impact of the project on the safety of spectators or others at their venue.

The views of the club safety officer and of the environmental health department of the district council must be taken into account.

Proposed safety management schemes will have to show a scale appropriate to past and projected attendance figures. Supporting information may be required.

Technical Conformity

For urgent works schemes, the facility proposed should be of adequate size and conform with the appropriate technical specifications and/or other recognised specific criteria. Projects will also be reviewed against the following technical requirements:

- appropriateness of the site location;
- overall venue layout and design standard;
- accessibility for people with disabilities;
- accessibility and use by both genders; and
- planning issues and project readiness.

For safety management schemes the Sports Council will determine criteria for and approve providers of:

- the safety officers training programme;
- the stewards training programme;
- CCTV;
- the fixing of CCTV brackets; and
- the heavy stewarding.

Financial Viability and Funding

Applicants must demonstrate that they have secured a viable capital funding package. Applications need to display that their percentage of the finance is in place, or that there are other realistic sources for raising the funding shortfall within six months of the application.

Applicants will also need to show that they can manage the project and control the finances during its development.

Applicants may be required to evidence the necessary financial need to warrant an award.

Social Inclusion

The Sports Council is committed to providing equality of opportunity for people who may suffer social disadvantage.

In particular, the Sports Council recognises that arrangements for women, young people and people with disabilities are limited at some sporting venues. Applicants are encouraged to consider these issues within their planned project.

- (b) The maximum grant available to first division clubs for urgent works is 85% up to a maximum of £15,000 per club and for safety management is 90% of the total cost. All applicants who fulfil the funding criteria will be successful.

West Tyrone: Budget Share

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to (a) detail all buildings and amenities within his responsibility in the constituency of West Tyrone; (b) outline the percentage of his budget that has been allocated to the West Tyrone constituency, and; (c) explain how this compares with the previous budget. (AQW 1081/00)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department does not have any buildings and amenities for which I have direct responsibility within the constituency of West Tyrone. In relation to parts (b) and (c) of the question this information is not recorded on a constituency basis and could be provided only at a disproportionate cost.

EDUCATION

Central Administration Budget

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the central administration budget for his Department in each of the last two financial years and to advise the specific functions to which any increase will be allocated; and if he will make a statement. (AQW 944/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): I have interpreted the central administration budget as referring to Departmental Running Costs (DRC).

The DRCs of my Department were:

- 1998-99 - net expenditure amounting to £15.112 million
- 1999-2000 - net expenditure amounting to £16.016 million

The increase is attributable to the application of the 1999 pay settlement and inescapable costs arising from the restructuring of Departments in preparation for devolution.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Central Administration Budget

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the central administration budget for his Department in each of the last two financial years and to advise the specific functions to which any increase will be allocated; and if he will make a statement.

(AQW 940/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The central administration budget for my Department for the years 2000-01 and 2001-02, respectively, is £36.4 million and £38.1 million.

For the year 2000-01, additional moneys have been allocated to the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) and to Companies Registry. In 2001-02, additional moneys will be allocated to the continuing support of HSENI. In addition, moneys will be allocated to work required for the freedom of information legislation, the modernising government agenda and to cover devolution costs.

Sustainable and Renewable Energy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he has taken to encourage the development of sustainable and renewable energy.

(AQW 948/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I support fully the development of sustainable and renewable energy. The harnessing of renewable energy sources assists the diversification of Northern Ireland's energy supplies and has an important role to play in reducing greenhouse gases emissions.

Government have established an initial target of 45 megawatts of renewables plant in Northern Ireland by the year 2005. The then Department of Economic Development, in pursuit of this objective, made two Non-Fossil Fuel Orders (NFFO) in 1994 and 1996 under which Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) is required to purchase some 32 megawatts of renewable energy. In addition, a number of innovative renewable energy projects have been assisted under the EU funded energy demonstration scheme and the EU INTERREG cross-border energy sub-programme. Furthermore, 1,000 customers currently receive all or part of their electricity

from renewable sources under Northern Ireland Electricity's eco-energy tariff scheme.

Recent assessments of the potential for renewables in Northern Ireland have indicated that, based on certain assumptions, 7% of electricity consumption could be met by offshore wind energy by 2005 and that a further 7.6% could be met by other renewables by 2010.

My Department intends to consult interested parties in the new year on the future development of renewable energy sources in Northern Ireland. We will wish, in particular, to seek views on how Northern Ireland might best make a proportionate contribution to the revised UK target of 10% of electricity from renewables by 2010 and also on the possible replication of the recent Great Britain legislation on a renewables obligation which will place an obligation on suppliers to obtain a specified percentage of their supplies from renewable sources.

Large-Scale Shipbuilding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will confirm that adequate engineering expertise is available in Northern Ireland to undertake large-scale shipbuilding; and if he will make a statement.

(AQW 956/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Northern Ireland has a long and respected tradition of engineering excellence which is partly reflected in the engineering faculties of the two universities and the further education institutions where substantial numbers of students are enrolled in courses in engineering and the technologies. At November 2000 there were nearly 2,500 participants undertaking specialist training in engineering occupations under the Jobskills programme.

With regard to skills that may be required in the future to meet the needs of large-scale shipbuilding, it remains important that education and training providers be sufficiently flexible and responsive to the needs of employers to ensure that skill needs will be met, regardless of the sector in which those needs arise.

A number of important initiatives have already been taken in this area.

The Northern Ireland skills task force has commissioned a programme of research to review in detail the skills demand and supply in priority areas on which one report, on the IT sector, has already been published and another, on the electronic engineering sector, is almost complete.

Work is due to begin on a review of the mechanical engineering sector in the new year. This research will provide a better and more informed understanding of the balance between skills supply and demand in the engineering — including shipbuilding — sectors.

In the meantime the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will continue to work closely with the Harland & Wolff Group to identify specific trades and skills required to meet the challenges of potential new work in the shipbuilding and offshore sectors.

Aggregates

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the percentage volume of non-fuel material quarried or extracted in Northern Ireland and reused within Northern Ireland for each of the past five years. (AQW 967/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The following quantities of non-fuel material were quarried or extracted in Northern Ireland in each of the past five years:

1999	29,020 tonnes
1998	22,356 tonnes
1997	21,591 tonnes
1996	25,113 tonnes
1995	22,120 tonnes

Information on the percentage of these quantities reused in Northern Ireland is not available.

Aggregates: Imports

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the volume of quarried or extracted non-fuel materials imported into Northern Ireland from (a) the Republic of Ireland, (b) Great Britain and (c) the rest of the world for each of the past five years. (AQW 968/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The information requested is not available.

Aggregates: Exports

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the percentage volume of quarried or extracted non-fuel materials exported from Northern Ireland to (a) the Republic of Ireland, (b) Great Britain and (c) the rest of the world for each of the past five years. (AQW 969/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Comprehensive information on the quantity of non-fuel materials exported from Northern Ireland is not available. The report of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners for 1999 records that the following quantities of stones were exported, mainly to Great Britain, in each of the last years:

1995	264,000 tonnes
1996	325,000 tonnes
1997	254,000 tonnes
1998	392,000 tonnes
1999	364,000 tonnes

Definitions of “Urban” and “Rural”

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to state the definition of (a) “urban” and (b) “rural” used within his Department. (AQW 1006/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment does not have specific definitions for “urban” or “rural”.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Central Administration Budget

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the central administration budget for his Department in each of the last two financial years and to advise the specific functions to which any increase will be allocated; and if he will make a statement.

(AQW 941/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): The Department’s central administration budget meets the salary, general administrative expenses and other costs of staff employed in corporate services, as well as IT capital requirements.

Corporate services was set up in December 1999 following devolution.

The following table sets out the actual expenditure incurred by corporate services in 1999-2000 and projected spend for the current year.

Department of Environment			
Branch	Year	Current 000’s	Capital 000’s
Corporate Services	1999/00	289	0
	2000/01	1328	408

The Draft Budget for 2001-02 includes an increase in the Department’s overall allocation for administration costs. This will help meet inflationary pressures.

Townscape Character and Conservation Areas

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment if he will provide a breakdown by constituency of (a) areas of

townscape character and (b) conservation areas in Northern Ireland. (AQW 953/00)

Mr Foster: The information requested is set out in the attached schedules.

AREAS OF TOWNSCAPE CHARACTER

East Belfast Cherryvalley Circular Road Cregagh Wandsworth	North Belfast Cliftonville Donegall Park Avenue Sunningdale Twaddell	South Belfast Hampton Park Holyland North/South Parade and Park Road Rosetta Rugby Road Thiepval Upper Malone
West Belfast None	East Antrim None	East Londonderry Portrush
Fermanagh & South Tyrone Enniskillen Irvinestown	Foyle Bonds Hill Victoria Park Culmore Eglinton	Lagan Valley None
Mid Ulster None	Newry & Armagh None	North Antrim Galgorm
North Down Bangor Bay	South Antrim Hazelbank/ Abbeylands Lenamore Lenamore (extension) Rushpark	South Down None
Strangford None	Upper Bann Lurgan	West Tyrone None

CONSERVATION AREAS

East Belfast McMaster Street Cyprus Avenue Knockdene King's Road	North Belfast Cathedral Somerton	South Belfast Linen Belfast City Centre Malone Park/ Adelaide Park Queen's Stranmillis Malone
West Belfast None	East Antrim Carnlough Glenarm Whitehead Carrickfergus	East Londonderry None
Fermanagh & South Tyrone Enniskillen Lisnaskea Caledon Northland, Dungannon Moy	Foyle Historic City Clarendon Street	Lagan Valley Hillsborough Lisburn Moir Dromore

Mid Ulster Moneymore	Newry & Armagh Newry Armagh Richhill Loughgall Bessbrook	North Antrim Bushmills Ballycastle Ballymoney Cushendall Cushendun Gracehill Draperstown
North Down Donaghadee	South Antrim Merville Garden Village Antrim Randalstown	South Down Ardglass Castlewellan Downpatrick Killough Strangford Rostrevor
Strangford Killyleagh Portaferry Saintfield	Upper Bann None	West Tyrone Newtownstewart Sion Mills Omagh

Quarry Owners: Legal Requirements

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the legal requirements placed on quarry owners to prevent noise, dust, fume-pollution and structural damage to neighbouring homes.

(AQW 963/00)

Mr Foster: In granting planning permission for quarries for the extraction of hard rock the Department imposes planning conditions which control the vibration and noise from blasting operations. Current practice and research indicates that the application of these conditions will prevent structural damage occurring to property.

All quarries are required by the Industrial Pollution Control (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 to use best available techniques not entailing excessive cost (BATNEEC) to prevent, or minimise, all aspects of air pollution from their operations.

The BATNEEC requirement is enforced for each quarry by conditions set out in an authorisation issued by the chief industrial pollution inspector of my Department. In most cases, these authorisations incorporate an improvement programme setting out a series of actions required to bring the quarry's standards of dust control up to the BATNEEC standards.

In addition, quarry operators are obliged to comply with the Quarries (Explosives) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1991. These regulations take account of modern blasting practices and materials and set out the standards to be achieved in order to prevent danger from the presence and use of explosives at quarries. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Industry's quarry inspector polices these regulations.

Planning Application for Housing Development

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of the Environment if he will make it his policy that a planning application for housing development must indicate the full proposed development plans before approval is granted. (AQO 485/00)

Mr Foster: Full details of any proposed housing development are indicated before planning approval is granted. However, under existing law, applicants are entitled to make an outline planning application for operational development, which includes housing. This enables applicants to establish whether the development of land for a proposed use is acceptable in principle, without the financial expense of preparing detailed plans. This is a long established procedure within the planning system, and I have no plans to change it.

However, the Department's publication 'Creating Places – Achieving Quality in Residential Developments' requires applicants to provide much more detailed information — for example, an analysis of the application site and its context together with a concept statement, with applications for outline permission. This will assist the Department in assessing a proposal against quality and sustainability objectives. It will also provide the public with more information about the proposals.

Drink-Driving

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to address the problem of drink-driving; and if he will make a statement. (AQO 507/00)

Mr Foster: Drink-driving remains a major cause of deaths and serious injuries on Northern Ireland's roads. My Department carries out extensive research into attitudes to drinking and driving. This is to ensure that the Department's education and advertising activities are targeted effectively. Advertising and publicity campaigns are co-ordinated with RUC enforcement campaigns.

I can assure the Assembly that I am totally committed to further reducing road casualties. I recently launched a new anti-drink-drive commercial in association with the National Safety Council in the Republic of Ireland. This has provided the focus of the current Christmas anti-drink-drive campaign.

An experimental scheme in the use of courses as a sentencing option for drink-drive offenders has been running in Belfast and Newtownabbey petty sessions district since April 1998. On 11 December, the Assembly approved the motion to extend the experimental period until 2005.

My Department, in association with the RUC and other road safety groups, will continue with our efforts to reduce the problem of drink-driving and to encourage responsible driver attitudes. The importance of discouraging drink-driving will be emphasised in the new road safety strategy, on which I hope to be able to consult as soon as possible next year.

Third Party Appeals

Mr Poots asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what consultations he has had on the issue of third party planning appeals. (AQO 495/00)

Mr Foster: My Department is in regular contact with its counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales on this subject. There is no provision for third party appeals in any of the planning jurisdictions in the UK.

I have, however, been giving very careful consideration to all aspects of third party appeals and how they might impact on the planning system in Northern Ireland.

On the one hand, third parties already have structured opportunities to make representations concerning planning applications. Such representations are given careful consideration.

On the other hand, there is an argument that third party appeals would provide better protection to members of the public and that it would place them on the same footing as applicants whose permission for development had been refused.

Work carried out by my Department indicates that there would be significant costs involved in introducing a third party appeal system in Northern Ireland. Such a provision would also add delays to the planning process and would increase uncertainty among developers. Third party appeals could also be used to obstruct a commercial competitor or to frustrate a neighbour.

This is an area which I realise is attracting considerable interest and debate not just in Northern Ireland but also in the rest of the UK. I will therefore continue to keep our policy and procedures under review and have presented an analysis to my Executive Colleagues for early consideration.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Central Administration Budget

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the central administration budget for his Department in each of the last two financial years

and to advise the specific functions to which any increase will be allocated; and if he will make a statement.

(AQW 937/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The central administration budget for the Department of Finance and Personnel for 2000-01 is £92.6 million. The revised budget for 2001-02 as presented to the Assembly on 12 December provides £97.1 million. This represents an increase of £4.5 million and will allow the Department to maintain its current level of service including provision for pay increases and the restructuring of the Department to incorporate the former Department of the Environment agencies.

Domestic Rate Revenue

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the revenue generated through the collection of domestic rate by electoral ward in the parliamentary constituency of West Belfast and as a percentage of the overall domestic rate value in the Belfast City Council area.

(AQW 1122/00)

Mr Durkan: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Business Rate Revenue (West Belfast)

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the rates revenue generated from retail business in the constituency of West Belfast by electoral ward and as a percentage of the overall retail rate value generated in Belfast City Council area.

(AQW 1188/00)

Mr Durkan: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Central Administration Budget

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the central administration budget for her Department in each of the last two financial years and to advise the specific functions to which any increase will be allocated; and if she will make a statement.

(AQW 935/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The Department of Health, Social

Services and Public Safety's running cost provision for 2000-01, its first full year of operation, is £31.1 million. The Budget proposals for 2001-02 uplift the provision to £32.7 million. Most of the additional £1.6 million would go towards maintaining existing levels of service by meeting next year's pay pressures, but it will also enable the Department to augment its support for a number of programmes and services. Examples of these are the development of children's services, strengthening support for the equality and New TSN agendas, hospital services, public safety and strategic planning.

Is é £31.1m. costais choinneála na Roinne Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí do 2000-01, a chéad bhliain iomlán oibre. Ardaíonn na moltaí Buiséid do 2001-02 an soláthar go dtí £32.7m. Chaithfí an chuid is mó den £1.6m breise leis na caighdeáin seirbhíse atá ann anois a choinneáil trí bhrú pá na bliana seo chugainn a chlúdach, ach chomh maith leis sin cuirfidh sé ar chumas na Roinne cur lena tacaíocht do roinnt clár agus seirbhísí. Orthu seo tá forbairt sheirbhísí páistí, ag neartú tacaíochta do na cláir oibre don chomhionannas agus DRS Nua, seirbhísí ospidéal, sábháilteacht phoiblí agus pleanáil straitéiseach.

Designer Drugs

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has had discussions with other Departments in relation to public information on the long-term effects of designer drugs, with specific reference to Ecstasy.

(AQW 945/00)

Ms de Brún: Public information plays an important role in increasing awareness of the damage that can be caused by drug misuse. During the recent meeting of the ministerial group on drugs, of which I am chairperson, I provided an overview of the drugs-related public information campaign delivered by the Health Promotion Agency over the last few years. One phase of this campaign was focused on Ecstasy, LSD and amphetamine sulphate (speed), providing information to young people on long-term and short-term effects of these drugs.

I also advised my ministerial colleagues of the next phase of the campaign, which, although not focused solely on Ecstasy, will be targeted at young people attending bars and nightclubs.

Tá ról tábhachtach ag an eolas phoiblí ar aird a dhíriú ar an dochar is féidir le mí-úsáid drugaí a dhéanamh. Ag cruinniú den ghrúpa aireachta ar dhrugaí ar na mallaibh, a bhfuil mise i mo chathaoirleach air, thug mé forbhreathnú ar an fheachtas eolais phoiblí faoi dhrugaí atá ar bun ag an Ghníomhaireacht Cothaithe Sláinte le blianta beaga anuas. Bhí céim amháin den fheachtas seo dírithe ar an Eacstais, LSD agus sulfáit amfáitímín (luas), ag cur eolais ar fáil do dhaoine óga ar éifeachtaí fadtéarmacha agus gearrthéarmacha na ndrugaí seo.

Chomh maith leis sin chuir mé mo chomhAí ar an eolas faoin chéad chéim eile den fheachtas, a bheas dírithe ar dhaoine óga a ghnáthaíonn tithe tábhairne agus clubanna oíche.

Filipino Nurses

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) how many Filipino nurses have been recruited for the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, (b) the total cost to date and (c) how much it costs to provide accommodation for these nurses. (AQW 957/00)

Ms de Brún: Within the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area the Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust has recruited 20 Filipino nurses.

The total cost to date is £48,183.

The nurses are responsible for their own accommodation charges.

Taobh istigh de limistéar Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir d'earcaigh Iontaobhas Pobail agus Ospidéal Uladh 20 banaltra ó na Filipíneacha.

Is é an costas iomlán go dtí seo £48,183.

Tá na banaltraí freagrach as costas a lóistín féin.

Cardiac Surgeon (Ulster Hospital)

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) confirm that the cardiac surgeon who left the Eastern Health and Social Services Board at the Ulster Hospital has not yet been replaced and (b) outline the steps she is taking to fill the vacancy.

(AQW 958/00)

Ms de Brún: There is no cardiac surgeon based at the Ulster Hospital. However, a consultant cardiac surgeon employed by the Royal Hospitals Group HSS Trust retired recently, and the vacant post has been advertised. There has been a specialist trainee in post for several years, who has completed training within the last year in anticipation of such a vacancy. The vacant post will have to be filled through competition in line with the Appointment of Consultant Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996.

Níl aon mháinlia cairdiach bunaithe ag Ospidéal Uladh, ach d'éirigh máinlia cairdiach comhairleach a bhí fostaithe ag Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa na nOspidéal Ríoga as a obair ar na mallaibh, agus fógraíodh an post folamh. Tá foghlaimeoir sainiúil i bpost le roinnt blianta anuas in oirchill folúntais den chineál a bhfuil traenáil críochnaithe aige taobh istigh den bhliain seo caite. Caithfear an post folamh a líonadh trí iomaíocht de réir Rialacha Ceapacháin na nDochtúirí Comhairleacha (TÉ) 1996.

Chiropractic Services

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what provision she has made for the chiropractic service within the Health budget and how many staff are employed in each board area with that expertise. (AQW 959/00)

Ms de Brún: No specific provision for chiropractic services has been made within the HPSS budget. The information requested on members of staff with chiropractic expertise is not readily available.

Ní dhearnadh aon soláthar ar leith sa bhuiséad SSSP do sheirbhísí círeapraicteacha. Níl an t-eolas a iarradh maidir le baill foirne a bhfuil scileanna círeapraicteacha acu ar fáil go héasca.

Funding: Eastern Health and Social Services Board

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to release the funding necessary to address the need for nurses in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 960/00)

Ms de Brún: The number of nurses employed in the Eastern Board area is a matter for determination between the board and the health and social services trusts. The additional resources that I intend to make available to the health and social services boards should help the Eastern Board address the priorities in its area.

Is ceist í líon na mbanaltraí a fhostaítear i gceantar Bhord an Oirthir atá le socrú idir an bord agus na hontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta. Ba cheart do na hacmhainní breise a bhfuil sé de rún agam á gcur ar fáil do na boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta cuidiú le Bord an Oirthir tabhairt faoi na tosaíochtaí ina cheantar.

Cancer

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) how many people have been diagnosed with cancer since 1996, (b) what categories they fall under and (c) what steps she is taking to reduce the incidence of prostate cancer. (AQW 974/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not yet available. Data for the years 1997 and 1998 should be available in early 2001. Information on the number of deaths from cancer since 1996 is shown in the following table.

**TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CANCER DEATHS BY SITE:
NORTHERN IRELAND 1996-1999**

Cancer Site	Males				Females			
	1996	1997	1998	1999	1996	1997	1998	1999
Colorectal	221	191	244	203	206	221	199	207
Rate per 100,000	27.07	23.22	29.49	24.88	24.16	25.78	23.11	24.27
Lung	531	500	478	478	285	273	297	303
Rate per 100,000	65.04	60.78	57.78	58.58	33.42	31.84	34.49	35.52
Breast					309	265	297	286
Rate per 100,000					36.24	30.91	34.49	33.53
Prostate	211	208	220	195				
Rate per 100,000	25.85	25.28	26.59	23.90				
Ovary					88	90	94	118
Rate per 100,000					10.32	10.5	10.92	13.83
Stomach	111	103	121	113	89	68	94	74
Rate per 100,000	13.6	12.52	14.63	13.85	10.44	7.93	10.92	8.68
Oesophagus	91	89	93	99	53	55	61	62
Rate per 100,000	11.15	10.82	11.24	12.13	6.22	6.41	7.08	7.27
Cervix					45	26	33	36
Rate per 100,000					5.28	3.03	3.83	4.22
Bladder	64	40	52	43	30	40	25	42
Rate per 100,000	7.84	4.86	6.29	5.27	3.52	4.67	2.9	4.92
Kidney	40	42	42	39	17	36	37	28
Rate per 100,000	4.9	5.11	5.08	4.78	1.99	4.2	4.3	3.28
All cancers	1903	1843	1921	1841	1722	1743	1727	1813
Rate per 100,000	233.1	224.02	232.2	225.61	201.95	203.29	200.53	212.54

There is as yet no effective screening test for prostate cancer and no evidence on which to base treatment. The surgical interventions that are currently in use have a significant risk of leading to impotence and incontinence and there is no evidence that lives are saved.

The National Screening Committee, which advises Health Ministers on all aspects of screening policy, has considered the evidence for prostate cancer screening and has concluded that the current research evidence did not support a national screening programme. This advice was accepted by Health Ministers. The committee continues to keep this matter under review, and should it in the future reconsider its decision, Health Ministers will give careful consideration to any recommendations that are forthcoming.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil go fóill. Ba chóir go mbeadh na sonraí do na blianta 1997 agus 1998 ar fáil go luath sa bhliain 2001. Tá eolas ar líon na mbásanna ailse ó 1996 léirithe ar an tábla thíos.

TÁBLA 1: LÍON BÁSANNA AILSE DE RÉIR SUÍMh: 1996-1999

Suíomh Ailse	Fir				Mná			
	1996	1997	1998	1999	1996	1997	1998	1999
Drólainne/Reictim	221	191	244	203	206	221	199	207
Ráta an 100,000	27.07	23.22	29.49	24.88	24.16	25.78	23.11	24.27
Scamhóg	531	500	478	478	285	273	297	303
Ráta an 100,000	65.04	60.78	57.78	58.58	33.42	31.84	34.49	35.52
Cíoch					309	265	297	286
Ráta an 100,000					36.24	30.91	34.49	33.53
Próstáit	211	208	220	195				
Ráta an 100,000	25.85	25.28	26.59	23.90				
Ubhagán					88	90	94	118
Ráta an 100,000					10.32	10.5	10.92	13.83
Goile	111	103	121	113	89	68	94	74
Ráta an 100,000	13.6	12.52	14.63	13.85	10.44	7.93	10.92	8.68
Éasafagas	91	89	93	99	53	55	61	62
Ráta an 100,000	11.15	10.82	11.24	12.13	6.22	6.41	7.08	7.27
Ceirbheacs					45	26	33	36
Ráta an 100,000					5.28	3.03	3.83	4.22
Lamhnán	64	40	52	43	30	40	25	42
Ráta an 100,000	7.84	4.86	6.29	5.27	3.52	4.67	2.9	4.92
Ae	40	42	42	39	17	36	37	28
Ráta an 100,000	4.9	5.11	5.08	4.78	1.99	4.2	4.3	3.28
Ailsi uile	1903	1843	1921	1841	1722	1743	1727	1813
Ráta an 100,000	233.1	224.02	232.2	225.61	201.95	203.29	200.53	212.54

Go dtí seo níl scrúdú éifeachtach scagtha ann ar ailse phróstáite agus níl fianaise ann ar a mbunofaí cóireáil. Tá baol suntasach ann go mbeadh éagumas fireann agus neamhchoinneálacht mar thoradh ar dhaoine ag dul faoi scian agus níl fianaise ar bith ann go sábháiltear beathaí.

Mheas an Coiste Náisiúnta Scagtha, a thugann comhairle d'Airí Sláinte ar gach gné den pholasáí scagtha, an fhianaise maidir le scagadh a dhéanamh ar ailse phróstáite agus tháinig sé ar an tuairim nach dtacaíonn an fhianaise thaighde reatha le clár náisiúnta

scagtha. Ghlac na hAirí Sláinte leis an chomhairle seo. Coinníonn an Coiste an t-ábhar seo faoi athbhreithniú, agus dá ndéanfadh sé athchomhairle ar a chinneadh sa todhchaí, déanfaidh Airí Sláinte machnamh go cúramach ar mholtaí ar bith a thiocfaidh amach as.

Cancer Registry

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will detail (a) her assessment of the Cancer Registry since it was set up in 1994, (b) what problems have been identified with the registry and (c) what refinements are still to be made to it. (AQW 975/00)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) The Cancer Registry is a vital source of key information for the planning of cancer services and is a very necessary part of the infrastructure that is needed in our efforts to reduce the incidence of cancer. Without the registry we would not know with any certainty the incidence of different cancers, the outcomes of our preventative programmes or the outcomes of our treatment services. In addition, no meaningful research in cancer can be done without proper registration.

The registry is also involved in collaborative work with the Cancer Registry in the South of Ireland and will soon produce, in conjunction with the South's registry, an All Ireland Cancer Incidence Report. In addition, the registry is collaborating with the National Cancer Institute in the USA on research on melanoma. The Registry has received recognition for the quality of its data by being made a voting member of the International Association of Cancer Registries. I visited the Cancer Registry in August this year and was most impressed with the work of the registry and the dedication of the staff.

- (b) I am not aware of any problems with the registry or its work.
- (c) The registry is continuing to refine its procedures on an ongoing basis, particularly in relation to data capture and validation using, where possible, electronic means to do so.
- (a) Is foinse rithabhachtach an Chlárlann Ailse le haghaidh eochaireolais i bpleanáil sheirbhísí ailse, agus is cuid shár-riachtanach í den infrastruchtúr atá de dhíth leis an iarracht s'againne ar mhinicíocht ailse a laghdú. Gan an chlárann ní bheadh a fhios againn go cinnte faoi mhinicíocht ailsí difriúla, faoi thorthaí na gclár coisctheach ná faoi thorthaí ár seirbhísí cóireála. Lena chois, ní féidir taighde fiúntach ar bith a dhéanamh gan chlárú ceart.

Tá baint ag an chlárann le comhoibriú leis an Chlárlann Ailse i nDeisceart na hÉireann agus cuirfidh sí amach gan mhoill, i gcomhar le Clárann an Deiscirt, Tuairisc Mhinicíochta Ailse Uile-Éireann. Lena chois, tá an chlárann ag comhoibriú leis an Institiúid Náisiúnta Ailse i SAM ar thaighde ar mheileanóma. Fuair an chlárann aitheantas as cáilíocht a chuid sonraí nuair a rinneadh ball vótála de Chumann Idirnáisiúnta na gClárlanna Ailse di. Thug mé cuairt ar an Chlárlann Ailse i Lúnasa na bliana seo agus chuaigh obair na clárlainne agus díograis na foirne i bhfeidhm go mór orm.

- (b) Ní fios domh fadhbanna a bheith ann leis an chlárann nó lena cuid oibre.

- (c) Tá an chlárann ag leanúint léi ag tabhairt a nósanna imeachta chun foirfeachta maidir le bailiú sonraí agus bailmheas, ag úsáid na meán leictreonach lena thabhairt i gcrích nuair is féidir.

Cancer Services

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if, in the light of the Campbell Report on cancer services, which identified three areas of concern, she will detail (a) what progress has been made on the concept of cancer care, (b) the concept and development of cancer units, (c) the primary care input to cancer services and (d) what areas have yet to be implemented. (AQW 976/00)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) Significant progress has been achieved on the implementation of the Campbell Report, 'Investing for the Future', which recommended the reorganisation and improvement of cancer services to ensure more effective treatment and care of patients. This has entailed the introduction of a multidisciplinary, multi-professional team approach for the treatment of cancers, with increased specialisation in cancer management. Services are now provided on a network basis through a cancer centre in Belfast and cancer units in each of the four health and social services board areas.
- (b) The cancer units, which are located at Altnagelvin, Antrim, Craigavon, Belfast City and the Ulster Hospitals, now provide a wide range of services for cancer patients, including specialist diagnostic, therapeutic and support services such as radiography, endoscopy, chemotherapy for the more common cancers and laboratory services. This year's additional allocation of £8 million for cancer services is enabling the recruitment and training of additional staff for the cancer units. However, the availability of key specialist staff will dictate the

speed at which improvements in cancer services can be implemented.

- (c) To help primary care teams in the diagnosis, long-term management and support of cancer patients, local guidelines for GPs on the early diagnosis and referral of patients with cancer are at present being developed. Guidelines on the referral of patients with suspected breast cancer have already been issued. A directory of cancer specialists, which is designed to facilitate improved communication with the hospital sector, is also being developed.
- (d) The full implementation of 'Investing for the Future' entails the accommodation of services currently provided at Belvoir Park Hospital in a new oncology centre on the Belfast City Hospital site by 2003. The construction of the new centre is due to begin next year. In line with this, a new day hospital will also be developed on C floor of the City Hospital tower block.
- (a) Rinneadh dul chun cinn tábhachtach ar chur i bhfeidhm Thuairisc Mhic Cathmhaoil, 'Ag Infheistiú don Todhchaí,' a mhol atheagrú agus feabhsú i seirbhísí ailse le cóireáil agus cúram othar níos éifeachtaí a chinntiú. Mar chuid de sin, tugadh isteach cur chuige ildisciplíneach, ilghairmiúil do chóireáil ailsí, le níos mó speisialtóireachta i mbainistíocht ailse. Soláthraítear seirbhísí anois ar bhonn líonra trí ionad ailse i mBéal Feirste agus trí aonaid ailse i ngach ceann de na ceantair bhord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta.
- (b) Soláthraíonn na haonaid ailse, atá lonnaithe in Otharlann Alt na nGealbhan, Aontroma, Chraigavon, Chathair Bhéal Feirste agus Uladh réimse leathan seirbhísí anois d'othair le hailse, lena n-áirítear sainseirbhísí diagnóiseacha, teiripeacha, agus tacaíochta ar nós raideagrafaíochta, ionscópáíochta, ceimiteiripe do na hailsí is coitianta agus seirbhísí saotharlainne. Tá an £8 milliún breise a dáileadh i mbliana do sheirbhísí ailse ag cuidiú le hearcú agus le hoiliúnt foirne breise do na haonaid ailse. Socróidh infhaighteacht eochairshainfhoirne a ghaiste is féidir na feabhsuithe i seirbhísí ailse a chur i bhfeidhm áfach.
- (c) Le cuidiú le foirne príomhchúraim i bhfáthmheas, i mbainistíocht fhadtéarmach agus i dtacaíocht othar le hailse, tá treoirilínte áitiúla do liachleachtóirí ar fháthmheas agus ar atreorú luath othar le hailse á bhforbairt faoi láthair. Eisíodh treoirilínte ar atreorú othar a mheastar ailse chéice a bheith acu cheana féin. Tá eolaire de speisialtóirí ailse, a dearadh le cumarsáid fheabhsaithe leis an earnáil otharlainne a éascú, á fhorbairt fosta.
- (d) Tá socrú seirbhísí, atá á soláthar faoi láthair in Otharlann Pháirc Belvoir, in ionad oinceolaíochta ar

shuíomh Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste faoi 2003 mar chuid de chur i bhfeidhm 'Ag Infheistiú don Todhchaí.' Tá tógáil an ionaid nua le toiseacht sa bhliain seo chugainn. De réir seo, forbrófar otharlann lae nua ar urlár C d'áraslann Otharlann na Cathrach fosta.

Performance-Related Pay

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of trust board directors and other employees eligible for performance-related pay and/or bonuses by health trust board in each of the last six years. (AQW 978/00)

Ms de Brún: The number of trust board Directors and other employees eligible for performance-related pay and/or bonuses in the last six years is set out in the attached table.

Tá líon na stiúrthóirí bhord iontaobhais agus na bhfostaithe eile atá i dteideal pá i gcoibhneas le feidhmniú agus/nó bónas le sé bliana anuas leagtha amach sa tábla seo thíos.

**NUMBER OF TRUST BOARD DIRECTORS AND EMPLOYEES RECEIVING PERFORMANCE —
RELATED PAY/BONUSES FROM 1 APRIL 1994 TO 31 MARCH 2000**

Name of Trust	Operational Date	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000
Royal Group of Hospitals and Dental Hospital HSS Trust	1.4.93	45	55	60	65	78	94
Craigavon Area Hospital Group HSS Trust	1.4.93	7	6	9	13	13*	16
Green Park HSS Trust	1.4.93	19	23	24	26	29	21*
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust	1.4.93	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ulster North Down and Ards Hospitals HSS Trust	1.4.93	29	47	49	45	TRUST DISSOLVED 1.4.98	
Eastern Ambulance Service HSS Trust	1.4.94	2	TRUST DISSOLVED 1.4.95				
North Down and Ards Community HSS Trust	1.4.94	0	0	0	0	TRUST DISSOLVED 1.4.98	
South and East Belfast HSS Trust	1.4.94	13	27	29	39	44	47
North and West Belfast HSS Trust	1.4.94	25	28	25	29	40*	41*
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	1.4.94	16	38	54	55	55	3
Newry and Mourne HSS Trust	1.4.94	4	4	5	6	6	6
Craigavon and Banbridge Community HSS Trust	1.4.94	2	16	24	25	6	22
Mater Infirmorum Hospital HSS Trust	1.4.94	8	9	9	8	8*	11*
Causeway HSS Trust	1.4.95		19	19	22*	18*	24*
Northern Ireland Ambulance Service HSS Trust	1.4.95		2	9	9	9*	12*
Armagh and Dungannon HSS Trust	1.4.96			27	27*	27*	27*
United Hospitals HSS Trust	1.4.96			13	23	24*	25*
Altnagelvin Hospitals HSS Trust	1.4.96			0	0	5	5
Foyle HSS Trust	1.4.96			37	37*	38*	40
Homefirst Community HSS Trust	1.4.96			31	54	52*	56
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	1.4.96			19	25	25*	25*
Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trust	1.4.98					48*	45*

Source: Trust Human Resource Departments:

* indicates that Directors/Senior Managers were eligible for PRP but this was withheld or restricted in order to comply with the Minister's request to restrict pay increases.

LÍON NA STIÚRTHÓIRÍ AGUS NA BHFOSTAITHE BHORD IONTAOBHAIS AG FÁIL PÁ/BÓNAS BAINTEACH LE CLEACHTADH OIBRE ÓN 1Ú AIBREÁN 1994 GO DTÍ AN 31Ú MÁRTA 2000

Ainm an Iontaobhais	Dáta Feidhmithe	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000
Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Ríoga na n-Otharlann agus na n-Otharlann Fiaclóireachta	1.4.93	45	55	60	65	78	94
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Cheantair Craigavon	1.4.93	7	6	9	13	13*	16
Iontaobhas SSS na Páirce Glaise	1.4.93	19	23	24	26	29	21*
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	1.4.93	0	0	0	0	0	0
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlanna Uladh, an Dúin Thuaidh agus na hArda	1.4.93	29	47	49	45	IONTAOBHAS SCAOILTE 1.4.98	
Iontaobhas SSS Seirbhís Otharcharr an Oirthir	1.4.94	2	IONTAOBHAS SCAOILTE 1.4.95				
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal an Dúin Thuaidh agus na hArda	1.4.94	0	0	0	0	IONTAOBHAS SCAOILTE 1.4.98	
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Theas agus Thoir	1.4.94	13	27	29	39	44	47
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh agus Thiar	1.4.94	25	28	25	29	40*	41*
Iontaobhas SSS an Dúin Lios na gCearrbhach	1.4.94	16	38	54	55	55	3
Iontaobhas SSS an Íúir agus na mBeann Boirche	1.4.94	4	4	5	6	6	6
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Craigavon agus Dhroichead na Banna	1.4.94	2	16	24	25	6	22
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann an Mater	1.4.94	8	9	9	8	8*	11*
Iontaobhas SSS an Chlocháin	1.4.95		19	19	22*	18*	24*
Iontaobhas SSS Seirbhís Otharcharr Thuaisceart Éireann	1.4.95		2	9	9	9*	12*
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha agus Dhún Geanainn	1.4.96			27	27*	27*	27*
Iontaobhas SSS na n-Otharlann Aontaithe	1.4.96			13	23	24*	25*
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlanna Alt na nGealbhan	1.4.96			0	0	5	5
Iontaobhas SSS an Fheabhail	1.4.96			37	37*	38*	40
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Homefirst	1.4.96			31	54	52*	56
Iontaobhas SSS Sliabh Speirín	1.4.96			19	25	25*	25*
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal agus Otharlanna Uladh	1.4.98					48*	45*

Foinse: Ranna Acmhainne Daonna an Iontaobhais:

* a léiríonn go raibh Stiúrthóirí/Bainisteoirí Sinsearach i dteideal PBC ach coinníodh siar é seo nó cuireadh srian air de réir iarratas an Aire le srian a chur ar mhéaduithe pá.

Clinical Waste Strategy

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) if there is an all-Ireland clinical waste strategy, (b) where the sites are located and (c) the name of the administering company.

(AQW 996/00)

Ms de Brún: A joint waste management board representing the then Department of Health and Social Services and the Department of Health and Children, Dublin, signed a 10-year principal agreement with Sterile Technologies (Ireland) Limited on 4 August 1998 for the disposal of all clinical waste within the island.

The company in the South of Ireland is Sterile Technologies (Ireland) Limited with two sites, one in Dublin and the other in Cork.

The local company is Sterile Technologies Inc (NI) Limited with one site at Antrim Hospital.

Shínigh comhbhord bainistíochta dramhaíola ag déanamh ionadaíochta ar son na Roinne Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta mar a bhí, agus An Roinn Sláinte agus Leanaí, Baile Átha Cliath, príomh-chomhaontú 10 mbliana le Sterile Technologies (Éire) Ltd ar 4 Lúnasa le haghaidh dhiúscairt na dramhaíola cliniciúla uilig ar an oileáin.

Is é Sterile Technologies (Éire) Limited an comhlacht i nDeisceart na hÉireann ag a bhfuil dhá shuíomh, ceann amháin i mBaile Átha Cliath agus an ceann eile i gCorcaigh.

Is é Sterile Technologies Inc (TÉ) Limited an comhlacht áitiúil ag a bhfuil suíomh amháin ag Otharlann Bhaile Aontroma.

Ulster Hospital: Capital Investment

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if, pursuant to AQW 748/00, she will detail (a) what meetings her officials have had with the Ulster Hospital Trust and with the Eastern Health and Social Services Board about capital investment for the Ulster Hospital site and about redevelopment and (b) who attended those meetings.

(AQW 1011/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department's officials have taken part in six meetings with senior staff from the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust and the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. The dates of the meetings are as follows:

25 September 2000
3 October 2000
16 October 2000
2 November 2000
6 November 2000
14 December 2000

The meetings were attended by staff at senior level from the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust, the Eastern Health and Social Services Board and my Department. Those attending included the chief executive, the medical director and directors of operations/acute services and corporate services from the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust, the director of planning and contracting at the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, and my director of planning and performance management.

Ghlac feidhmeannaigh mo Roinne páirt i sé chruinniú le foirne sinsearacha ó Iontaobhas Otharlann agus Phobal Uladh agus ó Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir. Is iad seo a leanas dátaí na gcrúinnithe:

25 Meán Fómhair 2000
3 Deireadh Fómhair 2000
16 Deireadh Fómhair 2000
2 Samhain 2000
6 Samhain 2000
14 Nollaig 2000

D'fhreastail foirne sinsearacha ó Iontaobhas Otharlann agus Phobal Uladh, ó Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir agus ó mo Roinn na cruinnithe. Orthu sin a d'fhreastail bhí an príomh-fheidhmeannach, an stiúrthóir míochaine agus na stiúrthóirí obráidí/géarsheirbhísí agus seirbhísí corparáideacha ó Iontaobhas Otharlann agus Phobal Uladh, an stiúrthóir pleanála agus déanta conarthaí ag Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir, agus mo stiúrthóir pleanála agus bhainistíocht feidhmíthe.

Prescribed Drugs: Wastage

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to reduce wastage of prescribed drugs.

(AQW 1034/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department's policy is to ensure that patients receive appropriate drugs, medicines, aids and appliances on the basis of their clinical need, whilst endeavouring to secure safe, effective and economic prescribing.

Various initiatives to help achieve this are in place, including prescribing incentive schemes to encourage GPs to prescribe more economically. The health and social services boards also have a new initiative, Managing Your Medicines, which has been implemented since October 2000. It is a medication review service provided from designated pharmacies for patients who are vulnerable or at risk and who appear to have difficulty in managing their medicines. Following the review, a report is sent to their GP identifying any problems and suggesting appropriate remedial action. This new service should also assist in achieving safe and cost-effective use of medication.

Is é polasaí mo Roinne a chinntiú go bhfaigheann othair na drugaí, na cógais, na háiseanna agus na fearais chuí ar bhonn a riachtanais chliniciúil, agus ag an am chéanna ag tabhairt iarrachta le hordú slán, éifeachtach agus eacnamúil a chinntiú.

Tá tionscnaimh éagsúla ann le cuidiú leis seo a bhaint amach, lena n-áirítear scéimeanna dreasachta ordaithe le liachleachtóirí a spreagadh le hordú níos eacnamúla a dhéanamh. Tá tionscnamh nua “Ag Bainistíocht do Chógas”, a cuireadh i bhfeidhm ó bhí Deireadh Fómhair 2000 ann, ag na boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta fosta. Is seirbhís athbhreithnithe cógas í a sholáthraítear ó chógaslanna údaraithe d’othair atá leochaileach nó i mbaol agus a bhfuil deacrachtaí acu i mbainistíocht a gcógas. I ndiaidh an athbhreithnithe, seoltar tuairisc chuig a liachleachtóir ag aithint fadhbanna ar bith agus ag moladh gníomhú cuí feabhais. D’fhéadfadh an tseirbhís seo cuidiú le húsáid slán chostas-éifeachtach cógais a bhaint amach.

Alcohol Strategy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline when she intends to publish an alcohol strategy. (AQW 1035/00)

Ms de Brún: I officially launched the ‘Strategy for Reducing Alcohol Related Harm’ on 5 September last year. The strategy was distributed to a wide range of interested organisations and individuals including MLAs.

Sheol mé an “Straitéis d’Ísliú Dochair a Bhaineas le hAlcól” go hoifigiúil ar an 5ú Meán Fómhair anuraidh. Dáileadh an straitéis ar réimse leathan eagraíochtaí agus daoine aonair leasmhara, lena n-áirítear TTR.

Mobile Phone Outputs: Biological Effects

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to describe fully what biological effects may be caused by outputs from mobile telephone technology. (AQO 522/00)

Ms de Brún: This is a new technology, and there has been relatively little research carried out to date. The independent expert group on mobile phones (IEGMP) in its recently published report concluded that there is scientific evidence which suggests that there may be biological effects occurring at exposures to RF radiation below current guidelines. These include thermal (localised heating) effects and non-thermal effects — for example, movement of cells. There is, for example, some evidence that subtle changes including short-term effects on the electrical activity of the brain can occur. Some scientists have suggested that these biological effects may influence behaviour — for example, sleep patterns, reaction times.

The IEGMP report, which includes an explanation of biological effects at chapter 5, is available on the Internet web site, www.iegmp.org.uk. ‘The Lancet’, vol 356, 25 November 2000, also contains articles on this issue.

A new research programme funded jointly by Government and industry was launched on 8 December 2000.

Is teicneolaíocht nua í seo agus ba bheag taighde a rinneadh uirthi go dtí seo. Ina thuairisc a foilsíodh ar na mallaibh, tháinig an grúpa saineolaithe neamhspleácha ar ghutháin phóca (GSNGP) ar an tuairim go bhfuil cruthú eolaíoch ann a mhaíonn gurbh fhéidir go bhfuil éifeachtaí bitheolaíocha ag tarlú mar gheall ar nochtadh le radaíocht MR atá faoi na treoirilínte reatha. Orthu seo tá éifeachtaí teirmeacha (téamh áitiúil) agus éifeachtaí neamhtheirmeacha — mar shampla bogadh ceall. Mar shampla, tá roinnt cruthaithe ann a léiríonn gur féidir le hathruithe caolchúiseacha, lena n-áirítear éifeachtaí gearrthéarmacha ar ghníomhaíocht leictreach na hinchinne, a tharlú. Mhaígh roinnt eolaithe gur féidir leis na héifeachtaí bitheolaíocha seo tionchar bheith acu ar an iompar — mar shampla patrúin chodlata, amanna frithghníomhaíochta.

Tá tuairisc an GSNGP, ina bhfuil miniú ar éifeachtaí bitheolaíocha i gcaibidil 5, ar fáil ar an láithreán Idirlín, www.iegmp.org.uk. Istigh sa Lancet iml. 356 Samhain 25, 2000, tá ailt ar an cheist seo fosta.

Seoladh clár taighde nua comh-mhaoinithe ag an Rialtas agus ag an earnáil thionsclaíoch ar an 8ú Nollaig 2000.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Central Administration Budget

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the central administration budget for his Department in each of the last two financial years and to advise the specific functions to which any increase will be allocated; and if he will make a statement. (AQW 939/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): My Department was established in December 1999; therefore there was no central administration budget for 1998/99. The direct running cost figure in the budget for the current financial year (2000-01) is £29.9m.

Student Finance

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment what steps he is taking following the Assembly vote on the report

of the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment into student finance.

(AQW 950/00)

Dr Farren: I was most grateful to the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee for its report and for the hard work which went into its preparation. The report was of great assistance to me in formulating my own proposals for changes to the student support arrangements. As you know, I announced my proposals to the Committee on 15 December, and I am enclosing a copy of the press release that I issued later that day containing details of my package.

You will see that, while I was unable to adopt all of the Committee's recommendations, my own proposals go a considerable way towards meeting the Committee's concerns.

I hope that despite the remaining differences between our respective approaches, the Assembly will see my package of proposals as a fair and equitable means of addressing the needs of the least well off in our society.

JUDE Programme

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail any plans to continue with the JUDE programme after December 2000 or if he is considering replacing it with another programme.

(AQW 983/00)

Dr Farren: The joint universities deaf education centre (JUDE) project is an innovative initiative aimed at supporting deaf and hearing impaired students at both universities in Northern Ireland and at improving access to higher education and ultimately employment for such students. My Department's financial support of nearly £310,000 over three years for the initiative ended on 31 December 2000. A report on the project has been sought, and I shall wish to seek advice from the Northern Ireland higher education council (NIHEC) on the report and on whether, and in what form, there should be further departmental support for the programme. In the meantime, I understand that the universities will continue the work of the JUDE programme within their core services for disabled students.

Definitions of "Urban" and "Rural"

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to state the definition of (a) "urban" and (b) "rural" used within his Department.

(AQW 1066/00)

Dr Farren: The Department does not use the terms "urban" or "rural" in respect of its service provision or in the presentation of its statistical data. It has not therefore experienced a need to define these terms. Departmental

programmes and services are normally administered on a geographical basis by reference to a local authority, job centre, district or regional area.

Manufacturing Industry: Training

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline the steps he is taking to increase training levels within the manufacturing industry.

(AQW 1073/00)

Dr Farren: First, I have asked the Northern Ireland skills task force to advise me on the demand for labour and skills. The task force has identified a number of priority areas including manufacturing industry. A skills monitoring report and research on electronic industry skills needs will each be published early in the new year. Secondly, a number of initiatives have been introduced. Increases in places in higher and further education have been targeted on the priority skills areas. In addition, the further education colleges have been provided with additional funding to address skills issues especially manufacturing. The Jobskills programme has been focused on priority skills areas with premium funding made available to increase the number of places in manufacturing skills. Similarly, the modern apprenticeship programme has been targeted on growth areas. I am confident that the measures I have taken will increase year on year the number training for the manufacturing sector. I will, of course, through the skills task force monitor the situation to seek to meet the needs of Northern Ireland employers.

New Deal

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to (a) detail the impact of the New Deal on unemployment and (b) give his assessment of the effectiveness of New Deal and outline his plans for its improvement.

(AQW 1076/00)

Dr Farren: Between the date of the introduction of the New Deal for 18- to 24-year-olds in April 1998 and November 2000 there have been significant falls in the numbers of unemployed claimants who are within the target groups covered by the two main New Deals — New Deal for 18- to 24-year-olds and the New Deal for 25-plus. The numbers in the 18 to 24-year-olds group — those who are unemployed, aged between 18 and 24 and claiming jobseeker's allowance (JSA) for six months or more — have fallen by 65% and in the New Deal 25-plus group — those who are unemployed, aged 25 or more and claiming JSA for 18 months or more — the numbers have fallen by 57%.

While the fall in numbers may not be attributable solely to New Deal — for example, a percentage would

probably have gained employment irrespective of New Deal — it has certainly had a significant effect. This can be demonstrated by a comparison with the fall, over the same period, in the numbers of those claiming JSA who were not eligible for either of the two main New Deals, which totalled only 6%.

The significant fall in claimant numbers and the generally positive findings from the initial phases of the extensive programme of evaluation which is in progress demonstrate that New Deal has been very effective in assisting unemployed people in Northern Ireland back into the workforce.

There is, however, always room for improvement and my Department is continuously seeking ways to improve New Deal and tailor it to meet the specific needs of Northern Ireland. For example, in the new year, in partnership with the basic skills unit, my officials will be introducing new initiatives in the area of basic skills, which will help in the identification and assessment of basic skills needs. A team has also been set up to review the needs of those who face multiple barriers to employment, and further training will be provided for all New Deal personal advisers covering areas such as basic skills and action planning.

On a national level, a restructured New Deal for 25-plus will be introduced from April 2001 incorporating a number of suggestions for improvement, covering all of the New Deals, I made recently to the GB Minister, Tessa Jowell. The most significant of these is the increase in the intensive activity period from 13 weeks to up to 26 weeks.

Work is also under way on the restructuring of the New Deal for 18- to 24-year-olds, although this is still at a relatively early stage of development.

In addition to the two main New Deals, improvements are also being made to the smaller, voluntary, but equally important New Deals. For example, following successful pilots in a number of areas, from April 2001, the New Deal for Disabled People will be rolled out across Northern Ireland to cover all claimants to incapacity benefits, on a purely voluntary basis.

I can assure you that I will keep New Deal under review and ensure that it continues to assist unemployed people in Northern Ireland back into the workforce.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Draft Regional Transport Strategy

Mr McNamee asked the Minister for Regional Development when he intends to meet with the Minister for the Environment and Local Government in the

Republic of Ireland to discuss the draft regional transport strategy. (AQW 895/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): In my statement to the Assembly on 4 December 2000 I indicated that it is my intention to meet with my counterparts in the Republic of Ireland when diary commitments permit. They are the Minister for the Environment and Local Government, Noel Dempsey, and the Minister for Public Enterprise, Mary O'Rourke.

Rainfall Trends

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the changes he has identified in rainfall trends which will require additional flood management planning. (AQW 908/00)

Mr Campbell: Water Service is carrying out 105 area drainage studies to determine the improvements required to reduce the risk of flooding and meet environmental objectives. Historical information on rainfall levels is being taken into account in these studies. Water Service and Roads Service also use rainfall forecast information to assist with operational planning including the response to major incidents such as flooding.

The identification of changes in rainfall trends, however, is a long-term process. At present there is no scientific data available to indicate a conclusive change in the weather pattern. However, research by the Meteorological Office into rainfall patterns generally is continuing. The results of this research will be used by my Department to determine whether any changes are necessary to current infrastructure design standards.

Central Administration Budget

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the central administration budget for his Department in each of the last two financial years and to advise the specific functions to which any increase will be allocated; and if he will make a statement.

(AQW 936/00)

Mr Campbell: The Department for Regional Development's central administration budget meets the salary, general administrative and other costs of all staff other than those employed in roads and water functions. The following information is the total for each of the last two financial years:

	£m
1999 – 00	16.2
2000 – 01	16.9

The draft Budget for 2001-02 provides an increase in the Department's overall allocation for administration costs. This will help meet inflationary pressures as well

as the costs of additional staff to take forward important new work — for example, in transport.

West Belfast: Arterial Routes

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans he has to upgrade arterial routes in West Belfast. (AQW 965/00)

Mr Campbell: With the exception of the proposed M1/Westlink improvements, my Department's Roads Service has no plans to upgrade arterial routes in West Belfast. These proposed improvements, if implemented, will have an effect on the usage of other roads and are expected to relieve congestion on parallel routes, including those in West Belfast.

The longer-term transportation and road infrastructure needs of the Greater Belfast area, including West Belfast, will be addressed as part of the Belfast metropolitan area plan, work on which is due to commence towards the end of 2000-01.

In the meantime, as part of my Department's policy to develop a more balanced and integrated transport system in Northern Ireland, Roads Service, in conjunction with Translink, proposes to introduce a quality bus corridor on the Falls Road/Andersonstown Road route during 2001-02. The scheme will reserve an existing lane over much of the length of this route for the exclusive use of buses and taxis.

Sewage Treatment Works

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development if, in relation to the sewage treatment works at Hunters Crescent, Omagh, he will (a) explain the delay in deciding its future, (b) confirm the existence of plans to add to the structure of the works; and if he will make a statement. (AQW 973/00)

Mr Campbell: In the light of the representations made to me at meetings on 27 September 2000 by members of Omagh District Council and local residents, Water Service is presently carrying out further detailed costings and land valuations on the council's preferred site. I wish to consider all of these complex issues very carefully, and I would hope to be in a position to make an announcement next month on the way ahead.

Pending the construction of the new works, it is proposed to improve the operational performance of the existing works at Hunter's Crescent by the installation of reed beds and new screening and ancillary equipment including storm tanks and pumps. These improvements will help to minimise the risk of flooding and will improve effluent quality. The estimated cost is in the order of £1.5 million, and it is expected that the work will commence in the autumn of 2001. The carrying out

of these improvement works will not have a bearing on the selection of the site for the new works.

Rail Services (Newry to Belfast)

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to (a) upgrade the Translink rail service between Newry and Belfast, (b) introduce a timetable suitable for commuters travelling from Newry to Belfast and arriving in time to start work at 9.00 am, (c) provide information for passengers at unmanned stations and (d) improve the number, quality and comfort of railway carriages. (AQW 1022/00)

Mr Campbell: Translink has advised that there are no plans at present to upgrade the rail service between Newry and Belfast. The service runs on modern, continuously welded track that was installed as part of the upgrade of the Belfast-Dublin rail line. There is already a rail service specifically directed at commuters departing from Newry at 7.25 am, and arriving at Great Victoria Street at 8.37 am and Belfast Central Station at 8.48 am. Translink has also advised that plans to provide information for passengers at unmanned stations are included in a project to enhance or replace the long-line public address system. In addition, all unmanned halts are regularly inspected to ensure timetable information is available. However, as Translink suffer significant levels of vandalism at unmanned halts this information can frequently be destroyed. On 18 December 2000 the Assembly approved £19.6 million additional revenue for the railways in 2001-02. This will allow for the purchase of new trains to replace the existing class 80 trains. Translink considers that the quality, comfort and reliability of these trains will greatly exceed the current stock once their commissioning is completed. However, Translink currently has no plans to increase the overall number of trains on the Newry to Belfast line, as new stock will simply replace existing stock.

Railway Network

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his policy in relation to the railway network in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1099/00)

Mr Campbell: I remain committed to maintaining and developing the rail service in Northern Ireland. Ideally I would like to see the current network not only retained, but expanded with modern trains providing a frequent service on upgraded track. The £19.6 million additional resources for the railway network approved by the Assembly on 18 December 2000 will now allow work to begin on an investment programme. This will bring the existing core network and rolling stock up to modern safety and quality standards in accordance with the consolidation option outlined in the railway task force's interim report.

Public Transport (Carrickfergus To Mallusk)

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide public transport from Carrickfergus to Mallusk to facilitate residents taking up employment in the Mallusk area. (AQW 1194/00)

Mr Campbell: Translink has informed me that it has plans to introduce a service between Carrickfergus and Mallusk to be financed by the rural transport fund, but as yet details have not been finalised. The service will be advertised in the local press.

Newry Bypass Upgrade

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to upgrade the Newry bypass to dual carriageway standard. (AQO 513/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service is in the process of commissioning a route feasibility study to identify the best option for upgrading the stretch of the A1 from Beech Hill to Cloghogue roundabout. The study will examine options for:

- improving and upgrading the existing road — including the Newry bypass — to dual carriageway standard; and
- providing a new dual carriageway route from Beech Hill to join the Newry bypass in the vicinity of Camlough Road — this would involve the dualling of the southern section only of the existing bypass.

The preferred option will be considered for inclusion in the Roads Service 10-year forward planning schedule of major works which is due to be published next year.

Recycled Aggregates

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the volume of recycled aggregates (a) available in Northern Ireland and (b) used in Northern Ireland in works undertaken by or on behalf of his Department in each of the past five years. (AQO 526/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department has no information on the volume of recycled aggregates available in Northern Ireland, nor does it keep detailed records of the volumes of such materials used by it or its contractors. My Department does, however, seek to recycle materials where it is cost effective to do so.

Toome Bypass

Mr McClelland asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that the Toome bypass road project will proceed as planned. (AQO 520/00)

Mr Campbell: I can confirm that my Department's Roads Service is continuing to progress this project through the necessary statutory procedures and, assuming there are no objections to the vesting order and that funds are available for the project, work on site will commence early 2002.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Central Administration Budget

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the central administration budget for his Department in each of the last two financial years and to advise the specific functions to which any increase will be allocated; and if he will make a statement.

(AQW 943/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): The central administration costs for my Department in the current financial year and the next financial year are as follows:

	£m
2000 – 2001	15.6
2001 – 2002	16.3

The proposed budget of £16.3m for 2001-02 includes an increase of £0.7m to meet the cost of pay/price increases.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr R Hutchinson asked the Minister for Social Development if, following the end of the consultation period on the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme, he will detail (a) the number of submissions received (b) from whom they were received and (c) his proposals to eradicate fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 954/00)

Mr Morrow: Consultation on the proposals for the new Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme, announced in July 2000, concluded at the end of September 2000. Forty-six responses were received from:

Northern Ireland Housing Executive – Energy Conservation Officer

Social Security Agency

Omagh District Council

Magherafelt District Council

Eastern Health and Social Services Board

British Medical Association NIO

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Ballymoney Borough Council
 Council for Energy Efficiency Development
 Down District Council
 Craigavon Borough Council
 Phoenix Natural Gas
 DCI Energy Control Ltd
 Oma-Wrap Home Insulation Ltd
 Northern Ireland Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux
 Bryson House
 Northern Ireland Electricity
 Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zones
 Bryson House – Installers
 Gingerbread
 Rural Community Network (NI)
 Building Research Establishment (BRE)
 Abbey Insulation Ltd
 Northern Ireland Tenants Action Project
 Age Concern (Londonderry)
 North Down Borough Council
 EAGA Partnership
 NEA (National Energy Action)
 Housing Rights Service
 Western Regional Energy Agency & Network (WREAN)
 Rural Development Council
 Northern Ireland Environment Link
 National Saving Energy Ltd
 Royal National Institute for the Blind
 Energy Saving Trust
 Northern Ireland Consumer Committee for Electricity
 General Consumer Council
 Belfast City Council - Health and Environmental Services Department
 Newry and Mourne District Council
 Northern Ireland Housing Executive – Chief Executive
 Department for Social Development - Statistics and Research Branch
 Chartered Institute of Housing in Northern Ireland
 Ards Borough Council
 Northern Ireland Housing Council
 Age Concern Northern Ireland
 The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations

Suggested amendments to the proposals are currently being considered, and I anticipate this exercise will be concluded by the end of February when I will announce details of any proposed changes to the scheme.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr R Hutchinson asked the Minister for Social Development when he last met with representatives of the EAGA Partnership to discuss the operation and further development of the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme; and if he will make a statement. (AQW 955/00)

Mr Morrow: EAGA Partnership is the manager of the current Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES), and my officials meet with them regularly to discuss performance and operational issues. In regard to the development of the new DEES programme, meetings took place with representatives of EAGA in May and November this year.

Fire Authority Report (Culmore Gardens)

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm if he has received a fire authority report, as requested by the Housing Executive, into a fire at Culmore Gardens, Andersonstown and if so what are the details. (AQW 964/00)

Mr Morrow: I have not received or asked for a copy of a report. Since this is a Housing Executive property, the chief executive, as accounting officer for that organisation, is responsible for establishing the causes of damage to its property. The chief executive has confirmed that the Housing Executive has received a report of fire in relation to this property. I understand that the fire was most likely caused accidentally by a child using either matches or a lighter. The alarm was raised by the activation of the mains-powered smoke alarm.

Home Purchases: Housing Executive

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a breakdown by constituency of home purchases under the special purchases of evacuated dwellings (SPED) and acquisition of suitable houses (ASH) schemes within the past 12 months. (AQW 966/00)

Mr Morrow: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has advised me that in the 12 months ending 30 November 2000:

- 79 houses have been bought under the scheme for the purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED). A breakdown of the information is only available by Housing Executive district and that information is as follows;
- there have been no acquisitions in the past 12 months under the acquisition of satisfactory houses (ASH) scheme.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 12 January 2001

Written Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Ulster Farmers' Union

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to (a) confirm that she has had regular meetings with the Ulster Farmers' Union and (b) detail what issues were discussed. (AQW 1130/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I have met representatives of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) on a number of occasions since the restoration of devolution. I made a trip to union headquarters in October when I met with the commodity and central committee chairpersons. My most recent business meeting was in early November, although I also hosted the launch of the UFU food promotion initiative at the end of November.

During the course of my meetings with the UFU, we have discussed a wide range of issues reflecting the current concerns of the industry, such as the difficulties in the pigs sector, the case for the relaxation of the beef export restrictions, the new LFA support scheme, agrimony compensation and the draft Programme for Government.

At an operational level, officials from throughout my Department are in contact with UFU officials and office bearers almost daily.

EDUCATION

Special Advisers

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to confirm that his special adviser has a criminal record resulting from terrorist-related convictions.

(AQW 980/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): I do not consider it appropriate to answer requests for personal details about civil servants.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail how many telecommunications masts have been placed within the grounds of schools and if he will identify, by management type, those schools in which masts have been erected. (AQW 990/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that there are currently six such masts, with one in each of the following schools -

Controlled Schools	Carrickfergus Grammar Ballyclare Secondary Laurelhill Community College, Lisburn Killinchy Primary School
Catholic Maintained Schools	St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint
Voluntary Grammar Schools	St Mary's Christian Brothers Grammar, Belfast

There is no evidence to suggest that the health and safety of staff and pupils in schools is affected by telecommunications masts on school premises. The independent expert group on mobile phones, which reported on this matter last May, concluded that mobile phone base stations presented no general health and safety risks. However, in line with the recommendations in the group's report, the Radiocommunications Agency will be carrying out an audit of telecommunications masts on school premises to ensure that exposure guidelines are not exceeded and the masts comply with agreed specifications. I am aware of genuine concern about the issue, and I will continue to monitor the situation closely.

There are four masts on education and library board-owned premises but neither the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools nor the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education have entered into contracts with telecommunications suppliers for the siting of masts within their grounds. The erection of masts on school grounds is a matter for individual school authorities. I am satisfied that the resources allocated to them are sufficient to meet the funding needs of schools. My Department is not party to contracts between telecommunications providers and school authorities and has no plans to monitor any such contracts.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if he will ensure that all telecommunications masts sited within school grounds meet with current safety legislation. (AQW 991/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that there are currently six such masts, with one in each of the following schools -

Controlled Schools	Carrickfergus Grammar Ballyclare Secondary Laurelhill Community College, Lisburn Killinchy Primary School
Catholic Maintained Schools	St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint
Voluntary Grammar Schools	St Mary's Christian Brothers Grammar, Belfast

There is no evidence to suggest that the health and safety of staff and pupils in schools is affected by telecommunications masts on school premises. The independent expert group on mobile phones, which reported on this matter last May, concluded that mobile phone base stations presented no general health and safety risks. However, in line with the recommendations in the group's report, the Radiocommunications Agency will be carrying out an audit of telecommunications masts on school premises to ensure that exposure guidelines are not exceeded and the masts comply with agreed specifications. I am aware of genuine concern about the issue and I will continue to monitor the situation closely.

There are four masts on education and library board-owned premises but neither the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools nor the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education have entered into contracts with telecommunications suppliers for the siting of masts within their grounds. The erection of masts on school grounds is a matter for individual school authorities. I am satisfied that the resources allocated to them are sufficient to meet the funding needs of schools. My Department is not party to contracts between telecommunications providers and school authorities and has no plans to monitor any such contracts.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if he will confirm that safeguards exist to protect the health and safety of staff and pupils in schools or colleges where telecommunications masts are currently sited.

(AQW 992/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that there are currently six such masts, with one in each of the following schools -

Controlled Schools	Carrickfergus Grammar Ballyclare Secondary Laurelhill Community College, Lisburn Killinchy Primary School
Catholic Maintained Schools	St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint
Voluntary Grammar Schools	St Mary's Christian Brothers Grammar, Belfast

There is no evidence to suggest that the health and safety of staff and pupils in schools is affected by telecommunications masts on school premises. The independent expert group on mobile phones, which reported on this matter last May, concluded that mobile phone base stations presented no general health and safety risks. However, in line with the recommendations in the group's report, the Radiocommunications Agency will be carrying out an audit of telecommunications masts on school premises to ensure that exposure guidelines are not exceeded and the masts comply with agreed specifications. I am aware of genuine concern about this issue, and I will continue to monitor the situation closely.

There are four masts on education and library board-owned premises but neither the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools nor the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education have entered into contracts with telecommunications suppliers for the siting of masts within their grounds. The erection of masts on school grounds is a matter for individual school authorities. I am satisfied that the resources allocated to them are sufficient to meet the funding needs of schools. My Department is not party to contracts between telecommunications providers and school authorities and has no plans to monitor any such contracts.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to reduce the need for boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education or individual schools to seek alternative funding by entering into contracts with telecommunications suppliers that necessitate the siting of masts within their grounds and if he will make a statement.

(AQW 993/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that there are currently six such masts, with one in each of the following schools -

Controlled Schools	Carrickfergus Grammar Ballyclare Secondary Laurelhill Community College, Lisburn Killinchy Primary School
Catholic Maintained Schools	St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint
Voluntary Grammar Schools	St Mary's Christian Brothers Grammar, Belfast

There is no evidence to suggest that the health and safety of staff and pupils in schools is affected by telecommunications masts on school premises. The independent expert group on mobile phones, which reported on this matter last May, concluded that mobile phone base stations presented no general health and safety risks. However, in line with the recommendations in the group's report, the Radiocommunications Agency will be carrying out an audit of telecommunications masts on school premises

to ensure that exposure guidelines are not exceeded and the masts comply with agreed specifications. I am aware of genuine concern about this issue, and I will continue to monitor the situation closely.

There are four masts on education and library board-owned premises but neither the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools nor the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education have entered into contracts with telecommunications suppliers for the siting of masts within their grounds. The erection of masts on school grounds is a matter for individual school authorities. I am satisfied that the resources allocated to them are sufficient to meet the funding needs of schools. My Department is not party to contracts between telecommunications providers and school authorities and has no plans to monitor any such contracts.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to ensure that he will closely monitor contracts entered into by telecommunications providers and education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education or individuals. (AQW 994/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that there are currently six such masts, with one in each of the following schools -

Controlled Schools	Carrickfergus Grammar Ballyclare Secondary Laurelhill Community College, Lisburn Killinchy Primary School
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There are four masts on education and library board-owned premises but neither the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools nor the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education have entered into contracts with telecommunications suppliers for the siting

of masts within their grounds. The erection of masts on school grounds is a matter for individual school authorities. I am satisfied that the resources allocated to them are sufficient to meet the funding needs of schools. My Department is not party to contracts between telecommunications providers and school authorities and has no plans to monitor any such contracts.

Urban and Rural

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to state the definition of (a) urban, and (b) rural used within his Department. (AQW 1005/00)

Mr M McGuinness: In general terms, urban applies to cities and towns and rural to all other areas.

For the purposes of the new viability criteria for Irish-medium and integrated primary schools, the Department is applying the definition of urban to Belfast and Derry and rural to all other areas.

Anti-Smoking

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of the impact of anti-smoking programmes in schools in the last ten years. (AQW 1046/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I am very aware of the importance of getting across the anti-smoking message in schools. This is an aspect of health education that is a compulsory element of the school curriculum. My Department, in conjunction with other bodies, has issued guidance to schools on smoking as part of an overall package on the misuse of drugs. However, it must be recognised that this is only part of the picture; a school can only ensure that it gets across the message about the harmful effects of smoking. Outside school there are unfortunately very strong messages that promote and encourage young people to smoke.

While no assessments have been carried out in the past ten years on the impact of schools on anti-smoking, the Health Promotion Agency has carried out a number of campaigns over the past number of years. Although these were not targeted specifically at schools, they have aimed to reduce the incidence of smoking among young people. Evaluations of these campaigns showed that they had had positive results.

Buildings and Amenities: West Tyrone

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Education to (a) detail all buildings and amenities within his responsibility in the constituency of West Tyrone (b) outline the percentage of his budget that has been allocated to the West Tyrone constituency and (c) explain how this compares with the previous budget. (AQW 1090/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Responsibility for buildings and amenities rests with the owners. Within the education sector in West Tyrone, the owners are the Western Education and Library Board and individual voluntary bodies. Budget information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Investment: East Antrim

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the IDB has any plans to attract investment to the East Antrim area. (AQW 1028/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The IDB seeks to encourage new employment from existing companies and new investors. In the past couple of years in particular, this investment has been mostly from the knowledge-based sectors such as telecommunications, software development and call centre operations. The recent world-class investments by Nortel Networks in Monkstown and by C-MAC and Solelectron mean that East Antrim is now very well placed as an attractive location for further inward investment. Land for investments is available at Carrickfergus and Larne.

The IDB has also been working with local councils, including those in East Antrim, to support the councils' own efforts and to ensure co-operation with the IDB in the attraction of these kinds of projects. The work has included participation in the CORE group of councils' strategy conference in May 2000. The IDB has also recently held a seminar for all council economic development officers in order to share experiences in marketing Northern Ireland as an investment location and encourage joint working in the future.

Industry: Use of Recycled Products

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he is taking to encourage the use of recycled products in industry. (AQW 1029/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Since 1993, my Department, through the Industrial Research & Technology Unit (IRTU), has managed a range of programmes to encourage industry to improve its environmental performance and competitiveness. Over that time the emphasis has shifted from recycling towards waste minimisation and reuse as the preferred options in the waste hierarchy.

Market-led demand for recycled products is essential to the economic viability of waste recycling. The environ-

mental newsletter produced by IRTU, 'POINT', has featured articles promoting the use and purchase of recycled products. It has also highlighted the NI 2000 buy recycled campaign, which aims to close the recycling loop by increasing the demand for recycled products.

My Department, with the Department of the Environment, is supporting an international conference, exhibition and design competition aimed at promoting the development of markets for recycled products. The event 'Blue Skies - Green Horizons', to be held in the Waterfront Hall, Belfast from 5 February to 7 February, will highlight how new sustainable business opportunities can be created by developing products that use recycled materials.

Since 1994, IRTU's waste exchange bureau has supported the development of a network of local recycling companies by facilitating the exchange of waste materials between producers and potential users. The recently launched Internet-based waste exchange, NIWEB, has improved the sourcing of recyclable wastes, helping local companies respond to demands for recycled products and materials.

IRTU provides financial support to promote environmental auditing and the development of accredited environmental management systems within businesses. Participating companies are encouraged to adopt green purchasing policies to reduce their environmental impacts and improve resource efficiency.

The supply chain challenge, which encourages business champions to influence the greening of their supplier base, has been actively supported and promoted by IRTU.

Potential Investors

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of IDB and LEDU potential investors who visited Northern Ireland in each of the past five years and (b) the areas visited by constituency. (AQW 1031/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The IDB records details of potential inward investor visits by district council area and has not maintained a separate record of visits by parliamentary constituency.

The attached table provides details of visits, by potential inward investors to district council areas, arranged by the IDB between April 1995 and March 2000. The IDB deals with all inward visits, irrespective of the size of the potential new project; this is why there are no separate figures for LEDU.

However, LEDU works closely with the IDB and the various councils in those visits that have relevance to their client companies. In November 1999, for example, LEDU, in conjunction with Into the West, a consortium of the five local district councils in Tyrone and Fermanagh including LEDU, hosted a conference in Omagh when

15 companies from Australia, Canada and New Zealand visited the region to seek out opportunities for joint venture investments with small companies there. The investors visited companies in the constituencies of West Tyrone, Mid Ulster, and Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

VISITS TO DISTRICT COUNCIL AREAS BY POTENTIAL INVESTORS

	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/2000
Antrim	18	34	21	44	18
Ards	3	10	1	4	4
Armagh	1	4	2	2	2
Ballymena	3	0	5	4	1
Ballymoney	1	3	2	2	0
Banbridge	3	1	1	1	0
Belfast	55	62	82	78	102
Carrickfergus	7	22	15	11	8
Castlereagh	8	6	2	7	6
Coleraine	3	7	7	3	1
Cookstown	17	10	9	3	4
Craigavon	16	15	16	11	9
Derry	30	32	14	29	16
Down	2	3	4	5	3
Dungannon	9	4	3	1	1
Fermanagh	11	15	5	2	6
Larne	4	1	9	10	2
Limavady	2	7	2	2	2
Lisburn	41	31	23	35	11
Magherafelt	4	0	1	1	0
Moyle	0	0	0	0	0
Newry and Mourne	16	9	5	7	10
Newtownabbey	19	22	20	18	33
North Down	9	3	4	7	5
Omagh	6	8	5	5	8
Strabane	9	10	2	7	4
Total	297	319	260	299	256

Notes: Visits to Northern Ireland which do not include interest in specific Council areas are excluded from this table.

Total District Council visits may exceed total visits to Northern Ireland as companies may visit more than one District Council area.

IDB: American Offices

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans to review the number and location of IDB offices in the United States of America and whether he proposes to establish an office

in Washington D.C. to work in co-operation with the Northern Ireland Bureau. (AQW 1038/00)

Sir Reg Empey: IDB's resources, including the number and location of its offices, are constantly reviewed and aligned to the inward investment opportunity in the territorial and sectoral markets across the USA.

The inward investment business opportunity from Washington D.C. has been adequately serviced to date from the IDB's office in Boston, in co-operation with the Northern Ireland Bureau. However, I will be looking at the wider opportunities over the coming months in view of the recent announcement about the future of the Department's agencies.

IDB: American Offices

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total cost incurred in each of the last two financial years by each of the four IDB offices in the United States of America and the amount proposed under the draft Budget for 2001/2002.

(AQW 1039/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The cost incurred for the past two years is tabled below. The Chicago (head office) costs include all centralised administration billing, IT and management costs common to all the USA offices. It is not possible to meaningfully allocate the PR activity costs by location due to the cross-sectoral and geographical nature of the activities.

	1999/00	2000/01
Chicago	£1,120,000	£1,125,000
San Jose	£463,000	£500,000
Boston	£311,000	£309,000
Atlanta	£115,000	£143,000
Total	£2,009,000	£2,077,000
PR Activity	£1,154,000	£1,137,000

The budgets for 2001/2002 have not yet been agreed.

IDB: Boston Office

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail which of the IDB offices in the United States of America is responsible for interaction with the political and business communities in Washington D.C. (AQW 1040/00)

Sir Reg Empey: IDB's office in Boston is responsible for targeting the business community in Washington DC, and establishes links with the Northern Ireland Bureau on political influencers in that area.

Average Wage

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the average wage for (a) an adult male in Northern Ireland for each of the last five years and (b) an adult female in Northern Ireland for each of the last five years. (AQW 1062/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The average gross weekly earnings of full-time adult employees whose pay was unaffected by absence for each of the last five years by gender are as follows:

AVERAGE GROSS WEEKLY EARNINGS - 1995 - 2000

	Male Adult	Female Adult
1995	£330.90	£251.40
1996	£337.40	£256.90
1997	£335.90	£265.20
1998	£367.70	£277.60
1999	£376.80	£295.10
2000	£393.30	£307.30

Source: New Earnings Survey (NES); DETI

Aggregates Tax

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to (a) give his assessment of the aggregate tax on quarrying and (b) outline the steps he is taking to counter its introduction into Northern Ireland. (AQW 1074/00)

Sir Reg Empey: On 29 November 2000, Mark Durkan and officials from relevant Departments including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment met representatives of the Quarry Products Association (QPA) to hear their assessment of the impact of the proposed aggregates levy on the Northern Ireland quarrying sector.

Mark Durkan made a subsequent statement in response to the Assembly motion on 12 December 2000, setting out the position and the steps that he and ministerial colleagues were taking to fully assess the impact of the levy on the quarrying industry and the local economy as the basis for deciding whether a sustainable case can be made to the Treasury. Of course, I am concerned about the particular impact of the levy on the competitiveness of Northern Ireland quarrying products companies, and Ministerial colleagues and I, are giving the matter the fullest consideration. We are also having regard to the objectives on sustainable development that the Executive have signed up to in the draft Programme for Government.

Targeting Social Need

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to (a) list the designated Targeting

Social Need areas in each constituency (b) detail any recent review of those areas and (c) give his assessment of Targeting Social Need in the Strangford constituency. (AQW 1075/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's New TSN action plan, together with all other departmental action plans, will be published shortly by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and will contain, a) details of the areas designated, and b) the basis on which areas were reviewed to consider and identify disadvantage.

As regards the Strangford constituency, my reply to AQW 886/00 explained that the councils within the constituency do not exhibit overall high levels of disadvantage compared to other areas, and have therefore not been designated for New TSN purposes by the Department.

The Department will, however, react to significant employment changes in an area, whether designated under New TSN or not. The establishment of the Ards task force within the Strangford constituency is an example of this approach.

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Christmas Cards

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of official Christmas cards he has sent (b) the cost of their design, publication and postage and (c) the list of people on the Minister's official Christmas card list. (AQW 1111/00)

Sir Reg Empey:

- The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has sent approximately 410 official Christmas cards.
- The Minister's official Christmas card was ordered from a charity catalogue at a cost of £810. Postage cost £87.
- Christmas cards are typically sent to individuals and members of organisations with which the Department regularly corresponds or which have a significant interest in the Department's activities and responsibilities.

Climate Change Levy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his contingency plans to protect the international competitiveness of energy-intensive companies should the European Commission refuse the package of measures associated with the introduction of the climate change levy. (AQW 1140/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Policy on the climate change levy is a reserved taxation matter and remains the responsibility of Parliament. I therefore relay the following answer

provided in response to the same question, raised as an oral Parliamentary Question in the House of Lords on 23 November 2000:

“The Government have always made clear that aspects of the climate change levy package are subject to state aid clearance. The most recent draft of the EU guidelines for environmental measures was published in October. I am glad to say that it is encouraging for the UK applications. The Government are continuing to work closely with the Commission to ensure a timely approval of their applications.”

Visitor Centres

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of visitors to the top ten visitor centres in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years. (AQW 1141/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) collates figures for a range of facilities included in the itineraries of visitors to Northern Ireland. “Tourist visitors” may comprise only a small proportion of total visitors to the facilities over the year. Performance figures are presented in NITB’s annual Visitor Attraction Survey report. A copy of the report is available in the Assembly Library.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Rural Shops and Post Offices: Rates Relief

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he is taking to implement the provisions of Schedule 1 of the Rates (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and if he will indicate when rural shops and post offices in Northern Ireland can expect to benefit from the same level of rates relief as that already enjoyed by their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. (AQW 1064/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I refer you to the answer (AQW 621/00), which I gave on 24 November to the Member for East Antrim, Sean Neeson, in the Official Report for that date — the Written Answers to Questions booklet that was issued to all Members.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Special Advisers

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that her special

adviser has a criminal record for terrorist convictions and to give the details of these convictions.

(AQW 979/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I do not consider it appropriate to answer questions requesting personal details about civil servants.

Ní shílím go bhfuil sé ceart ceisteanna ag iarraidh sonraí pearsanta faoi státseirbhísí a fhreagairt.

Down Lisburn Trust: Mental Health

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail when she expects the £100,000 diverted from mental health by Down Lisburn Trust for acute services to be returned.

(AQW 981/00)

Ms de Brún: As previously indicated, Down Lisburn Trust hopes to restore the £100,000 diverted this year from mental health to acute services next year, subject to resource availability.

Mar a tugadh le fios roimhe, tá súil ag Iontaobhas an Dúin agus Lios na gCearrbhach an £100,000 a atreoraíodh ón MheabhairShláinte go géarsheirbhísí i mbliana a thabhairt ar ais don MheabhairShláinte sa bhliain seo chugainn ag brath ar infhaighteacht acmhainne.

Bills: Leaving Care and Child Protection and Vulnerable Adults

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail when the Leaving Care and the Child Protection and Vulnerable Adults Bills will be implemented, and to make a statement.

(AQW 982/00)

Ms de Brún: The Leaving Care Bill has been included in the legislative programme for the current session of the Assembly. The Child Protection and Vulnerable Adults Bill will be included in the following session. Before they are introduced in the Assembly, consultation documents for each Bill will be issued outlining the Department’s proposals for change. It is intended that these proposals will be issued for public consultation in the near future. Subject to Assembly approval, and the production of any supporting regulations and guidance, the new legislation will be implemented as soon as possible.

Cuireadh an Bille Ag Fágáil Cúraim sa Chlár Reachtaíochta do sheisiún reatha an Tionóil agus beidh an Bille um Chosaint Páistí agus Aosach Leochaileach sa chéad seisiún eile. Sula gcuirfear faoi bhráid an Tionóil iad, eiseofar doiciméid chomhairliúcháin ar gach Bille ag leagan amach moltaí na Roinne le haghaidh athrú. Tá sé beartaithe go n-eiseofar na moltaí seo le haghaidh comhairliúcháin phoiblí gan mhoill. Ag brath ar

fhaomhadh an Tionóil, agus ar sholáthar rialacha agus ar threoracha tacaíochta, cuirfear an reachtaíocht nua i bhfeidhm a luaithe agus is féidir.

Epidemiology Survey

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to conduct an epidemiology survey on mental health as current data and statistics need updating. (AQW 984/00)

Ms de Brún: I am considering a number of large-scale health surveys, including one on mental health. The timing of these surveys will depend on securing the necessary finance.

Tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh ar roinnt suirbhéanna mórscaála, ceann ar an mheabhairshláinte san áireamh. Beidh uainiú na suirbhéanna seo ag brath ar an airgead riachtanach a fháil.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging: Waiting Time

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current waiting time for patients requiring a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan. (AQW 998/00)

Ms de Brún: This information is not routinely collected centrally.

Information obtained from the Royal Victoria Hospital indicates that non-urgent cases wait for up to 22 months for an MRI scan. Urgent cases can be seen more quickly but can wait for up to five months.

Information obtained from Musgrave Park Hospital indicates that routine cases wait approximately seven months for an MRI scan. Urgent cases can be seen in three to six weeks, but emergency cases can be seen much sooner.

A portable scanner is also in operation at the Antrim Area Hospital, but details of waiting times for this scanner are not available.

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach de ghnáth.

Léiríonn an t-eolas seo a fuarthas ó Ospidéal Ríoga Victoria go bhfanann cásanna nach bhfuil práinn leo suas le 22 mhí faoi choinne scanadh MRI. Is féidir cásanna práinneacha a fheiceáil níos gaiste ach féadann siad fanacht suas le cúig mhí.

Léiríonn an t-eolas a fuarthas ó Ospidéal Pháirc Musgrave go bhfanann gnáthchásanna thart ar seacht mí faoi choinne scanadh MRI. Is féidir cásanna níos práinní a fheiceáil i 3-6 seachtaine ach is féidir cásanna éigeandála a fheiceáil níos gaiste.

Tá scanóir iniompartha ag feidhmiú in Ospidéal Cheantar Aontroma ach níl sonraí ar uaireanta feithimh don scanóir seo ar fáil.

Mental Health: Allocation

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what proportion of the extra £1.5 million allocated to the health budget will be earmarked for mental health. (AQW 1012/00)

Ms de Brún: I am not clear as to the extra £1.5 million to which you refer. However, I am pleased to point out that as a result of the October monitoring round, I was successful in securing an extra £0.5 million for mental health. This will be allocated shortly to health and social services boards.

Níl sé soiléir agam maidir leis an £1.5 milliún breise a dtagraíonn tú dó. Tá áthas orm le cur in iúl áfach, mar thoradh ar Bhabhta Monatóireachta Mhí Dheireadh Fómhair, gur éirigh liom £0.5 milliún breise a fháil do shláinte mheabhrach. Dáilfear seo ar na Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta gan mhoill.

Ulster Hospital: Cancer Specialist

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will confirm that the cancer specialist is leaving the Ulster Hospital and detail what steps she is taking to fill the post. (AQW 1014/00)

Ms de Brún: I am not aware that any cancer-related staff are leaving the Ulster Hospital.

Ní feasach dom go bhfuil aon bhaill fhoirne a bhfuil baint acu leis an ailse ag imeacht ó Ospidéal Uladh.

Funding for NHS Nursing Care

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount she has allocated to provide National Health Service (NHS) nursing care to residents of private nursing homes and how many NHS hospital beds will consequently be made available. (AQW 1017/00)

Ms de Brún: I have not allocated funds specifically for this purpose, although an additional £15 million has been allocated to health and social services boards this year for winter pressures. This should provide for additional community nursing services and extra community-care packages. However, it is a matter for boards, in partnership with trusts, to decide specifically how these resources are distributed. At present there is no accurate estimate of the potential numbers of acute beds that could be freed by such measures.

Even with this additional investment, I am conscious that there is still a need for further resources to enable more patients to be cared for in their own homes, therefore freeing up hospital beds. To this end I am seeking to secure additional community care funding through the December monitoring round, and I will ensure that it is given a high priority when detailed decisions are made on allocations for future years.

Níor leithroinn mé airgead le haghaidh na cúise áirithe seo, cé gur leithroinneadh £15 mhilliún breise ar Bhoird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta i mbliana do bhrúna an gheimhridh. Ba chóir go ndéanfaidh seo seirbhísí breise altranaís phobail agus bearta breise cúraim phobail a sholáthar. Baineann sé leis na Boird, i gcomhar leis na hIontaobhais, áfach, cad é mar a shocraíonn siad ar dháileadh ar leith na n-acmhainní seo. Faoi láthair níl meastachán cruinn ar líon poitéinsiúil géarleapacha a thiofadh a scaoileadh saor mar tríd a leithéid de bhearta.

Fiú leis an infheistíocht bhreise seo is eol dom go bhfuil gá ann go fóill le hacmhainní breise, le fail a thabhairt do níos mó othar bheith faoi chúram ina dtithe féin, rud a scaoilfeas saor leapacha ospidéal. Leis an chuspóir seo a bhaint amach tá mé ag iarraidh airgead breise cúraim phobail a chinntiú trí Bhabhta Monatóireachta na Nollag agus cinnteoidh mé go dtabharfar tosaíocht ard dó nuair a dhéanfar mionchinnidh ar leith ar leithranna sna blianta seo chugainn.

Additional Hospital Beds

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her recently-announced distribution plans for 300 extra beds and detail (a) when these extra beds will be available and for what period (b) the number of additional beds allocated to each trust area and (c) the total cost involved.

(AQW 1018/00)

Ms de Brún: Details about the additional hospital beds in place for winter are set out in the table below.

Board Area	Trust	Additional Beds
Eastern	Royal Group of Hospitals	54
	Belfast City Hospital	40
	Down Lisburn	38
	Ulster Community & Hospitals	37
Northern	United Hospitals	39
	Causeway	12
Southern	Craigavon Area Hospital Group	27
	Newry & Mourne	11
Western	Altnagelvin Hospitals	24
	Sperrin Lakeland	9

Total Number of beds	291
Cost	£5 million

The additional beds were operational by 1 January 2001 and will be available until March or April, depending on circumstances. The additional intensive-care and high-dependency beds that have been provided are permanent.

Leagtar amach sonraí faoi leapacha ospidéal bhreise don gheimhreadh sa tábla seo thíos.

Ceantar Boird	Iontaobhas	Leapacha breise
Oirthear	Grúpa Ríoga na nOspidéal	54
	Ospidéal Chathair Bhéal Feirste	40
	An Dún Lios na gCearrbhach	38
	Pobal Uladh & Ospidéal	37
Tuaisceart	Ospidéal Aontaithe	39
	An Clochán	12
Deisceart	Grúpa Ospidéal Cheantar Chraigavon	27
	Iúr agus Múrn	11
Iarthar	Ospidéal Alt na nGealbhan	24
	Speirín Tír na Lochanna	9
Líon iomlán na leapacha		291
Costas		£5 milliún

Bhí na leapacha breise a dtugtar miontuairisc orthu thuas uilig oibríochtúil faoi 1 Eanáir 2001 agus beidh siad ar fáil go dtí Márta nó Aibreán, ag brath ar na tosca. Tá na leapacha Dianchúraim agus Ardspleáchais bhreise a cuireadh ar fáil le bheith ann go buan.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Patient Transfer

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her plans to improve facilities for patients transferring from accident and emergency departments to general wards.

(AQW 1019/00)

Ms de Brún: The availability of hospital beds for patients requiring admission from accident and emergency departments is a key element in the comprehensive plans that boards and trusts have developed in readiness for this winter. The level of emergency admissions is highest during the winter months and in recognition of that, a wide range of measures has been put in place to provide extra bed capacity over coming months. These measures include the provision of approximately 300 additional hospital beds. There will also be about 1,000 additional community care packages in place this winter, including intermediate care schemes to reduce the need for inappropriate hospital admissions and help to ensure that people who do not need to be in hospital can be discharged.

Is príomhghné de phleananna cuimsitheacha a d'fhorbair na Boird agus na hIonntaobhais le déanamh réidh don gheimhreadh, go gcuirtear leapacha ospidéil ar fáil d'othair a bhfuil iontráil de dhíth orthu ó na ranna Timpiste agus Éigeandála. Tá líon na n-iontrálacha éigeandála níos airde le linn mhíonna an gheimhridh agus dá bhrí sin cuireadh réimse leathan beart i bhfeidhm le líon breise leapacha a chur ar fáil thar na míonna atá romhainn. Cuimsíonn na bearta seo soláthar 300 leaba bhreise ospidéil. Beidh thart ar 1,000 beart cúraim phobail breise ann an geimhreadh seo, lena n-áirítear scéimeanna cúraim idirmheánaigh le riachtanas iontrálacha ospidéil míchuí a laghdú agus le cuidiú le daoine nach gá dóibh bheith san ospidéal a ligan amach.

Accident and Emergency Departments

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each month since April 1999, (a) the number of people treated in the accident and emergency departments in acute hospitals in Northern Ireland (b) the average waiting time for treatment in each accident and emergency department in Northern Ireland (c) the number of people admitted to the wards from each accident and emergency department in Northern Ireland and (d) the average waiting time for a bed for patients admitted to the wards from each accident and emergency department in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1020/00)

- a) **Ms de Brún:** Information on attendances at accident and emergency departments in hospitals here is collected on a quarterly basis and is detailed in the table below.

ATTENDANCES AT A&E DEPARTMENTS IN LOCAL HOSPITALS

Quarter Ending	Attendances
30 April 1999	159,498
30 June 1999	179,342
30 September 1999	175,828
31 December 1999	162,297
31 March 2000	153,396
30 June 2000	177,491
30 September 2000	173,735

- b) This information is not collected centrally.
c) This information is collected on a quarterly basis and is detailed in the table below.

PATIENTS ADMITTED TO HOSPITAL VIA A&E DEPARTMENTS, BY TRUST

Trust	Quarter ending						
	March 1999	June 1999	Sept. 1999	Dec. 1999	March 2000	June 2000	Sept. 2000
BCH	2,073	2,589	2,680	3,021	2,961	2,854	2,868
UC&HSST	2,959	3,106	3,179	3,239	3,391	3,625	3,403
Royal Group	264	269	358	467	1,023	340	359
Mater	94	114	108	166	119	129	120
Down Lisburn	1,146	1,067	1,468	1,388	1,459	1,558	1,355
United	2,569	2,643	2,789	3,390	3,635	3,703	3,781
Causeway	100	100	100	100	100	100	162
Craigavon Group	1,347	1,374	1,914	2,428	2,787	2,649	2,968
Armagh & Dungannon	507	440	364	10	39	54	47
Newry & Mourne	59	89	97	108	105	113	168
Altnagelvin	1,343	1,383	1,357	1,260	1,238	1,228	1,345
Sperrin Lakeland	781	820	758	839	886	943	907
Total	13,242	13,994	15,172	16,416	17,743	17,296	17,483

- d) Information on the time waiting for admission from an accident and emergency department is collected on the basis of time bands — less than one hour; one hour to under two hours; two hours or more — and it is not possible to derive an average waiting time from these figures.
a) Bailítear eolas ar fhreastal ar ranna T&É in ospidéal anseo ar bhonn ráithiúil agus tá mionchuntas air sa tábla thíos.

FREASTAL AR RANNA T&É IN OSPIDÉIL ÁITIÚLA

Deireadh na Ráithe	Freastal
30 Aibreán 1999	159,498
30 Meitheamh 1999	179,342
30 Meán Fómhair 1999	175,828
31 Nollaig 1999	162,297
31 Márta 2000	153,396
30 Meitheamh 2000	177,491
30 Meán Fómhair 2000	173,735

- b) Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach.
c) Bailítear an t-eolas seo go ráithiúil agus tá mionchuntas air sa tábla thíos.

OTHAIR A LIGEADH ISTEACH CHUIG AN OSPIDÉAL TRÍ RANNA T&É, DE RÉIR IONTAOBHAS

Iontaobhas	Deireadh na Ráithe						
	Márta 1999	Meith. 1999	M. Fómhair 1999	Nollaig 1999	Márta 2000	Meith. 2000	M. Fómhair 2000
OCBF	2,073	2,589	2,680	3,021	2,961	2,854	2,868
UPU&OISS	2,959	3,106	3,179	3,239	3,391	3,625	3,403
Grúpa Ríoga	264	269	358	467	1,023	340	359
Mater	94	114	108	166	119	129	120
An Dún Lios na gCearrbhach	1,146	1,067	1,468	1,388	1,459	1,558	1,355
Aontaithe	2,569	2,643	2,789	3,390	3,635	3,703	3,781
An Clochán	100	100	100	100	100	100	162
Grúpa Craigavon	1,347	1,374	1,914	2,428	2,787	2,649	2,968
Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn	507	440	364	10	39	54	47
An tIúr agus an Mhúrn	59	89	97	108	105	113	168
Alt na nGealbhan	1,343	1,383	1,357	1,260	1,238	1,228	1,345
Loch-cheantair Shliabh Speirín	781	820	758	839	886	943	907
Iomlán	13,242	13,994	15,172	16,416	17,743	17,296	17,483

- (d) Bailítear an t-eolas ar an am a caitheadh ag fanacht ar iontráil ó ranna T&É de réir bandai ama (níos lú ná 1 uair, uair go dtí níos lú ná 2 uair, 2 uair nó níos mó) agus ní féidir meánam feithimh a bhaint as na figiúirí seo.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Trolleys

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the circumstances under which a patient awaiting admission to a ward from an accident and emergency Department is required to wait on a trolley (b) the average length of time, for each month since April 1999, for which patients have had to wait on trolleys in acute hospitals in Northern Ireland and (c) the number of patients, for each month since April 1999, who have had to wait for more than one hour on a trolley in each accident and emergency department in acute hospitals in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1021/00)

Ms de Brún:

- a) Patients wait on trolleys when they have been assessed as needing admission to hospital but no vacant bed is available. This occurs because the number of beds

available over a 24-hour period depends on the balance between new admissions and discharges. Overall, the numbers are roughly in balance over the 24-hour period, but at peak admission times there can be a mismatch between the admissions and discharges. Every effort is made to anticipate changes in demand, but equally it is not possible to tailor the two to cover all the circumstances. Boards are currently endeavouring to re-arrange capacity to better reflect bed pressures.

- b) Information on the time waiting for admission from an accident and emergency department is collected on the basis of time bands — less than one hour; one hour to under two hours; two hours or more — and it is not possible to derive an average waiting time from these figures.
- c) This information is collected on a quarterly basis and is detailed in the table below.

PATIENTS ADMITTED TO HOSPITAL VIA A&E DEPARTMENTS WAITING OVER 1 HOUR FOR ADMISSION, BY TRUST

Trust	Quarter ending						
	March 1999	June 1999	Sept. 1999	Dec. 1999	March 2000	June 2000	Sept. 2000
BCH	236	196	319	444	627	438	376
UC&HSST	1,343	1,099	1,169	1,309	1,325	1,237	1,387
Royal Group	4	6	46	7	142	20	77
Mater	45	68	81	98	51	101	54
Down Lisburn	152	108	203	298	322	271	330
United	187	161	238	462	537	647	572
Causeway	7	2	0	5	4	4	23
Craigavon Group	118	173	188	303	704	580	657
Armagh & Dungannon	41	7	28	2	2	10	4
Newry & Mourne	4	5	1	14	15	10	31
Altnagelvin	686	680	686	616	654	539	626
Sperrin Lakeland	0	0	1	0	0	11	26
Total	2,823	2,505	2,960	3,558	4,383	3,868	4,163

- a) Fanann othair ar thralaithe nuair a mheastar gur gá iad a chur isteach chuig an ospidéal ach nach bhfuil leaba shaor ar fáil. Tarlaíonn seo as siocair go mbraitheann líon na leapacha thar thréimhse 24 uaire ar líon na n-othar a ligeadh isteach i gcomparáid le líon na n-othar a ligeadh amach. San iomlán bíonn na huimhreacha cothrom tríd is tríd ach ag buaicuairéanta iontrála féadann líon na n-iontrálacha agus an líon a scaoileadh amach ag teacht salach ar a chéile. Déantar gach iarracht leis na hathruithe éilimh seo a thuar ach ní féidir an dá rud a chur in

óiriúint leis na himthosca uile a chlúdach. Faoi láthair tá na Boird ag iarraidh an líon leapacha a athshocrú le dul i ngleic níos fearr le brúnna leapacha.

- b) Bailítear an t-eolas ar an am a caitheadh ag fanacht ar iontráil ó ranna T&É de réir bandaí ama (níos lú ná 1 uair, uair go dtí níos lú ná 2 uair, 2 uair nó níos mó) agus ní féidir meánam feithimh a bhaint as na figiúirí seo.
- c) Bailítear an t-eolas seo go ráithiúil agus tá mionchuntas air sa tábla thíos.

OTHAIR A LIGEADH ISTEACH CHUIG AN OSPIDÉAL TRÍ RANNA T&É, DE RÉIR IONTAOBHAS

Iontaobhas	Deireadh na Ráithe						
	Márta 1999	Meith. 1999	M. Fómhair 1999	Nollaig 1999	Márta 2000	Meith. 2000	M. Fómhair 2000
OCBF	236	196	319	444	627	438	376
PU&OISS	1,343	1,099	1,169	1,309	1,325	1,237	1,387
Grúpa Ríoga	4	6	46	7	142	20	77
Mater	45	68	81	98	51	101	54
An Dún Lios na gCearrbhach	152	108	203	298	322	271	330
Aontaithe	187	161	238	462	537	647	572
An Clochán	7	2	0	5	4	4	23
Grúpa Craigavon	118	173	188	303	704	580	657
Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn	41	7	28	2	2	10	4
An tIúr agus an Mhór	4	5	1	14	15	10	31
Alt na nGealbhan	686	680	686	616	654	539	626
Loch-cheantar Shliabh Speirín	0	0	1	0	0	11	26
Iomlán	2,823	2,505	2,960	3,558	4,383	3,868	4,163

Childcare Services

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the most recent available figures for spending on family and childcare services in Northern Ireland (b) how these compare with England and Wales and (c) specifically what is being compared particularly with reference to the inclusion of “Quality Protects” funding in England and Wales.

(AQW 1027/00)

Ms de Brún: In 1998/99, the most recent year for which complete figures are available, a total of £66,816,765 was spent here on family and childcare services. Expenditure in England on corresponding services was £2,560 million and in Wales was £114,457,000.

All three figures cover expenditure on personal social services for children and their families. None include expenditure on “Quality Protects” programmes.

I 1998/99, an bhliain dheireanach a bhfuil figiúirí iomlána ann di, caitheadh suim iomlán £66,816,765 ar Sheirbhísí Teaghlaigh agus Cúraim Pháistí anseo. Caitheadh £2,560 milliún ar sheirbhísí den chineál céanna i Sasana agus £114,457,000 sa Bhreatain Bheag.

Clúdaíonn na trí fhigiúr caiteachas ar sheirbhísí sóisialta pearsanta do pháistí agus a dteaghlaigh. Níl caiteachas ar chláracha “Cosnaíonn Cáilíocht” san áireamh i gceann ar bith acu.

Influenza Vaccinations

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people within the target groups that have been vaccinated against influenza.

(AQW 1033/00)

Ms de Brún: Between 1 October 2000 and 30 November 2000, 214,488 individuals within the target groups have been vaccinated against influenza as part of this year’s influenza immunisation programme. The programme will continue to run until 31 January 2001.

Idir 1ú Deireadh Fómhair agus 30ú Samhain 2000, vacsaíníodh 214,488 duine taobh istigh de na spriocghrúpaí i gcoinne an fhliú mar chuid de chlár imdhíonta fliú na bliana seo. Leanfaidh an clár imdhíonta fliú ar aghaidh go dtí 31ú Eanáir 2001.

Dentistry

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm her plans to increase spending on dentistry over the next three years.

(AQW 1036/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department’s oral health strategy is currently being evaluated, and when the results of the evaluation become known, I will consider any resource implications for future years. In the meantime, demand-led general dental services will continue to be funded by the Department.

Déarfainn arís go bhfuil Stráitéis Shláinte Béil mo Roinne á measúnú faoi láthair agus nuair a thiocfas torthaí an mheasúnaithe amach déanfaidh mé mo mhachnamh ansin ar impleachtaí acmhainne don todhchaí. Idir an dá linn leanfar le maoiniú Seirbhísí Ginearálta Fiaclóra, ag brath ar éileamh, ón Roinn.

Angiograms: Waiting Time

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her proposals to reduce waiting times for angiograms. (AQW 1037/00)

Ms de Brún: I am concerned that too many patients wait for too long for angiograms and for hospital services generally. In September, I issued a 'Framework for Action on Waiting Lists', which gave boards and trusts a comprehensive, long-term strategy for dealing with waiting lists. I have allocated an additional £5 million this year to support action on waiting lists across all specialties. I expect boards' action on waiting lists to reduce waiting times for many services, including angiograms. My Department is currently considering an implementation plan on recommendations flowing from a review of cardiology services. A review of cardiac surgery is also being undertaken and is due to report within the next couple of months. The outcome of these reviews should be an improvement in services generally for patients with heart disease, including those who need angiograms.

In addition, a new angiography suite is due to open at Altnagelvin Hospital in spring 2001. This will improve the angiography services for people in the western board area and may also have a positive effect on waiting times at the Royal Group of Hospitals, where patients from the north-west are currently seen.

Tá mé buartha go bhfuil barraíocht othar ag fanacht rófhada ar aingiaghram agus ar sheirbhísí ospidéal i gcoitinne. I Meán Fómhair, d'eisigh mé "*Creatlach um Ghníomh ar Liostaí Feithimh*" a leag amach do na Boird agus do na hIontaobhais stráitéis chuimsitheach fhadtéarmach le dul i ngleic le liostaí feithimh. Chuir mé £5 mhilliún sa bhreis i mbliana ar leataobh le tacú le gníomh ar liostaí feithimh fud fad na speisialtachtaí uile. Tá mé ag dúil le gníomh ó na Boird ar liostaí feithimh le haga feithimh a laghdú faoi choinne cuid mhór seirbhísí, aingiaghraim san áireamh. Tá mo Roinn ag déanamh machnaimh faoi láthair ar phlean le moltaí a chur i bhfeidhm a thiocfas ó athbhreithniú ar sheirbhísí cairdeolaíochta. Táthar ag tabhairt faoi athbhreithniú ar mháinliacht chairdiach agus beidh tuairisc le fáil sa chéad chúpla mí eile. Ba chóir go mbeadh feabhas ar sheirbhísí go ginearálta do dhaoine a bhfuil galar croí orthu mar thoradh ar na hathbhreithnithe seo, bheadh na daoine a bhfuil aingiaghram de dhíth orthu san áireamh.

Lena chois, tá sraith sheomraí nua aingiaghraim le hoscailt in ospidéal Alt na nGealbhan in Earrach na bliana 2001. Feabhsóidh seo seirbhísí aingiagrafaíochta do dhaoine i mBord an Iarthair agus is féidir go mbeidh tionchar dearfach aige ar liostaí feithimh an Ghrúpa Ríoga Ospidéal, áit a gcóireáiltear othair ón Iar-thuaisceart faoi láthair.

Occupational Therapy Visits: Waiting Times

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current waiting times for occupational therapy visits in the area covered by the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust and how these compare with the other trust areas.

(AQW 1041/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on waiting times between referral and start of occupational therapy assessment for the quarter ending 30 September 2000 is detailed in the table below.

Provider	Priority Cases		Other Cases	
	Total	% waiting 2 weeks or more	Total	% waiting 3 months or more
Down Lisburn	70	38	202	49
North & West Belfast	247	54	154	41
Ulster Community & Hospitals	17	7	287	42
South & East Belfast	366	45	230	52
Causeway	99	53	99	66
Homefirst	440	46	475	38
Armagh & Dungannon	46	16	153	56
Craigavon & Banbridge	79	38	79	48
Newry & Mourne	0	0	171	97
Foyle	117	49	264	66
Sperrin Lakeland	166	58	90	45

Tá mionchuntas sa tábla thíos ar an eolas ar liostaí feithimh idir tús mheasúnú OT agus atreorú don ráithe ag críochnú 30 Meán Fómhair 2000.

Solathróir	Cásanna tosaíochta		Cásanna eile	
	Iomlán	% ag fanacht 2 sheachtain nó níos mó	Iomlán	% ag fanacht 3 mhí nó níos mó
An Dún Lios na gCearrbhach	70	38	202	49
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	247	54	154	41
Pobal Uladh & Ospidéal	17	7	287	42
Béal Feirste Theas agus Thoir	366	45	230	52
An Clochán	99	53	99	66

Homefirst	440	46	475	38
Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn	46	16	153	56
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	79	38	79	48
An tIúr agus an Mhúrn	0	0	171	97
An Feabhal	117	49	264	66
Loch-cheant ar Shliabh Speirín	166	58	90	45

Eastern Health and Social Services: Allocation

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline how the extra £408,000 allocated to the Eastern Health and Social Services Board has been distributed and what effect this has had on reducing occupational therapy waiting times within its area. (AQW 1042/00)

Ms de Brún: The extra £408,000 allocated to the Eastern Health and Social Services Board to tackle occupational therapy (OT) waiting lists was distributed to community trusts as follows:

	£
North & West Belfast HSS Trust	228,000
South & East Belfast HSS Trust	72,816
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	55,500
Ulster Community Hospitals HSS Trust	51,684
	408,000

There has been a 30% reduction in the numbers of people waiting for occupational therapy services in excess of charter standards as recorded for the second quarter of this year for North and West Belfast Trust, South & East Belfast Trust and Ulster Community Hospitals Trust. Figures for Down Lisburn Trust are not yet available.

Tugadh amach an £408,000 dáilte do Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir chun déileáil le liostaí feithimh teiripe ceirde (TC) do na hIontaobhais Phobail mar a leanas:

	£
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh agus Thiar	228,000
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Theas agus Thoir	72,816
Iontaobhas SSS An Dún Lios na gCearrbhach	55,500
Iontaobhas SSS Ospidéal Phobal Uladh.	51,684
	408,000

Tá laghdú 30% ar líon na ndaoine ag fanacht le seirbhísí TC de bhreis ar chaighdeán chairte mar a cláraíodh don dara ceathrú den bhliain seo d'Iontaobhas

Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh agus Thiar, Iontaobhas Bhéal Feirste Theas agus Thoir agus Iontaobhas Ospidéal Phobal Uladh. Níl figiúirí d'Iontaobhas An Dún Lios na gCearrbhach ar fáil go fóill.

Antibiotics: Prescribing

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the guidelines issued to GPs on the prescribing of antibiotics. (AQW 1045/00)

Ms de Brún: Guidance on antibiotic prescribing was contained in a letter from the chief medical officer on resistance to antibiotics and other antimicrobial agents. This was copied to all GPs in June 1999. In addition, an article on antimicrobial resistance was the lead in the chief medical officer's update of June 2000. This also included relevant information for GPs.

This winter and last my Department has put in place a public information campaign on antibiotic prescribing, involving leaflets and posters. These have been distributed to GPs to assist them in explaining antimicrobial resistance to patients. The leaflet highlights that most upper respiratory tract infections are viral in origin and do not need antibiotics. There is some evidence of a recent decline in antibiotic prescribing in this area.

Much multidisciplinary work has also taken place in primary care to promote the optimal prescribing of antibiotics. This includes GPs working with board prescribing advisers and secondary care professionals to develop local formularies, protocols for antibiotic prescribing for management of certain infections, and local campaigns highlighting the dangers of over-prescribing.

Bhí treoir ar ordú frithbheathach istigh i litir ón Phríomh-Oifigeach Míochaine, ar fhrithbheartaíocht d'fhrithbheathaigh agus d'oibreáin fhrithmhíocróbacha eile; tugadh cóipeanna di seo do gach DG i Meitheamh 1999. Ina theannta sin, ba é an t-alt ar fhrithbheartaíocht fhrithmhíocróbach an príomhalt i Leagan Úr an Phríomh-Oifigigh Míochaine de Mheitheamh 2000 di. Faoi iamh léi seo bhí eolas cuí do DGí.

An Geimhreadh seo, agus seo caite, chuir an Roinn s'agam feachtas eolais phoiblí ar ordú frithbheathach ar bun inar úsáideadh bileoga agus postaeirí. Dáileadh iad seo ar DGí chun cuidiú leo frithbheartaíocht fhrithmhíocróbach a mhíniú d'othair. Aimsíonn an bhileog go bhfuil an chuid is mó d'ionfhabhtuithe sa bhealach riospráide uachtarach víreasach ó bhunús, agus nach gá frithbheathaigh chun iad a chóireáil. Tá roinnt chruthaithe ann a léiríonn meath deireanach in ordú frithbheathach anseo.

Rinneadh cuid mhór oibre ilhdhisciplíní i bpríomhchúram fosta le hordú optamach frithbheathach a chur chun cinn. San áireamh tá DGí, ag obair le Comhairleoirí Boird Ordaithe agus le gairmithe cúraim thánaistigh

chun leabhair fhoirmlí áitiúla, le prótacail d'ordú frithbheathach do bhainistíocht ionfhabhtuithe áirithe, agus le feachtais áitiúla, ag cur béime ar na contúirtí ró-ordaithe, a fhorbairt.

Alzheimer's Disease

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the initiatives taken to help victims of Alzheimer's Disease. (AQW 1047/00)

Ms de Brún: The dementia policy scrutiny report, published in May 1995, identified five main elements required to provide a response to the challenge of dementia:

- Early diagnosis of every person with dementia;
- Early and continuing support in line with assessed need;
- Support for carers;
- A specific programme for younger people with dementia; and
- A continuum of care delivered by properly trained staff in suitable facilities.

My Department accepted the scrutiny report as the basis for policy in this area and the regional strategy for health and social wellbeing required health and social services boards and trusts to take steps to implement all of its recommendations — some 33 in total.

Significant progress has been made towards implementing the programme for action set out in the scrutiny report.

The importance of early diagnosis has been accepted and each of the boards has developed strategies to try to ensure that diagnosis is made as early as possible. Board and trust staff are working with voluntary organisations such as the Alzheimer's Society to promote awareness of dementia. Significant investment has been made in establishing multidisciplinary teams, and training initiatives have been put in place for staff. There is a network of carer support groups in place in each board area, and training for carers has been developed in conjunction with the voluntary sector. Work is also going on in partnership with the voluntary sector to address the needs of younger sufferers and their carers.

D'aimsigh an Tuairisc Scrúdain ar Pholasáí Néaltraithe, a foilsíodh i mBealtaine 1995, cúig phríomhghné a bhí de dhíth le freagra a thabhairt ar dhúshlán an néaltraithe:

- Diagnóis luath gach duine a bhfuil néaltrú air
- Tacaíocht luath agus leanúnach ag brath ar an riachtanas measúnaithe
- Tacaíocht do chúramóirí
- Clár ar leith do dhaoine níos óige a bhfuil néaltú orthu; agus

- Leanúnachas cúraim á chur ar fáil ag daoine atá oilte mar is ceart in áiseanna cuí.

Ghlac mo Roinn leis an Tuairisc Scrúdain mar dhúshraith don pholasáí san ábhar seo agus d'iarr an Straitéis Reigiúnach le haghaidh Sláinte agus Folláine Sóisialta ar Bhoird agus ar Iontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta céimeanna a thabhairt leis na moltaí s'acu uile a chur i bhfeidhm - 33 acu san iomlán.

Rinneadh dul chun cinn suntasach leis an chlár um ghníomh a leagadh amach sa Tuairisc Scrúdain a chur i bhfeidhm.

Glacadh leis an tábhacht a bhí le diagnóis luath agus d'fhorbair gach Bord straitéisí le hiarracht a dhéanamh le cinntiú go ndéantar an diagnóis a luaite is féidir. Tá foireann Bhoird agus Iontaobhais ag obair le heagraíochtaí deonacha amhail an Cumann Alzheimer le feachtas néaltraithe a chur chun cinn. Rinneadh infheistíocht shuntasach i mbunú foirne ildisciplíneacha agus cuireadh tionscnaimh oiliúna i bhfeidhm don fhoireann. Tá gréasán grúpaí tacaíochta cúramóirí i bhfeidhm i ngach ceantar Boird agus forbraíodh oiliúint do chúramóirí i gcomhar leis an earnáil dheonach. Tá obair idir lámha i bpáirtíocht leis an earnáil dheonach le dul i ngleic le riachtanais fulangaithe óga agus a gcúramóirí.

Urban and Rural: Definitions

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the definition of (a) urban and (b) rural used within her Department.

(AQW 1053/00)

Ms de Brún: The Department does not have a standard definition of urban and rural for use in all circumstances.

For example, the ambulance service uses the same population density figures as Great Britain to define health and social services board areas as urban, rural or sparsely populated for the application of ORCON response targets.

There is also a rural practice payments fund from which payments are made to GPs on the basis of mileage units credited to practitioners subject to certain conditions.

Níl sainmhíniú caighdeánach ag an Roinn do 'uirbeach' agus do 'tuathúil' ar féidir léi a úsáid i ngach cúrsa.

Mar shampla, úsáideann an tSeirbhís Otharcharr na figiúirí dlús daonra céanna is a úsáidtear ar an Bhreatain Mhór le ceantair Bhoird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta a dheimhniú mar cheantar uirbeach, tuathúil nó mar cheantar le daonra gann le spriocanna freagartha ORCON a chur i bhfeidhm agus ar obair.

Tá Ciste Íocaíochtaí Cleachtaidh Tuaithe ann fosta ónar féidir Dochtúirí Ginearálta a íoc de réir ionad

míleáiste creidmheasta do dhochtúirí faoi réir coinníollacha áirithe.

Psychiatric Day Hospital Facilities

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the staffing levels at each grade in psychiatric day hospital facilities in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1084/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Staffing levels in psychiatric day hospital facilities	Whole Time Equivalent
Consultant Psychiatrists	6.55
Clinical Psychologists	1.5
Senior House Officers	5.2
Occupational Therapy	17.7
Social Work	18.25
Nursing grade A	8
Nursing grade B	2
Imult0Nursing grade D	23.55
Nursing grade E	48.01
Nursing grade F	6
Nursing grade G	19.05
Nursing grade H	3
Care Assistants	6.03

Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sonraithe sa tábla thíos.

Leibhéil na foirne in áiseanna otharlainne lae síciatracha	Coibhéis Ama Iomlán
Siciatraithe Comhairleacha	6.55
Síceolaithe Cliniciúla	1.5
Oifigigh Tí Shinsearacha	5.2
Teiripe Saothair	17.7
Obair Shóisialta	18.25
Grád Banaltrachta A	8
Grád Banaltrachta B	2
Grád Banaltrachta D	23.55
Grád Banaltrachta E	48.01
Grád Banaltrachta F	6
Grád Banaltrachta G	19.05
Grád Banaltrachta H	3
Cúntóirí Cúraim	6.03

Health and Social Services Trusts: Non-Executive Directors

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the criteria for the appointment of non-executive directors to health and social service trusts. (AQW 1086/00)

Ms de Brún: The appointment of non-executive directors to health and social services trusts is conducted in accordance with the principles established by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

A person who seeks appointment as a non-executive director of a Health and Social Services Trust must, in the first instance, meet two general criteria. They are, firstly, to have a commitment to the principles and objectives of the health and personal social services, and secondly, to live or work in, or have significant connections with, the area served by the trust.

There are also more specific criteria to be met. A non-executive director must have particular experience or expertise, which would benefit the running of a trust. Such expertise would include relevant professional skills, management skills gained in either the private, public or voluntary sectors, experience of voluntary or community work, or an ability to bring a user or carer perspective to the decision-making of a trust board. A non-executive director must also possess the competencies and personal qualities considered necessary for the post. These include abilities such as team-working, developing relationships, communicating effectively, analysing complex problems, and commitment, diplomacy and integrity.

I am especially keen to attract nominations for appointment from people with experience at grassroots community level, and from all sections of society and all social classes, particularly women, disabled people and people from ethnic minorities.

Ceaptar stiúrthóirí neamhfheidhmeannacha do na hIontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta de réir na bprionsabal leagtha síos ag Coimisinéir na gCeapachán Poiblí.

Sa chéad dul síos caithfidh duine atá ag iarraidh ceapachán a fháil mar stiúrthóir neamhfheidhmeannach in Iontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta dhá chritéar ginearálta a chomhlíonadh. Is iad na critéir, sa chéad áit, go gcaithfidh siad bheith ceangailte le prionsabail agus spriocanna Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta, agus sa dara áit, bheith ina gcónaí nó ag obair, nó baint thábhachtach a bheith acu leis an cheantar a ndéanann an tIontaobhas freastal air.

Tá critéir níos sainsiúla le comhlíonadh chomh maith. Caithfidh stiúrthóir neamhfheidhmeannach taithí nó tallann ar leith a bheith acu a rachadh chun sochair d'obair an Iontaobhais. Ar na rudaí seo bheadh scileanna gairmiúla ábhartha, scileanna bainistíochta a fuarthas sna

hearnálacha príobháideacha, poiblí nó deonacha, taithí ar obair dheonach nó obair don phobal, nó go bhfuil siad ábalta peirspictíocht an úsáideora nó an tsoláthraí cúraim a thabhairt chuig socrúithe Boird Iontaobhais. Caithfidh na héirimí agus cáilíochtaí pearsanta a bheith ag stiúrthóir neamhfheidhmeannach a meastar a bheith riachtanach don phost. Ar na hábaltachtaí seo tá rudaí mar an cumas bheith ag obair mar chuid d'fhoireann, caidrimh a fhorbairt, cumarsáid a dhéanamh go héifeachtach, anailís a dhéanamh ar fhadhbanna casta, agus díograis, cáiréis agus macántacht.

Go háirithe tá mé ar bís le hainmnithe a spreagadh ó dhaoine a bhfuil taithí acu ag leibhéal an ghnáthphobail, agus ó gach cuid den sochaí agus ó gach aicme, go háirithe ó mhná, daoine míchumasacha agus daoine ó mhionlachtaí eitneacha.

Buildings and Amenities: West Tyrone

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) detail all buildings and amenities within her responsibility in the constituency of West Tyrone (b) outline the percentage of her budget that has been allocated to the West Tyrone constituency and (c) explain how this compares with the previous budget. (AQW 1088/00)

Ms de Brún: All buildings and amenities within my responsibility in the West Tyrone constituency are listed below:

Building/Amenity	District	Current Use	Owner
Strabane Health Centre	Strabane	Health Centre	Foyle
Strabane County Buildings	Strabane	Social services offices & Day Centre	Foyle
5A Railway Road Strabane	Strabane	Mental Health Office and Clinic	Leased in.
Glenside A.T.C	Strabane	Adult Training Centre	Foyle
Tyrone County Hospital	Omagh	Acute Hospital	Sperrin Lakeland
Omagh General Hospital	Omagh	Vacant	Sperrin Lakeland
Derg Valley Health Clinic	Omagh	Clinic	Sperrin Lakeland
Omagh Health Centre	Omagh	Health Centre	Sperrin Lakeland
Carrickmore Health Centre	Omagh	Health Centre	Sperrin Lakeland
Conneywarren Children's Home	Omagh	Children's Home	Sperrin Lakeland
Riverside House	Omagh	Offices & Clinic	Sperrin Lakeland

Building/Amenity	District	Current Use	Owner
Gortmore RHE & Day Centre	Omagh	Residential Home for Elderly & Day Centre	Sperrin Lakeland
Omagh Centre Deverney Hse	Omagh	Health Care	Sperrin Lakeland
Tyrone & Fermanagh Hospital	Omagh	Hospital	Sperrin Lakeland
Sperrin Bungalow	Omagh	Vacant	Sperrin Lakeland
Belmore House at Omagh General Hospital	Omagh	Health Care	Sperrin Lakeland
Lisnamallard I.T.U.	Omagh	Industrial	Sperrin Lakeland
Lissan House, Dublin Road	Omagh	AMH Office & Clinic	Leased in.
Campsie House, Campsie Road.	Omagh	Offices AMH	Leased in.
Training Centre Campsie	Omagh	Training Centre	Leased in.
Satellite Unit Castlederg	Omagh	AMH Learning for Disability	Leased in.
The Shop, Gortin.	Omagh	Support Project	Leased in.
The Shop, Dromore Main Street	Omagh	Support Project	Leased in.
Milestone Centre, Carrickmore Industrial Estate.	Omagh	Support Project	Leased in.
Castlederg HC rented accommodation from GPs.	Strabane	Trust health care	Leased in.
Strathroy Hostel, Gortin Road.	Omagh	Residential Hostel.	Leased in.

As resources are allocated to health and social services boards rather than by constituency area, an outline of the percentage of my budget that has been allocated to the West Tyrone constituency could only be provided at a disproportionate cost.

Tá na foirgnimh agus na háiseanna uilig i ndáilcheantar Thír Eoghain Thiar atá faoi mo chúram liostáilte thíos:

Foirgneamh/Áis	Ceantar	Úsáid Reatha	Úinéir
Ionad Sláinte an tSraitha Bán	An Srath Bán	Ionad Sláinte	Feabhal
Foirgnimh Chontae an tSraitha Bán	An Srath Bán	Oifigí na seirbhísí sóisialta & Ionad Lae	Feabhal
15A Bóthar an Iamróid An Srath Bán	An Srath Bán	Oifig Sláinte Meabhrach agus Clinic	Ar Léas
A.T.C Thaobh an Ghleanna	An Srath Bán	Ionad Oiliúna Dhaoine Fásta	Feabhal

Foirgneamh/Áis	Ceantar	Úsáid Reatha	Úinéir
Otharlann Contae Thír Eoghain	An Ómaigh	Géarotharlann	Sliabh Speirín
Otharlann Ghinearálta na hÓmaí	An Ómaigh	Úsáid ar bith	Sliabh Speirín
Clinic Sláinte Ghleann na Deirge	An Ómaigh	Clinic	Sliabh Speirín
Ionad Sláinte na hÓmaí	An Ómaigh	Ionad Sláinte	Sliabh Speirín
Ionad Sláinte na Carraige Móire	An Ómaigh	Ionad Sláinte	Sliabh Speirín
Teach Páistí Chon Uí Mhurnáin	An Ómaigh	Teach Páistí	Sliabh Speirín
Teach Cois Abhann	An Ómaigh	Oifigí & Clinic	Sliabh Speirín
TCS agus Ionad Lae An Ghoirt Mhóir	An Ómaigh	Teach Cónaithe do Sheandaoine & Ionad Lae	Sliabh Speirín
Ionad na hÓmaí Teach Deverney	An Ómaigh	Cúram Sláinte	Sliabh Speirín
Otharlann Thír Eoghain & Fhear Manach	An Ómaigh	Otharlann	Sliabh Speirín
Bungaló Shliabh Speirín	An Ómaigh	Úsáid ar bith	Sliabh Speirín
Teach An Bhéil Mhóir ag Otharlann Ghinearálta na hÓmaí	An Ómaigh	Cúram Sláinte	Sliabh Speirín
I.T.T. Lios na Mallacht	An Ómaigh	Tionsclaíoch	Sliabh Speirín
Teach Leasáin, Bóthar Bhaile Átha Cliath	An Ómaigh	Oifig & Clinic AMH	Ar Léas.
Teach Chamsain, Bóthar Chamsain.	An Ómaigh	Oifigí AMH	Ar Léas.
Ionad Oiliúna Chamsain	An Ómaigh	Ionad Oiliúna	Ar Léas.
Ionad Satailíte, Caisleán na Deirge	An Ómaigh	Léann AMH do Mhíchumas	Ar Léas.
The Siopa, An Goirtín.	An Ómaigh	Tionscadal Tacaíochta	Ar Léas.
An Siopa, An Droim Mór An Phríomhshráid	An Ómaigh	Tionscadal Tacaíochta	Ar Léas.
Ionad Chloch Mhíle, Eastát Tionsclaíochta na Carraige Móire	An Ómaigh	Tionscadal Tacaíochta	Ar Léas.
CS Chaisleán na Deirge, cóiríocht ar cíos ó DGí.	An Srath Bán	Iontaobhas Chúram Sláinte	Ar Léas.
Brú an tSraitha Crua, Bóthar An Ghoirtín.	An Ómaigh	Brú Cónaithe.	Ar Léas.

Ní fhéadfaí achoimre a thabhairt ar chéatadán mo bhuiséid a dáileadh ar dháilcheantar Thír Eoghain Thiar ach ar chostas díreireach mar go roinntear acmhainní ar Bhoird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta ná de réir dáilcheantair.

Radiotherapy Equipment

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) detail the radiotherapy equipment available in Northern Ireland (b) outline the level of staffing in cancer services across Northern Ireland and (c) give her assessment of any improvements that have been made in this area. (AQW 1100/00)

Ms de Brún: The radiotherapy treatment equipment available comprises four linear accelerators, a tele-isotope cobalt unit, a superficial unit and a brachytherapy unit. Treatment planning equipment consists of two simulators and a treatment planning system.

Information is not readily available on the number of staff involved in the care of cancer patients, as their treatment and care is provided across a wide range of specialties and directorates, including oncology, surgery, palliative care and diagnostic services in acute and community settings.

The provision of cancer services is being improved at present in line with the 1996 report 'Cancer Services: Investing for the Future.' It recommended that cancer care should be delivered by multidisciplinary, multi-professional teams and that the provision of cancer services should be reorganised, with cancer units established in each board area, linked to the cancer centre in Belfast. In line with this, oncology clinics are now provided at the cancer units at Antrim, Altnagelvin, Craigavon and the Ulster Hospitals. Over 50% of day-patient chemotherapy is now provided outside the cancer centre. Specialisation in site-specific cancers has also commenced with the identification of lead clinicians in a range of cancers. Multidisciplinary teams have also been established.

Sa trealamh cóireála raiditeiripe ar fáil tá ceithre Luasaire Líneacha, Ionad Cóbailt Teiliosatóipe, Ionad Éadomhanda agus Ionad Bracaiteiripe. Sa Trealamh Pleanála Cóireála tá 2 Insamhlúchán agus Córas Pleanála Cóireála.

Níl eolas ar fáil go réidh ar líon na ndaoine san fhoireann a bhfuil lámh acu i gcúram othar le hailse, mar go soláthraítear a gcóireáil trasna réimse leathan speisialtachtaí agus stiúrthóireachtaí, san áireamh tá seirbhísí oinceolaíochta, máinliachta, cúraim mhaolaithigh agus fáthmheasa i suímh ghéir agus phobail araon.

Tá soláthar seirbhísí ailse á fheabhsú faoi láthair de réir na tuairisce 1996 *Seirbhísí Ailse: Ag Infheistiú don Todhchaí*. Mhol sí gur chóir d'fhoirne ilhdisciplíneacha, ilghairmiúla cúram ailse a sholáthar agus gur chóir soláthar seirbhísí ailse a atheagrú, le hionaid ailse bunaithe i ngach ceantar Boird, ceangailte leis an Ionad Ailse i mBéal Feirste. Faoi réir seo, soláthraítear clinicí oinceolaíochta ar fáil anois ag na hionaid ailse in Otharlann Aontroma, Alt na nGealbhan, Craigavon agus Uladh. Soláthraítear breis agus 50% de cheimiteiripe othair lae taobh amuigh den ionad ailse. Thosaigh saineolaíocht

in ailsí suíomh-shainiúla le haithint dochtúirí móra i réimse ailsí. Bunaíodh foirne ilhdhisCIPLíneacha fosta.

Research: Removal of Organs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her policy in relation to the removal and retention of organs from dead children for the purposes of research. (AQW 1101/00)

Ms de Brún: The policy here in relation to the removal or retention of organs from children who have died is that no organs are used for the purposes of research. Where organs are removed for post-mortem examination this is done only with the consent of the parents or guardian.

In March 2000 the chief medical officer, Dr Henrietta Campbell, issued interim guidance on post-mortem examination to all trusts. The chief medical officer in England, Prof Liam Donaldson, is conducting an investigation into the issue of organ and tissue retention, and my Department will issue further definitive guidance following his report to Ministers and the issuing of equivalent guidance to the NHS.

Is é an polasaí anseo maidir le baint nó coinneáil orgán ó pháistí a fuair bás nach n-úsáidtear orgán ar bith do chúiseanna taighde. Nuair a bhaintear orgáin do scrúdú iarbháis, déantar seo le cead na dtuismitheoirí nó an chaomhnóra amháin.

I Mí an Mhárta 2000, d'eisigh an Príomh-Oifigeach Míochaine, an Dr Henrietta Campbell, treoir eatramhach ar scrúdú iarbháis do na hIontaobhais SSS uilig. Tá an Príomh-Oifigeach Míochaine i Sasana, An tOllamh Liam Donaldson, ag déanamh fiosraithe ar cheist na coinneála orgáin agus fíocháin agus eiseoidh an Roinn s'agam tuilleadh teorach soiléire i ndiaidh tuairisc an POM i Sasana chuig Airí, agus eisiúint comhthéorach don SNS.

Regional Medical Services Group

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) detail the members of the regional medical services group (b) confirm by whom they were appointed and their clinical experience (c) outline the areas they will examine (d) detail the meetings they have had to the present and when they expect to report. (AQW 1102/00)

Ms de Brún:

(a) The regional medical services consortium (RMSC) board is comprised of the boards' directors of public health and the boards' directors with responsibility for planning/contracting, plus nursing and GP representatives. The current members are:

Dr J Little	Consultant in Public Health Medicine, EHSSB (Chair)
Dr D Stewart	Director of Public Health, EHSSB

Ms A Lynch	Director of Planning and Contracting, EHSSB
Dr J Courtney	General Practitioner, EHSSB
Dr J Watson	Director of Public Health, NHSSB
Mr I Deboys	Director of Performance Management and Secondary Care, NHSSB
Ms L McNair	Director of Nursing, NHSSB
Dr M Nicholl	General Practitioner, NHSSB
Dr W McConnell	Director of Public Health, WHSSB
Mr M Bradley	Director of Healthcare, WHSSB
Dr A M Telford	Director of Public Health, SHSSB
Mr C Donaghy	Director of Planning and Performance Management, SHSSB
Dr M Donnelly	General Practitioner, NI GP Fundholding Association

There is also a RMSC project team, which is responsible for the identification and investigation of service development issues and the preparation of papers, reports and recommendations. The current members are:

Mr Peter McLaughlin	Project Manager, EHSSB (Chair)
Dr J Little	Consultant in Public Health Medicine, EHSSB
Dr C Beattie	Consultant in Public Health Medicine, EHSSB
Ms T Magirr	Planning and Contracting, EHSSB
Ms A McCollum	Director of Pharmacy, EHSSB
Ms M Waddell	Director of Nursing, EHSSB
Dr A Mairs	Consultant in Public Health Medicine, NHSSB
Ms F Carswell	Finance, NHSSB
Dr C Hamilton	Consultant in Public Health Medicine, WHSSB
Dr D Corrigan	Consultant in Public Health Medicine, SHSSB
Ms M Coulter	Finance, SHSSB
Mr M Timoney	Director of Pharmacy, SHSSB
Mr R McMillen	Project Manager, Campbell Commissioning Project (For issues relating to Cancer services)

From time to time RMSC will co-opt other members to assist in the appraisal of specific issues involving social services or professions allied to medicine.

- (b) The four health and social services boards appoint the members of the RMSC board and the project team. It would require disproportionate effort to provide details of the members' clinical experience.
- (c) The RMSC was set up by the four health and social services boards and the Department of Health and Social Services in 1991, to allow boards to co-operate in the commissioning and purchasing of regional medical services; and to ensure that vulnerable services — particularly high-cost/low-volume ones — are protected.

The RMSC is not a purchaser or commissioner in its own right, and can best be described as a voluntary forum within which commissioners can discuss regional medical issues of mutual interest.

(d) The RMSC board usually meets four times a year and the project team meets monthly. Reports and recommendations made by the project team are submitted to the RMSC Board for approval. The RMSC board in turn is responsible to the four boards' chief executives for any decisions taken.

(a) Tá Stiúrthóirí Sláinte Poiblí na mBord agus Stiúrthóirí na mBord atá freagrach as Pleanáil/Déanamh Conarthaí, agus as ionadaithe banaltraí agus DGí ar Bhord Chuibhreannas Seirbhísí Míochaine Réigiúnacha (CSMR). Is iad seo a leanas na baill atá air faoin láthair:

Dr J Little	Lia i Míochaine Sláinte Poiblí, BSSSO (Cathaoirleach)
Dr D Stewart	Stiúrthóir Sláinte Poiblí, BSSSO
A Bn. Lynch	Stiúrthóir Pleanála agus Déanta Conarthaí, BSSSO
Dr J Courtney	Dochtúir Ginearálta, BSSSO
Dr J Watson	Stiúrthóir Sláinte Poiblí, BSSST
An tUas. I Deboys	Stiúrthóir Bainistíochta Cleachtaidh agus Cúraim Thánaistigh, BSSST
L Bn. McNair	Stiúrthóir Banaltrachta, BSSST
Dr M Nicholl	Dochtúir Ginearálta, BSSST
Dr W McConnell	Stiúrthóir Sláinte Poiblí, BSSSI
An tUas. M Bradley	Stiúrthóir Cúraim Sláinte, BSSSI
Dr A M Telford	Stiúrthóir Sláinte Poiblí, BSSSD
An tUas C Donaghy	Stiúrthóir Pleanála agus Bainistíochta Cleachtaidh, BSSSD
Dr M Donnelly	Dochtúir Ginearálta, Comhaltas Scarthóirí DGí TÉ

Tá Foireann Tionscadail CSMR ann fosta atá freagrach as aithint agus fiosrú ceisteanna forbartha seirbhísí agus as ullmhú páipéar, tuairiscí agus moltaí. Seo a leanas baill na Foirne faoi láthair:

An tUas Peter McLaughlin	Bainisteoir Tionscadail, BSSSO (Cathaoirleach)
Dr J Little	Lia i Míochaine Sláinte Poiblí, BSSSO
Dr C Beattie	Lia i Míochaine Sláinte Poiblí, BSSSO
T Bn. Magirr	Pleanáil agus Déanamh Conarthaí, BSSSO
A Bn. McCollum	Stiúrthóir Cógaisíochta, BSSSO
M Bn. Waddell	Stiúrthóir Banaltrachta, BSSSO
Dr A Mairs	Lia i Míochaine Sláinte Poiblí, BSSST
F Bn. Carswell	Airgeadas, BSSST
Dr C Hamilton	Lia i Míochaine Sláinte Poiblí, BSSSI
Dr D Corrigan	Lia i Míochaine Sláinte Poiblí, BSSSD
M Bn. Coulter	Airgeadas, BSSSD

An tUas. M Timoney	Stiúrthóir Cógaisíochta, BSSSD
An tUas. R McMillen	Bainisteoir Tionscadail, Tionscadal Coimisiúnaithe Mhac Cathmhaoil (Do cheisteanna a bhaineann le Seirbhísí Ailse)

An tUas. R McMillen Bainisteoir Tionscadail, Tionscadal Coimisiúnaithe Mhac Cathmhaoil (Do cheisteanna a bhaineann le Seirbhísí Ailse)

Ó am go ham, comhthoghfaidh CSMR baill eile chun cuidiú le measúnacht ceisteanna áirithe a bhaineann leis na Seirbhísí Sóisialta nó le Gairmeacha Bainteach le Míochaine.

(b) Ceapann na ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta baill ar Bhord an CSMR agus ar Fhoireann an Tionscadail. Bheadh iarracht dhíreireach de dhíth le sonraí de thaithí chliniciúil na mball a chur ar fáil.

(c) Bhunaigh na ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus An Roinn Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an CSMR i 1991, chun cead a thabhairt do Bhoird comhoibriú a dhéanamh i gcoimisiúnú agus i gceannach seirbhísí míochaine réigiúnacha; agus le cinntiú go gcosnaítear seirbhísí lagchuidithe (go háirithe seirbhísí ardchostasacha agus ísealchumasacha).

Ní ceannaitheoir nó coimisinéir ceart é féin an CSMR ach is é an cur síos is fearr a dhéanamh air gur fóram deonach é inar féidir le coimisinéirí ceisteanna míochaine réigiúnacha de chomhshuim a phlé.

(d) Cruinníonn Bord an CSMR ceithre huair sa bhliain de ghnáth agus cruinníonn Foireann an Tionscadail go míosúil. Cuirtear tuairiscí agus moltaí déanta ag Foireann an Tionscadail isteach chuig Bord an CSMR d'fhormheas. Tá Bord an CSMR é féin freagrach do Phríomh-Fheidhmeannaigh na gceithre Bhord do chinneadh ar bith a dhéantar.

Beacon Houses: Fermanagh and Tyrone

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will, through the western board, provide adequate funding for voluntary care for day patients with mental problems referred by GPs to Beacon Houses in counties Fermanagh and Tyrone.

(AQW 1104/00)

Ms de Brún: Spending decisions on services for such patients are matters for the western board in discussion with local trusts. However, I assure you that day care generally and the services of the Beacon Houses in particular are recognised as a vital element of service provision. There are currently 292 daily places provided by trusts and the voluntary sector for people with mental health problems in the western board area. Sperrin Lakeland Trust has a contract with the Northern Ireland association for mental health to provide 39 places for people with mental health problems in Omagh and Fermanagh.

Baineann cinnte ar chaitheamh ar sheirbhísí d'othair mar sin leis an Bhord SSS Iartharach i plé le hIontaobhais áitiúla. Geallaim duit áfach, go n-aithnítear cúram lae i gcoitinne, agus seirbhísí na dTithe Beacon go háirithe mar ghné fhiorthábhachtach de sholáthar seirbhíse. Faoi láthair, soláthraíonn Iontaobhais agus an earnáil dheonach 292 áit laethúla do dhaoine le fadhbanna sláinte meabhrach i gCeantar an Bhoird Iartharaigh. Tá conradh ag Iontaobhas Shliabh Speirín le Cumann Thuaisceart Éireann um Shláinte Meabhrach le 39 n-áit a sholáthar do dhaoine le fadhbanna sláinte meabhrach ar an Ómaigh agus i bhFear Manach.

Morning-After Pill

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm when the morning-after pill will be available without prescription in Northern Ireland and if chemists will be given the discretion to sell or prescribe the drug. (AQW 1106/00)

Ms de Brún: Emergency hormonal contraception (EHC), also known as the morning-after pill, has been legally available here, without prescription, from Monday, 1 January 2001. It is anticipated that the product will not, however, become available from the manufacturer until late January/early February 2001.

Supply will be on the basis of a prescription written by a GP or by sale of medication. There is currently no provision in law for pharmacists to prescribe. Pharmacists have a code of ethics, which includes the provision that those who, for personal convictions or religious beliefs, do not wish to supply a specific medicine, are not required to do so. However, they are obligated under their professional code to re-direct anyone requesting emergency hormonal contraception to an appropriate alternative source of supply, which may be another pharmacist, GP surgery or family planning clinic.

Beidh frithghiniúint hormónach éigeandála (FHÉ), ar a dtugtar “an piolla don mhaidin dár gcionn” chomh maith, ar fáil go dleathach anseo, gan oideas, ón Luan 1 Eanáir 2001. Meastar nach mbeidh an piolla curtha ar fáil ag an déantóir áfach go dtí go mall i mí Eanáir nó go luath i mí Feabhra 2001.

Cuirfear ar fáil é ar bhonn oidis scríofa ag gnáthdhochtúir nó ar díol mar leigheas. Faoi láthair ní thugann an dlí cead do chógaiseoirí an t-oideas a scríobh. Tá cód eiteac ag na cógaiseoirí ina bhfuil foráil ann dóibh siúd, de thairbhe creidimh phearsanta nó creideamh reiligiúnach, nár mhian leo leigheas áirithe a chur ar fáil, ní thugtar orthu a leithéid a dhéanamh. Tá siad faoi dhualgas óna gcód gairmiúil go n-atreoródh siad duine ar bith atá ag iarraidh frithghiniúint hormónach éigeandála chuig duine eile cuí a chuireann ar fáil i bódh sin ina chógaiseoir, ina fheithemhlann gnáthdhochtúra nó ina chlinic pleanáil clainne.

Morning-After Pill: Test and Analysis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what tests and analysis have been done on the morning-after pill to ensure no harmful effect on those using it on a regular basis. (AQW 1107/00)

Ms de Brún: Emergency hormonal contraception (EHC), also known as the morning-after pill, is not recommended for use on a regular basis. Clinical trials have shown that the efficacy of hormonal emergency contraception is increased the earlier it is taken after unprotected sexual intercourse. Pharmacy supply is therefore important in allowing women timely access to emergency contraception at times when doctors or clinics might not be accessible.

The committee on the safety of medicines (CSM) considered the scientific evidence of the safety of levonorgestrel 0.75mg if it was removed from prescription control for women aged 16 and above. They advised that levonorgestrel 0.75mg for emergency contraception may safely be supplied as a pharmacy medicine for women aged 16 and above and that all the steps required to safely supply emergency contraception could be successfully completed in a pharmacy. They also recommended that women obtaining emergency contraception from a pharmacist should be encouraged to see a doctor for follow up advice.

Ní mholtar úsáid frithghiniúint hormónach éigeandála (FHÉ), ar a dtugtar “an piolla don mhaidin dár gcionn” chomh maith, ar bhonn reatha. Thaispeáin trialacha cliniciúla dá luaite a ghlactar é i ndiaidh collaíochta gan frithghiniúint is amhlaidh a mhéadaítear éifeacht frithghiniúint hormónach éigeandála. Is tábhachtach mar sin soláthar tráthúil cógaslainne a dhéanamh ag tabhairt faille do mhná an fhrithghiniúint éigeandála a fháil nuair nach mbeadh teacht ar dhochtúirí ná ar chlinicí.

Rinne an Coiste um Shábháilteacht Cógas (CSC) a mhachnamh ar fhianaise eolaíochta ar shábháilteacht levonorgestrol 0.75mg má bhaintear é ó rialú oidis do mhná atá 16 nó os a chionn. Mhol siad gur féidir levonorgestrol 0.75mg a chur ar fáil go sábháilte mar chógas cógaslainne do mhná atá 16 nó os a chionn agus gur féidir na céimeanna cearta atá riachtanach le frithghiniúint éigeandála a sholáthar go sábháilte a bhaint amach i gcógaslann. Molann siad chomh maith gur chóir mná a spreagadh, atá ag fáil frithghiniúint éigeandála ó chógaslannaí, le dul chuig dochtúir le comhairle a fháil maidir leis an cheist seo.

Trust Recovery Plan

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list in summary form the

agreed measures per financial year in each trust recovery plan to achieve the agreed recovery target.

(AQW 1112/00)

Ms de Brún: The recovery plans produced by the relevant trusts are still under consideration by my Department and as such do not represent agreed final documents. It is therefore inappropriate for me to comment on the plans at this stage. My Department will continue to evaluate the recovery plan proposals and aims to complete this process by the end of the financial year.

Tá an Roinn s'agam ag meas na bpleananna téarnaimh go fóill atá déanta ag na hIontaobhais chuí agus mar sin ní doiciméid iad atá beartaithe go críochnúil. Ní cóir dom mar sin mo thuairim a nochtaidh ar na pleananna faoi láthair. Rachaidh an Roinn s'agam ar aghaidh ag measúnú na moltaí le haghaidh plean téarnaimh agus tá sé mar aidhm aici an próiseas a chríochnú faoi dheireadh na bliana airgeadais.

Nurses: Return to Professional Practice Course

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many people have completed the return to professional practice course for nurses in each of the past five years.

(AQW 1113/00)

Ms de Brún: Return to professional practice courses have been offered since 1998. The following numbers of nurses have completed training in each year since then:

1998	54
1999	59
2000	39

One hundred and seventeen nurses are currently participating in return to practice training.

Additional training places will be available early next year to meet an identified demand for places.

Tá Cúrsaí don Fhilleadh ar an Chleachtas Gairmiúil á dtairiscint ó 1998. Seo a leanas líon na mbanaltraí a chríochnaigh an traenáil i ngach bliain ó shin:

1998	54
1999	59
2000	39

Tá 117 banaltra ag glacadh páirte i dtraenáil fillte ar chleachtas faoi láthair.

Beidh áiteanna traenála breise ar fáil go luath san athbhliain chun éileamh ar áiteanna a aithnítear a líonadh.

Trust Deficit Recovery Plan

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the methodology of

equality impact assessment that has been applied to each trust deficit recovery plan and the conclusions and adverse impacts established for each trust plan.

(AQW 1114/00)

Ms de Brún: The recovery plans produced by the relevant trusts are still under consideration by my Department and as such do not represent agreed final documents. The equality considerations are an important part of the development of the recovery plans by the relevant organisations, and I will expect those organisations to address their equality obligations fully in any agreed recovery measures.

Tá na pleananna téarnaimh a rinne na hIontaobhais chuí faoi athbhreithniú go fóill ag mo Roinnse, agus, mar sin de, ní cáipéisí críochnaithe comhaontaithe iad. Is cuid thábhachtach iad na saincheisteanna comhionannais i bhforbairt pleananna téarnaimh na n-eagraíochtaí cuí agus beidh coinne agam go dtabharfaidh na heagraíochtaí sin aghaidh iomlán ar a ndualgais chomhionannais maidir le bearta téarnaimh comhaontaithe ar bith.

Breast Cancer: Consultants

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) detail the number of consultants employed in dealing with breast cancer (b) give her assessment of the provision of service since the departure of Mr Khan and (c) confirm when Mr Khan's replacement will be appointed.

(AQW 1126/00)

Ms de Brún: It is not possible to provide the information requested on the number of consultants dealing with breast cancer. Consultants in a number of different specialties, including general surgery, medical/clinical oncology, radiology and pathology may be involved in dealing with cases of breast cancer at different stages or in different cases and they are not identified separately as dealing with breast cancer cases.

I am happy to report that Dr Khan has withdrawn his resignation and I am satisfied that the breast reconstruction service is continuing to operate smoothly.

Ní féidir an t-eolas a iarradh a thabhairt ar líon na lianna comhairleacha ag déileáil le hailse chéice. Féadann lianna comhairleacha i roinnt sainréimsí éagsúla, ina measc, máinliacht ghinearálta, oinceolaíocht mhíochaine/chiniciúil, raideolaíocht agus paiteolaíocht bheith bainteach leis ag déileáil le cúiseanna ailse céice ag céimeanna nó i gcásanna éagsúla, agus ní idirdhealaítear iad mar lianna ag déileáil le cásanna d'ailse chéice.

Tá áthas orm le cur in iúl gur tharraing Dr Khan a éirí as siar agus tá mé sásta go bhfuil an tseirbhís atógála céice ag feidhmiú ar aghaidh go réidh.

Breast Cancer: Reconstructive Surgery

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) detail the incidence rate for breast cancer for each of the last five years and (b) detail how many patients are waiting for reconstructive surgery. (AQW 1127/00)

Ms de Brún:

- a) Information is available for the calendar years 1993 to 1996 and is detailed in the table below. The number of incidences from 1997 to date is not yet available from the cancer registry.

INCIDENCE OF BREAST CANCER IN THE LOCAL FEMALE POPULATION

	1993	1994	1995	1996
Incidence cases	768	812	863	868
Rate per 100,000 population	92	96.7	102.3	101.8

- b) At 30 November 2000 — the latest date for which information is available — there were 514 persons waiting for breast reconstruction surgery at local hospitals. It is not possible to determine which patients are having breast reconstruction surgery solely because of breast cancer.

- a) Tá eolas ar fáil do na blianta 1993 go dtí 1996 agus é sonraithe sa tábla thíos. Níl méid na minicíochta ó 1997 go dtí an lá inniu ar fáil go fóill ón Chlárlann Ailse.

MINICÍOCHT AILSE CÍCHE I MEASC AN BHANDAONRA ÁITIÚIL

	1993	1994	1995	1996
Minicíocht casanna	768	812	863	868
Ráta de réir 100,000 den daonra	92	96.7	102.3	101.8

- b) Ar an 30ú lá de Shamhain 2000 (an dáta is déanaí a bhfuil eolas ar fáil) bhí 514 dhuine ag fanacht ar mháinliacht ar athdhéanamh cíche in otharlanna áitiúla. Ní féidir a rá cé acu de na hothair a bhí ann fá choinne athdhéanta chíce as ailse chíce amháin.

Nursing Homes: Monitoring

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) detail how she monitors nursing homes and/or residential care and (b) outline her plans to improve the monitoring process.

(AQW 1128/00)

Ms de Brún: The conduct of nursing homes and residential care homes is regulated under the Registered Homes (Northern Ireland) Order 1992, the Nursing Homes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993 and the Residential Care Homes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993. Responsibility for monitoring compliance with the Order

and the Regulations rests with the registration and inspection units of the health and social services boards.

I am currently considering ways of improving regulation and will set out my plans in due course.

Rialaítear oibriú na mbailte banaltrachta agus na mbailte cúraim chónaithe faoi Ord na mBailte Cláraithe (TÉ) 1992, Rialacha na mBailte Banaltrachta (TÉ) 1993 agus Rialacha na mBailte Cúraim Chónaithe (TÉ) 1993. Luíonn an fhreagracht as monatóireacht go ndéantar de réir an Oird agus na Rialacha le hAonaid Chláraithe agus Iniúchta na mBord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta.

Tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh ar dhóigheanna leis an rialú a fheabhsú faoi láthair agus leagfaidh mé amach na pleananna seo i gceann na haimsire.

Nursing Home Care: Relatives' Liability

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) give her assessment of the liability to relatives in respect of payment for the provision of care in nursing homes and (b) detail any plans she has to review this. (AQW 1129/00)

Ms de Brún: Relatives are not liable, under the provisions of articles 36 and 99 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 and the Health and Personal Social Services (Assessment of Resources) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993, for the payment of any costs connected with residential or nursing home care provided or arranged by the health and personal social services.

However, there is provision in the legislation and guidance to enable a willing third party to pay the additional accommodation costs where residents choose to enter more expensive accommodation than that normally contracted by a board.

Furthermore under article 100 of the Order, married partners who have sufficient resources may be expected to make a voluntary contribution towards the cost of their spouse's care. This is a seldom-used provision, and I am considering its repeal in the package of measures that I will bring forward for the long-term care of the elderly.

Ní ar ghaolta, faoi fhorálacha Airteagail 36 agus 99 den Ord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta (TÉ) 1972 agus Rialacha Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta (Measúnú ar Acmhainní) (TÉ) 1993, atá iocaíocht costais ar bith a bhaineann le cúram cónaitheach nó le teaghlach altranais a sholáthraíonn nó a shocraíonn na Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta agus Sláinte.

Tá foráil agus treoir sa reachtaíocht áfach le cur ar chumas duine eile na costais bhreise lóistín a íoc áit ar bith a roghnaíonn cónaitheoirí dul isteach chuig lóistín eile atá níos costasaí seachas ceann atá faoi chonradh ag Bord de ghnáth.

Ar a bharr seo, faoi Airteagal 100 den Ord, is féidir go mbeifear ag dúil le go dtabharfadh céile pósta a bhfuil go leor acmhainní acu airgead a thabhairt le cuidiú le costas chúram a chéile. Is annamh a úsáidtear an fhoráil seo agus tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh ar a aisghairm sna bearta a chuirfidh mé chun tosaigh faoi choinne chúram fadtéarmach na sean.

Ambulance Service Staff

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) detail the number of ambulance workers who have left the service on grounds of ill health in each of the last five years and (b) outline the policy she intends to follow to address this issue. (AQW 1134/00)

Ms de Brún: The number of ambulance service staff who, as the result of ill health, have retired or left the service is as follows:

1995/96	19
1996/97	13
1997/98	14
1998/99	14
1999/2000	13

My Department has issued guidance to all health and personal social services employers on occupational health and health and safety and is aware that the Northern Ireland ambulance service trust has developed policies in accordance with both sets of guidelines. It is also known that the trust continuously monitors reasons for ill health and strives to ensure that staff have a safe and healthy environment within which to work. My Department's guidance on occupational health is currently being revised.

Tá méid na foirne a d'éirigh as, nó a d'fhág, an tseirbhís otharchairr de thairbhe drochshláinte, mar a leanas.

1995/96	19
1996/97	13
1997/98	14
1998/99	14
1999/2000	13

Thug mo Roinn treoir ar shláinte cheirde, ar shláinte agus ar shábháilteacht, do gach fostóir de chuid an SSPS. Is eol dóibh fosta, go bhfuil cuspóirí bunaithe ag an Iontaobhas Sheirbhís Otharchairr Thuaisceart Éireann a luíonn le gach sráith de na treoirínte. Tá sé ar eolas fosta, go bhfuil scéim mhonatóra ar siúl ag an Iontaobhas a scrúdaíonn fáthanna drochshláinte, agus iad ar a ndícheall timpeallacht sábháilte, sláintiúil a chur ar fáil don fhoireann ina mbeidh siad ábalta oibriú ann. Faoi láthair, tá treoir mo Roinne ar shláinte cheirde á athscrúdú.

Dental Provision

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the availability and accessibility of dental provision in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1135/00)

Ms de Brún: I am satisfied with the level of accessibility and availability of dental provision here. The health service provides a full range of dental services through general dental practitioners, the community dental service and the hospital dental service. No-one should be unable to obtain health service dental treatment. There is one general dental practitioner — the main provider of health service dentistry — for every 2,400 people here which is better provision than in England, Scotland and Wales.

Tá mé sásta le leibhéal fhoráil na déidliachta anseo ó thaobh rochtana agus infhaighteachta de. Cuireann an tSeirbhís Sláinte réimse iomlán seirbhísí déidliachta ar fáil trí ghnáthfhiacloirí, trí sheirbhís déidliachta an phobail agus trí sheirbhís déidliachta an ospidéal. Ba chóir go mbeadh duine ar bith ábalta teacht ar chóireál déidliachta na seirbhíse sláinte. Maidir le gnáthfhiacloirí, na príomhsholáthróirí déidliachta sna seirbhíse sláinte, tá fiacloir amháin ann do gach 2,400 duine anseo is fearr an fhoráil ná mar atá i Sasana, in Albain nó sa Bhreatain Bheag.

Child Protection Working Group

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the voluntary sector representatives on the child protection working group established under the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQW 1146/00)

Ms de Brún: The child protection joint working group established under the North/South Ministerial Council consists of officials from the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children and the Catholic Council for Maintained Schools in the South and from the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety here.

The Group has submitted a report containing preliminary recommendations to both Education Ministers. If the Ministers approve the broad approach outlined in the report, the group will begin to develop detailed proposals, and the voluntary sector will be included in consultation on the proposals.

Tá an Comhghrúpa Oibre ar Chosaint an Pháiste a bunaíodh faoi Chomhairle Airí Thuaidh/Theas déanta suas as oifigigh ó Roinn an Oideachais agus na hEolaíochta, ón Roinn Sláinte agus Páistí agus Comhairle na Scoileanna Maoinithe Caitliceacha sa Deisceart agus ó Roinn an Oideachais agus ón Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí anseo.

Chuir an Grúpa tuairisc a bhfuil bunmholtaí inti faoi bhráid na beirte Aire Oideachais. Má aontaíonn an bheirt Aire leis an chur chuige ginearálta a ndéantar achoimhre air sa tuairisc, tosóidh an Grúpa ar mholtaí mionchruinne a fhorbairt agus beidh an earnáil dheonach páirteach sa chomhairliú ar na moltaí.

Child Protection Working Group

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the composition and current agenda of the child protection working group established under the North/South Ministerial Council.

(AQW 1147/00)

Ms de Brún: The working group is tasked with establishing a mechanism for the reciprocal identification of people who are considered unsuitable to work with children. The initial emphasis is on teachers, but it is envisaged that this will extend in due course to other education, youth and health sector staff who have substantial, unsupervised access to children.

Tá an Grúpa Oibre freagrach as meicníocht a bhunú chun daoine a aithint go cómhálartach a mheastar nár cheart dóibh bheith ag obair le páistí. Tá an chéadbhéim ar mhúinteoirí, ach táthar ag dúil go leathnóidh seo amach in am is i dtráth do bhaill fhoirne oideachais, óige agus sláinte eile a bhíonn le páistí cuid mhór gan stiúradh.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Conlig Water Service Depot: Staffing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will (a) confirm that staff changes are proposed at the Water Service depot at Conlig (b) outline the numbers involved (c) detail what consultations have taken place with local representatives on this matter.

(AQW 986/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): Water Service carries out periodic reviews of its work arrangements to ensure the optimum use of resources, including staff, in order to provide improved services and to demonstrate best value for money, in the interests of customers and the tax payer.

A review team is currently considering the rationalisation and centralisation of the technical services function within Eastern Division of Water Service. The technical service function deals with the processing of applications for new connections to water mains and sewers, new housing development proposals, and planning and property inquiries. The function is presently undertaken at five locations including the Conlig office, where 4 members of staff are involved.

It is expected that the review will be completed next month and the final recommendations will be discussed with trade union representatives in the normal way through Water Service's consultative procedures, before decisions are taken on the way ahead.

Cycle Lanes

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that cycle lanes currently being developed by Sustran will be created in rural towns across Northern Ireland to promote road safety, healthy recreational activity and concern for the environment and if he will make a statement.

(AQW 997/00)

Mr Campbell: The Northern Ireland cycling strategy, which my Department launched in June 2000, recognises the health and environmental benefits of cycling. The strategy aims amongst other things, to improve cyclists' safety and create a cycle-friendly infrastructure.

As regards the latter, Roads Service is helping Sustrans to develop the national cycle network in Northern Ireland. The first phase of the network, which will be substantially completed by April 2001, will create 500 miles of cycle network. In conjunction with district councils, Roads Service hopes to improve cycle access in towns across Northern Ireland by developing planned urban cycle networks and by providing an additional 50 miles of urban cycle route by the end of 2005.

Aggregates Tax

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the financial implications of a proposed UK aggregates tax to the work of his Department.

(AQW 1025/00)

Mr Campbell: It is proposed that the aggregates tax will be introduced with effect from 1 April 2002. My Department's initial assessment is that this will impose additional costs of about £7 million annually. Most of these costs will be borne on the roads programme where the introduction of the tax is expected to increase road maintenance and capital costs by some 7.5% — £5 million to £6 million. It is estimated that the Water Service will face additional costs of £1 million and that the transport companies will also have increased costs of at least £200,000.

Buildings and Amenities: West Tyrone

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to (a) detail all buildings and amenities within his responsibility in the constituency of West Tyrone (b) outline the percentage of his budget that has

been allocated to the West Tyrone constituency and (c) explain how this compares with the previous budget.

(AQW 1079/00)

Mr Campbell: I have detailed below my Department's buildings and amenities in response to part (a) of your question. The information requested in parts (b) and (c) is not recorded on a constituency basis and could be provided only at a disproportionate cost.

ROADS SERVICE OFFICES AND DEPOTS

Arvalee Depot 32 Deverney Road Arvalee Omagh Co Tyrone	Sollus Yard 237 Victoria Road Bready Co Tyrone
Castlederg Yard 11 Castlegore Road Castlederg Co Tyrone	Newtownstewart Yard Old Station Road Newtownstewart Co Tyrone
Melmount Yard Melmount Road Strabane Co Tyrone	Plumbridge Yard 32a Dergbrough Road Plumbridge Co Tyrone
"Elmview" (Strabane Section Office) 20 Derry Road Strabane Co Tyrone	Ballyfatten Storage Area Strabane Co Tyrone
Moyagh Storage Area 26 Moyagh Road Strabane Co Tyrone	Killeter Storage Area 20A Aghalunmy Road Killeter
Drumskinney Depot Galbally Dromore Co Tyrone	

WATER SERVICE OFFICES AND DEPOTS

Office and Depot 69 Gortin Road, Omagh	Office Park Road, Strabane
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- Other Installations
- 35 Car parks in Omagh and Strabane
- 4 Water Treatment Works (at Lough Macrory, Lough Bradan, Glenhordial and at River Derg, near Ardstraw).
- 49 Water Pumping Stations
- 80 Service Reservoirs
- 81 Waste Water Treatment Works
- 46 Waste Water Pumping Stations

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Buildings and Amenities: West Tyrone

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to (a) detail all buildings and amenities within his responsibility in the constituency of West Tyrone (b) outline the percentage of his budget that has been allocated to the West Tyrone constituency and (c) explain how this compares with the previous budget. (AQW 1082/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): The Department for Social Development has responsibility for the following buildings in the constituency of West Tyrone:

- Omagh Social Security Office, 19 Mountjoy Road, Omagh, BT79 7BB.
- Benefit Investigation Services, 15/17 High Street, Omagh, BT79 1BA.
- Omagh Medical Support Services, Block A, Nurses Home, Community Service Building, Tyrone & Fermanagh Hospital, Omagh
- The Appeal Service, 12/14 Dublin Road, Omagh, BT78 1ES.
- Strabane Social Security Office, Urney Road, Strabane, BT82 9BX.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to provide information in relation to budgets as this can only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Sunday On-Course Betting

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the initial action taken by him in response to the wishes of the Assembly, as expressed on 28 November 2000, regarding the introduction of legislation necessary to legalise Sunday on-course betting. (AQW 1087/00)

Mr Morrow: I have noted the motion carried by the Assembly on 28 November on this matter.

Housing Benefit Claims System

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development what action he is taking to expedite the housing benefit claims system and what steps he is taking to ensure that assessments are correct. (AQW 1096/00)

Mr Morrow: The Housing Executive is required by housing benefit regulations to determine all housing benefit claims within 14 days of receiving all information needed for the assessment of the claim, or as soon as reasonably practicable thereafter. For the year 1999/2000 the Executive succeeded in determining 94.25% of all

claims within this timescale. The figure for the six-month period, April to September 2000 was 94·5%.

As regards accuracy, for the year 1999/2000 the Executive achieved an accuracy level of 96·4% in the assessment of all claims. For the six-month period to September 2000 the accuracy rate was 95·3%.

Both of these measures of performance compare favourably with those of local authorities in Great Britain. The Executive's performance in these areas is monitored within the organisation and by the Local Government Auditor, and is reported on regularly to the Department to ensure that this high level of achievement is maintained.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 19 January 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Prisoners Groups: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the funding allocated to prisoners' groups in each constituency area for the financial years 1998-1999, 1999-2000 and 2000-2001.

(AQW 1013/00)

Reply: The information requested is not maintained by constituency area and could only be compiled in this format at a disproportionate cost.

Victims Unit

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline when the first meeting of the Victims Unit with Give Innocent Victims Equality (GIVE) and Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR) will take place.

(AQW 1024/00)

Reply: As part of an ongoing information sharing exercise, officials from the Victims Unit met representatives of FAIR in Markethill on 29 November 2000. This will be followed by regular further meetings in the coming months. An initial meeting with GIVE has been scheduled for 19 January.

Costs of Questions

Mr Fee asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister pursuant to AQW 799/99: (a) what action has been taken to determine the range of costs incurred in responding to written and oral questions to Ministers of the Assembly and; (b) when and where the results of that action will be available. (AQW 1063/00)

Reply: An exercise has recently been conducted on the cost of answering a written Assembly question. The average cost of providing a written answer is £91.44.

A similar exercise is under way in relation to oral Assembly questions. A figure for the average cost is expected to be available in March 2001.

The exercise to determine the cost of answering Assembly questions will be repeated at five-yearly intervals.

Urban and Rural

Mr Hussey asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to state the definition of the words urban and rural as used by their Office.

(AQW 1065/00)

Reply: The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister does not have a formal definition of the words urban and rural. However, when working with other Northern Ireland Departments, the Office takes account of any definitions relevant to their policies.

Christmas Cards

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail: (a) the number of official Christmas cards they have sent; (b) the cost of their design, publication and postage and; (c) the list of people on the Ministers' official Christmas card list.

(AQW 1108/00)

Reply: The First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the junior Ministers sent 1,350 official Christmas cards at a cost of £686.35. The cost of postage was £354.30.

Christmas cards are typically sent to individuals and members of organisations who Ministers meet during the year. They are sent to counterparts and office-holders in organisations with which a Department regularly corresponds or who have a significant interest in a Department's activities and responsibilities.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Milk Quota

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how she intends to: (a) address the concerns about proposed milk quota allocation; (b) provide support for farmers who own a milk quota with more than 250,000 litres; (c) provide support for farm businesses with more than one family deriving a living from one milk quota and; (d) provide support for

new entrants to the farming industry since 1 April 1999 with regard to distribution of milk quotas.

(AQW 1143/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): A diversity of views were expressed during the consultation process on the allocation of additional milk quota, and essentially it was a choice between an allocation to all producers and a targeted approach. As the amount of quota is small, I decided that to provide maximum impact at individual farm level it should be allocated to active small producers.

If I had decided to allocate the quota to all producers on a pro-rata basis, the impact on producers with a quota holding of more than 250,000 litres would have been quite modest. In the circumstances, and given the recent payment of £2.4 million agrimonetary compensation to all dairy farmers, I do not see a need for any further action to address the concerns of larger producers.

I have some sympathy for new entrants, and I would have liked to have been able to help them. Unfortunately it was not possible to devise an acceptable mechanism. Nevertheless some new entrants since 1 April 1999 may benefit if they acquired all, or some, of their quota by gift or inheritance from a producer who was eligible for an award at 1 April 1999 but who has since disposed of his quota.

All milk producers will benefit from the rising trend in milk prices and from the recent payment of £2.4 million of dairy agrimonetary compensation.

EU Farm Support: Reduction

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans to implement the proposed reduction in EU farm support as presented by the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Fisheries.

(AQW 1144/00)

Ms Rodgers: My Department is currently involved in implementing the reforms agreed in the Agenda 2000 negotiations which culminated in the Berlin Agreement of March 1999. These involve reductions in market support accompanied by increases in direct support payments. We expect Northern Ireland agriculture to make a small net gain in income, with the reduction in market returns being more than offset by increases in direct payments.

There is ongoing discussion of the need for further reform of the Common Agricultural Policy because of budgetary pressures, enlargement of the EU, and the desire to reach an agreement in a new round of World Trade Organisation trade talks. However, it will be some time before any new Common Agricultural Policy reform proposals emerge.

Fishing Quotas: Cuts

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to: (a) outline the impact on the fishing community of the cuts in the fishing quotas; (b) detail the steps she is taking to secure the jobs and future of the fishing industry and if she will make a statement.

(AQW 1201/00)

Ms Rodgers: We had some success at the December Fisheries Council meeting in negotiating increases above the initial Commission proposals. However, it was disappointing that the total allowable catch for Irish Sea cod remains at its 2000 level and for the important nephrops there is a 10% reduction. As regards nephrops stock, a formal declaration from the Council was secured that this will be revised if a low by-catch of cod in the nephrops fishing can be demonstrated. Undoubtedly the industry faces a difficult year ahead but we cannot ignore the scientific advice and the interaction that catches of other stocks have on cod, which are in serious difficulties. We must ensure that the industry has a long-term future. I hope to soon be in a position to announce a fishing vessel decommissioning scheme to assist the industry through the difficult times ahead.

EU Common Fisheries Policy: Review

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans for public consultation in Northern Ireland on the proposed review of the EU Common Fisheries Policy.

(AQW 1221/00)

Ms Rodgers: The European Commission has yet to publish its proposals, but it is preparing a Green Paper on the 2002 review for publication in the spring of this year. It is my intention to conduct extensive consultation.

Irish Lights Commission

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to address the situation whereby Northern Ireland fishermen have to pay duties to the Irish Lights Commission, whilst their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland do not.

(AQW 1246/00)

Ms Rodgers: Responsibility for policy relating to the collection of lights dues, rests with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in London.

The UK Fisheries Minister, Mr Elliot Morley has recently written to Mr Keith Hill, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, seeking a reduction or the removal of the payment of lights dues by UK fishermen.

I have written to Mr Hill to support Mr Morley's attempt to obtain a reduction, or the removal, of the payment of

lights dues by UK fishermen. I have done this in view of the recent hardships suffered by the Northern Ireland fishing industry, and the fact that Northern Ireland fishermen are required to pay lights dues while their Republic of Ireland colleagues do not.

A copy of the Department's recent press release announcing my support for Mr Morley's position is attached.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

9 January 2001

004/00

Agriculture Minister Announces Support for Local Fishermen

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Brid Rodgers MLA, today announced that she was supporting calls from local fishermen for the removal of lights dues.

These dues were initially levied to cover the cost of navigational aids provided by lighthouses, but these aids are no longer used by fishermen.

The Minister said that she had written to the Minister at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, (DETR) with responsibility for lights dues,

Calling for the removal of this burden she said:-

"Each year our fishermen pay out some £58,000 for this service part of which they no longer receive. When I met with them recently this was certainly one issue that their representatives highlighted. What they find particularly galling is the fact that their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland no longer pay these dues.

"Following the December meeting of the Fisheries Council I pledged to do whatever I could to help the local fishing industry. This I hope will be seen as a first step in what will be continuing efforts to alleviate the hardship faced by this sector.

"I would also like to take this opportunity to reiterate my resolve to pursue a Northern Ireland vessel decommissioning scheme and will continue to consult the industry on it's development."

Note for Editors

Lights dues are used to meet the operating costs of all aids to navigation used by mariners around the UK and Irish coasts. All lights dues collected go to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) who manage the General Lighthouse Fund (GLF) on behalf of all Lighthouse Authorities. The Commissioners of Irish Lights (CIL) are the General Lighthouse Authority for the whole island of Ireland. The policy in the UK is

that users should pay towards the cost of the service provided by the General Lighthouse Authorities and, in line with this policy, lights dues are therefore levied on Northern Ireland fishing vessels. Fishing vessels based in the Republic of Ireland do not pay lights dues. However the Irish Government makes a contribution to the General Lighthouse Fund, the level of which is a matter between the UK and Irish Governments. The total contribution from the Northern Ireland Fishing Fleet is in the region of £58,000 per annum.

Predator Control

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the advice given on predator control to those seeking to establish fish farming enterprises in the Carlingford Lough area. (AQW 1247/00)

Ms Rodgers: My officials give general advice to people who seek to establish fish farming enterprises in Carlingford Lough on predators that may affect the species they intend to cultivate and the recognised measures available to control such predators. Fish farmers are also advised through conditions in their fish culture licences that they must notify the Department of any major problems they encounter with predators and seek approval for their removal and disposal. This would include seeking the necessary statutory consent from the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment where appropriate.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Public Records Office of Northern Ireland

Mr McClelland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail: (a) the number of users who have visited the Public Record Office this year and; (b) what plans he has to provide wider access to the facility.

(AQW 999/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The number of user visits to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) since 1 January 2000 was 16,564. The number of first time users since 1 January 2000 was 4,536.

PRONI is actively extending its customer base. Since 1999 it has opened outreach centres at the Border Counties History Collective premises at Blacklion, Co Cavan; at Derry City Council's Harbour Museum; and at the Ballymena Borough Council Morrow's Shop Museum. A fourth centre is due to be opened this spring in the premises of Armagh Ancestry at St Patrick's Trian Centre in Armagh. These centres provide computerised indexes and other finding-aids for records held at PRONI so that

the potential user of PRONI's resources can obtain as much information as possible before visiting PRONI.

PRONI also has a user-friendly and informative web site (<http://proni.nics.gov.uk/index.htm>) that has just been awarded a five star rating by the Good Web Guide for the excellence and accessibility of the genealogical information. Already the number of pages accessed on the PRONI web site is averaging almost 1 million per year. PRONI is continuing to update and add to its web site and has set itself a target for the next financial year to increase the number of pages by 5%.

In devising its business plan for 2001-2002, PRONI has very much in mind the importance of widening and improving access to its unique information resources and increasing the number of people making use of these resources.

Gaelic Games

Mr McClelland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail: (a) the number of venues available for the playing of Gaelic games in South Antrim and; (b) what funding has been made available to enhance such venues. (AQW 1002/00)

Mr McGimpsey: There are seven GAA clubs and two schools in the South Antrim parliamentary constituency area where Gaelic games are known to be played. These are as follows:

GAA clubs:	Erin's Own	Cargin
	Tir na nOg	Randalstown
	St James'	Crumlin
	St Comgall's	Antrim
	Kickhams	Creggan
	St Enda's	Glengormley
	St Ergnatt's	Moneyglass
Schools:	Edmund Rice College	Hightown
	St Olcan's High School	Randalstown

These school grounds are only used occasionally by the local clubs for training/games.

Funding for sport in Northern Ireland is made available through the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. The following two GAA clubs within the South Antrim parliamentary constituency area have received financial support through the Sports Council's Capital Lottery Programme:

Tir na nOg	Randalstown	£51,101
St Enda's	Glengormley	£78,200

Urban and Rural

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to state the definition of the words urban and rural used within his Department. (AQW 1004/00)

Mr McGimpsey: While most people will have an intuitive sense of what is meant by the terms urban and rural there are no universally accepted definitions that the Department is able to apply to its activities.

However, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has defined rural areas for the purposes of their rural development programme as all parts of Northern Ireland outside the Belfast metropolitan area, the city of Derry/Londonderry and towns with populations greater than 5,000.

My Department would use this definition should the need arise.

Carp Introduction

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the research he has undertaken on the effect of introducing carp to Inland Waterways in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1060/00)

Mr McGimpsey: On reaching my decision to allow the introduction of carp into Northern Ireland, I sought advice from scientific and technical staff in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of the Environment, Environment and Heritage Service, (EHS), and from technical staff in my own Department.

The introduction of any animal which is not ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland requires the consent of the Environment and Heritage Service under the provisions of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. The EHS has carried out a survey of all Northern Ireland's lakes detailing plant communities and water chemistry. Using this and other relevant information, EHS assesses the potential impact of proposed carp introductions on a site by site basis and will only give approval where it is considered that there will be no significant damage to nature conservation interests.

The scientific advice provided by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was based on experience from elsewhere as there are no significant carp populations locally on which to carry out practical research.

Scientific and technical advice is that carp are unlikely to breed successfully on a regular basis in Northern Ireland as a result of summer water temperatures being too low. Accordingly, Northern Ireland waters are unlikely to facilitate production of carp fry. Furthermore, carp cannot interbreed with indigenous species. Scientific staff have examined a small population of carp that was introduced in around 1996 into a pond in the vicinity of Belfast. There was no indication that the population had bred

since its introduction and fish growth rates subsequent to introduction were steady but not high.

The potential disease risk from introducing carp was also considered. The Fish Health Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998 require fish species entering Northern Ireland to be accompanied by certification by a competent authority that they are free from specified diseases, including spring viraemia of carp. The responsible authority, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, indicated that it would issue the appropriate health and movement permits if it was satisfied that imports came from a disease free stock.

On the basis of the above I decided to allow the introduction of carp. However, they should only be introduced into lakes that have either no fishery value or very low fishery value. Any outlets to other loughs or rivers must be screened to the Department's satisfaction to prevent escapes. Carp introduction must be subject to the Department of the Environment's licensing requirements and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's fish-health requirements being met.

For those carp introduced to date, the source of the fish was thoroughly researched from a fish-health perspective. Testing was carried out for bacterial, viral, and parasitic diseases and the results were scrutinised before permits were issued. The fish were later sampled and tested by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's veterinary science division after stocking. The site will continue to be inspected on a frequent basis.

Carp Introduction

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the action he has taken to prevent carp introductions into lakes in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1061/00)

Mr McGimpsey: In September 2000 I decided to allow the controlled introduction of carp fisheries in Northern Ireland subject to the following conditions: Carp introduced will only be permitted into lakes which have no or very low fishery value and any outlets to other loughs or rivers will have to be adequately screened to prevent escapes; the carp will have to be certified as being from a disease free stock and a licence will also be required from the Department of Environment under the provisions of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. These conditions should act as a safeguard to ensure that there are no detrimental effects on native fish stocks. Each potential development will be considered on a site by site basis.

Lawn and Indoor Bowls

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of participants in the sport of bowls — lawn and indoor — in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1067/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The latest figures available are as follows:

Irish Bowling Association	6,440
Irish Women's Bowling Association	2,510
Irish Women's Indoor Association	612
Irish Indoor Bowling Association	30,000 (estimated)

Lawn and Indoor Bowls

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the measures he has put in place to ensure improved accessibility, participation and coaching in the sports of bowls — lawn and indoor — in Northern Ireland and to ensure improved support and encouragement for participation at representative level.

(AQW 1068/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland has statutory responsibility for the development of sport in the Province. The council provides technical and financial support to the Irish Bowling Association, the Irish Women's Bowling Association, the Irish Women's Indoor Bowling Association and the Irish Indoor Bowling Association. This support covers coaching, nurturing talent, squad preparation and competition from both Exchequer Grant and Sports Lottery Fund programmes, under which £38,693 has been contributed in the current financial year. In addition, the talented athlete programme will be providing substantial assistance for the preparation of bowlers participating in the Commonwealth Games in Manchester in 2002.

In recent years clubs have received over £1 million to help with major capital projects.

Lawn and Indoor Bowls

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to investigate alleged underfunding of bowls — lawn and indoor — by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1069/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The attached table details the financial support which has been provided to the sport of bowls — lawn and indoor — by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland between 1998 and 2001. This is a significant level of funding and I am unaware of the allegations of underfunding.

FUNDING FROM THE SPORTS COUNCIL FOR LAWN AND INDOOR BOWLS 1998/99 - 2000/01**EXCHEQUER FUNDING - ANNUAL GRANT AND MAJOR HOME EVENTS SUPPORT**

	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001
IBA	£3,000	£3,000	£3,000
IWBA	£2,000	£2,750	£2,000
IWIBA	£1,000	£1,000	£1,000
IIBA	£1,000	£1,469	£1,000

LOTTERY FUNDING - TALENTED ATHLETE AND MAJOR INTERNATIONAL EVENT SUPPORT

	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001
IBA	£12,500		
IWBA	£4,360	£10,000	£18,050
IWIBA			£16,643
IIBA			

TOTAL

	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001
IBA	£15,500	£3,000	£3,000
IWBA	£6,360	£12,750	£18,050
IWIBA	£1,000	£1,000	£16,643
IIBA	£1,000	£1,469	£1,000

Under the Sports Lottery Fund, Capital Programme, none of the governing bodies applied for funding, but money was awarded to clubs as follows — indoor bowls, £723,100, outdoor bowls, £709,501.

TOTAL 1998 - 2001 — £1,513,373

Governing bodies:-

IBA Irish Bowling Association (men's lawn and indoor bowls).

IWBA Irish Women's Bowling Association (women's lawn bowls).

IWIBA Irish Women's Indoor Bowling Association (women's indoor bowls).

IIBA Irish Indoor Bowling Assoc. (men's and women's indoor short mat bowls).

Football Task Force

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of meetings to date of the football task force and to give a breakdown of the attendance of members. (AQW 1098/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Last October I announced plans for an initiative, 'Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland'. I also announced the establishment of an advisory panel to help guide the process of developing the strategy.

The advisory panel has met on three occasions — 15 November 2000, 15 December 2000, and 10 January 2001.

The advisory panel has established two sub-groups, one to consider the arrangements for a conference workshop to which representatives of key interest groups will be invited, and the other to consider best practice elsewhere. The conference planning sub-group has met twice, on 29 November 2000 and 5 January 2001. The best practice sub-group has also met twice on 7 December 2000 and 10 January 2001. A breakdown of the attendance of the advisory panel members at these meetings is as follows:-

	Advisory Panel	Conference Planning Sub-group	Best Practice Sub-group
Out of	3	2	2
Gerry Armstrong	1	-	-
Professor Alan Bairner	3	-	2
Hilary Brady*	2	2	
Ian Dowie	0	-	-
Jim Flanagan	3	2	-
Billy Hamilton*	3	2	-
Bryan Hamilton	2	-	1
Johnny Jameson*	3	-	2
Felix McCrossan	2	2	-
Sammy McIlroy	0	-	-
Nadine Nicholl	1	-	1
Martin O'Neill	0	-	-
Jim Price	2	1	-
Councillor Jim Rogers	3	-	-
Professor Eric Saunders	1	-	-
Marty Tabb	3	-	2
Stephen Watson	3	-	-
Eamonn McCartan*	3	2**	-

* Hilary Brady, Chairperson of Conference Planning Sub-group

Billy Hamilton, Chairperson of Advisory Panel

Johnny Jameson, Chairperson of Best Practice sub-group

Eamonn McCartan, observer

**Sports Council official attended in Mr McCartan's absence.

In addition, there has been informal contact with panel members based in GB.

Several members of the advisory panel are participating in the series of open meetings to be held at venues throughout Northern Ireland during the week commencing 15 January 2001 as part of a consultation process to obtain as wide a range of views as possible on the game of football in Northern Ireland.

Advisory panel members will also be participating with representatives of key interest groups in a conference workshop to be held from 10 February 2001 to 12 February 2001.

Christmas Cards

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail: (a) the number of official Christmas cards he has sent; (b) the cost of their design, publication and postage and; (c) the list of people on the Minister's official Christmas card list. (AQW 1109/00)

Mr McGimpsey: In December 2000 I sent 340 official Christmas cards at a total cost of £393.20. The cost of design and publication for these cards was £1.00 per card, and of the 340 cards sent, 280 were issued by second class postage. No postal charge was incurred on the remaining 60 cards.

Christmas cards are typically sent to individuals and members of organisations met through the year by Ministers; to counterparts and office-holders in organisations with which a Department regularly corresponds or which have a significant interest in the Department's activities and responsibilities.

Grant Assistance

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what projects have been allocated grant assistance by the national endowment for science, technology and the arts. (AQW 1121/00)

Mr McGimpsey: To date one project in Northern Ireland has received grant assistance from the national endowment for science, technology and the arts (NESTA). This was the Invention and Innovation award of £50,000 over two years made to Paul McCormack in May 2000 to help develop and test a full working prototype of PAC TechFor, an innovative labour saving device that can automate packaging functions and help businesses meet their environment targets.

I understand that NESTA will be announcing further awards in February and that one of these, a Fellowship award, will come to Northern Ireland.

Fishery Advisory Groups

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to: (a) detail the fishery advisory or policy making groups with which he has developed links; (b) list the meetings he has had with them and; (c) explain the policies he has adopted as a result. (AQW 1132/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The main advisory or policy-making group within the inland fisheries area that I have responsibility for is the Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB). The FCB has statutory responsibility for making and enforcing policy on the conservation and protection of salmon and inland fisheries — except for the Foyle and Carlingford areas which are the responsibility of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. The

board of the FCB comprises representatives from the inland and salmon commercial fishing industry, angling representatives, the Ulster Farmers Union, fish farming, tourism, sport, industry and local councils. The Department may seek the FCB's advice on any matter pertaining to inland fisheries. The FCB is required to submit all policy and legislative proposals to me for approval.

I have not yet had formal policy meetings with the FCB, although I have met it informally. The FCB has been consulted in writing on a number of advisory and policy issues.

The FCB was consulted on the Department's proposals to introduce common carp into specified Northern Ireland waters which will provide opportunities for local and tourist anglers to fish exclusively for carp.

There is ongoing liaison between the Department and the FCB on the implementation of a salmon management plan, which will introduce the internationally acceptable catchment based approach to salmon management and conservation.

The Department advised the FCB that fishery scientists were concerned that marine survival of wild salmon was showing a serious decline and that consideration should be given to the introduction of measures to reduce exploitation of salmon stocks. The FCB has submitted proposals to the Department, which are currently under consideration.

Athletics

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the capacity to stage major athletics events in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1149/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Northern Ireland as a whole is well resourced in terms of available tracks and has hosted many significant events in recent years. There are four synthetic tracks at present; at the Templemore complex in Londonderry; the Antrim Forum, the Mary Peters Track, and a new eight-lane track soon to be opened in Bangor. Additionally, there is a new indoor athletics track in the Odyssey Arena, which offers opportunities for competition during the winter months. There is also a plan to create a new track as part of the Sports Institute Northern Ireland at the University of Ulster.

The sports governing body, the Northern Ireland Athletics Federation, is competent in managing major events, and the sport in general has the human resources and skills resources to attract and present events appropriate to Northern Ireland's size and status.

EDUCATION

Eleven-plus Transfer Examination

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Education if, for each of the last five years, he will detail

- the total cost of the administration of the 11-plus transfer examinations
- the amount spent on marking exam papers
- the amount spent on issuing results
- how many 11-plus transfer examination results have been challenged by appeal
- how many decisions have been changed on appeal and
- how much the appeal process cost each of the education and library boards and the Department of Education.

(AQW 1043/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness):

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) is responsible for the setting, marking and administration of the transfer tests, while other administrative duties, including recruitment, training and payment of invigilators and posting of results are the responsibility of education and library boards.

The CCEA and the boards advise that the information requested is estimated as follows,

	1995/96 £	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
(a) total administration cost	426,089	484,389	413,481	404,293	385,496
(b) cost of marking tests	162,032	208,693	146,024	133,682	123,945
(c) cost of issuing results	5,642	5,832	5,885	5,797	5,710
(d) number of results appealed	Not Available	1,484	1,730	1,789	1,531
(e) number of results changed	Not Available	7	16	5	5

Reference to appeals is to requests for remarking, which is the responsibility of CCEA, and does not involve education and library boards, so no direct costs accrue to boards or the Department.

Performance Related Pay

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education if he intends to introduce performance related pay for teachers and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1044/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Committee (Schools) is currently negotiating a revised pay structure for teachers here. It would be premature to comment further while negotiations continue but I will advise the member of the agreed outcome in due course.

Free School Meals

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils receiving free school meals.

(AQW 1124/00)

Mr M McGuinness: At October 2000, the number of pupils entitled to free school meals, and the uptake in each sector, is:

	Entitlement	Uptake
Nursery Schools	1,477	1,081
Primary Schools	41,305	34,515
Secondary Schools	29,206	22,594
Grammar Schools	4,966	3,859
Total	76,954	62,049

Pupil Absenteeism

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Education to detail the recorded levels of pupil absenteeism.

(AQW 1125/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The education and library boards and individual schools have provided details of the non-attendance percentage rates for 1999/2000 in each education and library board area as follows:

	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB
Primary	7.1	4.4	4.2	6.2	4.8
Secondary	8.0	7.4	7.0	8.0	7.2

Pupil/Teacher Ratio

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Education to detail the average number of pupils per teacher in: (a) primary schools; (b) secondary schools; (c) grammar schools and; (d) special needs schools, in each education and library board in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1169/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Figures for 2000/01 are not yet available. For 1999/2000 the information requested is as follows:

	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	Total
Primary	20.0	20.4	21.0	20.8	19.1	20.2
Secondary	13.8	14.1	14.4	14.5	14.1	14.2
Grammar	15.4	15.5	15.5	15.6	15.6	15.5
Special	5.7	5.9	6.4	7.1	5.7	6.2

Irish-medium and Integrated Schools

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline the results of the consultation exercise on the review of the viability criteria for Irish-medium and integrated schools. (AQO 542/00)

Mr M McGuinness: On Monday 18 December 2000 I announced reduced viability criteria for integrated and Irish-medium primary schools. The revised criteria are as follows. There will initially be an intake of 15 pupils for new urban schools and an intake of 12 pupils for new schools in rural areas. There will also be medium-term targets of an intake of 20 for urban schools and 15 for rural schools. Schools must satisfy these medium-term targets in order to qualify for capital funding. While the secondary level viability criteria have not been reduced at this stage, I am committed to looking strategically at the development of second-level provision in consultation with appropriate education partners.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

West Tyrone: Budget Percentage

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to: (a) detail all buildings and amenities within his responsibility in the constituency of West Tyrone; (b) outline the percentage of his budget that has been allocated to the West Tyrone constituency, and; (c) explain how this compares with the previous budget. (AQW 1080/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and its agencies do not have any buildings or amenities within its responsibility in the constituency of West Tyrone.

The Department and its agencies do not allocate moneys on a constituency basis. However, I would submit the following information regarding funding.

Selective Financial Assistance (SFA) from the IDB may be offered in respect of viable business plans brought forward by client companies wherever they are located. It is not allocated by geographical area within Northern Ireland. Similarly, IDB support for companies, under its trade international and business excellence programmes, is not allocated on a geographical basis but on the needs of individual companies irrespective of location.

Certain details of IDB's SFA are, however, published by parliamentary constituency and appear in Table 3.4 in the IDB's annual report 1999/00, a copy of which has been provided to each MLA following its publication on

23 November. Over the past five years IDB offered £8.7 million of SFA towards eight projects in the West Tyrone constituency, representing a total investment of £29 million and offering 704 new and safeguarded jobs.

In the financial year 1998/99 LEDU committed £1,110,747 to the West Tyrone constituency, which was 6% of the total LEDU letter of offer commitment for that year. In the financial year 1999/00 LEDU committed £874,649 to the West Tyrone constituency, which was 4% of the total LEDU letter of offer commitment.

During 1998/1999 £236,000 was committed by IRTU to projects in the West Tyrone constituency which was 1.7% of the total committed funds. During 1999/2000 a total of £1,163,000 was committed in the constituency, which was 10% of the total committed funds.

Since 1 January 1995, SFA awarded by the NITB to projects across the 18 Northern Ireland parliamentary constituencies' amounts to £56,118,477. Of this amount, the West Tyrone constituency received £1,544,863, representing 2.75% of total assistance awarded during the period.

From 1 January 1990 to 31 March 1994 financial assistance awarded by the NITB to projects across the 18 Northern Ireland parliamentary constituencies amounted to £54,124,086. Of this amount, the West Tyrone constituency received £2,107,614, representing 4% of total assistance awarded during the period.

ENVIRONMENT

Historical Sites

Mr McClelland asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of listed and/or designated heritage and historical sites in the constituency of South Antrim. (AQW 1000/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): There are 5 historic monuments in state care, 86 scheduled historic monuments, 6 registered historic garden sites, 269 listed buildings and 4 conservation areas in the South Antrim constituency. The Environment and Heritage Service has identified 1,342 archaeological sites in the constituency.

The 1,342 sites include 263 early Christian period raths, 371 earthwork enclosures, 47 ecclesiastical sites, 43 prehistoric megalithic tombs, cairns, or barrows, 37 standing stones, 20 Anglo-Norman mottes, 11 tower-houses or medieval castles, and 252 sites of indeterminate nature detected on aerial photographs. The remainder is made up of rarer site types.

The 269 listed buildings comprise 15 grade A, 17 grade B+, 130 grade B1, 34 grade B2 and 73 grade B types.

Data on these sites, monuments and buildings can be accessed in the Monuments and Buildings Record, at 5-33 Hill Street, Belfast. The Sites and Monuments Record is now available online, through the EHS web site, www.ehsni.gov.uk

The four conservation areas are Merville Garden Village, Antrim, Antrim – Riverside, and Randalstown.

Waste Management Strategies

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans to assist district councils in the preparation of waste management strategies.
(AQW 1009/00)

Mr Foster: My Department is providing financial support, improved data on waste arisings and detailed guidance on partnerships and planning to help district councils prepare their waste management plans.

Following publication of the Northern Ireland waste management strategy, district councils formed three waste management planning partnerships to prepare waste management plans for their areas. The Department has given financial support to two of these groups and has offered similar support to the third. The recently approved Budget has made £3.5 million available to my Department in 2001-02 to assist councils in the implementation of their waste management plans. I am currently considering how best these resources might be used.

My Department is also working to improve the accuracy of waste data available to councils to help the planning process and subsequent monitoring. Building on a pilot survey in 1998-99 on municipal waste arisings, my Department has a more detailed survey of municipal, industrial and commercial wastes, covering all council areas under way. The survey is expected to be completed this March.

My Department has issued a guidance paper on partnerships and has set up an inter-group forum to enable representatives from each council grouping to exchange ideas and experience, to encourage councils to adopt a partnership approach on waste issues. It has also sponsored a partnership conference, in conjunction with the Institute of Waste Management, to bring together representatives of the public, private and voluntary sectors.

My Department's Planning Service is also working with councils in preparing waste management plans. A draft planning policy statement providing guidance on the Department's policies on planning applications for waste facilities is expected to go for consultation in the near future.

My Department is also completing guidance on best practical environmental options.

Abandoned Cars

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the current procedures to deal with abandoned cars.
(AQW 1049/00)

Mr Foster: Under the Pollution Control and Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 it is the responsibility of district councils to remove or dispose of abandoned vehicles and to initiate proceedings for prosecution.

The Department for Regional Development has powers to secure the removal of vehicles from roads that cause obstruction, danger or nuisance and that, under the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, the police are empowered to remove any vehicle illegally parked or abandoned.

Urban and Rural

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the definition of the words urban and rural as used by his Department.
(AQW 1051/00)

Mr Foster: There is no statutory definition or standard definition of the words urban and rural.

The terms are used mainly in the planning service in my Department but their use needs to be interpreted in the particular context in which they appear.

The planning strategy for rural Northern Ireland defines rural Northern Ireland as being all of Northern Ireland outside the development limits of Bangor, Carrickfergus, Londonderry and beyond the inner edge of the green belt for the Belfast urban area.

However, different definitions have also been used. In a recent study to which the Planning Service contributed, the rural area of Northern Ireland was defined as the total area outside the development limits of all settlements having a population of 3,000 or more.

Cormorants: Numbers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the present number of cormorants in Northern Ireland and what has been the percentage increase in numbers in each of the last five years. (AQW 1057/00)

Mr Foster: The most recently available count of wintering cormorants (1998-99) was 2,605 birds.

Percentage increases in wintering populations from previous winters have been:-

1998/99	+ 28.2%
1997/98	+ 50.0%
1996/97	- 8.8% (decrease)
1995/96	+ 11.3%
1994/95	+ 6.0%

Cormorants: Culling Licences

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of licences to cull cormorants issued this year and how many cormorants have been culled in the year 1998-1999 and 1999-2000. (AQW 1058/00)

Mr Foster: Licences to kill cormorants are issued where the Environment and Heritage Service is satisfied that this is necessary to prevent serious damage to fisheries.

Nineteen licences were issued in 2000. Seventy-five birds have been reported killed under the terms of 15 of these licences. Reports for the remaining four licences are awaited.

Ninety-six birds were killed in 1998, and 102 birds were killed in 1999.

Cormorants: Control

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline what measures he is taking to control cormorants and their predation on fish-stock. (AQW 1059/00)

Mr Foster: My Department has no duty to control cormorant numbers. The Environment and Heritage Service may, on application by fishery managers, issue licences under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 to kill a limited number of cormorants in order to control predation. A condition of the licences is that managers are required to use non-lethal methods first, including shooting to scare, as the preferred way of protecting fish stocks against predation and to kill birds only as a last resort.

West Tyrone Budget Percentage

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of the Environment to: (a) detail all buildings and amenities within his responsibility in the constituency of West Tyrone; (b) outline the percentage of his budget that has been allocated to the West Tyrone constituency and; (c) explain how this compares with the previous budget. (AQW 1092/00)

Mr Foster:

(a) Environment and Heritage Service (EHS)

There are 13 historic monuments in state care, 159 scheduled historic monuments and 4 registered historic garden sites. EHS has identified 1,154 archaeological sites in the constituency.

The 1,154 sites include 230 early Christian period raths, 221 earthwork enclosures, 190 prehistoric megalithic tombs, cists or cairns, 159 standing stones and stone circles, 59 sites of indeterminate nature detected on air photographs, 27 ecclesiastical sites and 22 tower houses or medieval castles.

EHS is also responsible for nature reserves at Killeter and Meenadoan.

Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency (DVTA)

DVTA owns the testing centre at Gortrush Industrial Estate, Derry Road, Omagh.

Planning Service

Planning service has premises officer responsibility for County Hall in Omagh.

(b) & (c) The information requested is not recorded on a constituency basis and could be provided only at a disproportionate cost.

Cormorants: Lough Neagh

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if any colonies of cormorants have been established on Lough Neagh and what action he has taken to control their numbers. (AQW 1093/00)

Mr Foster: No breeding colonies of cormorants have been established on Lough Neagh. However, the numbers of birds counted in winter there in recent years have been as follows:

1994/95	631
1995/96	951
1996/97	921
1997/98	1185
1998/99	2071

My Department has no duty to control cormorant numbers but, in certain circumstances, can licence others to kill cormorants as a last resort in order to prevent fish predation.

Planning Regulations: Review

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if he has plans to review the planning regulations and how long this process will take. (AQW 1094/00)

Mr Foster: I intend to review the systems for operational planning policy, development planning and development control as part of the Executive's proposed review of public administration, referred to in the recently published draft Programme for Government. The review will reflect the concerns expressed about the time taken to carry out the processes and the need to make them as efficient as the legal and consultative constraints will allow.

The reviews are targeted for completion by the end of December 2001 and will cover how the processes are carried out, not who does them — the latter being for the Executive's wider review.

The Environment Committee will be consulted as part of this process.

Planning Legislation Appeals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to bring forward proposals to amend planning legislation relating to appeals so that successful appellants can receive compensation, thus bringing Northern Ireland into line with Great Britain. (AQW 1095/00)

Mr Foster: My Department has no plans to amend planning legislation relating to appeals to enable successful appellants to claim compensation, nor does such a scheme exist in Great Britain.

Appeal costs can be awarded in GB in certain limited and specified cases.

Sheep Dip: Contamination

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what percentage of groundwater supplies are at risk of contamination by sheep dip and pesticide disposal. (AQW 1103/00)

Mr Foster: Under the Groundwater Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998, my Department has responsibility for controlling the disposal of spent sheep dip and waste pesticides on land. The purpose of the regulations is to protect groundwater.

Approximately 8% of the drinking water supply of the Water Service is taken from groundwater sources. The quality of these sources is regularly monitored by the Water Service for a range of sheep dips and pesticides used in Northern Ireland. There have been no recorded occasions where the regulatory standards have been exceeded in respect of these substances.

In order to provide further safeguards the Water Service has appointed a consultant to carry out a risk analysis of drinking water sources. This will include identifying potential sources of pollution, preparing maintenance schemes, and practical pollution monitoring programmes.

My Department's drinking water inspectorate (DWI) monitors 70 groundwaters under the Private Water Supplies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1994. For the period 1999-2000, two (2.7%) were found to contain non-sheep dip pesticides at concentrations greater than the regulatory limit of 0.1 microgrammes per litre. Under the regulations the DWI keeps owners/occupiers and health authorities informed of the monitoring results.

Additionally, my Department's water quality unit has in the last year commenced a groundwater monitoring programme at 78 sites, which includes 36 private water supplies serving single dwellings. The purpose of the programme is to assess the general quality of groundwater

in Northern Ireland. Out of 58 sites for which data are currently available, six (10%) — of which three are single dwelling supplies — have been found to contain one or more non-sheep dip pesticides above the regulatory limit. The DWI has written to the six owners/occupiers advising them of the results and providing advice on what they should consider doing if they use the supply for drinking water.

It is not possible at present to determine whether the above incidents of exceeding the limits are due to disposal, normal use of pesticides, or whether they are from localised contamination of the wells/boreholes due to poor pesticide management practices.

Christmas Cards

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment to detail: (a) the number of official Christmas cards he has sent; (b) the cost of their design, publication and postage and; (c) the list of people on the Minister's official Christmas card list. (AQW 1110/00)

Mr Foster: (a) 255 Christmas cards were sent.

(b) The total expenditure on Christmas cards was £404.39

This is broken down as follows —

- | | |
|----------------------------|---------|
| 1. Design and printing | £345.39 |
| 2. Postage (second class). | £ 59.00 |

Christmas cards are typically sent to individuals and members of organisations I have met throughout the year; to counterparts and office-holders in organisations with which my Department regularly corresponds or who have a significant interest in my Department's activities and responsibilities.

Quality Decisions

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to outline what measures are in place to ensure that the planning office make quality decisions when dealing with planning applications. (AQW 1118/00)

Mr Foster: There are a number of measures in place to ensure that decisions made in respect of planning applications are of the highest quality.

The Planning Service, when determining planning applications, is guided by legislation, planning policy statements, development plans and development control advice notes. These provide a framework for ensuring that decisions are not only of the highest quality, but are consistent and transparent. Additionally, the Planning Service also provides a comprehensive training programme for all staff.

The Planning Service is continually looking to introduce new initiatives to improve the quality of its work.

One such initiative is the “quality initiative” which was set up to improve the quality of new housing developments. The initiative establishes the principle that the quality of a housing scheme is as important as its location. For schemes to be consistent with the quality initiative, they have to show a sense of distinctiveness and identity, and variety and contrast in their layout, house types, orientations and finishes.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of telecommunication masts erected in the east Antrim area in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1119/00)

Mr Foster: My Department does not hold details of the number of telecommunications masts erected. As with most planning approvals, a developer has five years from the date of a decision notice to commence a development.

Of the 55 applications for telecommunications masts submitted in the east Antrim area in the last five years, 51 were approved, three were withdrawn, and one was refused planning permission.

Industry: Waste

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the steps he is taking to reduce waste sent to landfill from industry.

(AQW 1120/00)

Mr Foster: The Northern Ireland waste management strategy contains a target to reduce the amount of industrial and commercial wastes placed in landfill to 85% of its 1998 level by 2005.

District councils will have to indicate how they propose to achieve this target in their waste management plans now in preparation.

To assist councils with accurate data on waste, my Department appointed consultants last November to undertake a detailed survey of municipal, industrial and commercial waste arising.

Increased recycling and new markets for recycled products will be important in meeting the landfill reduction target. Together with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and key stakeholders, my Department is establishing a market development programme to stimulate demand for recycled products.

Key tasks for the independent advisory board to be established under the strategy will be to promote the market development programme and to establish a business leaders’ forum for waste minimisation.

Financial assistance from my Department enabled ARENA Network to undertake a study on the development

of markets for recycled materials in Northern Ireland, the findings of which were released at a conference last November.

Further financial assistance to NI2000 is to support the production of an all-Ireland recycling directory. The directory will be published at the end of January.

In February, my Department will co-sponsor an event to encourage creation of new product designs using recycled and sustainably harvested materials. Design will be a key influence in reducing waste sent to landfill.

Sewage Sludge

Mr K Robinson asked the the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to: (a) inform the farming community of the implications of the European Union sewage sludge Directive and; (b) encourage an awareness that concentrations of heavy metals in sludge should not exceed the threshold limits laid down in legislation.

(AQW 1153/00)

Mr Foster: The use of sewage sludge in agriculture is regulated under the Sludge (Use in Agriculture) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995, which implement EU Directive 86/278/EEC. The Department of the Environment is responsible for implementing the Directive.

The regulations, which place a responsibility on sludge producers to maintain registers of sewage sludge use in agriculture, are complemented by the code of practice for the agricultural use of sewage sludge.

The Department for Regional Development’s Water Service is the only sludge producer coming under the terms of the Directive in Northern Ireland. The Water Service is required to ensure that sludge provided to farmers for spreading, and the fields to which it is to be applied, meet the requirements of the regulations. The Water Service provides farmers with nutrient and metal analyses of sludges and metal levels in the receiving soils.

These arrangements are subject to audit by the Environment and Heritage Service. The audit confirmed that the Water Service is complying with the requirements of the regulations.

Mossley West Station

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline when planning permission will be granted for the station at Mossley West.

(AQW 1156/00)

Mr Foster: Following careful consideration of all the issues involved, my Department presented its preliminary opinion in November 2000 to refuse planning permission for this application to Newtownabbey Borough Council for consideration.

This opinion was based on the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service recommendation that approval could not be recommended unless the application was accompanied by a proposal to provide pedestrian facilities at a nearby bridge over the railway line, whilst maintaining the existing vehicular width.

The Department for Regional Development has advised that the applicant is currently consulting interested parties with a view to a satisfactory outcome to this matter being reached as soon as possible.

Sewage Sludge: Quantity

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the procedures used to monitor the quantity of sewage sludge produced and used in agriculture within Northern Ireland and to detail the procedures used to determine metal and nutrient concentrations as required under the EU Directive. (AQW 1173/00)

Mr Foster: EU Directive 86/278/EEC is implemented in Northern Ireland by the Sludge (Use in Agriculture) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1990, which are complemented by the code of practice for agricultural use of sewage sludge.

The Department for Regional Development's Water Service is the only sludge producer defined within the regulations in Northern Ireland. The Water Service, as required by the Directive, maintains a register of the quantities of sludge produced, the location of the fields on which the sludge is spread and analyses of the soil before the spreading of sludge. The Water Service samples and analyses soil and sludges in accordance with the code of practice, which specifies the analytical methods for determining the concentrations of nutrients and metals in sludge and soil.

These arrangements are subject to audit by the Environment and Heritage Service. This has confirmed that the Water Service is complying with the requirements of the regulations.

Ancient Woodland

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment if he has plans to compile an inventory of all the woodland that was in existence in Northern Ireland before 1830. (AQW 1251/00)

Mr Foster: The Environment and Heritage Service has agreed to enter into a partnership with the Woodland Trust to compile an ancient woodland inventory for Northern Ireland. Woodland known to have been in existence in 1830 will qualify.

The Woodland Trust has applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund for assistance towards its costs in compiling the

inventory. Subject to a successful outcome, initial work on the inventory should start this year.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Public Sector Posts

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will detail the amounts spent employing private consultancy firms in the recruitment of public service posts since 1995 and if he will give a breakdown for each year. (AQW 439/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): [holding answer 14 November 2000]: Since 1995 no private consultancy firms have been employed to recruit staff to the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Information on recruitment in the wider public sector is not held centrally.

North/South Bodies

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the costs of each of the seven North/South bodies for 2001-02. (AQW 523/00)

Mr Durkan: Final estimates for the implementation bodies have yet to be approved by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government. I will write to you as soon as the allocations are confirmed.

There are only six North/South implementation bodies. The Northern Ireland Executive's contribution to the budgets of the bodies for the coming year, as detailed in the 2001-02 Budget, was approved by the Assembly on the 18 December 2000.

The allocations made to each of the six bodies in the 2001-02 Budget are as follows –

Waterways Ireland	£2.6m
Language Body	£3.5m
Food Safety Promotion Board	£1.5m
Trade & Business Development Body	£2.9m
Special EU Programmes Body	£0.6m
FCILC: Loughs and Lights	£0.6m

A total of £5.8m was also included in the 2001-02 Budget to provide the North/South Tourism Company, a publicly owned limited company established by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Bord Failte, with funds to meet Northern Ireland's share of the international marketing of the island of Ireland.

Departmental Administration: Costs

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail: (a) the total cost for the 10-Department option for Government, and; (b) an estimated cost for a six-Department administration. (AQW 1050/00)

Mr Durkan: The planned departmental running costs of the 11-department administration for 2000-01 are £628.4 million.

The most recent figures available on the old six-department structure are for 1998-99, when planned departmental running costs totalled £585.2 million.

Whilst there is a considerable difference between these figures, one needs to acknowledge the two-year pay and price increases built into departmental allocations as part of the 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review settlement.

Urban and Rural

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the definition of the words urban and rural as used by his Department. (AQW 1052/00)

Mr Durkan: The Department of Finance and Personnel does not have a formal definition of urban or rural. However, when working with other Northern Ireland Departments my Department takes account of any definitions relevant to their policies.

West Tyrone Budget Percentage

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to: (a) detail all buildings and amenities within his responsibility in the constituency of West Tyrone; (b) outline the percentage of his budget that has been allocated to the West Tyrone constituency, and; (c) explain how this compares with the previous budget.

(AQW 1089/00)

Mr Durkan: The Minister of Finance and Personnel is responsible for the provision of office accommodation for all Government Departments, including agencies within those Departments. The list below details all office accommodation in the West Tyrone constituency that is owned or leased by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Town	Property Name	Address
Omagh	Crown Buildings	7 Mountjoy Road
	Crown Buildings Car Park	Mountjoy Road
	County Hall	Drumragh Avenue
	Rural Development Office	21 Hospital Road
	15/17 High Street (SSA)	15-17 High Street
	DOE Roads Office	32 Deverney Road
	Medical Support Service	51 Market Street
	DARD Sperrin House	Sedan Avenue
	Grugans Garage (OSNI)	10 Mountjoy Road
	DOE Office	10A Market Street
	Boaz House	15 Scarffe's Entry
	Kevlin Buildings	Kevlin Avenue
Strabane	Crown Building	Urney Road
	Elmview (Roads Service)	20 Derry Road
	T & EA Office	23 Upper Main Street
	DARD Area Office	Units 14 & 15 Orchard Road
Trillick	DARD Area Office	25 Main Street
Castlederg	DARD Area Office	8A Ferguson Crescent
Plumbridge	DARD Area Office	32 Dergbrough Road

The information requested in parts (b) and (c) of your question is not recorded on a constituency basis and could be provided only at a disproportionate cost.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Deficit Recovery Plans

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the target reduction in cumulative deficit per financial year for trusts that have an agreed deficit recovery plan. (AQW 1115/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The recovery plans produced by the relevant trusts are still under consideration by my Department, and none has yet been formally agreed. My Department is working with the boards and trusts concerned with a view to finalising plans by the end of this financial year.

Tá mo Roinn ag meas pleananna téarnaimh na n-iontaobhas cuí go fóill agus níor socraíodh plean ar bith acu go foirmiúil go dtí seo. Tá mo Roinn ag obair leis na boird agus leis na hiontaobhais bhainteacha le bailchríoch a chur ar na pleananna faoi dheireadh na bliana airgeadais seo.

Deficit Recovery Plans

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all trusts that have an agreed deficit recovery plan following the 30 October deadline. (AQW 1116/00)

Ms de Brún: The recovery plans produced by the relevant trusts are still under consideration by my Department and as such do not represent agreed final documents.

Tá mo Roinn ag meas pleananna téarnaimh na n-iontaobhas cuí go fóill agus mar sin ní doiciméid críochnaithe iad.

Deficit Management

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide evidence that the process of deficit management is being applied locally in a way comparable to health trusts in England, Scotland and Wales. (AQW 1131/00)

Ms de Brún: Trusts, here and in England, Scotland and Wales, have to comply with the statutory duty to break even over a rolling three-year period, and in exceptional circumstances, over a five-year period. Where trusts, here and in England, Scotland and Wales, experience serious financial deficits, they are required to produce a financial recovery plan in order to recover the deficit position.

The deficit problem is influenced by the allocation of resources to the health and social services sector, and for some years the level of resource increases here has been lower than in GB. A number of trusts in GB have also received assistance to help cope with deficit problems.

Recovery plans here are evaluated and agreed on a consistent basis, following the same approach, to ensure parity for all trusts.

Caithfidh iontaobhais anseo, i Sasana, in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag cloí leis an dualgas reachtúil le fanacht taobh istigh den bhuiséad thar thréimhse reatha trí bliana, agus i gcúinsí eisceachtúla, thar thréimhse cúig bliana. Áit ar bith a bhfuil easnamh airgeadais ag iontaobhais anseo nó i Sasana, in Albain nó sa Bhreatain Bheag iarrtar orthu plean téarnaimh airgeadais a sholáthar leis an easnamh a thabhairt isteach.

Téann an dáileadh acmhainní ar an earnáil sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta i bhfeidhm ar fhadhb an easnaimh agus le blianta anuas b'ísle leibhéal méaduithe acmhainne anseo ná sa Bhreatain Mhór. Fuair roinnt iontaobhas sa Bhreatain Mhór cabhair le cuidiú leo dul i ngleic le fadhbanna easnaimh.

Déantar measúnú agus socrú ar phleananna téarnaimh anseo ar bhonn seasta, ag glacadh an chur chuige céanna le cinntiú go bhfaigheann gach iontaobhas cothrom na Féinne.

Chief Executives: Salaries

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to: (a) detail the job description and salary for the current financial year for each

chief executive of boards and trusts, and; (b) outline her policy in regard to salaries. (AQW 1136/00)

Ms de Brún: A copy of the job description for each of the chief executive posts has been placed in the library. The total salary that chief executives will receive this year is set out in the attached table.

My Department determines the salary payable to board chief executives. In so doing, any pay increase must be in line with those agreed for other groups of HPSS staff. Under current legislation trusts have the freedom to pay chief executives remuneration packages that they deem appropriate. However, packages must be justified and reasonable in light of the general practice in the public sector. I propose to curtail trust freedom to act independently on pay, and this power is contained in the Health and Personal Services Bill, which is currently before the Assembly. I intend to introduce new pay and grading for all HPSS senior managers.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD AND TRUST CHIEF EXECUTIVE SALARIES FOR THE YEAR 2000/2001

Board	2000/2001 Year
Eastern HSS Board	£90,447
Northern HSS Board	£73,104
Southern HSS Board	£78,026
Western HSS Board	£33,040 (see note 1)
Eastern Board Area Trusts	
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust	£82,784
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	£100,250
Green Park HSS Trust	£71,453
Mater Infirmorum Hospital HSS Trust	£66,500
N&W Belfast HSS Trust	£84,746
NI Ambulance Service HSS Trust	£59,565
RGH & Dental Hospital HSS Trust	£91,735
S&E Belfast HSS Trust	£90,900 (see note 2)
Ulster Comm. & Hospitals HSS Trust	£85,947
Southern Board Area Trusts	
Armagh & Dungannon HSS Trust	£67,025
Craigavon Area Hospital HSS Trust	£68,024
Craigavon & Banbridge Comm. HSS Trust	£69,491 (see note 2)
Newry & Mourne HSS Trust	£67,512
Northern Board Area Trusts	
Causeway HSS Trust	£83,017
Homefirst Comm. HSS Trust	£81,000 (see note 2)
United Hospitals HSS Trust	£72,975
Western Board Area Trusts	
Altnaglevin Hospital HSS Trust	£69,216
Foyle HSS Trust	£67,624
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	£72,109

Notes

(1) This Chief Executive took up post on 1 October 2000

Therefore the total salary actually payable in 2000/2001 will be £33,040. The full year salary costs would be £66,080.

(2) This figure does not include any pay increase for the year 2000-01. The remuneration committee in each of these trusts will meet early in the new year to agree salary increases for 2000-2001.

Cuireadh cóip den chur síos ar phoist na bpríomhfheidhmeannach sa Leabharlann. Tá na tuarastail iomlána a gheobhaidh príomhfheidhmeannaigh i mbliana leagtha amach sa tábla thíos.

Socraíonn mo Roinn na tuarastail a íocfar le príomhfheidhmeannaigh boird. Nuair a dhéantar seo, caithfidh ardú tuarastail ar bith bheith ag cur leo sin a aontaíodh do ghrúpaí eile fhoireann SSSP. Faoin reachtaíocht atá ann faoi láthair, tá cead ag iontaobhais, má shíleann siad go bhfuil sé ceart, bearta cúitimh a íoc le príomhfheidhmeannaigh, ach caithfidh siad a bheith réasúnta de réir chaighdeán na hearnála poiblí. Molaim go laghdaítear saoirse na n-iontaobhas le gníomhú go neamhspleách ar phá agus tá an chumhacht seo sa Bhille Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Pearsanta atá faoi bhráid an Tionóil faoi láthair. Tá sé ar intinn agam pá agus grádú nua a thabhairt isteach do bhainisteoirí sinsearach SSSP uilig.

TUARASTAIL PHRÍOMHFHEIDHMEANNACH BORD AGUS IONTAOBHAS SLÁINTE AGUS SEIRBHÍSÍ SÓISIALTA DON BHLIAIN 2000/2001

Bord	Bliain 2000/2001
Bord SSS an Oirthir	£90,447
Bord SSS an Tuaiscirt	£73,104
Bord SSS an Deiscirt	£78,026
Bord SSS an Iarthair	£33,040 (féach nóta 1)
Iontaobhais Cheantar Bhord An Oirthir	
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	£82,784
Iontaobhas SSS an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach	£100,250
Iontaobhas SSS na Páirce Glaise	£71,453
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann an Mater Infirmorum	£66,500
Iontaobhas SSS Thuaisceart agus Iarthar Bhéal Feirste	£84,746
Iontaobhas SSS Seirbhís Otharcharr TÉ	£59,565
Iontaobhas SSS GRO & Otharlainne Fiaclóireachta	£91,735
Iontaobhas SSS Dheisceart agus Oirthear Bhéal Feirste	£90,900 (féach nóta 2)
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlanna agus Phobal Uladh	£85,947
Iontaobhais Cheantar Bhord An Deiscirt	
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha & Dhún Geainn	£67,025
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Ceantair Craigavon	£68,024

Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna	£69,491 (féach nóta 2)
Iontaobhas SSS An Iúir & Mhúrna	£67,512
Iontaobhais Cheantar Bhord An Tuaiscirt	
Iontaobhas SSS An Chlocháin	£83,017
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Homefirst	£81,000 (féach nóta 2)
Iontaobhas SSS na nOtharlann Aontaithe	£72,975
Iontaobhais Cheantar Bhord An Iarthair	
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Alt na nGealbhan	£69,216
Iontaobhas SSS An Fheabhail	£67,624
Iontaobhas SSS Loch-Cheantar Speirín	£72,109

Nótaí

(1) Thosaigh an príomhfheidhmeannach seo sa phost ar 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2000 agus ar an ábhar sin is é £33,040 an tuarastal iomlán a íocfar go dearfa i 2000-2001. Is é £66,080 na costais a bheadh ar thuarastal na bliana iomláine.

(2) Ní chuireann an figiúr seo ardú pá ar bith don bhliain 2000-01 san áireamh. Cruinneoidh an coiste cúitimh i ngach ceann de na hiontaobhais seo go luath sa bhliain úr le hardú tuarastail a aontú don bhliain 2000-2001.

Speech and Language Therapists

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the levels of recruitment and retention of speech and language therapists in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1139/00)

Ms de Brún: There has been no formal assessment of the recruitment and retention of speech and language therapists. Health and social services boards and trusts are responsible for ensuring that there are sufficient therapists to provide the level of service to meet the assessed needs of their populations. I have not been made aware of any specific difficulties in this regard.

Ní raibh measúnú foirmiúil ar fhostú agus ar choinneáil teiripithe urlabhra agus teanga ann. Tá boird agus iontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta freagrach as cinntiú go bhfuil go leor teiripithe ann le caighdeán seirbhíse a chur ar fáil a fhreastlaíonn ar riachtanais a bpobal. Go dtí seo, nór tarraingíodh m'aird ar dheacrachtaí áirithe maidir leis seo.

Whiteabbey Hospital

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that the necessary bed spaces will be made available at Whiteabbey Hospital to cope with the annual increase in winter demand. (AQW 1154/00)

Ms de Brún: The United Hospitals Trust, which is responsible for Whiteabbey Hospital, has been working closely with the Northern Health and Social Services Board, Homefirst Community HSS Trust and with GPs

to put in place a wide range of measures designed to deal with increased demands for services over the winter period.

These measures include the provision of additional beds at all hospitals in the Northern Board's area, including Whiteabbey, as well as extra beds at hospitals in Belfast. In this regard, hospitals managed by the United Trust also benefit from the services of the emergency admissions co-ordination centre, which manages emergency hospital admissions for Eastern and Northern Board hospitals.

Tá Iontaobhas na nOspidéal Aontaithe, atá freagrach as Ospidéal na Mainistreach Finne, ag obair go dlúth le Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Tuaiscirt, le hIontaobhas Pobail Homefirst agus le liachleachtóirí ginearálta bearta a chur i bhfeidhm a ceapadh le plé leis na héilimh bhreise ar sheirbhísí sa gheimhreadh.

Ar na bearta seo beidh leapacha breise á soláthar i ngach ospidéal i gceantar Bhord an Tuaiscirt chomh maith le leapacha breise in ospidéal i mBéal Feirste. Maidir leis seo, bainfidh ospidéal atá faoi bhainistíocht an Iontaobhais Aontaithe leas as seirbhísí ionad comhordaithe na niontrálacha éigeandála, atá ag bainistiú iontrálacha éigeandála d'ospidéal Bhord an Oirthir agus Bhord an Tuaiscirt.

Occupational Therapists

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail: (a) the number of occupational therapists, and; (b) the ratio of occupational therapists to population for each trust in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1161/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is detailed in the tables below.

(A) OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS AS AT 30 SEPTEMBER 2000

TRUST	Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) Staff Numbers
Belfast City Hospital	22.60
Green Park	34.75
S & E Belfast Community	36.10
Ulster Community & Hospital	39.52
Royal Group Hospitals	18.05
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	7.40
N & W Belfast Community	25.20
Lisburn & Down	32.19
Causeway	18.24
Homefirst Community	77.59
Armagh & Dungannon	25.95
Newry & Mourne	22.24
Craigavon/Banbridge Community	36.18

Foyle HSS Community	33.66
Sperrin/Lakeland	25.17
Total	454.84

(B) RATIO OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS TO POPULATION

There is no official population figure available by trust area, and the ratios are therefore provided by health and social services board area.

Board	Population	WTE	Ratio of WTE: Population
Eastern	669404	215.81	1 : 3102
Northern	425406	95.83	1 : 4439
Southern	308616	84.37	1 : 3658
Western	279397	58.83	1 : 4749
TOTAL	1682823	454.84	1 : 3700

Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sonraithe sna táblai thíos.

(A) TEIRIPITHE SAOTHAIR MAR A BHÍ AR 30 MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2000

IONTAOBHAS	Cóimheas Uile-Aimseartha (CUA) Líon Foirne
Ospidéal Chathair Bhéal Feirste	22.60
An Pháirc Ghlas	34.75
Pobal Bhéal Feirste an Deiscirt agus an Oirthir	36.10
Ospidéal agus Pobal Uladh	39.52
Grúpa Ríoga Ospidéal	18.05
Ospidéal Mater Infirmorum	7.40
Pobal Bhéal Feirste an Tuaiscirt agus an Iarthair	25.20
Lios na gCearrbhach agus an Dún	32.19
An Clochán	18.24
Pobal Homefirst	77.59
Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn	25.95
An tIúr agus Múrn	22.24
Pobal Craigavon agus Droichead na Banna	36.18
Pobal SSS an Fheabhail	33.66
Sliabh Speirín/ Loch-Cheantar	25.17
IOMLÁN	454.84

(B) CÓIMHEAS TEIRIPITHE SAOTHAIR LE DAONRA

Níl líon oifigiúil daonra ar fáil de réir cheantar iontaobhais agus tá na cóimheasa ar fáil de réir cheantar bhord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta.

Bord	Daonra	CUA	Cóimheas CUA : Daonra
Oirthear	669404	215.81	1 : 3102
Tuaisceart	425406	95.83	1 : 4439

Deisceart	308616	84:37	1 : 3658
Iarthar	279397	58:83	1 : 4749
IOMLÁN	1682823	454:84	1 : 3700

Occupational Therapists

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current average waiting time for visits by occupational therapists concerning house adaptations in each trust in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1162/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on average waiting time for visits by occupational therapists in regard to house adaptations is not collected.

Ní bhailítear eolas ar an mheánam feithimh do chuireanna ó theiripthe saothair maidir le-oiriúnuithe tí.

Residential Care

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail for each health and social services trust: (a) the number of people in each month since April 1999 who have had to remain in residential care due to the lack of care workers to provide care in the community; (b) the average extra time spent in residential care for each person who has had to remain in residential care due to the lack of care workers to provide care in the community, for each month since April 1999, and; (c) the steps being taken to recruit sufficient care workers to provide a service which meets the needs of the community.

(AQW 1168/00)

Ms de Brún: The statistical information requested is not available.

It is clear that there are difficulties attracting, recruiting and retaining people for home help and analogous social care posts in some areas. Health and social services trusts are making special efforts to recruit sufficient home care workers for their services. These efforts include reviewing the arrangements, terms and conditions for the employment of home care staff and considering the employment of care workers on fixed-period contracts and contracted weekly hours. When specific difficulties arise in relation to the availability of care workers, the trusts make every effort to resolve these or provide alternative arrangements for care that are acceptable to the individuals and families concerned.

Níl an t-eolas staitisticíúil a iarradh ar fáil.

Is léir go bhfuil fadhbanna i limistéir áirithe ag mealladh, ag earcú agus ag coinneáil daoine do phoist mar chuiditheoir baile nó poist chúraim shóisialta den chineál céanna. Tá iontaobhais SSS ag déanamh a ndíchill go leor oibrithe cúraim bhaile a earcú dá seirbhísí. Ar na hiarrachtaí seo tá athbhreithniú ar shocruithe, théarmaí

agus choinníollacha fostaíochta d'oibrithe cúraim bhaile, agus táthar ag machnamh ar oibrithe cúraim a fhostú ar chonarthaí ar théarma seasta agus uaireanta seachtainiúla conraithe. Nuair a tharlaíonn fadhbanna maidir le soláthar oibrithe cúraim, déanann na hiontaobhais a seacht ndícheall iad a réiteach nó socruithe cúraim eile a chur ar fáil atá sásúil ag na daoine agus teaghlaigh lena mbaineann siad.

Special Needs Children Programme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that the funding for the special needs children programme will be controlled from within her Department.

(AQW 1176/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department is responsible for funding healthcare services provided to children with special needs, and health and social services boards and trusts are responsible for ensuring that the funds provided are used to meet the particular needs of their local populations.

Tá mo Roinn freagrach as seirbhísí cúraim sláinte a mhaoiniú a sholáthraítear do pháistí a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta acu agus tá boird agus na iontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta freagrach as a chinntiú go mbaintear úsáid as an mhaoiniú a sholáthraítear le freastal ar na riachtanais ar leith atá ag an phobal áitiúil.

Occupational Therapists

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of occupational therapists currently employed by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board and to confirm that eight new occupational therapists are needed to address the present workload.

(AQW 1178/00)

Ms de Brún: Occupational therapists in the Health and Personal Social Services are employed by health and social services trusts. The number employed by each trust within the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area at 30 September 2000 is set out in the table below.

Trust	Occupational Therapists
Belfast City Hospital	24
Green Park Trust	38
South & East Belfast Trust	42
Ulster Community & Hospital Trust	47
Royal Group	19
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	8
North & West Belfast	29
Lisburn & Down	38

Health and social services boards and trusts are responsible for ensuring that there are sufficient occupational

therapists to provide the level of service to meet the assessed need of their population.

Fostaíonn iontaobhais SSS na teiripithe saothair sna seirbhísí sláinte agus sna seirbhísí sóisialta pearsanta. Tá an líon a d'fhostaigh gach iontaobhas i gceantar Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir leagtha amach sa tábla thíos.

Iontaobhas	Teiripeoirí Ceirde
Ospidéal Cathrach Bhéal Feirste	24
An Pháirc Ghlas	38
Deisceart agus Oirthear Bhéal Feirste	42
Pobal agus Ospidéal Uladh	47
An Grúpa Ríoga	19
Ospidéal an Mater Infirmorum	8
Tuaisceart agus Iarthar Bhéal Feirste	29
An Dún agus Lios na gCearrbhach	38

Tá boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta freagrach as a chinntiú go bhfuil go leor teiripithe saothair ann leis an leibhéal seirbhíse a sholáthar a fhreagraíonn do riachtanas measúnaithe an phobail áitiúil.

Trust Boards: Personal Expenses

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of spending on personal expenses by each trust board area in each of the last four years. (AQW 1183/00)

Ms de Brún: The reimbursement of personal expenses to trust chief executives and executive directors is as follows:

HSS Trust	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
Altnagelvin Hospitals	Nil	25	Nil	Nil
Armagh and Dungannon	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Belfast City Hospital	224	42	98	164
Causeway	164	275	535	338
Craigavon and Banbridge Community	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Craigavon Area Hospital	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Down Lisburn	830	910	1,007	928
Foyle	210	118	115	30
Green Park	N/k	N/k	N/k	422
Homefirst Community	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Newry and Mourne	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
North and West Belfast	Nil	86	536	1,277
NI Ambulance Service	556	1,102	778	1,477
Royal Group of Hospitals	1,790	1,531	1,216	1,082

HSS Trust	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
South and East Belfast	778	992	635	777
Sperrin Lakeland	250	300	350	300
Ulster Community & Hospitals	2,774	1,207	2,649	1,529
United Hospitals	Nil	Nil	127	49

Is mar a leanas atá na suimeanna a cúitíodh le príomhfheidhmeannaigh iontaobhais agus le stiúrthóirí feidhmiúcháin as a gcaiteachas pearsanta:

Iontaobhais SSS	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
Ospidéal Alt na nGealbhan	Náid	25	Náid	Náid
Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
Ospidéal Cathrach Bhéal Feirste	224	42	98	164
An Clochán	164	275	535	338
Pobal Craigavon agus Dhroichead na Banna	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
Ospidéal Cheantar Craigavon	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
An Dún agus Lios na gCearrbhach	830	910	1,007	928
An Feabhal	210	118	115	30
An Pháirc Ghlas	Ní fios	Ní fios	Ní fios	422
Pobal Homefirst	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
Ospidéal an Mater Infirmorum	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
An tIúr agus Múrna	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
Tuaisceart agus Iarthar Bhéal Feirste	Náid	86	536	1,277
Seirbhís Otharcharranna TÉ	556	1,102	778	1,477
An Grúpa Ríoga Ospidéal	1,790	1,531	1,216	1,082
Deisceart agus Oirthear Bhéal Feirste	778	992	635	777
Loch-Cheantar Speirín	250	300	350	300
Pobal agus Ospidéal Uladh	2,774	1,207	2,649	1,529
Na hOspidéal Aontaithe	Náid	Náid	127	49

Trust Board Chief Executives: Personal Expenses

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of personal expenses paid to trust board chief executives in each of the last four years. (AQW 1184/00)

Ms de Brún: The amounts paid to trust chief executives in reimbursement of personal expenses is as follows:

HSS Trust	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
Altnagelvin Hospitals	Nil	25	Nil	Nil
Armagh and Dungannon	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Belfast City Hospital	224	42	98	60
Causeway	164	275	535	338
Craigavon and Banbridge Community	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Craigavon Area Hospital	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Down Lisburn	830	910	1,007	928
Foyle	60	90	80	30
Green Park	N/k	N/k	N/k	422
Homefirst Community	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Newry and Mourne	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
North and West Belfast	Nil	86	536	1,277
NI Ambulance Service	543	918	720	682
Royal Group of Hospitals	945	595	88	210
South and East Belfast	778	914	498	717
Sperrin Lakeland	200	250	200	250
Ulster Community & Hospitals	2,229	1,207	2,118	1,385
United Hospitals	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil

Is mar a leanas atá na suimeanna a cúitíodh le príomhfheidhmeannaigh iontaobhais as a gcaiteachas pearsanta:

Iontaobhais SSS	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
Ospidéal Alt na nGealbhan	Náid	25	Náid	Náid
Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanaínn	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
Ospidéal Cathrach Bhéal Feirste	224	42	98	60
An Clochán	164	275	535	338
Pobal Craigavon agus Dhroichead na Banna	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
Ospidéal Cheantar Craigavon	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
An Dún agus Lios na gCearrbhach	830	910	1,007	928
An Feabhal	60	90	80	30
An Pháirc Ghlas	Ní fios	Ní fios	Ní fios	422
Pobal Homefirst	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
Ospidéal an Mater Infirmorum	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
An tIúr agus Múrna	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid
Tuaisceart agus Iarthar Bhéal Feirste	Náid	86	536	1,277
Seirbhís Otharcharranna TÉ	543	918	720	682

Iontaobhais SSS	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
An Grúpa Ríoga Ospidéal	945	595	88	210
Deisceart agus Oirthear Bhéal Feirste	778	914	498	717
Loch-Cheantar Speirín	200	250	200	250
Pobal agus Ospidéal Uladh	2,229	1,207	2,118	1,385
Na hOspidéal Aontaithe	Náid	Náid	Náid	Náid

Residential Care Homes for Children

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps she is taking to improve the recruitment and terms of service for those who work in residential care homes for children. (AQW 1185/00)

Ms de Brún: Last year I established the Children Matter taskforce because of the recognised shortage of residential care places for children. The role of the taskforce is to produce a realistic and achievable regional plan for the expansion of residential childcare services. I am expecting to receive the regional plan shortly from the taskforce.

A human resources sub-group of the taskforce was established in October 2000 to develop a strategy for the recruitment of staff to meet the requirements of an expanded residential childcare sector. The recruitment strategy will also address the issue of retaining staff within this sector, by addressing issues such as the provision of appropriate training and support to residential staff.

Bhunaigh mé an tascfhórsa Tábhacht le Páistí anuraidh mar gheall ar an ghanntanas aitheanta cúraim chónaithe do pháistí. Is é ról an tascfhórsa plean réigiúnach réadúil so-aimsithe a chur amach le haghaidh fairsingiú seirbhísí cúraim chónaithe do pháistí. Tá coinne agam an plean réigiúnach a fháil ón tascfhórsa gan mhoill.

Bunaíodh fo-ghrúpa acmhainní daonna den tascfhórsa i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2000 le straitéis d'earcaíocht foirne a fhorbairt le freastal ar riachtanais earnáil fhorbartha cúraim chónaithe do pháistí. Tabharfaidh an straitéis earcaíochta aghaidh ar conas foireann a choinneáil san earnáil seo fosta trí plé le soláthar na hoiliúna agus na tacaíochta cuí don fhoireann chónaithe.

Child Maltreatment

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the implications for her Department of the recently published NSPCC report into child maltreatment, and if she will make a statement. (AQO 546/00)

Ms de Brún: Child abuse and the need to safeguard children is a matter of concern to all of us, and I welcome the NSPCC's report on child maltreatment.

The report contains a large number of recommendations in relation to further research, training, public education, data collection and strategies for dealing with child abuse. My Department will be considering the report carefully, and I will take account of it when developing future policy for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.

Is cúis inní dúinn uilig í an mhí-úsáid páistí agus an gá le páistí a chosaint, agus cuirim fáilte roimh thuairisc an NSPCC ar dhrochíde ar pháistí.

Tá cuid mhór moltaí sa tuairisc maidir le níos mó taighde, traenáil, oideachas poiblí, bailiú sonraí agus straitéisí le déileáil le mí-úsáid páistí. Beidh mo Roinn ag déanamh dianmhachnaimh ar an tuairisc, agus cuirfidh mé san áireamh í i bhforbairt polasaithe amach anseo le páistí a chosaint agus lena leas a chothú.

Erne Hospital

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assurance that full gynaecology services will be reinstated in the Erne Hospital at the earliest opportunity. (AQO 559/00)

Ms de Brún: The decision to combine gynaecology and female surgical services at the Erne hospital is a contingency arrangement, agreed by the Sperrin Lakeland Trust and the Western Health and Social Services Board, to enable the trust to handle winter pressures. This is a temporary measure, and the trust advised the Department last week that they intend restoring normal services from 5 February, subject to emergency activity remaining within manageable proportions.

Is socrú teagmhasach é an cinneadh, aontaithe ag Iontaobhas Loch-Cheantar Speirín agus ag Bord an Iarthair, seirbhísí gíniceolaíochta agus máinliachta ban ag Otharlann na hÉirne a chur le chéile le cuidiú leis an iontaobhas agus leis an bhord brúnna an gheimhridh a láimhseáil. Is beart sealadach é seo, agus thug an t-iontaobhas le fios don Roinn an tseachtain seo chuaigh thart go bhfuil rún acu gnáthsheirbhísí a chur in áit arís ó 5 Feabhra, ar choinníoll go bhfanann gníomhaíocht éigeandála faoi stiúir.

Quality Protects Legislation

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if it is her intention to bring quality protects legislation into Northern Ireland.

(AQO 553/00)

Ms de Brún: As I indicated to the Assembly on 12 December during the debate on the Health Committee's Report on residential and secure accommodation for

children, I intend to produce a regional overview of the way forward for children's services. I will also be bringing forward a range of proposals relating to children's services to address the same broad issues covered by the quality protects programme in England. In doing so, I will also look at the new national children's strategy in the South.

Mar a thug mé le fios don Tionól ar 12 Nollaig le linn na díospóireachta ar thuairisc an Choiste Sláinte ar chóiríocht chónaithe agus dhaingean do pháistí, tá rún agam forbheathnú réigiúnach a thabhairt chun cinn ar an bhealach chun tosaigh do sheirbhísí páistí. Chomh maith leis sin beidh mé ag tabhairt réimse moltaí chun tosaigh maidir le seirbhísí páistí le tabhairt faoi na saincheistanna leathana céanna a chlúdaítear ag an chlár quality protects (cosnaíonn cáilíocht) i Sasana. Agus seo á dhéanamh agam, amharcaidh mé ar straitéis nua náisiúnta na bpáistí sa Deisceart.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Audited Figures for 1999-2000

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the Department's audited figures for the year 1999-2000 will be available. (AQO 554/00)

Ms de Brún: Appropriation accounts for 1999-2000 were prepared on the basis of the Departmental structure as at 1 April 1999 — before the Executive was established. The appropriation accounts for the former Department of Health and Social Services have now been audited, and I understand that they will be published shortly by the Comptroller and Auditor General, as normal, in a single volume covering the accounts of all Departments.

In addition to the appropriation accounts, summarised accounts for health and social services organisations are also published. These contain a summary of the audited accounts of the individual HPSS bodies and are produced and audited somewhat later than the Department's accounts. The summary of the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 accounts have been passed to the Comptroller and Auditor General for audit. I understand that he is currently finalising his report on the 1998-99 accounts, and they too will be available for publication shortly. The 1999-2000 summarised accounts are likely to be published in the summer.

Ullmhaíodh cuntais leithreasaithe do 1999-2000 ar bhonn an struchtúir Roinne ar an 1 Aibreán 1999, is é sin sular cuireadh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin ar bun. Tá cuntais leithreasaithe don iar-Roinn Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta iniúchta anois agus tuigim go bhfoilsíodh an tArd-Reachtaire Cuntas agus Ciste gan mhoill iad, mar is gnách, in imleabhar amháin ag cumhdach chuntais na Ranna uilig.

I dteannta na gcuntas leithreasaithe, foilsítear cuntais achoimrithe d'eagraíochtaí sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta fosta. Tá achoimre chuntais iniúchta na bhforas SSSP aonair iontu agus cuirtear amach agus iniúchtar iad níos moille ná cuntais na Roinne. Tugadh an achoimre a rinneadh ar chuntais 1998-1999 agus 1999-2000 don Ard-Reachtair Cuntas agus Ciste le hiniúchadh. Tuigim go bhfuil sé ag cur bailchríche ar a thuairisc ar chuntais 1998-1999 faoi láthair, agus beidh siad ar fáil le foilsiú ar ball. Is dócha go bhfoilseofar cuntais achoimrithe 1999-2000 sa samhradh.

General Practitioner Fundholding

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the size, in terms of population coverage, of the health committees to replace current GP fundholding and trust arrangements.

(AQO 544/00)

Ms de Brún: On 11 December I published a consultation paper 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care', which sets out proposals for new arrangements in primary care to be put in place following the end of the GP fundholding scheme.

The paper proposes that groupings of primary care professionals, called local health and social care groups, should be constituted as committees of Health and Social Services boards and be given the remit of improving the delivery of primary care services to local populations and contributing to the commissioning of health and social services for the populations they serve. It proposes that they might typically cover populations in the region of 50,000 to 150,000. The paper also suggests that the actual population coverage would vary according to local geography and demography and that it would be inappropriate to impose strict population limits.

There are no proposals in the paper concerning trust arrangements.

Ar 11 Nollaig d'fhoilsigh mé páipéar comhairliúcháin 'Ag Déanamh an Bhealaigh chun Tosaigh sa Chúram Phríomhúil' a leagann amach moltaí ar shocrúithe nua sa chúram phríomhúil atá le cur i bhfeidhm i ndiaidh dheireadh na scéime cisteshealbhúchais liachleachtóirí.

Molann an páipéar gur chóir meithle gairmithe chúraim phríomhúil, dar teideal grúpaí sláinte áitiúla agus cúraim shóisialta, a chur le chéile mar choistí bhoird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta. Ba sainchúram dóibh feabhsú cúraim phríomhúil do dhaoirí áitiúla a sholáthar agus cur le coimisiniú seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta do na daoirí a bhfuil siad ag freastal orthu. Moltar gur chóir dóibh freastal ar dhaoirí de 50,000 go 150,000. Tugann an páipéar le fios chomh maith go mbeadh duifear idir na daoirí a chlúdófaí ag brath ar thíreolaíocht agus ar dhéimeagrafaíocht na háite agus nár cheart teorainneacha righne daonra a leagan síos.

Níl moltaí sa pháipéar ag baint le socruithe iontaobhas.

Health Boards: Projected Budgets

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to indicate the projected budget for 2001-02 for each of the Northern Ireland health boards, using: (a) the current weighted capitation formula; (b) the proposed new weighted capitation formula as outlined in the 'Third Report From The Capitation Formula Review Group'; and if she will make a statement.

(AQO 552/00)

Ms de Brún: I am not yet in a position to provide detailed budgets for health and social services boards for 2001-02. However, I can confirm that full implementation of the proposals set out in the third report of the capitation formula review group would lead to marginal changes in the relative shares of resources for each board. The current shares excluding transitional relief for the Eastern, Northern, Southern and Western Board areas are 42.11%, 23.69%, 17.67% and 16.53% respectively. These would change to 41.93% for the Eastern Board, 23.71% for the Northern Board, 17.67% for the Southern Board and 16.69% for the Western Board.

Some further adjustments may be necessary following my consideration of the responses to the consultation document. When the figures are finalised it is my intention to phase their implementation to minimise any financial instability for boards whose capitation share is reducing.

While I have not yet reached a decision my present view is that implementation should be phased over three years to ensure that change is manageable.

Níl mé i riocht go fóill mionbhuiséid do bhoird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta don bhliain 2001-02 a chur ar fáil. Is féidir liom a dhearbhu áfach gur athruithe imeallacha i scaireanna coibhneasta na n-acmhainní do gach bord an toradh a bheadh ar chur i bhfeidhm iomlán na moltaí atá leagtha amach sa tríú tuairisc den ghrúpa athbhreithnithe foirmle ceannsráithe. Is iad 42.11%, 23.69%, 17.67% agus 16.53% faoi seach na scaireanna atá ann faoi láthair do bhoird an oirthir, an tuaiscirt, an deiscirt agus an iarthair gan faoiseamh idirthréimhseach a chur san áireamh. D'athrófaí iad seo go 41.93% do Bhord an Oirthir, go 23.71% do Bhord an Tuaiscirt, go 17.67% do Bhord an Deiscirt agus go 16.69% do Bhord an Iarthair.

D'fhéadfaí tuilleadh coigeartuithe bheith de dhíth i ndiaidh mé na freagraí ar an cháipéis chomhairliúcháin a mheas. Nuair a bheas na figiúirí tugtha chun críche, tá sé ar intinn agam a gcur i bhfeidhm a thabhairt isteach céim ar chéim le éagobhsaíocht airgeadais ar bith do bhoird a íoslaghdaí a bhfuil a scair cheannsráithe ag íslíú.

Cé nach bhfuil cinneadh déanta agam go fóill, is í mo thuairim faoi láthair gur chóir an cur i bhfeidhm a

thabhairt isteach céim ar chéim thar trí bliana le cinntiú go bhfuil na hathruithe soláimhsithe.

Nurses

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the provision she has made to increase the number of nurses employed in Northern Ireland and if she will make a statement.

(AQO 548/00)

Ms de Brún: In recognition of a current shortage of qualified nursing staff and the recruitment and retention difficulties being experienced by some health and personal social services, a number of initiatives have been taken to increase the number of nurses in employment.

In the short term, 117 qualified nursing staff are currently participating in return to professional practice training and will shortly be ready to resume nursing practice. Further training opportunities will be offered by the three in-service education units and both local universities over the next few months.

In order to enhance the supply of qualified nursing staff, an additional 300 training places for new nurses have been commissioned over a three-year period. The need for a further increase is also currently under consideration.

Health and personal social services employers recognise the need to operate recruitment and retention strategies that encourage nursing staff to join and remain in employment. These include minimising the use of temporary contracts and offering meaningful and acceptable terms and conditions of employment.

Leis an ghanntanas reatha de fhoireann cháilithe altranais agus na deacrachtaí earcaíochta agus coinneála atá ag roinnt fostóirí SSSP a chur ina gceart, cuireadh tús le roinnt tionscnamh le líon na n-altraí i bhfostaíocht a mhéadú.

Sa ghearrthéarma, tá 117 foireann altranais cáilithe rannpháirteach in oiliúnt filleadh ar chleachtas gairmiúil faoi láthair, agus beidh siad réidh ar ball le cleachtas a atosú. Cuirfidh na trí ionad oideachais inseirbhíse agus an dá ollscoil áitiúla deiseanna breise oiliúna ar fáil sna míonna seo chugainn.

Le soláthar fhoireann cháilithe altranais a mhéadú, coimisiúnaíodh 300 áit bhreise oiliúna d'altraí nua thar tréimhse trí bliana. Tá machnamh á dhéanamh fosta faoi láthair ar an gha le méadú breise.

Aithníonn fostóirí seirbhísí sláinte agus pearsanta an gá le straitéisí earcaíochta agus coinneála a fheidhmiú a spreagfaidh foireann altranais le fostaíocht a ghlacadh agus le fanacht inti. Orthu seo tá íoslachdú úsáid conarthaí sealadacha agus tairiscint téarmaí agus coinníollacha fostaíochta fiúntacha inghlactha.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

West Tyrone Budget Percentage

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to: (a) detail all buildings and amenities within his responsibility in the constituency of West Tyrone; (b) outline the percentage of his budget that has been allocated to the West Tyrone constituency; and (c) explain how this compares with the previous budget.

(AQW 1091/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): The only buildings and amenities for which I have responsibility in your constituency are the job centres in Kevlin Avenue, Omagh and Upper Main Street, Strabane.

The information requested in parts (b) and (c) of your question is not recorded on a constituency basis and could only be provided at a disproportionate cost.

Quality of Teaching

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to give his assessment of the current quality of teaching in further education colleges.

(AQW 1137/00)

Dr Farren: Good quality teaching in further education colleges is essential if students are to achieve their maximum potential and contribute to society and the Northern Ireland economy.

Unlike any other part of the UK, all full-time lecturers and associate lecturers — part-time with teacher recognition — in further education are required to be trained teachers either when they commence teaching, with a Bachelor of Education or Postgraduate Certificate in Education, or within the first three years of taking up appointment. In the case of the latter, lecturers study on a part-time basis at the University of Ulster for a Postgraduate Certificate in Further and Higher Education.

The governing body in each college of further education has responsibility for the quality of teaching in that college and, in addition, the education and training inspectorate assesses the quality of teaching and learning as part of its inspection process.

In the past two years approximately 600 teaching sessions were observed. Approximately 25% of the lessons observed were excellent, 54% were good, and 20% were satisfactory. One percent of the lessons was unsatisfactory.

In an effort to help colleges assess quality of teaching the education and training inspectorate has produced indicators of quality, which inspectors use to assess the quality of provision.

The inspectorate has also introduced an associate assessor scheme where lecturers are trained by the inspectorate in classroom observation to make judgements on the quality of teaching and learning. These lecturers will work alongside the inspectorate in college inspections.

Raising standards and promoting quality are priorities for the further education sector generally. Good quality teaching is an essential component.

Whilst overall performance is very good, it is an area I will keep under constant scrutiny.

Centres of Excellence

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to explain why there are no centres of excellence being created in colleges of further education west of the Bann. (AQW 1145/00)

Dr Farren: Bids from further education colleges for recognition as centres of excellence were considered by an independent assessment panel, which included industry representatives and the education and training inspectorate. Bids were assessed against a number of criteria, which focused on standards, quality and industry responsiveness.

The panel concluded that eight bids were strong enough to meet the criteria for recognition as centres of excellence. These included the Upper Bann Institute of Further and Higher Education bid to be recognised as a centre of excellence in ICT and Computing. A number of other bids of a high standard, including some from the North West Institute and Fermanagh College, were considered worthy of recognition and the award of additional funding to help them improve quality/standards and links with industry.

The centre of excellence initiative is part of the wider strategic investment initiative, totalling £3.7million, from which all colleges benefited. Armagh, East Tyrone, Fermanagh and Omagh colleges benefited from funding set aside to assist the development of strategic alliances, and Armagh, East Tyrone and Omagh colleges received funding to assist the alignment of existing staffing with evolving economic needs. Not all colleges bid against all the components of the strategic investment initiative.

The additional investment of £3.7 million in further education colleges demonstrates our continuing commitment to the achievement of the highest standards by the sector including its responsiveness to the needs of local business and industry.

Basic Literacy and Numeracy Skills

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline his plans to reduce the number of adults who lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. (AQW 1157/00)

Dr Farren: The findings of the international adult literacy survey, in which Northern Ireland was benchmarked against almost all the OECD countries, indicate that approximately 24% of the adult population in Northern Ireland perform at the lowest levels of literacy. Improving basic skills is one of the key challenges facing my Department. To this end a number of initiatives have already been taken to tackle the problem.

Basic Skills Unit

A basic skills unit has been set up within the educational guidance service for adults (EGSA), but relating to the basic skills committee. The role of this new committee and unit is to provide the Department with advice on adult literacy and numeracy issues. It will identify, promote and support good practice in teaching and learning basic skills, support innovation in basic skills education, and encourage collaboration between providers. A basic skills unit innovation fund has been established to promote and support innovative approaches in the delivery of basic skills to adults within the wider community. Additionally, I have asked the basic skills unit to advise me on a range of targets for taking people out of basic skills and how best to measure progress against these targets. I have sought their advice on how to market and promote basic skills education and how the teacher base might be expanded.

Learndirect

Basic skills is also one of the key priorities set by Government for the university for industry (UFI). UFI has commissioned materials in this area, making use of the latest technologies, and these are accessible by anyone, anywhere and at any time under the brand name of learndirect. For those without access to a computer the training material can be accessed at a range of learndirect learning centres – 16 of which are already open or will open shortly in Northern Ireland.

The Department has put funding arrangements in place for learners in learndirect centres. Under these arrangements all basic skills courses are offered free of charge to learners, up to a maximum cost of £500 per person per year.

New Deal

In December 1999 the agency set up a basic skills working group to review basic skills within New Deal. A “toolkit”, aimed at raising the awareness of New Deal personal advisers of basic skills issues and to assist in identifying clients with basic skills needs was developed and is currently being rolled out to the jobcentre network. The group is also involved with a New Deal curriculum project which aims to consider exemplars of good practice in basic skills delivery and report on the requirements of the New Deal sector when implementing the new basic skills standards and curriculum.

Developments in GB

The Department for Education and Employment has published its strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy recently. My officials are studying these proposals closely and these, together with advice from the basic skills unit, will help inform our own strategy. There will be liaison with other Departments given the particular cross-cutting nature of this issue. I will keep progress in this area of work under review, but I am confident that with sustained effort we can make a real difference.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Translink Services

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail: (a) what proportion of Translink services have run on time since January 1999; (b) how many trains have been more than 15 minutes late in each month since January 1999; (c) how many timetabled services have not run at all in each month since January 1999; and (d) his plans to improve the reliability of the timetable.

(AQW 1023/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell):

- (a) Translink measures delays of over five minutes on the Larne, Bangor and Portadown lines and delays of over 10 minutes on the Londonderry and Dublin lines. Translink has advised that from January 1999 to November 2000, 94% of services were punctual to within five minutes on the Larne, Bangor and Portadown lines, and 93% were punctual to within 10 minutes on the Londonderry and Dublin lines.
- (b) Translink does not retain figures on an absolute basis and has not been able to supply information about the number of trains that have been late each month since January 1999. However, it has been able to supply figures for each month from January 1999 to November 2000, the latest month for which figures are available, for delays over five minutes on the Larne, Bangor and Portadown lines and delays over 10 minutes on the Londonderry and Dublin lines. Translink does not measure delays of over 15 minutes.

NIR PUNCTUALITY RESULTS 1999

% DELAYS OVER 5 MINUTES				% DELAYS OVER 10 MINUTES	
Month	Larne line	Bangor line	Portadown line	Londonderry line	Dublin line
January	4	3	1	6	2
February	2	0	0	2	2

March	3	1	0	3	0
April	4	1	1	6	4
May	7	3	2	6	3
June	6	5	0	5	1
July	4	5	1	1	1
August	8	8	2	5	4
September	5	6	3	8	8
October	17	17	7	23	22
November	9	10	4	9	15
December	7	5	2	8	6

NIR PUNCTUALITY RESULTS 2000 (TO NOVEMBER 2000)

% DELAYS OVER 5 MINUTES				% DELAYS OVER 10 MINUTES	
Month	Larne line	Bangor line	Portadown line	Londonderry line	Dublin line
January	7	2	2	6	3
February	8	4	3	11	7
March	5	2	2	6	6
April	4	3	2	2	3
May	4	2	2	4	2
June	6	3	3	2	1
July	3	3	2	1	3
August	5	3	3	4	3
September	6	3	3	4	4
October	10	6	4	6	4
November	22	20	13	13	17

- (c) Translink does not retain figures on an absolute basis and it has not been able to supply information about the number of trains that have not run at all for each month since January 1999. However, it has been able to supply figures for each month from January 1999 to November 2000, the latest month for which figures are available.

NIR RELIABILITY RESULTS 1999

Month	Larne line	Bangor line	Portadown line	Londonderry line	Dublin line
January	0.5	0.6	0.2	0.4	0
February	0	0	0.1	0	0
March	0.2	0.1	0	0	0
April	0.2	0.1	0	0.8	0
May	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.2	0
June	0.3	0.8	0	0.4	0
July	0.1	0.1	0	0	0
August	0	0.4	0	0.2	0.5
September	0.1	0.3	0.2	0	0
October	0.8	0.7	0	0.4	0

Month	Larne line	Bangor line	Portadown line	London-derry line	Dublin line
November	0.3	1.3	0.2	0.2	0
December	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0

NIR RELIABILITY RESULTS 2000 (TO NOVEMBER 2000)

Month	Larne line	Bangor line	Portadown line	London-derry line	Dublin line
January	0.2	0.1	0	0	0
February	0.8	0.3	0.1	0.4	0
March	0.3	0.1	0.2	1	0
April	0.3	0.2	0.1	0	0
May	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.6	0
June	0.7	0.1	0.3	0.4	0
July	0.1	0.1	0.1	0	0
August	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.5
September	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.6	0
October	0.5	0.2	0.5	0.4	0
November	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.2

Translink advises that its plans to improve timetable reliability relate primarily to improving punctuality. It considers that punctuality problems are caused almost exclusively by the condition of the current rolling stock. The £19.6 million additional resources for railways approved by the Assembly on 18 December will allow Translink to initiate an investment programme to replace outdated rolling stock with new trains, which should provide more reliable and more comfortable services.

Urban and Rural

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the definition of the words urban and rural as used in his Department. (AQW 1054/00)

Mr Campbell: There is no standard definition of the words urban and rural. For the purposes of strategic regional planning the Department for Regional Development considers rural Northern Ireland to include all towns, villages, small settlements and open countryside outside the main urban areas of Belfast and Londonderry. This is consistent with the comments made by the independent panel that conducted the public examination into the draft regional strategic framework in November 1999. The framework will ensure that there is an integrated approach to dealing with rural development issues. It also reflects the fact that the region is predominantly rural. It has a dispersed population, living mainly in a variety of settlement types served by the main market towns, which are the hubs of employment, services and key amenities.

Mossley West Rail Station

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that the Mossley West train station has not been included in the latest timetable for services between Londonderry and Belfast and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1155/00)

Mr Campbell: Translink has advised that Mossley West train station is not expected to be operational when the Antrim to Bleach Green line is opened and has not been included in the timetable that Translink intend to operate initially on that line.

Mossley West Rail Station

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that Mossley West Rail Station will be included in the new timetable of services. (AQW 1172/00)

Mr Campbell: Translink has confirmed that it intends to use the Mossley West station as soon as possible. I understand that Translink is currently consulting interested parties with a view to ensuring safe access to the station so that an outstanding planning consideration can be resolved as soon as possible.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**Housing Bill**

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to outline when the Housing Bill will be brought to the Assembly for consideration. (AQW 988/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): I am awaiting a formal response from the Executive Committee to the policy proposals I submitted to it in October 2000 in connection with the proposed Housing Bill. Discussions have taken place with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister about the proposals in the meantime. Until the Executive Committee's approval is forthcoming, I will not be in a position to progress the Bill further. In the circumstances, it is not possible to predict precisely when the Bill will be brought to the Assembly for consideration although I still hope that it will be introduced before the summer recess.

Housing Executive Rents

Mr Close asked the Minister for Social Development if he will use the additional money made available from

increased housing sales to ensure that Housing Executive rents are not increased by a rate above that of inflation.

(AQW 1007/00)

Mr Morrow: On 22 December 2000 I announced that Housing Executive rents were to rise by 3% from April 2001. This is below the current rate of inflation and means that Housing Executive tenants in Northern Ireland will be better off than those in England and Wales where rents will rise by 4.5%. For the average tenant this will mean an increase of £1.17 per week.

It is not possible to use additional capital receipts from house sales to offset a rent increase. There are two reasons for this. First, house sales are classified as capital, whereas rental income is revenue. Treasury rules prohibit the transfer of funds from one to the other. Secondly, the Housing Executive's accounting arrangements, which are similar to all other non-departmental public bodies and departmental agencies, mean that additional receipts over and above those included in approved and published estimates cannot be carried over from one year to another. Again, in accordance with Treasury rules they must be surrendered to the Department of Finance and Personnel and are at the disposal of the Executive Committee.

Antisocial Behaviour

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development if, in relation to antisocial behaviour in Housing Executive property, he will detail the number of tenants that the executive has taken action against in each of the past two years in the Carrickfergus area and what the outcome of these actions has been. (AQW 1032/00)

Mr Morrow: All Housing Executive district offices have been required to collect and report on incidences of antisocial behaviour since October 2000. Although detailed information for the past two years is not available, there would be approximately 100 reports of antisocial behaviour in the Carrickfergus district per year. These include nuisance neighbours, bonfires, children playing, boundary disputes and abandoned properties.

The Housing Executive acts on all complaints. The issue of letters from the district office, follow-up visits, and interviews resolve many cases. The volunteer mediation service has also dealt with a number of cases of antisocial behaviour in the district.

There have been no evictions of Housing Executive tenants on the grounds of antisocial behaviour in the Carrickfergus district during the last two years.

You may also be interested to know that the Housing Executive has set up a central antisocial behaviour unit, including an officer seconded from the RUC, which will help district offices deal with the worst cases.

Antisocial Behaviour

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail current Housing Executive procedures to combat antisocial behaviour in their properties.

(AQW 1048/00)

Mr Morrow: The Housing Executive normally attempts to deal with antisocial behaviour through mediation using its neighbourhood dispute system. However, the Executive has a range of options available where mediation does not produce the desired result.

Housing Executive tenancies are normally "secure" tenancies, which means that the tenancy can only be brought to an end by a court order. While eviction is very much a last resort, the executive can seek an order for possession — eviction — against one of its tenants where the tenant's behaviour provides grounds for the court to make such an order. The grounds for possession, which are set out in legislation, include certain forms of antisocial behaviour such as causing nuisance or annoyance to neighbours and using a house for illegal or immoral purposes.

The Housing Executive can also seek an injunction against one of its own tenants, where the tenant has breached, or threatens to breach, his tenancy agreement — such a breach could include antisocial behaviour such as causing nuisance to neighbours. Where the court has granted such an injunction and the tenant breaches, or continues to breach, the tenancy agreement, the tenant can be held to be in contempt of court.

The Housing Executive is developing a wider approach to the problems of antisocial behaviour in the context of community safety. Initiatives include setting up a specialised unit to deal with the worst cases; developing seminars with staff from other bodies to promote closer working relationships; the introduction of neighbourhood wardens; and the imposition of sanctions against those on the waiting lists who have a history of antisocial behaviour.

Urban and Rural

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the definition of the words urban and rural used in his Department. (AQW 1055/00)

Mr Morrow: There are no definitions of the words urban and rural used by my Department. We use the definition of cities, towns and villages as delineated by the area plans that have been drawn up by planning service in the Department of the Environment.

Reducing Child Poverty

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the target for reducing child

poverty in Northern Ireland as part of the UK Government's policy of abolishing child poverty in 20 years.

(AQW 1085/00)

Mr Morrow: The commitment to eradicate child poverty in 20 years and halving it in 10 years covers a range of initiatives that seek to address the multi-dimensional problems associated with child poverty.

Ensuring that children get the best start in life requires improvements in a number of key areas, for example, improvement in family income through tax and benefit reform and through increasing opportunities for parents to work.

Progress towards achieving the objective will be monitored using key headline indicators such as:

- i. a reduction in the proportion of children living in low income households;
- ii. a reduction in the proportion of children living in households where nobody is in work; and
- iii. a reduction in the number of households with children living in housing that falls below the set standard of decency.

Refurbishment Schemes

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to minimise disruption and inconvenience to homeowners during planned refurbishment schemes on Housing Executive estates.

(AQW 1097/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive whose chief executive advises that it has established a set of consultation standards specific to homeowners affected by scheme related activity to ensure disruption and inconvenience are kept to a minimum. Action ranges from written notification, advising homeowners of scheme work that is to be undertaken, to detailed consultation where work is required to adjoining properties.

Voluntary Activity Unit

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of expenditure by the voluntary activity unit (VAU) to the voluntary and community sector for each district council, council ward and parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 1123/00)

Mr Morrow: The VAU administers a number of grant-making programmes including the district councils' community services programme. Details of the unit's allocation to each of the 26 district councils under the community services programme are given below.

The remainder of the information requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate

costs. Many organisations are funded directly and indirectly through VAU — estimated to be in the region of 4,000 — and the activities of many of these organisations span several of the boundaries identified in the question. Compounding the difficulty is the unit's use of managing agents, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust and the Volunteer Development Agency, to administer certain EU and volunteer funding programmes.

DSD COMMUNITY SERVICES PROGRAMME GRANTS TO DISTRICT COUNCILS 2000-2001

Name of Council	Amount of Community Services Grant Payable (2000-2001)
Antrim	60,929.38
Ards	42,341.82
Armagh	31,481.61
Ballymena	68,215.96
Ballymoney	15,063.80
Banbridge	33,793.00
Belfast	833,466.34
Carrickfergus	47,372.52
Castlereagh	106,987.57
Coleraine	44,273.66
Cookstown	15,228.09
Craigavon	211,731.72
Derry	152,567.64
Down	50,448.74
Dungannon & South Tyrone	18,070.90
Fermanagh	62,232.37
Larne	29,164.52
Limavady	26,951.69
Lisburn	83,589.09
Magherafelt	12,548.45
Moyle	24,190.45
Newry & Mourne	121,253.71
Newtownabbey	72,118.19
North Down	56,845.90
Omagh	85,891.44
Strabane	101,756.31

* Inclusive of grant for advice services

Regenerating Town Centres

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his plans to regenerate town centres outside designated targeting social need areas.

(AQW 1158/00)

Mr Morrow: It is too early to detail plans to regenerate any of our town centres. Officials from my Department

are working with representatives from other Departments to draw up a strategy for the regeneration of town centres that will need to be considered by relevant Ministers. However, we shall be examining the various proposals with a view to establishing a policy framework for reinvigorating town centres inside and outside designated targeting social need areas.

Town centres should be safe, attractive and vibrant places, which provide services and employment opportunities to their catchment populations.

Housing Selection Scheme

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Social Development if he has plans to revise the new Housing Executive housing selection scheme to take account of applicants with mental health problems. (AQW 1170/00)

Mr Morrow: Following a comprehensive consultation exercise, a common selection scheme for the allocation of tenancies by the Housing Executive and registered housing associations was introduced on 6 November 2000.

The design of the new common selection scheme takes account of the need to match applicants with mental health or other medical problems to appropriate accommodation. The scheme aims to assess a person's ability to function within his existing accommodation and how re-housing might improve that level of functional ability. The scheme does not focus on particular medical conditions, and there is no automatic entitlement to points for mental health problems. However, points are awarded for circumstances such as "health and social well being" and an applicant's mental health would be an important factor in this regard. The scheme also takes account of an applicant's support and/or supervision needs.

When the common selection scheme has been in operation for a sufficient time it will be evaluated to indicate the effectiveness of the new allocation policies.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of households in West Belfast which have received insulation measures under the domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES) in each of the last three financial years and to detail how this compares with other constituencies. (AQW 1205/00)

Mr Morrow: The number of households in West Belfast which have received DEES insulation measures in each of the last three financial years compared with other constituencies is as follows:

CONSTITUENCY	1998/99	1999/2000	2000/2001 (up to 31/12/00)

Belfast East	1196	1648	994
Belfast North	1996	2186	1594
Belfast South	191	731	368
Belfast West	1672	1989	1824
East Antrim	1060	710	603
East Londonderry	1144	960	632
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	1100	867	769
Foyle	2046	1944	1742
Lagan Valley	223	261	153
Mid Ulster	1677	818	549
Newry and Armagh	477	609	569
North Antrim	648	1208	618
North Down	662	403	373
South Antrim	760	315	348
South Down	232	196	112
Strangford	676	350	406
Upper Bann	1476	1663	1107
West Tyrone	1481	1661	336

Energy Action Grant Agency Partnership

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to outline when he last met representatives of the energy action grant agency partnership to discuss the operation and further development of the domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES) and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1232/00)

Mr Morrow: The energy action grant agency, now known as the EAGA partnership, is the manager of the current domestic energy efficiency scheme and my officials meet with the company regularly to discuss performance and operational issues. The last meeting was held on 11 January 2001. As regards the development of the new DEES programme, meetings took place with representatives of the EAGA partnership in May and November 2000.

Housing Executive: House Sales

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail: (a) the total sum of money passed to the Department of Finance and Personnel in respect of house sales by the Housing Executive in each of the last three years for which figures are available; and (b) the current shortfall in the housing budget. (AQW 1257/00)

Mr Morrow: The following table shows the total capital receipts surrendered to the Department of Finance and Personnel in each of the last three years:

CAPITAL RECEIPTS SURRENDERED IN-YEAR

1997/1998	£17.1m
1998/1999	£18.0m
1999/2000	£13.5m

The Housing Executive's accounting arrangements, which are similar to all other non-departmental public bodies, are subject to Treasury rules. These rules prohibit additional receipts over and above those included in approved and published estimates being held in-year, by the Housing Executive. Again, in accordance with Treasury rules, they must be surrendered to the Department of Finance and Personnel and are at the disposal of the Executive Committee.

There is no shortfall in the housing budget for the current financial year. In fact I have been able to secure additional in-year resources of just under £13 million — mainly for SPED, handicapped adaptations, loss of rental income and the loyalist feud on the Shankill — bringing the gross resources available in 2000-01 to £606 million.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development if, following the recent advertising campaign, he will outline the current take-up of the minimum income guarantee. (AQW 1289/00)

Mr Morrow: Since the take-up campaign in May 2000 just over 6,500 pensioners have applied for minimum income guarantee. Over 3,300 claims have been successful, with average additional payments of £25.00 per week.

The agency will continue to further promote minimum income guarantee in close partnership with the voluntary sector.

Social Fund Report

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Social Development to outline when he intends to publish his annual report on the social fund for 1999-2000 and the social fund commissioner's annual report (AQW 1379/00)

Mr Morrow: The Department's annual report on the social fund for 1999-2000 was published on 17 January and has been laid before the Assembly.

The report records that gross expenditure in the year was £47.6 million, with additional expenditure of £19 million on winter fuel payments. There were 219,000 non-repayable

grants, 1,956,000 interest free loans, 216,000 funeral and maternity payments, and 246,000 pensioners received winter fuel payments.

The social fund commissioner's annual report was also published on 17 January, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION**Sign Language Interpreters**

Mr Ford asked the Assembly Commission if it has any plans to introduce sign language interpreters in the Assembly to assist the deaf and hard of hearing.

(AQW 1008/00)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission:

At this stage the Commission has no plans to introduce sign language interpreters in the Assembly. However the Commission is willing to cater for any special requirements to visitors if the Assembly's Public Events Office receives prior notice.

To this end, the Commission has already arranged for the installation of an induction loop system in the Assembly Chamber to assist the deaf and hard of hearing in the interpretation of proceedings.

The Commission is aware of its responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act 1999 and is currently considering a number of substantive reports on the provision of disabled access and other facilities throughout Parliament Buildings.

"Fair Trade" Requirements

Mr Ford asked the Assembly Commission if it will require tea and coffee supplied within Parliament Buildings to comply with "Fair Trade" requirements.

(AQW 1026/00)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission:

The Commission has been considering this issue for some time and is aware that many Members have received information from War on Want (NI) on the "Fair Trade" campaign. The Commission has recently agreed to include a specific clause in new contractual arrangements with Mount Charles that will require the contractor to comply with "Fair Trade" policies when purchasing goods.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 26 January 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Children's Fund

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister when it expects to be able to give the information on the Children's Fund requested in AQW 879/00. (AQW 1165/00)

Reply: In answer to AQW 879/00 we advised that the arrangements for the management and distribution of the Children's Fund were being considered.

We expect to be in a position to announce a final decision on these arrangements, including the detailed criteria for making allocations, shortly.

Children's Fund

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline what steps are being taken to ensure that the proposed Children's Fund tackles child poverty in Northern Ireland and how it will contribute to the target set by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to eradicate child poverty in the UK. (AQW 1220/00)

Reply: The Executive Committee has agreed that the objective of the Children's Fund will be to provide support for children in need and young people at risk. The broad criteria already agreed for the Executive Programme Funds include a criterion relating to the need for proposals to be consistent with the objectives of New TSN policy. The detailed arrangements for operating the funds are currently being finalised.

By targeting resources, in the context of New TSN, at children in need and young people at risk, the Children's Fund has the potential to contribute significantly to tackling child poverty and improving the prospects for many children in Northern Ireland.

Children's Fund

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline the steps being taken to ensure that the criteria for the Children's Fund will be subject to screening and consultation with children's organisations and non-governmental organisations, as required by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQW 1222/00)

Reply: The policy of establishing Executive Programme Funds, including the Children's Fund, was included in the draft Programme for Government, which was subjected to an equality impact assessment and to extensive consultation.

The consultation process, which ran from 24 October until 15 January, involved a large number of non-governmental organisations. Responses were received from 120 organisations including many of the main children's organisations in Northern Ireland.

In addition to the formal consultation, the junior Ministers met with a delegation from the Children's Fund lobby group to hear their views on the operation of the Children's Fund.

The representations that have been made by children's organisations and other non-governmental organisations have been taken into account in finalising the detailed criteria and management arrangements for the Children's Fund and these will be announced shortly.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Specified Risk Material

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list the types of material that are designated as specific risk material for the purposes of the trans-boundary movement of waste. (AQW 1180/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): Specified risk material comprises the following types of material:

- (a) the intestine of bovine animals of all ages;
- (b) the skull including the brain and eyes, the tonsils, the spinal cord of bovine animals aged over 12 months;
- (c) in the case of the United Kingdom and Portugal, the entire head excluding the tongue but including the brain, eyes, trigeminal ganglia and tonsils, the thymus, the spleen and the spinal cord of bovine animals aged over six months and, in relation to bovine animals aged over thirty months, the vertebral column, including the dorsal root ganglia;

- (d) the skull including the brains and eyes, the tonsils and the spinal cord of sheep and goats aged over twelve months or that have a permanent incisor erupted through the gum and;
- (e) the spleen of sheep and goats of all ages.

Phillips Report

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how she proposes to implement the recommendations of the Phillips report on BSE and CJD. (AQW 1213/00)

Ms Rodgers: As I explained in my answer of 5 December, the Phillips report contains over 160 lessons and each needs to be considered very carefully. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is leading that consideration with a wide range of Government Departments, including all of the devolved administrations, with a view to preparing the Government's substantive response to the report in the coming months. You will appreciate it takes some time to address each of the lessons in such a significant report and as soon as I am in a position to let you have a substantive response on how I will be implementing those lessons that apply specifically to DARD I will do so. I will, of course, also be keeping the Assembly fully informed.

Organic Farming

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the targets she has set for the achievement of sustainable organic farming. (AQW 1219/00)

Ms Rodgers: Provision has been made in the Northern Ireland rural development plan for the organic farming scheme to grow from its present level of 20 producers farming just over 1,000 hectares to 1,000 farmers with 30,000 hectares under agreement by 2006.

You will recall that, in my response to your previous query on organic farming (AQW 703/00), I advised that I have commissioned a strategic study of the Northern Ireland organic sector by independent consultants based at the Elm Farm Research Centre in Berkshire. I shall receive the results of their study early in 2001 and this shall further inform my Department's efforts to ensure that the organic production sector develops in the best possible way to take advantage of market opportunities.

BSE

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of cases during 2000 of BSE in Northern Ireland in animals; (a) bred in

Northern Ireland, and; (b) bred in other EU regions, specifying in each case the region concerned.

(AQW 1224/00)

Ms Rodgers: Of the 22 cases of BSE recorded in Northern Ireland during 2000, 20 cases were in animals bred in Northern Ireland and two cases were in animals bred in GB.

BSE

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail an age classification for cases of BSE in Northern Ireland during 2000.

(AQW 1225/00)

Ms Rodgers: The age classification of BSE cases in Northern Ireland during 2000 is as follows:

Year of Birth	No of Cases
1991	1
1992	2
1993	3
1994	6
1995	8
1996	2
Total	22

Administrative Data Sets

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list the administrative data sets held by the Department and its agencies and detail whether these data sets provide qualitative data at enumeration district, electoral ward level, district council area or by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1237/00)

Ms Rodgers: I have attached a table showing the administrative data sets held by my Department.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Title of Administration Data Set	Data Available in the Form of:			
	Emune-ration District	Electoral Ward	District Council	Parl. Constitu-ency
	Yes /No	Yes /No	Yes /No	Yes /No
List of students attending agricultural college	No	Yes	Yes	No
List of food, horticulture and farm businesses with which DARD has contact	No	Yes	Yes	No
Forest Service database of tree species, area and year of planting	No	No	No	No

Title of Administration Data Set	Data Available in the Form of:			
	Emune-ration District	Electoral Ward	District Council	Parl. Constitu-ency
	Yes /No	Yes /No	Yes /No	Yes /No
Woodland grant scheme	No	No	No	No
Annual Forest Service statistics – operational information	No	No	No	No
Forest Service acquisitions and disposals	No	No	No	No
Animal and Public Health Information Service (APHIS)	No	No	No	No
Paper records relating to individual herd owners	No	No	No	No
Records of landowners riparian to designated minor watercourses subject to maintenance by contract	No	No	No	No
Grants & Subsidies Payment System	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
List of EU Approved Premises in Northern Ireland i.e. slaughterhouses, cutting plants, meat based product plants, minced meat and meat preparation plants and poultrymeat plants	No	No	No	No
List of Low Throughput Red and Poultry Meat Premises	No	No	No	No
List of Northern Ireland Export Approved Premises	No	No	No	No
List of approved Northern Ireland Egg Packing Stations	No	No	No	No
Egg Wholesalers	No	No	No	No
Licensed Slaughtermen in Northern Ireland	No	No	No	No
Approved Northern Ireland Dairy Establishments	No	No	No	No
Salmonella testing of Processed Animal Protein (Statutory)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Salmonella Serotyping under Zoonoses Order (Statutory)	Yes	No	No	No
Microbiological Analyses of Meat Products (Beef/Pork/Chicken/Fish) (Advisory & Contract Research)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Microbiological Analyses of Egg Products (Advisory and Contract)	Yes	No	No	No
Microbiological Analyses of Milk and Dairy Products (Statutory)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Title of Administration Data Set	Data Available in the Form of:			
	Emune-ration District	Electoral Ward	District Council	Parl. Constitu-ency
	Yes /No	Yes /No	Yes /No	Yes /No
Microbiological Analyses of Waters (Mains and Boreholes) (Advisory)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Microbiological Analyses of Packaging Products (Advisory and Contract)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Microbiological Analyses of Peat Mushroom Compost Products (Contract)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Microbiological Analyses of Food Products (other than milk,meat,eggs)(Advisory)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Analyses of Animal Feeds (Statutory) from feed mills & farmers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
List of Analyses of Animal Feeds (Advisory) from vets via Veterinary Science Division	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fishing Activity Database	No	No	No	No
Vessel Licensing System	No	No	No	No
Fish Movement System	No	No	No	No
Shellfish Farm Database	No	No	No	No
FIFG Grants Scheme Applications/Approvals/ Grant Records	No	No	No	No
List of Marine and Inland Licensed Fish Farm Applications	No	No	No	No
List of Consultees for Fish Farm Applications	No	No	No	No
List of Driftnet Licence Holders (Loughs Agency)	No	No	No	No
List of Draftnet Licence Holders (Loughs Agency)	No	No	No	No
Projects assisted by Leader II Programme (includes name of project promoter, amount of funding committed and amount paid)	No	No	No	No
Projects assisted by the Rural Development Programme (SPARD) – includes name and nature of project, nature and type of funding, job creation figures	No	No	No	No
Projects supported by Rural Development Council including name of project, amount and nature of funding received and job creation figures	No	Yes	Yes	No

Title of Administration Data Set	Data Available in the Form of:			
	Emuneration District	Electoral Ward	District Council	Parl. Constituency
	Yes /No	Yes /No	Yes /No	Yes /No
Disadvantaged wards – information taken from RDC/IFI and Robson report	No	Yes	Yes	No
Projects assisted by Rural Development Programme - IFI/INTERREG/PEACE. Include name of project and amount and nature of funding received.	No	No	No	No
All Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments maintain a range of records on their staff for the purposes of carrying out their functions as employers. Many of the records for individual members of staff are held on computerised systems which are managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel on behalf of Departments and their respective Agencies. These records include personnel, payroll and training records, applicants records for recruitment competitions and superannuation records for retired civil servants. Such records are not managed in a way which routinely provided data sets by enumeration district, electoral ward, District Council or Parliamentary Constituency.	No	No	No	No

Tree Felling Licenses

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has plans to re-introduce tree felling licenses. (AQW 1248/00)

Ms Rodgers: I do not have any current plans to re-introduce tree felling licenses. However, I will consult on the need for changes to the Forestry Act as part of the review of forest policy later this year.

Tuberculosis in Cattle

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of cattle compulsorily slaughtered on tuberculosis reactors in the last twelve months for which records are available that were; (a) over and under thirty months old; (b) on post mortem examination not showing signs of clinical

infection; (c) condemned as unfit for human consumption, or; (d) sold for human consumption. (AQW 1281/00)

Ms Rodgers: The information requested is as follows:

- (a) 3,634 under-thirty-months (UTM) and 5,668 over-thirty-months (OTM) tuberculosis reactor and in-contact animals were slaughtered during the year 2000. Under BSE regulations the carcasses of all of the OTM animals were destroyed;
- (b) 5,581 of these animals did not show signs of clinical infection on post mortem examination;
- (c) 185 of the 3,634 UTM animals were condemned as unfit for human consumption and;
- (d) 3,449 were sold for human consumption.

Pig Farmers Outgoers Scheme

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what funding will be made available for payment in the pig farmers outgoers scheme in Northern Ireland in financial years (a) 2000-01; (b) 2001-02 and (c) 2002-03. (AQW 1282/00)

Ms Rodgers: The object of the outgoers element of the pig industry restructuring scheme is to reduce UK sow capacity by 16% from that which existed in June 1998. The scheme will provide a one-off aid payment to those engaged in pig breeding at that time provided they comply with the scheme requirements. They must, for example, undertake not to be involved in any form of pig production for a period of ten years from the date of approval of their application. The scheme will operate on a sealed bidding process with applicants required to submit a sealed tender offer, which will ultimately reflect the cost per sow place to be taken out of production. Applicants throughout the UK will therefore be involved in a competitive tendering process. Northern Ireland's share of the aid will ultimately depend on the number of competitive bids submitted by local producers that are successful in the sealed bidding process.

A total of £66 million was allocated for all of the UK for both the outgoers and ongoers elements of the pig industry restructuring scheme over the period 2000-01 to 2002-03. The intention was that the £26 million provided in year 1 would cover payments to successful applicants under either element of the scheme. However, the introduction of the outgoers element could not take place until state aid clearance was given by the EC. With the resultant delay in opening the scheme, there will not be sufficient time for successful applicants to comply with their undertakings and be paid in the current financial year 2000-01.

All assistance under outgoers will be paid in 2001-02. Applicants will know by the end of March at latest if their bids have been successful or not. Claims can be

submitted once any necessary work on their pig breeding facilities has been completed. Claims for payment must be lodged no later than 31 August and all payments should be made before 26 October 2001.

Animals and Public Health Information System

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline when she intends to upgrade the animal and public health information system. (AQW 1309/00)

Ms Rodgers: The animal and public health information system (APHIS) has been subject to continual upgrade since its installation in November 1998.

The current phase includes a communication network upgrade, which will improve the exchange of information to and from meat plants on health, traceability and marketing statuses. Changes in APHIS software are also planned to speed up the processing of documentation in meat plant lairages. It is anticipated that these changes and the alterations in infrastructure necessary to support them will be in place by the spring.

Longer-term changes to the system hardware to improve contingency and availability are also planned, but are currently at an earlier stage of development.

These changes are being undertaken in conjunction with a Department of Agriculture and Rural Development/Industry-wide steering group which has been set up to oversee a strategy for further development of APHIS.

Pesticide Tax

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to introduce a pesticide tax. (AQW 1327/00)

Ms Rodgers: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and indeed the Northern Ireland Executive, does not have any tax-raising powers.

However, I can confirm that within the UK, Government Ministers are committed to minimising the adverse environmental impact of pesticides use, consistent with adequate crop protection. The possible role of a pesticide tax has been considered and the Chancellor of the Exchequer has indicated that such a tax, in conjunction with other measures, could be helpful in addressing the environmental impacts of pesticides. Other approaches are still being explored and the agrichemical industry has been encouraged to bring forward proposals for voluntary measures, which would achieve the same objective.

The GB crop protection association has published a formal set of proposals and, in Northern Ireland, the food chain and environment pesticides group, led by Mr John Gilliland (UFU deputy president) and which includes

representatives from farming, the environmental, consumer, retailer and agri-food sectors, has recently developed its own proposals. I understand that both groups are in discussion with HM Treasury.

Farming Practices

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the steps she is taking to ensure that the aid to hill farmers encourages the adoption of environmentally beneficial farming practices. (AQW 1330/00)

Ms Rodgers: The less favoured area compensatory allowance (LFACA) scheme forms an integral part of the overall package of measures within the 2000-06 rural development regulation plan designed to support and maintain traditional agriculture in disadvantaged areas which, because of their location, climate and topography, would otherwise be vulnerable to economic decline and depopulation.

An important eligibility condition for receipt of this support is the requirement for the application of good farming practice compatible with the need to safeguard the environment and maintain the countryside, in particular by sustainable farming.

Under the code of good farming practice prepared by the Department farmers are required to observe statutory environmental provisions for example in relation to pollution and the use of pesticides. They must also meet specified verifiable standards, which aim to prevent problems such as overgrazing. Further guidance and training will be made available to farmers so that they understand their obligations fully.

Inspections will be carried out by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Environment and Heritage Service to ensure compliance with good farming practice.

Agrimonetary Compensation

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her policy on agrimonetary compensation for livestock farmers. (AQW 1331/00)

Ms Rodgers: I favour the payment of all available agrimonetary compensation to livestock farmers and other farmers. This represents one of the few ways in which we can channel money directly into the hands of producers without breaching the very strict EU state aid rules. However, as there is no regional discretion on the payment of agrimonetary compensation, agreement has to be reached at UK level on this issue. Therefore, on 11 January 2001, I wrote to UK Agriculture Minister, Nick Brown about the latest tranches of compensation that have become available to the beef, sheep and dairy

sectors urging him to approach Treasury to obtain its agreement to draw down these funds. I also intend to raise this issue with Mr Brown at the regular meetings of UK Agriculture Ministers.

Organic Production

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what assistance is provided for farmers seeking to convert to organic production.
(AQW 1332/00)

Ms Rodgers: You will recall that, in my response to your previous queries on organic farming (AQW No 703/00 and AQW No 1219/00), I advised you on the financial assistance provided over a period of five years to producers converting to organic production. Sufficient finance has been made available under the Northern Ireland rural development plan for the organic farming scheme to grow from its present level of 20 producers farming just over 1,000 hectares to 1000 farmers with 30,000 hectares under agreement by 2006.

My Department also offers prospective organic producers a package of advisory assistance. This includes business management information and advice; education and training; conversion planning assistance; marketing information and advice; and organic farming scheme information and advice.

Interested producers are encouraged to participate in short courses. Greenmount College runs a free two-day course entitled "Introduction to Organic production", the second day of which incorporates a visit to an organic farm. Greenmount also facilitates organic beef and sheep, dairy, and horticulture producer development groups. Short courses, farm walks and study tours are held throughout the year on a range of topics of relevance to organic and prospective organic, producers.

Broadleaved Tree Cover

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what percentage of forests under her Department's control consists of broadleaved tree species and outline what steps she is taking to increase the broadleaved tree cover in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 1369/00)

Ms Rodgers: Approximately 8% of the total planted area controlled by my Department consists of broadleaved tree species. No individual forest consists exclusively of broadleaved tree species.

The UK forestry standard sets out the Government's approach for the sustainable management of woodlands. At least 5% of the area of any new wood is required to contain broadleaved trees and shrubs.

Incentives for farmers and other landowners to create broadleaf woodland are provided by the woodland grant

scheme (WGS) establishment grant and the farm woodland premium scheme (FWPS) annual payments. Higher rates of grant are paid for establishment of broadleaf species under the WGS. In addition, woodlands established with more than 50% broadleaves attract FWPS annual payments over a longer period compared with woodland with less than 50% broadleaf species.

The success of the schemes is shown by planting in the five years prior to 31 March 2000, which achieved planting of 1,622 hectares of broadleaved woodland. This is 47% of the total private woodland established.

In addition, forests directly managed by my Department's Forest Service were independently certified as complying with the voluntary UK woodland assurance standard. This standard requires plans to be in place to meet a target of at least 5% native broadleaves in the next rotation following felling and replanting. This action sets a good example for private woodland owners to follow.

Beef National Envelope

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her decision on the allocation of the beef national envelope for 2001 and if she will make a statement.
(AQO 594/00)

Ms Rodgers: For 2001, the available funds for Northern Ireland increased from £2.6 million to £5.2 million. As there was general support for continuing with the beef heifer top-up – worth £2.6 million, the main issue for decision was how to allocate the additional funding. Ultimately the decision came down to a choice between directing the funds to finishers of beef heifers or to suckler producers. I concluded that the fairest course of action was to split the funds 40:60, with 40% going to beef heifers and 60% going to suckler producers. This will raise the top-up on beef heifers at slaughter from about £16 to about £22 per animal and will provide a top-up on suckler cow premium of about £5 per animal.

Farm Woodland

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of farmers who have been grant aided for the creation of farm woodland in each of the last three years and how many hectares have been planted.
(AQO 578/00)

Ms Rodgers: Forest Service statistics identify whether the type of land planted is agricultural or non-agricultural, rather than the occupation of the person carrying out the planting.

In the financial year 1997-98 there were 111 people who planted 419 hectares of agricultural land.

In the following financial year 1998-99 this increased to 147 people who planted a total of 562 hectares of agricultural land.

In financial year 1999-2000 this again increased to 158 people who planted a total of 601 hectares of agricultural land.

Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans for a fishing vessel decommissioning scheme. (AQO 583/00)

Ms Rodgers: The Northern Ireland Transitional Objective 1 Programme containing a number of proposals for assistance to the Northern Ireland fishing industry including a proposal for a fishing vessel decommissioning scheme is currently with the EC for approval. Until that approval has been forthcoming I am not in a position to make any announcement about a fishing vessel decommissioning scheme.

However, in anticipation of the Transitional Objective 1 Programme being approved within the next few weeks my Department is currently developing the details of the decommissioning scheme and is consulting with the fishing industry.

Equality: Targeting Social Need

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what systems she will put in place to ensure her Department fulfils its duties under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in respect of equality and targeting social need. (AQO 586/00)

Ms Rodgers: The Department's approach to its obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 are clearly spelt out in the Department's equality scheme, which was widely circulated in draft last year and is currently awaiting the approval of the Equality Commission.

I assure the Member that I am fully committed to ensuring that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development fulfils all of its responsibilities in giving due regard to the promotion of equality of opportunity and in promoting good relations.

Targeting social need is not covered by section 75, and I would refer the Member to the answer I gave earlier today to the question from Mr Armstrong.

Rural Development Plan

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the Depart-

ment's rural development programme, and if she will make a statement. (AQO 574/00)

Ms Rodgers: My Department has recognised the need to pay close attention to the broader development of rural areas since 1991, when the rural development programme was first established. Rural development has been an important and growing part of the Department's work since then. Over the past decade the programme has engaged rural communities in helping to improve the economic, environmental and social opportunities available to them in disadvantaged rural areas. I have visited many rural communities and rural development projects over the past year and I have been able to see at first hand the hard work and commitment of the communities involved and the innovative work that has been undertaken in many remote localities. The partnerships which have developed between rural people and statutory interests under the guidance of my rural development division officials have made major progress in raising the profile of the value of rural society to us all.

It is clear that rural development is going to remain an important issue. The Executive's draft Programme for Government recognises the value of rural society and contains a specific commitment to rural proofing of appropriate policies.

Beef Special Premium

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the steps she is taking to protect small producers through the structure of the beef special premium. (AQO 572/00)

Ms Rodgers: The removal of the 90-head limit on claims for beef special premium was agreed collectively by myself and my fellow agriculture Ministers and will apply from the 2001 scheme year. There had been considerable demand for the removal of the limit for some time, but there had also been concern about the possible adverse effects on small producers if the removal of the limit lead to the national ceiling being exceeded, with consequent scaling back of producers' claims. The UK Agriculture Ministers also decided therefore to protect the incomes of smaller-scale producers by exempting those claiming on up to 30 animals per year from any scale-back if the national ceiling is exceeded. This approach had the support of the Assembly's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee.

Milk Quota

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail when the additional milk quota will be allocated to individual farmers in Northern Ireland. (AQO 580/00)

Ms Rodgers: Last week, letters were issued to all Northern Ireland milk quota holders registered at 1 April 1999 to advise them on a provisional basis if they are likely to be eligible for an allocation in accordance with my decision. Those who are considered eligible have been advised of the likely award in 2000-01.

An amendment to the dairy produce quota regulations is required to provide for the allocation. This should occur next month when a further letter will issue to all producers confirming the position regarding awards.

Access to the Countryside

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what discussions she has had with other Ministers relating to access to the countryside. (AQO 579/00)

Ms Rodgers: This matter is not one for which my Department has principal responsibility. The Department of the Environment is the lead Department in respect of this issue and I understand that they are continuing to consider how it may best be addressed.

I have not been involved in any discussions of this topic since the establishment of the Northern Ireland Executive. However, my officials have participated in a number of meetings at official level between representatives of the Department of the Environment, the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, the Health Promotion Agency and local authorities.

Environmental Schemes for Farmers

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans to assist farmers in environmental schemes, particularly the handling of slurry and planting shelter belts to reduce the impact of agricultural buildings. (AQO 569/00)

Ms Rodgers: My Department assists farmers in environmental schemes, such as the environmentally sensitive areas (ESA) scheme, which has operated for 10 years; the organic farming scheme (OFS); and the countryside management scheme (CMS). The EU Commission has recently approved continuation of these schemes under the Northern Ireland rural development plan, which envisages total agri-environment expenditure of £88 million by 2006.

Subject to our obtaining EU state aid approval, we propose to spend £500,000 on the introduction of a pilot farm waste management scheme. This scheme will be aimed at minimising farm source pollution, which is contributing to water quality problems.

This pilot exercise will give capital assistance towards repair projects to slurry tanks and silage holding facilities, which are considered as being able to deliver a

beneficial reduction in the risk of effluent escaping into watercourses.

My Department also provides technical advice to farmers in relation to environmental issues. This includes how to reduce the impact of agricultural buildings on the landscape. This is contained in a booklet published by my Department and entitled 'Farm Buildings in the Countryside'.

EU Fisheries Council

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to report on the outcome of the December EU Fisheries Council meeting and if she will make a statement. (AQO 595/00)

Ms Rodgers: I was pleased with the success in obtaining increases in the Commission proposals for herring (28%), haddock (58%) and plaice (33%). However, it was disappointing that the Commission went against advice and reduced the nephrops total allowable catch (10%). Overall we can claim some success against our objectives but I accept that the industry faces a difficult year and I will be doing all that I can to help.

Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the proposed timetable for the re-opening of the enhancement element of the environmentally sensitive areas scheme and if she will make a statement. (AQO 576/00)

Ms Rodgers: I hope to re-open the capital enhancement (E-Plan) element of the ESA scheme during the 2001-02 financial year, but it is difficult to put a precise date on when this will be possible. It will depend on the progress of new ESA scheme legislation, following the EU Commission approval of the Northern Ireland rural development plan, and on when all existing commitments have been processed and paid.

You will be aware that the E-Plan element of the ESA scheme was withdrawn from 1 April 1999. This followed a significant and unanticipated upsurge in the demand for capital works late in 1998-99, which created a demand greatly in excess of available resources.

An additional £1.9 million was secured to meet backlogged claims. The backlog has been cleared and all remaining claims should be paid within the next few months.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Theatres

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the steps he is taking to support theatres.

(AQW 1148/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The Arts Council of Northern Ireland currently provides annual revenue funding of almost £1.2 million for theatres across Northern Ireland:

Theatre	Funding 2000-01
Riverside, Coleraine	£51,000
Ardhowen, Enniskillen	£51,000
Grand Opera House, Belfast	£555,000
Lyric Players', Belfast	£475,000
Playhouse, Londonderry	£56,000
Rialto, Londonderry	£9,000
Total	1,197,000

The advent of the National Lottery has enabled the Arts Council to make a substantial commitment to arts venues and theatres right across Northern Ireland. Over the last year new theatres and arts venues have opened in Cookstown (£1.125 million) and Armagh (£3.7 million). Further funding has been committed by the Arts Council Lottery to the verbal arts centre in Londonderry (£1.2 million, official opening in March), Lisburn (£1.302 million), the Great Hall for the Down Lisburn Trust (£189,000), Portadown (£912,000), Ballymena (£2 million), Derry City (£2.6 million) and Omagh (£4 million). Most of the building projects will be completed by the end of the year.

The Arts Council has achieved its objective of providing, by 2001, a dedicated arts facility within a 20-mile radius of every person in Northern Ireland and is committed to the creation of a society where theatres and arts centres become every community's natural focus.

Sport and the Arts

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the steps he is taking to encourage sport and the arts in areas of high unemployment.

(AQW 1150/00)

Mr McGimpsey: One of the strategic goals in the corporate strategy for my Department is to increase participation in culture, arts and leisure through enhancing access to, and the quality of, facilities and services. This includes widening access and extending participation in all areas of the work of the Department. Sport and the arts are two important areas.

These objectives can be realised in part through the New TSN programme. To assist the Department and its partners meet its obligations under this programme, research has been commissioned to identify indicators of social disadvantage and barriers to participation. The initial piece of research is due to be completed on 31 March. Thereafter, my Department will consider what action needs to be taken in conjunction with its key partners to deliver services to those most in need. We will be working with the Sports Council and the Arts Council, the bodies with responsibility for the development of sport and the arts, to encourage increased participation by those people living in socially deprived areas.

I hope you find this helpful.

Improvement of Arts Education

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the contribution he is making to the improvement of arts education.

(AQW 1186/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The report 'Unlocking Creativity' was published by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on 8 November 2000 with the support of the Department of the Environment, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Industry and the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment. Over 5,000 copies have been distributed for consultation, which runs until 28 February. The report is intended to stimulate broad discussion and facilitate the formulation of an interdepartmental action plan. A briefing session for the Assembly Committees of the four Departments will be held at Parliament Buildings on 8 February.

'Unlocking Creativity' recognises explicitly the importance of harnessing creativity as a cross-cutting issue that can impact positively not only on the cultural sector, but also in the areas of formal and informal education, and social and economic development. It highlights the requirement for the education system to respond to the business community's needs for creative abilities in developing teamwork, social skills and powers of communication.

The five education and library boards, along with district councils and the Arts Council, are working with my Department in developing a global strategic approach specifically for the needs of the arts in education. The Arts Council and the five boards will provide a detailed response to 'Unlocking Creativity' before the end of February.

My Department is also seeking to ensure that the next round of funding from the new opportunities fund will include provision for sport and the arts in schools.

Administrative Data Sets

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the administrative data sets held by the

Department and its agencies and detail whether these data sets provide qualitative data at enumeration district, electoral ward level, by district council area or by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1241/00)

Mr McGimpsey: I can confirm that my Department, its agencies and non-departmental public bodies hold the following administrative data sets:-

Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Applications and Awards Database

National Lottery Applications and Awards Database

Artslink (Arts Listing magazine) Mailing List

Armagh Observatory and Planetarium

Staff, Customer and Supplier Details

List of Schools

Libraries

Library Membership Information

Ordinance Survey of Northern Ireland - Map data sets

County Boroughs (Belfast and Londonderry)

Parliamentary Constituencies 1983 and 1995

Local Government Districts 1984 and 1993

Wards 1984 and 1993

Enumeration District

Public Records Office of Northern Ireland

Register of Visitors to PRONI

Sports Council for Northern Ireland

General Admin Data Sets

Creative & Expressive Officers from Boards

Coach Educators

Community Relations Officers

Chief Executives - District Council

Chief Executives – Education & Library Boards

Leisure Centre Managers

Local Sports Advisory Committees

Outdoor Education Centres

Recreation Officers

Recreation Officers – Councils

Sports Development Officers

Media

Libraries

Schools

Governing Body Secretaries

Sports Council Applications and Awards

Sports Council National Lottery Applications and Awards

SPECIFIC SPORTS DEVELOPMENT DATA SETS

Type	Purpose
Community Sports Forum Members	Service meetings, contacts
Equity Review Group	Service meetings, contacts
Equity Facilitators (employed 1999)	Facilitators who run courses
Equity Facilitators (employed 2000)	Facilitators who run courses
Equity attendees	Equity training for all years
Education Forum Member	Service meetings, contacts
Interboard PE Panel Member	Service meetings, contacts
Kids First (May 1999)	List who attended training
Kids First (Oct 1998)	List who attended training
Pilot Course – April	List who attended Kids First Pilot Course
Sportsmark Awards School - 3 years	List of schools who have been awarded Sportsmark for years 1998-2000
Sportsmark Award 1997	List of individual awarded schools
Sportsmark Award 1998	List of individual awarded schools
Sportsmark Award 1999	List of individual awarded schools
Sportsmark Review Committee	Service meetings etc
Safe Sports Grounds	List of Clubs who have been awarded for year 2000/01

As these lists all hold postcodes they may be capable of analysis by enumeration district, electoral ward level, by district council area or by parliamentary constituency.

All Northern Ireland Civil Service departments maintain a range of records on their staff for the purposes of carrying out their functions as employers. Many of the records for individual members of staff are held on computerised systems managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel on behalf of Departments and their respective agencies. These records include personnel, payroll and training records, applicant records for recruitment competitions and superannuation records for retired civil servants. Such records are not managed in a way that routinely provides data sets by enumeration district, electoral ward, district council or parliamentary constituency.

Commemoration of the Battle of Cráeb Tulcha (Crew Hill)

Dr Adamson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any plans to celebrate the millennium of the first great battle of Cráeb Tulcha (Crew Hill) in 2004 and if he will make a statement. (AQO 593/00)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has no plans to celebrate the battle of Cráeb Tulcha in which the Ui Neills from mid-Ulster defeated the Ulaid, the people of the eastern part of modern Ulster. The battle was fought in 1004 at Crew Hill near Glenavy, Co Antrim and was a disastrous defeat for the Ulaid. While this obviously is of some historical significance, there is no particular reason

for celebrating or commemorating the event and my Department has no plans to do so. However, I understand that Lisburn Museum may be giving consideration to commemorating the event in its programme for 2003-04.

Provision of the Internet in Public Libraries

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his policy on the provision of Internet access in public libraries and if he will make a statement.
(AQO 581/00)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department's vision as set out in our corporate strategy is to achieve a confident, creative, informed and prosperous community. In this modern information age, one way to achieve this is to ensure that information is available to as many people as possible through the Internet. Our public libraries are ideally placed as information centres and many are already providing Internet access to enable the public to call in and become familiar with IT at their own pace. My Department is committed to maximising the benefits from the use of new technology including the connection of all public libraries to the Internet through projects such as the electronic libraries project.

Carp Fishing

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he is aware of the concerns throughout the angling community about the introduction of carp fishing and if he will make a statement.
(AQO 592/00)

Mr McGimpsey: I decided to allow the development of carp fisheries in Northern Ireland to cater for a growing demand from local anglers and to expand the variety of fishing available to tourist anglers. I am aware that there are some concerns among the angling community about the potential impact the introduction of this non-native species will have on indigenous fish stocks. To safeguard native fish stocks a number of conditions will apply. Carp will only be permitted into lakes that have no, or very low, fishery value and any outlets to other loughs or rivers will have to be adequately screened to prevent escapes; the carp introduced will have to be certified as being from a disease free stock and a licence for each site will be required from the Department of the Environment under the provisions of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

EDUCATION

Children with Disabilities

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education to detail; (a) what funding will be allocated to provide for children with disabilities in mainstream education; (b) what are the structures to be used, and; (c) who will be the working partners in the scheme. (AQW 985/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Special education legislation over the last 15 years has provided that wherever possible children with special educational needs should be educated in mainstream schools. However, some parents prefer their children to attend special schools and there are some children, especially those with the more severe disabilities, whose special educational needs are best met in special schools. I have no plans at present to change the current arrangements, which involve parents, boards and education and health professionals in the assessment and state-menting process, including making the appropriate placement for the child.

The legal presumption of education in mainstream has already generated a significant shift in the percentage of children with special educational needs being educated in mainstream schools over the last 10 years: from 31% in 1990 to 49% in 1999. It is anticipated that this trend will continue. Education and library board support has taken the form of additional peripatetic, special education unit and special school outreach teachers, classroom assistants, to provide special equipment and to make alterations to schools to improve physical access. It is not possible to identify separately the total amount of money used to support such children in mainstream education because of the financial arrangements for recording recurrent school expenditure.

Additionally, my Department has provided funding to support the introduction of the special educational needs code of practice: the latest recurrent allocations to boards were £1.5 million in 1999-2000 and £2 million in 2000-01. Additionally, £0.5 million capital expenditure was allocated in 1999-2000 to make mainstream schools more accessible to children with special educational needs and a further £1.5 million in 2000-01.

Schools Intake Criteria

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to his oral answer on 27 November 2000, to list the schools where the pupil intake was fewer than twelve and detail the intake for each school.
(AQW 1142/00)

Mr M McGuinness: As I indicated in the Assembly on 27 November, there are 400 rural primary schools where the total school enrolment is less than the enrolment

number required for those Irish-medium and integrated schools to which the new viability criteria would apply. As regards annual intakes rather than total enrolments, those schools with pupil intakes of less than 12, as at September 2000, are attached.

School Name	Y1 Intake
Aghadrumsee Primary School	9
Aghavilly Primary School	10
All Saints Primary School Banbridge	4
All Saints Primary School Omagh	10
Altayeskey Primary School	6
Altishane Primary School	6
Ampertaine Primary School	11
Anamar Primary School	7
Annsborough Primary School	3
Antiville Primary School	6
Ardmore Primary School	4
Ardstraw Primary School	9
Aughamullan Primary School	8
Augher Central Primary School	3
Aughnacloy Primary School	10
Ballee Primary School	9
Ballougry Primary School	9
Ballycloughan Primary School	8
Ballygawley Primary School	7
Ballyhackett Primary School	8
Ballykeigle Primary School	6
Ballylifford Primary School	6
Ballymena Academy Prep Department	0
Ballypriormore Primary School	5
Ballyrock Primary School	4
Ballytober Primary School	4
Ballytrea Primary School	11
Balnamore Primary School	9
Barnish Primary School	11
Bellaghy Primary School	6
Bellarena Primary School	5
Belleek (2) Primary School	2
Benburb Primary School	3
Bessbrook Primary School	9
Birches Primary School	7
Blackmountain Primary School	9
Bloomfield Collegiate Prep Department	7
Brackalislea Primary School	4
Braid Primary School	2
Bridgehill Primary School	7
Brookeborough Primary School	6
Bunscoil An Iuir	11

School Name	Y1 Intake
Burnfoot Primary School	5
Cabin Hill School	7
Carhill Integrated Primary School	5
Carlane Primary School	9
Carnalbanagh Primary School	8
Carnlough Primary School	4
Carntall Primary School	11
Carr Primary School	9
Castlecaulfield (No 2) Primary School	10
Castlewellan Primary School	8
Cavanacaw Primary School	1
Charley Memorial Primary School	0
Churchill Primary School	9
Churchtown Primary School	4
Clay Primary School	6
Clintyclay Primary School	5
Clogher Regional Primary School	5
Clontifleece Primary School	9
Clough Primary School	9
Collone Primary School	6
Conlig Primary School	3
Cornagague Primary School	6
Corranny Primary School	11
Creavery Primary School	7
Creggan Primary School	10
Crievagh Primary School	3
Crossgar Primary School	10
Crossroads Primary School	8
Culcrow Primary School	4
Cullycapple Primary School	8
Culmore Primary School	10
Culnady Primary School	9
Darragh Cross Primary School	9
Dechomet Primary School	3
Denamona Primary School	9
Derriaghy Primary School	10
Derryboy Primary School	5
Derrygonnelly Primary School	10
Derryhale Primary School	10
Derrylatinee Primary School	9
Dervaghroy Primary School	5
Desertmartin Primary School	7
Doagh Primary School	10
Donaghey Primary School	9
Donaghmore Primary School	8
Donemana Primary School	11
Downshire Primary School	5

School Name	Y1 Intake
Dromore Primary School	10
Drumaghlin Primary School	9
Drumroad Primary School	3
Drumbo Primary School	3
Drumduff Primary School	5
Drumhillery Primary School	10
Drumlegagh Primary School	10
Drumlisk Primary School	10
Drumnabey Primary School	11
Drumsallen Primary School	9
Duneane Primary School	3
Dungiven Primary School	3
Dunmullan Primary School	6
Dunseverick Primary School	9
Earl of Erne Primary School	1
Eden Primary School	11
Eglisk Primary School	4
Envagh Primary School	1
Erganagh Primary School	7
Evish Primary School	7
Foyle & Londonderry College Prep Department	0
Garryduff Primary School	8
Gillygooley Primary School	8
Glenagorland Primary School	3
Glenann Primary School	6
Glenarm Primary School	3
Glenlola Collegiate Prep Department	9
Glynn Primary School	8
Gorran Primary School	6
Gortnagarn Primary School	6
Gortnaghey Primary School	6
Granville Primary School	6
Groarty Primary School	5
Groomsport Primary School	3
Guinness Primary School	5
Harryville Primary School	11
Hillhall Primary School	9
Hunterhouse College Prep Department	4
Hutton Primary School	9
Innismagh Primary School	4
Keady Primary School	3
Kilbroney Primary School	9
Killowen Primary School	8
Killyhommon Primary School	10
Killylea Primary School	1
Killyman Primary School	9
Kilross Primary School	7

School Name	Y1 Intake
Kilskeery Primary School	4
Kingsmills Primary School	5
Kirkinriola Primary School	8
Knockahollet Primary School	9
Knocknagin Primary School	8
Knocknagor Primary School	3
Lack Primary School	11
Laghey Primary School	3
Lambeg Primary School	4
Landhead Primary School	9
Langfield Primary School	8
Largy Primary School	8
Lisferty Primary School	10
Lisnadill Primary School	7
Lisnamurrican Primary School	3
Listress Primary School	2
Longstone Primary School	8
Loughash Primary School	2
Loughbrickland Primary School	10
Loughries Primary School	10
Lourdes Primary School	6
Lurgan College Prep Department	2
Macosquin Primary School	9
Maghera Primary School	11
Magilligan Primary School	4
Maydown & Strathfoyle Primary School	10
Maze Primary School	10
Millquarter Primary School	8
Milltown Primary School	5
Minterburn Primary School	5
Mosside Primary School	2
Moy Regional Primary School	8
Mullabuo Primary School	11
Mullaghduh Primary School	2
Newmills Primary School	10
Newport Primary School	8
Newtownbutler (2) Primary School	4
Newtownhamilton Primary School	10
Newtownstewart Model Primary School	9
O'Neill Memorial Primary School	4
Our Lady's Primary School	1
Parkgate Primary School	10
Portadown College Prep Department	4
Portaferry Integrated Primary School	10
Presentation Primary School	8
Queen Elizabeth II (Pomeroy) Primary School	3
Queen Elizabeth II Primary School Trillick	4

School Name	Y1 Intake
Rasharkin Primary School	9
Richmount Primary School	8
Roan Primary School	8
Roscavey Primary School	4
Royal School Prep Department	6
Sandville Primary School	5
Scarva Primary School	1
Shanmullagh Primary School	0
Sistrakeel Primary School	6
Springfield Primary School	7
St Anne's Primary School Ballymena	10
St Anne's Primary School Donaghadee	5
St Anthony's Primary School	0
St Brigid's Primary School Drumilly	7
St Brigid's Primary School Augher	8
St Brigid's Primary School Cloughmills	10
St Brigid's Primary School Gortin	6
St Brigid's Primary School Mountfield	10
St Brigid's Primary School Tirkane	10
St Caireall's Primary School	11
St Ciaran's Primary School	11
St Colman's (Bann) Primary School	10
St Colman's Primary School Craigavon	8
St Colman's Primary School Dromore	8
St Colmcille's Primary School	7
St Columba's Primary School	4
St Columb's Primary School (Cullion)	9
St Davog's Scraghey Primary School	5
St Eoghan's Primary School	9
St Eugene's Primary School Lisnaskea	11
St Eugene's Primary School Omagh	1
St Eugene's Primary School Strabane	6
St James' Primary School Craigavon	3
St James' Primary School Drumatee	3
St John's English(1) Primary School	2
St John's Primary School Coalisland	7
St John's Primary School Hillsborough	7
St Johns Primary School Middletown	6
St John's Primary School Newry	8
St Joseph's (Brockaghboy) Primary School	6
St Joseph's Primary School Ahoghill	0
St Joseph's Primary School Caledon	4
St Joseph's Primary School Downpatrick	6
St Joseph's Primary School Fintona	2
St Joseph's Primary School Glenmornan	7
St Joseph's Primary School Killough	7
St Joseph's Primary School Lisnaskea	11

School Name	Y1 Intake
St Joseph's Primary School Poyntzpass	8
St Joseph's Primary School Strangford	11
St Joseph's Primary School Tyrella Road, Downpatrick	10
St Laurence O'Toole's Primary School	5
St Macartan's Primary School	6
St Malachy's Primary School Glencull	8
St Malachy's Primary School Magherafelt	8
St Malachy's Primary School Strangford	5
St Malachy's Primary School Whitecross	10
St Mary's Primary School Aghadowey	3
St Mary's Primary School Ardglass	9
St Mary's Primary School Aughnacloy	6
St Mary's Primary School Ballycastle	1
St Mary's Primary School Ballygowan	3
St Mary's Primary School Ballymena	10
St Mary's Primary School Belfast	11
St Mary's Primary School Bellanaleck	7
St Mary's Primary School Brookeborough	9
St Mary's Primary School Comber	3
St Mary's Primary School Derrylester	8
St Mary's Primary School Derrylin	10
St Mary's Primary School Fivemiletown	7
St Mary's Primary School Glenravel	10
St Mary's Primary School Laught	2
St Mary's Primary School Lurgan	8
St Mary's Primary School Rathfriland	7
St Mary's Primary School Saintfield	7
St Matthew's Primary School Dungannon	5
St Matthew's Primary School Magheramayo	1
St Michael's Primary School Mowhan	10
St Michael's Primary School Newtownhamilton	5
St Naile's Primary School	10
St Olcan's Primary School	9
St Oliver Plunkett Primary School	11
St Oliver's Primary School Carrickrovaddy	10
St Patrick's Primary School Augher	9
St Patrick's Primary School Aughercloney	3
St Patrick's Primary School Carrickmore	6
St Patrick's Primary School Castlewellsan	5
St Patrick's Primary School Dunamanagh	4
St Patrick's Primary School Magheralin	10
St Patrick's Primary School Moneymore	11
St Patrick's Primary School Portaferry	9
St Patrick's Primary School Rathfriland	8
St Patrick's Primary School Seskinore	7
St Paul's Primary School	7
St Peter's & St Paul's Primary School	9

School Name	Y1 Intake
St Teresa's Primary School	7
St Trea's Primary School	8
Stewartstown Primary School	4
Stragowna Primary School	1
Straidbilly Primary School	6
Tamnamore Primary School	7
Tattygar Primary School	7
Taughmonagh Primary School	9
The Drelincourt Infants School	11
Tildarg Primary School	11
Tir-Na-Nog Primary School	4
Toberlane Primary School	4
Tobermore Primary School	9
Trillick Primary School	3
Tullymacarette Primary School	5
Tullyroan Primary School	7
Tullywhisker Primary School	0
Tummery Primary School	7
Upper Ballyboley Primary School	5
Walker Memorial Primary School	6

Children with Special Needs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to confirm that the special needs for children programme will be managed and funded from within his Departmental budget. (AQW 1177/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The level of funding for special education is determined by the Education and Library Boards as part of their annual decisions about the allocation of their block grant. Mainstream school budgets allocated under the LMS system contain an additional element to cater for the needs of any non-statemented pupils with special educational needs. The costs associated with statemented children in mainstream schools are not separately identified. Special schools have partially delegated budgets, with all pupil-related costs being retained centrally by the boards.

To assist with the introduction of the special education provisions of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 which came into force in September 1997 and the introduction of the code of practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs in September 1998 additional ear-marked funding of £3.7 million was made available in 1998-99 — the first year of implementation of the code — and £7 million in each of the following years to provide support for schools and boards.

Annual School Leavers Survey

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Education to detail the numbers of students from secondary and grammar schools who are moving into each of; (a) further and higher education colleges; (b) universities; (c) training schemes and (d) unemployment. (AQW 1189/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Since the source of the information contained in this reply is the annual school leavers survey, which is undertaken on behalf of the Department of Education, I have been asked to respond.

The most recent year for which the requested information is available is 1998/99.

The figures are as follows:

	Secondary	Grammar	Total
a. Further and Higher Education Colleges	5,391	2,515	7,906
b. Institutions of Higher Education	1,188	6,430	7,618
c. Training Schemes	5,164	230	5,394
d. Unemployment	890	122	1,012

Cavanacaw Primary School

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to investigate development proposal No 142 in the Western Education and Library Board area in relation to violation of articles 9 and 14 of the Human Rights Act 1998 and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1202/00)

Mr M McGuinness: This development proposal relates to the proposed closure of Cavanacaw Primary School and I am satisfied that the proposal does not contravene the provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998.

Enrolment Figures

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Education to detail the enrolment figures at schools in the Lagan Valley constituency in each of the last five years. (AQW 1206/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information from the school census conducted in October each year is:

NURSERY SCHOOLS

	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01
Barbour Pavilion Nursery School	74	75	76	78	78
Pond Park Nursery School	100	100	101	104	104
Holy Trinity Nursery School	52	52	52	53	53

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01
Anahilt Primary School	273	266	276	277	285
Ballymacash Primary School	280	296	308	305	309
Ballymacrickett Primary School	200	219	232	224	245
Ballymacward Primary School	112	114	95	101	102
Bridge Integrated Primary School	311	337	370	384	394
Christ the Redeemer Primary School*	0	0	0	36	157
Derriaghy Primary School	95	86	79	82	76
Dromara Primary School	124	121	120	130	126
Dromore Central Primary School	511	536	545	568	595
Drumbo Primary School	68	58	42	36	30
Fair Hill Primary School**	0	152	161	163	167
Forthill Primary School	239	251	248	243	221
Friends' School Preparatory Department	190	198	187	181	169
Harmony Hill Primary School	712	710	707	698	668
Hilden Integrated Primary School	62	57	73	66	78
Hillhall Primary School	48	52	51	53	56
Hillsborough Primary School	353	348	356	368	378
Killowen Primary School	482	475	471	447	453
Knockmore Primary School	188	179	185	173	171
Lambeg Primary School	66	63	56	50	43
Lower Ballinderry Primary School	159	165	175	166	171
Maghaberry Primary School	204	204	212	216	214
Moirra Primary School	288	291	309	319	326
Newport Primary School	95	84	80	78	78
Oakwood Integrated Primary School***	0	0	0	113	135
Old Warren Primary School	173	150	159	169	163
Pond Park Primary School	595	588	600	594	601
Riverdale Primary School****	0	0	0	0	167
St Aloysius Primary School	325	319	302	328	329
St Colman's Primary School (Moirra)	76	70	61	53	45
St Colman's Primary School (Lisburn)	435	419	426	420	414
St Colman's Primary School (Dromore)	94	91	92	94	96
St Joseph's Primary School	265	251	234	205	184
St Michael's Primary School (Finnis)	77	75	72	71	71
Tullymacarette Primary School	68	72	62	60	47
Wallace High School Preparatory Department	196	195	198	192	190

* Christ the Redeemer Primary School opened 1.9.1999

** Fair Hill Primary School opened on 1.9.1997

*** Oakwood Integrated Primary School opened 1.9.1999

**** Riverdale Primary School opened on 28.2.2000

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01
Lisnagarvey High School	309	291	318	346	337
Dunmurry High School	424	410	365	326	278
Laurelhill Community College	946	927	927	952	958
St Patrick's High School	527	558	548	561	529
Forthill College*	689	683	755	813	843
Dromore High School	787	784	793	777	776

GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01
Friends' School	942	959	968	947	954
Wallace High School	1149	1160	1158	1138	1155

* Forthill College changed status from Controlled to Controlled Integrated on 1.9.1998

Full-Time Education

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Education to detail; (a) the participation rates in full-time education (over sixteen years of age) for West Belfast and; (b) the level of qualifications received by pupils in West Belfast and the recorded destination of school leavers from West Belfast in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1217/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Since the majority of the information contained in this reply is taken from the annual school leavers survey, which is undertaken on behalf of the Department of Education, I have been asked to respond.

Information in relation to further education students has been provided by the Department for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment.

Information for 2000-01 is not yet available. For those with West Belfast postcodes the participation rate of 16 year olds and 17 year olds in full-time education (excluding special and independent schools) was 52% in 1999/2000. Participation rates for the previous two years are not available.

Information for 1999/2000 is not yet available. The figures for the previous three years (excluding special and independent schools) are as follows for pupils with West Belfast postcodes:

HIGHEST QUALIFICATION OF SCHOOL LEAVERS

	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99
A Levels			
3 or more ⁽¹⁾	220	229	199
2 ⁽¹⁾	97	144	112
1	54	32	39
GCSEs			
5+ A*-C ⁽²⁾	254	234	249
1-4 A*-C ⁽²⁾	372	356	368
Other Grades (1+D-G) ⁽³⁾	358	344	346
No GCSEs	173	158	151
Total	1528	1497	1464

Notes¹ Includes GNVQ Advanced.² Includes GNVQ Intermediate.³ Includes GNVQ Foundation.**DESTINATION OF SCHOOL LEAVERS**

	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99
Institutions of Higher Education	235	250	217
Institutions of Further Education	386	359	324
Employment	360	301	334
Unemployment	72	63	88
Training	422	483	472
Unknown Destinations	53	41	29
Total	1528	1497	1464

School Transport

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline his current policy in relation to school transport. (AQW 1228/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Assistance with home to school transport is provided where it is considered necessary to facilitate the attendance of pupils at grant-aided schools.

The arrangements, approved by my Department, enable education and library boards to provide transport assistance where a pupil is unable to gain a place in a suitable school within statutory walking distance of his or her home. Statutory walking distance is two miles for primary school pupils and three miles for others, measured by the nearest available route.

The definition of suitable school relates to the established categories of controlled, catholic maintained, integrated and Irish-medium and, in the grammar sector, denominational and non-denominational schools. Transport assistance will be provided to pupils attending a school outside statutory walking distance in the chosen category provided there are no similar schools within statutory walking distance to which the pupil could have been admitted.

Children's Safety

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps he is taking in conjunction with the Department of the Environment to ensure the safety of children on their journeys to and from school. (AQW 1229/00)

Mr M McGuinness: School transport services are provided by the education and library boards in accordance with arrangements approved by my Department, which provide that pupils should be able to travel in safety and reasonable comfort. My Department is guided by the Department of the Environment in relation to the number of pupils that can be safely transported on buses and will consider carefully any recommendations that the Environment Committee makes following its inquiry into school transport.

Road safety education in schools is essential in ensuring the safety of children when travelling and schools are encouraged to adopt and implement a formal road safety policy, to appoint a road safety co-ordinator and to teach road safety on a regular basis, preferably as part of the curriculum. My Department is also participating in a school travel group, established by the Department for Regional Development, which will examine issues relating to improved road safety and personal safety, the development of wider travel choice opportunities through improved planning of transport (including safe walking and cycling routes) and encouragement of safe and efficient travel choices.

School Transportation Systems

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education if he has appraised the school transportation systems in the United States, Canada and Australia and if he will consider introducing similar systems in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1230/00)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department is aware of the school transportation systems, which operate in the United States, Canada and Australia.

It would be premature to initiate a major review of school transport policy here, before decisions have been taken on the structure of post-primary education and before the Assembly Environment Committee has reported on its inquiry into school transport.

Safety features are continually re-assessed, however, on the basis of good practice elsewhere and Education and Library Boards, for example, already fit energy absorbing seats to all new board vehicles in excess of 20 passengers seats in accordance with United Nations E.C.80 crash safety specifications.

Further research is also being undertaken by the Department of the Environment, in collaboration with my Department, into school transport safety standards elsewhere.

Sex Education

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to outline when guidance for primary and post primary schools on sex education will be introduced following the consultation process two years ago and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1316/00)

Mr M McGuinness: In the Written Answers booklet for 1 December 2000 I indicated that guidance from the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment on teaching relationships and sexuality education, and a departmental circular for schools, are being finalised but will be subject to equality impact assessment before issue. It is planned that both will be issued in the spring.

Sex Education

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of primary and post-primary schools that are currently providing a programme of sex education and outline what guidance they have received. (AQW 1317/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The Department does not have information on the number of schools providing specific sex education programmes. However, elements of sex education are included within the statutory programme of study for science and would also be covered within the compulsory health education cross-curricular theme. Guidance on sex education is contained in a circular, number 1987/45, issued by the Department.

Sex Education

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to confirm that no guidance on sex education will be made available to schools until after the completion of the current curriculum review by the Council for the Curriculum Examination and Assessment. (AQW 1319/00)

Mr M McGuinness: As I indicated in the in the Written Answers Booklet for 1 December 2000, guidance from the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment on teaching Relationships and Sexuality Education and a Departmental Circular for schools are being finalised, but will also be subject to equality impact assessment before issue. It is planned that both will be issued in the spring.

Sixth Form Accommodation

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Education to detail for each grammar and secondary school with a sixth form, whether sixth form accommodation is; (a)

purpose built; (b) specially adapted; (c) not subject to special provision or; (d) located off the main campus.

(AQW 1357/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. The provision of sixth form accommodation is a matter for individual school authorities.

Mobile Classrooms

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to eliminate the use of mobile classrooms at schools under his control. (AQW 1361/00)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department is committed to improving accommodation across the schools estate and the replacement of mobile classrooms has a high priority under the Department's capital programme. The rate at which mobile classrooms can be replaced with permanent accommodation depends on the availability of funds.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Incentive Schemes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if; (a) he is aware of the incentives that are offered in GB to create jobs and prosperity; (b) he will detail the criteria used and; (c) outline how they differ from schemes in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1198/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I understand that the principal incentives which are offered in GB to create jobs and prosperity are the enterprise grant scheme, available in EU approved assisted areas in England for small and medium sized businesses, and the regional selective assistance scheme. The broad criteria used to assess applications are as follows.

Enterprise Grant	Regional Selective Assistance
Quality	Location
Need	Need
Viability	Eligible Investment
Job displacement	Create or Safeguard jobs
European Commission sectoral restrictions	Viability
	Quality
	National and Regional benefit

In Northern Ireland assistance to business is provided through the business start programme and selective

financial assistance. There is a high degree of comparability between the GB and Northern Ireland schemes since both are covered by EU regional aids guidelines.

Expenditure: IDB, LEDU and IRTU

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of expenditure by the Industrial Development Board (IDB), Local Economic Development Unit (LEDU) and Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) by electoral ward and parliamentary constituency during each of the last three years.

(AQW 1216/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The IDB's expenditure in each of the last three years on selective financial assistance—grants, loans and shares—and on property capital works is set out in the attached tables at annexes A and B. Similar analysis of trade international expenditure could only be provided at disproportionate costs. Data relating to IDB expenditure is not compiled on an electoral ward basis.

An analysis of expenditure, as a result of letters of offer made to client business by LEDU is provided in the attached table at Annex C. This information is not held on an electoral ward basis.

The IRTU does not record the information requested on an electoral ward or constituency basis and the information could only be provided at a disproportionate cost. Funds committed to projects by parliamentary constituency are more readily available and for the years in question are in the attached table at Annex D.

Annex A

INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT BOARD PROPERTY CAPITAL EXPENDITURE BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY (£'000)

	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000
Belfast East	-	29	-
Belfast North	1,923	1,317	64
Belfast South	-	34	17
Belfast West	11,521	2,162	1,653
East Antrim	243	110	197
East Londonderry	207	68	68
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	1,633	904	665
Foyle	1,139	846	425
Lagan Valley	788	840	345
Mid Ulster	148	130	143
Newry & Armagh	1,244	1,284	1,234
North Antrim	1,754	1,638	105
North Down	-	48	94
South Antrim	1,266	2,561	4,504
South Down	265	4,224	3,775
Strangford	64	81	849

Upper Bann	579	1,232	271
West Tyrone	988	427	631

NOTE:

While most items of expenditure in relation to IDB's property portfolio are recorded on a constituency basis a number of areas of work—expenditure related to contracts for factory maintenance, for example—cannot be readily identified in this way and are not included. The breakdown above by parliamentary constituency is therefore not a fully comprehensive analysis.

Annex B

INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT BOARD

Parliamentary Constituency	Selective Financial Assistance Expenditure (£'000)		
	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000
Belfast East	5,891	4,243	7,633
Belfast North	7,326	970	3,809
Belfast South	507	1,388	2,169
Belfast West	6,939	7,468	2,433
East Antrim	12,926	11,787	12,282
East Londonderry	11,982	13,375	5,550
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	11,390	7,598	5,765
Foyle	10,789	26,956	19,224
Lagan Valley	3,399	6,613	5,090
Mid Ulster	4,754	1,710	5,694
Newry & Armagh	1,042	837	3,301
North Antrim	2,679	7,967	5,246
North Down	611	718	826
South Antrim	4,440	7,572	6,011
South Down	648	1,723	749
Strangford	902	1,121	1,499
Upper Bann	10,950	10,496	7,777
West Tyrone	5,081	919	1,372

NOTE:

Payments of SFA are made to the NI headquarters of the company concerned and are therefore recorded against the constituency in which the HQ is located. Where a company has a number of production units in different constituencies, this may not offer a true reflection of which constituencies actually benefited from the expenditure.

Annex C

LOCAL ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT UNIT

Sum of Amount Paid (£'000)	1997	1998	1999
Belfast East	468	628	523
Belfast North	2,222	1,474	859
Belfast South	811	1,268	1,820
Belfast West	721	605	507
East Antrim	503	693	577
East Londonderry	461	453	368

Sum of Amount Paid (£'000) Constituency	1997	1998	1999
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	906	807	762
Foyle	1,210	1,017	1,548
Lagan Valley	1,320	720	843
Mid Ulster	1,249	1,543	1,889
Newry & Armagh	1,011	1,343	1,379
North Antrim	506	843	661
North Down	569	806	698
South Antrim	770	874	1,033
South Down	816	668	608
Strangford	535	518	661
Upper Bann	1,105	904	762
West Tyrone	623	1,187	791

Annex D

INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY UNIT

	£000s committed		
	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01 (to date)
Belfast East	311	400	1,442
Belfast North	682	852	785
Belfast South	523	2,252	869
Belfast West	547	606	541
East Antrim	1,106	283	566
East Londonderry	1,135	613	111
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	246	468	794
Foyle	977	150	792
Lagan Valley	2,566	696	659
Mid Ulster	767	685	432
Newry & Armagh	605	587	300
North Antrim	383	728	159
North Down	310	353	700
South Antrim	2,477	719	1,040
South Down	187	56	16
Strangford	388	209	234
Upper Bann	718	1,165	713
West Tyrone	236	1,163	353

Administrative Data Sets

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list the administrative data sets held by the Department and its agencies and detail whether these data sets provide qualitative data at enumeration district, electoral ward level, district council area or by parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 1240/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, like other departments, maintains a range of records on their staff for the purposes of carrying out their functions as employers. Many of the records for individual members of staff are held on computerised systems, which are managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel on behalf of departments and their respective agencies. These records include personnel, payroll, training records and applicant records for casual recruitment competitions. Such records are not managed in a way that routinely provides data sets by enumeration district, electoral ward, district council or parliamentary constituency.

The Department also holds the following databases:

The company development programme, which can provide information regarding investment support made within electoral wards, district councils, and parliamentary constituencies.

The Northern Ireland single programme, which holds details regarding total amount of grant requested and total amount eligible at the beginning and end of the funding period. This information is not held by ward or projects.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment along with other Government department's input to the Department of Finance and Personnel EUSSPPR database, which provides information at district council level.

The jobseekers' allowance — claimant count unemployment — database holds postcode information, which can be aggregated to provide information at ward, district council, parliamentary constituency and travel-to-work area geographies.

The trading standards service holds details by postcode of trade premises that are liable to inspection by its field officers.

The geological survey of Northern Ireland (GSNI) holds mineral exploration reports, mineral licences and petroleum exploration reports — a mineral licence can cover up to 250 sq km and a petroleum licence can cover up to 350 sq km consequently either could straddle ward, district council or parliamentary constituency boundaries.

GSNI hold details of quarry locations and operators by postcode.

GSNI hold details regarding site investigations — reports by engineering companies. It contains the location and geology of boreholes, and the locations and descriptions of open shafts, which are identified by grid reference and not post code.

The health and safety executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) holds a database of workplaces for the purposes of monitoring health and safety at work standards. Details recorded include postcodes.

The registry of companies, credit unions and industrial and provident societies holds a database — accessible to the public. Details recorded include postcodes.

The main administrative data set held by the IDB is the corporate database. This contains a range of client company information, which is regularly analysed at district council and parliamentary constituency level.

A further data set contains details of the factories and land held by IDB on behalf of the Department. This provides information at district council and parliamentary constituency level.

IDB also collects information on visits to Northern Ireland by prospective inward investors. These statistics are available for each district council.

LEDU's client database includes postcodes as part of the address details.

IRTU maintains databases, relating to research and development support programmes and scientific services, which are capable of producing aggregated information at district council and parliamentary constituency level at acceptable cost.

Data sets relating to schemes of financial assistance administered by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board provide qualitative information at district council level.

All of the above data sets can be aggregated to the full range of specified geographical units, subject to the requirement to respect the confidentiality of the data. However, it is likely that some requests for information could only be collated at disproportionate cost.

EU Block Exemptions

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm that EU block exemptions in the field of state aid will help small and medium sized enterprises and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1255/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The new Regulation EC No 70/2001 of 12 January 2001 was published in the Official Journal of the European Communities (L10) on 13 January 2001. The purpose of the aid exempted by this Regulation is to facilitate the development of small and medium size enterprises. Further information can be found on the EU Commission website. A copy of the Official Journal of 13 January will be placed in the Assembly library.

North/South Tourism Company

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if, in view of the close co-operation between the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Bord Fáilte before the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement,

he will outline the benefits derived from formalising this arrangement. (AQW 1265/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The arrangements for the new North/South Tourism Company which has been set up jointly by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Bord Fáilte ensure that Northern Ireland is well placed from a tourism marketing and promotional perspective. A specific part of the company's remit is to take account of the need to develop tourism in Northern Ireland against the background of the problems faced by our industry over the past 30 years. Half of the recently appointed board of the company, including the chairman, are Northern Ireland nominees. With an equal voice, Northern Ireland is in a better position than ever to effectively market and promote our tourism product world-wide.

Manufacturing Industry

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of people employed in manufacturing in Northern Ireland in each year since 1979. (AQW 1284/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Estimates of the number of employee jobs in manufacturing in Northern Ireland are available from the quarterly employment survey.

Details of the employee jobs series for Northern Ireland from 1979 to 2000 can be found in the attached table.

EMPLOYEE JOBS¹ IN MANUFACTURING IN NORTHERN IRELAND 1979 – 2000

Year ²	Total Manufacturing Employee Jobs
1979	143,560
1980	134,630
1981	121,290
1982	109,960
1983	105,190
1984	105,410
1985	106,320
1986	103,310
1987	101,880
1988	103,950
1989	104,510
1990	104,370
1991	103,280
1992	100,720
1993	98,570
1994	100,730
1995	103,590
1996	103,880

Year ²	Total Manufacturing Employee Jobs
1997	107,300
1998	106,600
1999	105,000
2000	103,270

¹ Figures are rounded to the nearest 10

² Figures are at June of each year.

Source: *Quarterly Employment Survey, DETI*

Carpets International

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the financial assistance made available to Carpets International in Donaghadee from the IDB for the financial years 1998-99 and 1999-2000.

(AQW 1308/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The information is as follows:-

Payments	
1998/1999	Nil
1999/2000	£477,760

Killinchy Yarns

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the financial assistance made available to Killinchy Yarns at Balloo, Comber by the IDB for the financial years 1998-1999 and 1999-2000.

(AQW 1310/00)

Sir Reg Empey: There were no payments of financial assistance to Carpets International's Killinchy factory.

ENVIRONMENT

Sewage Sludge

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment at the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting, to seek confirmation from his counterpart that the EU Directive on sewage sludge has been implemented in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 1171/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): Compliance with EU Directives is a matter between individual Member States and the EC in the first instance.

Meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council environment sector discuss matters which have been identified as offering mutual benefits through enhanced co-operation. Sewage sludge has not been so identified.

It would not be appropriate to raise at meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council matters that lie between the Republic of Ireland and the EC and in which Northern Ireland does not have a direct interest.

EU Directives

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the penalties imposed on EU member states for non-compliance with the sewage sludge and other environmental directives.

(AQW 1174/00)

Mr Foster: The penalties imposed on EU member states for non-compliance with directives are determined by the European Court of Justice on a case by case basis, having considered the views of the EC.

The EC makes its recommendations taking into account such matters as the seriousness of the infringement, its duration and the deterrent effect of the penalty.

My Department does not hold records of penalties imposed on other Member States.

Castlebawn

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline when the planning authority will process the Castlebawn application in Newtownards.

(AQW 1179/00)

Mr Foster: The Planning Service is currently processing two planning applications for development at Castlebawn. It has now fully assessed many of the important associated planning criteria. However, the impact on the traffic network in Newtownards, and suitable mitigation measures, remain the principle major matter yet to be resolved. This requires a satisfactory agreement between the applicants and the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service. I understand that this is being pursued.

My Department will continue to do all it can to proceed to finalise its consideration of this case.

Road Safety: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his plans to improve road safety along the Belfast Road in Carrickfergus, considering the new developments at the Maritime Area, Fortfield Complex, Carrickfergus Industrial Centre and the Sloefield Industrial Area.

(AQW 1195/00)

Mr Foster: As part of the planning process, developers will generally be required to carry out any improvements necessary to the road network which arise from their proposals to enable the network to continue to operate safely and effectively. Where appropriate, developers are required to carry out transportation impact assessments

(TIA) to gauge the full impact of their proposals on the surrounding road network.

As regards new developments along the Belfast Road, Carrickfergus, my Department's Roads Service: was content that the roundabout at Irish Gate provided a satisfactory access to the Maritime development; was satisfied that additional access arrangements were not required for the relatively small Fortfield complex; is currently considering a TIA for the Carrickfergus Industrial Centre to determine whether improvements to the road network are required, and; was satisfied that access to and from the Sloefield development could be facilitated by the provision of traffic lights on Belfast Road.

Roads Service is also currently considering the possibility of an additional pedestrian crossing on Belfast Road adjacent to the Maritime Area. This is in response to a number of requests received from interested parties.

Excess speed is often a factor in accidents. Following discussions between my Department and the RUC, a number of routes have been selected for particular attention, including this section of the A2 at Carrickfergus. Speed camera signs are being erected at present. Their presence, coupled with increased prosecutions, should reduce speeds and contribute to a reduction in accidents.

Areas of Conservation and Townscape Character

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the conservation areas and areas of townscape character in North Down. (AQW 1231/00)

Mr Foster: My Department designated Donaghadee as a conservation area on 13 January 1994. Bangor bay was designated an area of townscape character on 26 November 1999.

Administrative Data Sets

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of the Environment to list administrative data sets held by the Department and its agencies and detail whether these data sets provide qualitative data at enumeration district, electoral ward level, by district council area or by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1238/00)

Mr Foster: The following administrative data sets are held by the Department of the Environment and its agencies:

- Individuals holding road freight licences
- Registered vehicles
- Driver Licensing system
- Belfast Vehicle Test diary system
- Driver Test booking system
- Requests for duplicate MOT certificates
- Register of approved driving instructors

- Register of Listed Buildings
- Applications for a Water Act consent
- Water Service waste water discharges
- Register of pollution incidents
- Register of protected conservation sites
- Register of applications for planning permission
- Register of Property Certificates

All of these databases contain geographic referencing — either a postcode or a geo-reference. Therefore, data can be aggregated to all the specified geographical units subject to the requirement to respect the confidentiality of the subject.

Tree Preservation Orders

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment if he has plans to reform the legislation concerning tree preservation orders. (AQW 1249/00)

Mr Foster: Plans to reform the legislation concerning tree preservation orders (TPO) include strengthening enforcement powers relating to the protection of trees. In particular, the offence of contravening a TPO may be tried on indictment and the courts, when determining the level of fine, shall have regard to any financial gain resulting, or likely to result, from the offence. It is proposed to increase maximum fines for contravention of TPOs on summary conviction from £5,000 to £20,000.

It is also proposed to make it an automatic requirement, unless considered otherwise by the Department, to replace trees removed or destroyed which are under the protection of a TPO. In addition, it is further proposed to afford the same protection to trees in a conservation area as is currently afforded to trees covered by a TPO.

The legislative proposals however are still at an early stage and there remain a number of policy areas that require further detailed consideration before they can be finalised.

Woodland Preservation Orders

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment if he has plans to introduce woodland preservation orders. (AQW 1250/00)

Mr Foster: The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 already enables my Department to make a TPO to protect the amenity value of "trees, groups of trees or woodlands," considered worthy of protection.

The Department has made a number of TPOs over recent years to protect woodland areas such as Finnebrogue Wood in Downpatrick and at Edenaclogh Wood, in Co. Fermanagh. Consideration is currently being given to the merits of making a TPO in relation to Prehen Wood in Co. Londonderry.

Sewage Sludge

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Environment to confirm that the Republic of Ireland is complying with the EU Directive on sewage sludge and if she will raise the matter with her Republic of Ireland counterpart at the next North/South Ministerial Meeting.

(AQW 1254/00)

Mr Foster: Compliance with EU Directives is a matter between individual member states and the EC in the first instance.

Meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council environment sector discuss matters that have been identified as offering mutual benefits through enhanced co-operation. Sewage sludge has not been so identified.

It would not be appropriate to raise at meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council matters that lie between the Republic of Ireland and the EC and in which Northern Ireland does not have a direct interest.

Tree Preservation Orders

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the criteria and timescale for a tree preservation order to be made and acted upon.

(AQW 1311/00)

Mr Foster: The Department has powers under the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 to make a TPO to protect healthy trees, groups of trees or woodland considered worthy of protection, due to the contribution they make to the amenity of a particular locality.

There is no legislative timescale for applying a TPO. Each case is considered on its merits and the urgency involved. However, the Department endeavours to apply a TPO as quickly as possible. Relevant criteria for making a TPO include consideration of the health, condition and value of the trees, their contribution to the locality, and the financial implications of applying a TPO. This consideration involves detailed consultation with a number of other agencies.

A TPO takes effect immediately it is applied. However, any person on whom a TPO is served may make objections or representations to the TPO and request a hearing with the planning appeals commission before the TPO is formally confirmed, withdrawn or modified by the Department.

Transboundary Movement of Waste

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline which district councils made submissions to the UK-wide report on the transboundary movement of waste; and if he has any plans to collate the relevant information for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1313/00)

Mr Foster: The export and import of waste in the UK is controlled by the Transfrontier Shipment of Waste Regulations 1994, which are enforced by district councils. The councils contribute to the UK-wide report through returns made direct to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR). The DETR has informed my Department that all 26 district councils have returned their statistical information.

The DETR issued a consultation paper on amending the regulations in August 2000. One of the leading proposals was to transfer the role of competent authority from the district councils to my Department. Among other things, this will allow the collation of relevant information in Northern Ireland.

Specified Risk Material

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what quantities of specified risk material have been imported from the Republic of Ireland in each of the last five years for which figures are available, and which landfill sites have been used.

(AQW 1314/00)

Mr Foster: The importation of specified risk material (SRM) is governed by animal health controls, which are the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

I understand from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development that 13,002.1 tonnes of raw and processed SRM have been imported into Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland since December 1999 as follows — all figures are in tonnes rounded to the nearest tenth:-

Type of SRM	1998	1999	2000
Raw	10.8	466.1	97.2
Processed	nil	3411.0	9017.0
Total	10.8	3877.1	9114.2

All processed SRM was landfilled at Tullyvar landfill site at Aughnacloy. Following processing of the raw SRM approximately 172 tonnes of meat and bone meal was landfilled at Cullmore landfill site, Co. Londonderry. No licences were issued prior to December 1999 to import SRM. All imports were under licence by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and subject to strict veterinary controls.

Under EC Decision 2000/418 all importation of SRM from the Republic of Ireland ceased in December 2000.

Specified Risk Material

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his policy on the importation for landfill of specified risk material.

(AQW 1315/00)

Mr Foster: The importation of specified risk material (SRM) is governed by animal health controls which are the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Where import is for direct disposal such movements are controlled by district councils under the Transfrontier Shipment of Waste Regulations 1994. New EU rules came into force on 1 October 2000 detailing the requirements for handling SRM.

Commission Decision 2000/418 made it illegal to dispatch SRM to another member state for any purpose other than incineration. The onus is on the exporting country to prevent the export of this material. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development wrote to the Republic of Ireland authorities pointing out that it was their responsibility to prevent this trade.

The Republic of Ireland sought a derogation from the EC to allow the trade to continue until such time as they had the appropriate incineration facilities to dispose of the material. However, this approach was unsuccessful and they ceased the trade in December 2000.

Road Accidents

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment of the extent of; (a) damage only road accidents; (b) road accidents including injury; (c) motorist fatalities; (d) pedestrian casualties, and; (e) pedestrian fatalities arising from increases in road traffic since January 1999. (AQW 1324/00)

Mr Foster: While it is generally accepted that there is a link between traffic growth and the overall number of road casualties, it is not possible to quantify the number of road collisions or casualties directly related to an increase in road traffic.

The RUC is unable to provide details of damage only collisions since there is not a legal requirement to report these collisions in all circumstances.

In 1999, compared with the average of the 1994-1998 period, road collisions involving injury increased by 7%; driver fatalities increased by 15%; pedestrian casualties reduced by 8%; and pedestrian fatalities also reduced by 8%.

Over the same period the number of vehicles licensed, which is one indicator of traffic growth, increased by 12%.

Details for the year 2000 are not yet available.

Cycle Helmets

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment of the effectiveness of cycle helmets. (AQW 1339/00)

Mr Foster: Cycle helmet wearing helps reduce the severity of head injuries during a collision. This was the

conclusion of research carried out by the transport research laboratory in GB in 1994. Further research carried out by the British Medical Association in 1999 produced similar results and recommended that Government and health and cycling organisations should promote helmet wearing among cyclists.

Rule 45 of the Highway Code for Northern Ireland recommends that cyclists should wear a helmet that conforms to current regulations and my Department's road safety education officers continue to promote helmet wearing among children taking part in cycling proficiency training.

While there are no plans in Great Britain or Northern Ireland to make cycle helmet wearing compulsory, my Department will continue to review the situation in the light of any new evidence as it becomes available.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Barnett Formula

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer with a view to re-negotiation of the Barnett formula. (AQW 1234/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I have not had any discussions with the Chancellor relating to the operation of the Barnett formula recently. However, prior to the conclusion of the 2000 Spending Review, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and I met with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to press for changes in relation to the Barnett formula.

In response to these representations and ongoing discussions with my officials, HM Treasury agreed to a number of changes to the operation of the Barnett formula. These changes are worth some £40 million extra a year to Northern Ireland over the 2000 Spending Review period.

The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are scheduled to meet the Chancellor shortly to discuss a range of issues, including funding arrangements.

Barnett Formula

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give his assessment of EU funding to Northern Ireland, currently retained by the Treasury under the Barnett formula. (AQW 1235/00)

Mr Durkan: The Barnett formula allocates Northern Ireland its population share of changes in planned spending on comparable programmes in England. No funds allocated

to Northern Ireland by the EU are retained by HM Treasury under the Barnett formula. These EU funds are additional to any allocations determined by the Barnett formula. Indeed much of these EU funds are 'ring-fenced' and cannot be used for any other purpose.

North/South Implementation Bodies

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total cost of each of the six North/South bodies since 2 December 1999 and how much was spent by these bodies during the period when the Assembly was suspended. (AQW 1243/00)

Mr Durkan: The North/South Implementation Bodies are currently in the process of preparing their accounts for 2000 which, subject to audit, will be available to the Assembly in due course. These accounts will cover a thirteen-month period including December 1999.

Unfortunately, I am unable to provide you with the amount spent by the bodies during the period the Assembly was suspended as it is not possible to disaggregate these accounts without incurring disproportionate costs.

Rate Collection Agency

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if, following the discovery of an error when calculating the penny products that affected the year 1997/98, he will outline the measures being taken to ensure the Rate Collection Agency can provide a quality service to Local Government. (AQW 1244/00)

Mr Durkan: The Rate Collection Agency accounts for rate income and discharges and provides financial information to enable each district council to determine a district rate. The agency also calculates and advises each district council of the amount of rate revenue due for each financial year. The amount of district rates paid over by the agency to district councils is based on a complex formula and the error affected this calculation.

The error originated in 1995 when a new public category of data was created in the agency's database but only affected payments of rate revenue to district councils for 1997/98 and 1998/99. It appears that the appropriateness of this data set was never questioned regarding penny product calculations until new and more robust checking arrangements were introduced by the agency during 2000.

The agency very much regret the error and the chief executive has assured me that the robust checking arrangements which detected this error will continue to operate to ensure the accuracy of penny product calculations in the future.

The agency is very much committed to continuous improvement and providing a quality service to all its

customers. This commitment is publicly stated in the agency corporate and business plans and annual reports. The agency's annual report, which is submitted to the Assembly, sets out performance against key targets, including quality of service.

The chief executive has overall operational responsibility for the day to day management of the agency and has established a system of internal control to provide assurance on the efficient, effective and economic operation of its business activities. The system of internal control is based on a framework of regular management information, administrative procedures including segregation of duties and a system of delegation and accountability.

The Department's internal audit unit conducts independent reviews of the Agency based on an analysis of the risk to which the Agency is exposed. The head of internal audit provides regular reports on internal audit activity in the Agency including his professional opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the system of internal control. The Northern Ireland Audit Office also conduct annual audits of the agency's financial statements.

The agency and I appreciate the importance of the penny product information in terms of the councils' financial planning process. The chief executive has assured me that he has taken a personal lead in ensuring that effective systems of control are in place and that the Agency will in future ensure that accurate penny product information is provided to councils in early November each year.

Legal Fees: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel pursuant to AQW 907/00 to detail; (a) the solicitors and barristers acting on behalf of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; (b) their fees; (c) the total cost of this case to the Department, and; (d) the total cost in respect of the previous ruling on the Minister's decision regarding maternity services. (AQW 1252/00)

Mr Durkan: The information requested is as follows:-

- (a) The solicitors acting on behalf of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the high court litigation referred to in AQW 907/00 are the Crown Solicitor's Office, instructed by the Departmental Solicitor's Office. The barristers are Mr Ronnie Weatherup QC and Mr Bernard McCloskey QC.
- (b) The fees of the Crown Solicitor's Office and Counsel are not known at this stage.
- (c) The solicitors and barristers for the applicant in this case have not yet submitted a note of their fees. At present, therefore, the total cost of the case to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in respect of legal representation is not known.

- (d) The total cost of legal representation in the application by Clare Angela Buick for judicial review of the decision by the then Minister, Mr Anthony Worthington MP, regarding maternity services was £63,081.23.

Housing Executive: House Sales

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail; (a) the amount surrendered to the Consolidated Fund as a result of house sales by the Housing Executive; (b) if the Department for Social Development was re-imbursed in any way, and; (c) his policy to ensure that moneys generated by Departments are kept within those Departments. (AQW 1256/00)

Mr Durkan: Additional receipts totalling £48 million, which were generated by the house sales programme during 2000/01, were surrendered by the Department for Social Development in in-year monitoring rounds to be reallocated by the Executive.

Approximately £2.5 million was allocated to the Department for Social Development in in-year monitoring rounds to compensate it for the loss of rental income resulting from the house sales programme.

Receipts from house sales need to be looked at in relation to the most pressing needs across the public sector, including housing pressures, and not linked automatically to any particular area or the Department in which they arise. As not all Departments generate receipts, it could skew the allocation of resources if all receipts were simply retained within programmes.

Administrative Data Sets

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list the administrative data sets held by the Department and its agencies and detail whether these data sets provide qualitative data at enumeration district, electoral ward level, by district council area or by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1259/00)

Mr Durkan: The information requested is as follows:

Information available by:				
Administrative Data Set	Enumeration District	Electoral Ward	District Council	Parliamentary Constituency
Central Finance Group				
Private Finance Initiative Projects*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Northern Ireland Single Programme Approved Projects Database 1994-1999*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Northern Ireland Community Support Framework Mailing List*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Northern Ireland Transitional Objective 1 Programme Mailing List*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Monitoring Committee Members 2000-2006*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Construction Service				
Approved Contractor List*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Work Order Processing System*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Departmental Finance and Information Systems Division				
Suppliers Database*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Customer Database*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency				
Live Births, Deaths and Stillbirths*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Marriages	No	No	Yes	No
Adoptions	No	No	No	No
Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rate Collection Agency				
Domestic and Non-Domestic rates	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Valuation and Lands Agency				
Property Data*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

* The data can be aggregated by postcode to all specific geographical units subject to the requirement to respect the confidentiality of the data subject. However, it is likely that some requests for information could only be collated at disproportionate cost.

In addition, all Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments maintain a range of records on their staff for the purposes of carrying out their functions as employers. Many of the records for individual members of staff are held on computerised systems, which are managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel on behalf of Departments and their respective agencies. These records include personnel, payroll and training records, applicant records for recruitment competitions and superannuation records for retired civil servants. Such records are not

managed in a way that routinely provides data sets by enumeration district, electoral ward, district council or parliamentary constituency.

Aggregates Tax

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has made representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to take account of the remoteness and low population in Northern Ireland when calculating the fixed rate of the proposed aggregates tax and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1266/00)

Mr Durkan: I am acutely aware of the profound impact, which the aggregates tax will have on the quarrying industry and the local economy. I met the quarry products association (QPA) on 29 November to hear their concerns, and I have taken careful heed of the motion passed by the Assembly on 12 December. I have now received further information from other Departments and the QPA about the implications of the tax and consider the time is now right to raise the issue with the Treasury.

I have been liaising closely with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on this matter. They will be raising the issue when they meet the Chancellor on 24 January. We will make further representations in the light of the response received at this meeting.

Rates

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the average rates bill in the last financial year for; (a) domestic ratepayers, and; (b) non-domestic rate payers in each district council area. (AQW 1295/00)

Mr Durkan: I attach two tables, which provide details of the average rates bill for 1999/2000 for; (a) domestic ratepayers, and; (b) non-domestic ratepayers in each district council area.

AVERAGE NON- DOMESTIC RATES FOR N.IRELAND FOR 1999/00

District	Amount
Antrim	9758.61
Ards	4782.32
Armagh City & District	4592.27
Ballymena	6192.99
Ballymoney	3573.40
Banbridge	4003.76
Belfast	9905.58
Carrickfergus	8030.66
Castlereagh	10708.19

District	Amount
Coleraine	5934.55
Cookstown	4581.50
Craigavon	6753.66
Derry	10159.80
Down	4646.73
Dungannon & South Tyrone	4132.99
Fermanagh	4779.49
Larne	7639.19
Limavady	6146.65
Lisburn	7888.87
Magherafelt	3726.83
Moyle	2719.12
Newry & Mourne	5777.37
Newtownabbey	9721.16
North Down	8149.29
Omagh	5519.60
Strabane	4371.01
NI Overall Average	7259.16

AVERAGE DOMESTIC RATES FOR N. IRELAND FOR 1999/00

District	Amount
Antrim	429.83
Ards	393.00
Armagh City & District	397.12
Ballymena	372.84
Ballymoney	389.39
Banbridge	403.90
Belfast	375.30
Carrickfergus	395.85
Castlereagh	372.53
Coleraine	450.77
Cookstown	354.75
Craigavon	372.02
Derry	408.22
Down	428.50
Dungannon & South Tyrone	323.03
Fermanagh	345.62
Larne	359.93
Limavady	379.81
Lisburn	413.79
Magherafelt	397.72
Moyle	426.76
Newry & Mourne	394.62
Newtownabbey	448.85
North Down	492.51

District	Amount
Omagh	418.22
Strabane	341.33
NI Overall Average	396.73

Administration Revenue Costs

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the increase in; (a) monetary terms and; (b) percentage terms for administration revenue costs across all Departments for next year.

(AQW 1298/00)

Mr Durkan: The increases in departmental running costs (DRC) next year are detailed in the table below. These exclude DRC which is specific to administering welfare to work programmes.

DEPARTMENT	Increase in DRC 01/02 on 00/01 (£m)	Increase in DRC 01/02 on 00/01 (%)
Agriculture and Rural Development	5.5	6.0
Culture, Arts and Leisure	1.0	8.2
Education	1.8	10.5
Enterprise, Trade and Investment	1.7	4.8
Environment	4.4	13.8
Finance and Personnel	4.6	4.9
Health, Social Services and Public Safety	1.4	4.6
Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment	4.4	16.2
Regional Development	6.7	5.1
Social Development	18.6	12.9
Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister	2.4	21.5

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Multiple Births

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the services and resources available to parents of multiple births.

(AQW 1197/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): There are no services specific to parents of multiple births. Services are generally available to parents of new babies. Community midwives and health visitors attend mothers at home following discharge from hospital and social services are involved where

appropriate. Health and Social Services Trusts may offer some domiciliary support and day care and home help is also available in certain circumstances. Where home help is provided it is subject to a means test.

Also, there is no specific social security provision for multiple births. Child benefit, which is paid at a fixed rate for each child, may be claimed. Dependants' allowances can also be awarded for other benefits such as income support, jobseeker's allowance and incapacity benefit.

The Department provides an annual grant of £12,300 to the local office of the twins and multiple births association. The association helps families individually or through local clubs and groups.

Níl seirbhísí ar bith ann atá sainiúil do thuismitheoirí ilbhreitheanna ach bíonn seirbhísí ar fáil do thuismitheoirí leanaí nua de ghnáth. Tugann mná cabhrach pobail agus cuairteoirí sláinte aire do mháithreacha sa teach i ndiaidh a scaoilte amach ón otharlann agus tá baint ag na seirbhísí sóisialta leis seo nuair is cuí. Féadann iontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta roinnt tacaíocht chúram baile agus cúram lae a thairiscint agus tá cuidiú baile ar fáil fosta i dtosca áirithe. I gcás ina soláthraítear cuidiú baile, bíonn sé faoi réir fiosrú maoine.

Níl soláthar leasa shóisialaigh ar leith ann d'ilbhreitheanna. Féadtar sochar leanaí, a íoctar ag ráta seasta do gach páiste, a éileamh. Féadtar liúntais chleithiúnaithe a thabhairt fosta do shochair eile cosúil le tacaíocht ioncaim, liúntas lucht cuardaigh poist agus sochar míchumais.

Tugann an Roinn deontas bliantúil £12,300 don oifig áitiúil den Chumann Cúplaí agus Ilbhreitheanna. Cuidíonn an cumann le teaghlaigh ar bhonn indibhidiúil nó trí chlubanna agus ghrúpaí áitiúla.

GP Fundholding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her policy for the health boards in relation to the proposed changes in GP fundholding and to state if the board will be responsible for any short falls or changes in funding.

(AQW 1199/00)

Ms de Brún: The ending of GP fundholding is subject to the will of the Assembly. When the GP fundholding scheme is abolished, I intend that each fundholding practice's liabilities should be met in the first instance from its fundholding budget or accumulated savings. Where the practice's assets are insufficient to meet all its liabilities, my Department will provide additional funding specifically to meet the costs incurred in closing the practice's fundholding accounts. Remaining shortfalls will be met by the board. Boards are aware that they will be required to meet fundholders' net deficits at the end of the scheme and some have set

aside contingency funds for this purpose. The arrangements I have outlined will be underpinned by subordinate legislation that will be made by my Department. Guidance, which was issued to the service on 20 December 2000 by my Department, outlined the respective roles and responsibilities of boards and fundholders in bringing about the final close-down of the GP fundholding scheme. The guidance also indicated that the budgets currently held by fundholders to commission services for their patients would be returned to the boards when fundholding ends.

Tá sé faoi réir thoil an Tionóil má tá deireadh le cur le cisteshealbhaíocht liachleachtóirí. Nuair a chuirfear deireadh leis an scéim chisteshealbhaíochta do liachleachtóirí ginearálta, tá sé ar intinn agam go n-íocfar fiachais gach cleachtais chisteshealbhaíochta, ar an chéad dul síos, óna bhuiséad cisteshealbhaíochta féin nó ón choigilt charnach atá aige. I gcás nach leor sócmhainní an chleachtais le híoc as gach fiachas dá chuid, cuirfidh mo Roinnse maoiniú breise ar fáil go sonrach chun na costais a íoc a thabhfófar de bharr cuntais chisteshealbhaíochta an chleachtais a dhruim. Íocfaidh an bord as na caillteanais atá fágtha. Tá a fhios ag na boird go bhfuil ceangal orthu íoc as glanchaillteanais na geisteshealbhóirí ag deireadh na scéime agus tá cuid díobh i ndiaidh maoiniú teagmhasach a chur i leataobh chun na críche sin. Beidh na socrúithe atá luaite agam fréamhaithe i bhfo-reachtaíocht a ullmhóidh mo Roinnse. Sa treoir a d'eisigh mo Roinn chuig an tSeirbhís ar an 20 Nollaig 2000 tá cur síos gairid ar na ról ar leith atá ag na boird agus ag na cisteshealbhóirí agus ar na freagrachtaí atá orthu faoi seach le linn deireadh iomlán a chur leis an scéim chisteshealbhaíochta do liachleachtóirí ginearálta. Míníodh sa treoir fosta go seolfaí na buiséid, atá ag cisteshealbhóirí faoi láthair le haghaidh seirbhísí a choimisiúnú dá n-othair, ar ais chuig na boird nuair a bheas deireadh le cisteshealbhaíocht.

Quality and Care and Treatment

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 920/00, to outline her timetable for the current review of the "range of issues" for improving the quality of care and treatment with the health and personal social services and to detail the intended completion and publication date of this review.

(AQW 1208/00)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to the answer to AQW 1209/00.

Tarraingim aird an Teachta ar an fhreagra ar AQW 1209/00.

Quality of Care and Treatment

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 920/00, to detail the "range of issues" currently under review for improving the quality of care and treatment within the health and personal social services. (AQW 1209/00)

Ms de Brún: I am currently considering a number of proposals which aim to ensure better protection of the public through improved quality in the care and treatment provided by the health and personal social services. I intend to make a statement on these proposals including a timeframe for implementation very shortly.

Tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh faoi láthair ar mholtaí a bhfuil sé d'aidhm acu cosaint níos fearr a chinntiú don phobal trí cháilíocht fheabhsaithe sa chúram agus sa chóireáil a chuireann an SSSP ar fáil. Tá rún agam ráiteas a dhéanamh ar na moltaí seo, lena n-áirítear fráma ama lena gcur i gcrích, gan mhoill.

Food Products

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to ensure that all food products retailed in Northern Ireland show the country of origin and clearly specify the ingredients. (AQW 1210/00)

Ms de Brún: The Food Standards Agency has responsibility for food safety issues and is committed to providing consumers with clear and concise information about the country of origin and ingredients of products sold here and in GB. Food labelling rules are harmonised at European level and implemented here by the Food Labelling Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996, which impose certain requirements in respect of both place of origin and ingredient listing. The regulations require the place of origin of a food to be given if omitting it would mislead a consumer about its true place of origin, and generally speaking the regulations require food to be labelled with a list of ingredients.

In relation to origin labelling new guidance notes issued last February to industry and district councils calling for tighter enforcement of existing legal provisions seek to ensure that origin labels on food are less ambiguous.

A "Better Labelling Initiative" was launched last January with the aim of establishing consumers' opinions of food labels and what improvements they would like to see. The agency has set up a food labelling forum to identify and take account of consumers' attitudes and preferences and to draw up an action plan that seeks to improve food labelling across a range of areas. The agency is currently pressing for clear EU rules on the use of terms like "produce of", and for a requirement for origin labelling on a wider range of foods including all meat and processed meat products. In addition the agency is

also pressing at EU level for more comprehensive ingredient listing. Sir John Krebs, the chairman of the agency, has already written to David Byrne, the EU Commissioner with responsibility for food matters about these issues.

Tá an Ghníomhaireacht Chaighdeán Bia freagrach as ceisteanna a bhaineann le sábháilteacht bhia agus tá rún daingean aici eolas soiléir achomair a sholáthar do thomhaltóirí faoi tháirgí a dhíoltar anseo agus sa Bhreatain. Is é sin na comhábhair atá iontu agus an tír arb as dóibh. Is ag leibhéal na hEorpa a chomhchuihbítear rialacha maidir le lipéadú agus cuirtear i bhfeidhm anseo iad faoi na Food Labelling Regulations (NI) 1996 a leagann síos ceanglais áirithe maidir le liostú comhábhar táirgí agus na dtíortha arb as dóibh. Éilítear sna rialacháin go dtugtar ionad tionscnaimh an bhia. Dá bhfágfaí sin amach chuirfeadh sé tomhaltóir ar strae maidir le fíorionad tionscnaimh an bhia agus éilítear go ginearálta go gcuirtear lipéad ar bhia a bhfuil liosta na gcomhábhar air.

Maidir le lipéadú de réir ionaid tionscnaimh, eisíodh nótaí treorach nua chuig an earnáil tionsclaíochta agus chuig na comhairlí ceantair mí Feabhra seo caite inar éilíodh go gcuirfí na forálacha dlí atá anois ann i bhfeidhm níos treise chun a chinntiú nach mbeidh lipéid de réir ionaid tionscnaimh chomh débhríoch.

Seoladh “Tionscnamh Feabhas ar Lipéadú” mí Eanáir seo caite chun tuairimí tomhaltóirí a aimsiú i leith lipéid bhia agus i leith dóigheanna ar mhaith leo feabhas a fheiceáil á chur orthu. Tá an Ghníomhaireacht i ndiaidh Fóram um Lipéadú Bia a bhunú chun dearcadh agus roghanna daoine a aimsiú agus a chur san áireamh agus chun Plean Gníomhaíochta a ullmhú le feabhas a chur ar lipéadú bia thar roinnt réimsí. Faoi láthair tá an Ghníomhaireacht ag iarraidh go leagfaidh an AE rialacha soiléire síos maidir le húsáid téarmaí mar “de dhéantús” agus gur gá go mbeidh lipéadú de réir ionaid tionscnaimh i bhfeidhm ar réimse níos leithne bia, agus feoil agus feoil phróiseáilte san áireamh. Lena chois sin tá an Ghníomhaireacht ag iarraidh fosta ag leibhéal an AE go mbeidh liostú níos cuimsithí comhábhar ann. Tá Sir John Krebs, Cathaoirleach na Gníomhaireachta, i ndiaidh scríobh chuig David Byrne, Coimisinéir an AE a bhfuil cúram cúrsaí bia air, faoi na ceisteanna seo.

Attacks on the Elderly

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline any recent discussions she has had with the Chief Constable in relation to greater protection for elderly people from attacks and if she will make a statement. (AQW 1211/00)

Ms de Brún: The protection of the general public, including the elderly, from attacks is not a matter specific to my Department. I have not had any discussions with the chief constable on the matter.

Ní bhaineann ceist chosaint an phobail i gcoitinne, lena n-áirítear seandaoine, ar ionsaithe leis mo Roinn amháin. Ní raibh cainteanna ar bith agam ar an ábhar leis an Ardchonstábla.

Code of Conduct

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the recourse available to the public if a health trust fails to abide by its “code of conduct”. (AQW 1223/00)

Ms de Brún: The code of conduct and the code of accountability for corporate governance in the HPSS was issued to the boards of HPSS bodies in November 1994 and it is expected that all members of the boards of these bodies will adhere to the principles of these codes. A member of the public who is concerned about a possible breach of the codes may raise it with the body itself, with the health and social services council for the area in which the body falls or with my Department.

Members of the public, who are dissatisfied with services, treatment or care provided to them by a trust or the manner in which such services are delivered, have recourse under the HPSS complaints procedure.

A person can complain directly to the commissioner for complaints (the Northern Ireland ombudsman) if they think they have suffered personally as a result of maladministration by a body which comes within the commissioner’s jurisdiction.

I mí na Samhna 1994 eisíodh cód iompair agus cód cuntasachta maidir le rialú corparáideach sna SSSSP chuig boird na gcomhlachtaí SSSP, agus táthar ag súil go gcloifidh gach ball de bhoird na gcomhlachtaí seo le prionsabail na gcód sin. Féadfaidh duine ar bith den phobal atá buartha faoi chás ina bhféadfadh na cóid a bheith saraithe an t-ábhar a chur faoi bhráid an chomhlachta féin, faoi bhráid na Comhairle Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta sa cheantar ina bhfuil an comhlacht nó faoi bhráid mo Roinne.

Féadfaidh daoine den phobal atá míshásta le seirbhísí, le cóireáil nó le cúram a fuair siad ó iontaobhas SSS, nó atá míshásta leis an dóigh a gcuirtear na seirbhísí sin ar fáil, leigheas a lorg faoi mhodh déanta gearán na SSSSP.

Thig le duine gearán a dhéanamh go díreach le Coimisinéir na nGearán (Ombudsman Thuaisceart Éireann), má tá sé/sí den bharúil gur fhulaing sé/sí go pearsanta de bharr drochriaracháin ar thaobh comhlachta a thagann faoi dhlínse an Choimisinéara.

Interdepartmental Groups

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the interdepartmental groups with which her Department is involved detailing

in each case; (a) the groups remit; (b) its current agenda; (c) its membership; (d) the list of those members who represent the voluntary sector and; (e) the process by which the members were selected. (AQW 1227/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department is involved in 23 Interdepartmental groups. I have arranged for the specific details requested in respect of each group to be placed in the Library.

Tá baint ag mo Roinn le 23 Ghrúpa idir-Roinne. Shocraigh mé go gcuirfí na sonraí áirithe a iarradh maidir le gach grúpa sa Leabharlann.

Thoracic Cancer

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to designate an intensive care bed at the Royal Victoria Hospital for thoracic surgery given the significant rise in thoracic cancer.

(AQW 1233/00)

Ms de Brún: Intensive care beds are a valuable resource which must be used to maximum effect for the benefit of all patients who require them, including patients recovering from thoracic surgery. It would not be appropriate nor a cost-effective use of this resource to allocate one of these beds for thoracic cancer patients.

Is acmhainn luachmhar iad leapacha dianchúraim a ba chóir a uas-úsáid do thairbhe na n-othar uilig a bhfuil siad de dhíth orthu, lena n-áirítear othair ag fáil bisigh ó mháinliacht thóracach. Níorbh úsáid cheart ná chostas-éifeachtach na hacmhainne seo í ceann de na leapacha a leithroinnt d'othair le hailse thóracach.

Morning-After Pill

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm; (a) that she signed The Prescription Only Medicines (Human Use) Amendment (No. 3) Order 2000; (b) that this Order applies to the morning-after pill; (c) that this Order applies to Northern Ireland and (d) this is compatible with Assembly Resolution against extending abortion law to Northern Ireland. (AQW 1253/00)

Ms de Brún: I can confirm that I signed The Prescription Only Medicines (Human Use) Amendment (No. 3) Order 2000 legislation on 8th December 2000 and that the Order applies to the morning-after pill. I can also confirm that prior to my signing, notification was sent to the HSSPS Committee. Committee members noted the position. The Order applies here and since the morning-after pill is a contraceptive, it is compatible with the Assembly Resolution against extending abortion law to here.

Tig liom a dhearbhu gur shínigh mé an reachtaíocht The Prescription Only Medicines (Human Use) Amendment

(No.3) ar an 8 Nollaig 2000 agus go mbaineann an tOrdú leis an phiolla don mhaidin dar gcionn. Tig liom a dhearbhu fosta roimh domhsa síniú gur cuireadh dearbhu chuig an Choiste SSSSP. Tá áirithe ag baill an Choiste ar an staid. Tá an tOrdú i bhfeidhm anseo mar gur frithghiniúnach é an piolla don mhaidin dar gcionn, agus tá sé de réir Rún an Tionóil in éadan an dlí ginmhillte a fhairsingiú anseo.

Administrative Data Sets

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the administrative data sets held by the Department and its agencies and detail whether these data sets provide qualitative data at enumeration district, electoral ward level, by district council area or by parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 1260/00)

Ms de Brún: Information and analysis unit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety currently holds four administrative data sets containing quantitative data capable of being analysed in terms of electoral ward, district council area, parliamentary constituency and, in principle, enumeration district. These data sets are as follows: the hospital inpatients system, the mental health inpatients system, the central health index and the dental payments system.

All local Civil Service departments maintain a range of records on their staff for the purposes of carrying out their functions as employers. Many of the records for individual members of staff are held on computerised systems, which are managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel on behalf of Departments and their respective agencies. These records include personnel, payroll and training records, applicant records for recruitment competitions and superannuation records for retired civil servants. Such records are not managed in a way that routinely provides data sets by enumeration district, electoral ward, district council or parliamentary constituency.

Faoi láthair tá 4 thacar sonraí riaracháin ag Aonad Eolais agus Anailíse (AEA) na Roinne Sláinte, Seirbhís Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí agus istigh iontu tá sonraí cainníochtúla a dtiocfadh anailís a dhéanamh orthu i dtéarmaí barda thoghchánaigh, limistéir Comhairle Ceantair, Toghláigh Parlaiminte agus (i bprionsabal) ceantair áirimh. Is mar a leanas atá na tacair shonraí: Córas Othar Cónaitheach na nOspidéal, Córas na nOthar Cónaitheach Meabhair-Shláinte, an Lárinnéacs Sláinte agus an Córas Íocaíochta Fiaclóireachta.

Coinníonn gach Roinn áitiúil den Státseirbhís réimse taifead ar an fhoireann atá acu chun a gcuid feidhmeanna mar fhostóirí a chur i gcrích. Coinnítear cuid mhór de na taifid ar bhaill aonair foirne ar chórais ríomhairithe a bhainistíonn an Roinn Airgeadais agus Pearsanra ar son na Ranna agus a nGníomhaireachtaí faoi seach. Is é atá

iontu taifid ar phearsanra, ar phárolla agus ar oiliúint, taifid ar iarratais ar chomórtais earcaíochta agus taifid ar aoisliúntais do státseirbhísigh ar scor. Ní bhíonn taifid den chineál seo á mbainistiú ar dhóigh a chuireann tacair shonraí ar fáil de ghnáth de réir ceantair áirimh, barda thoghchánaigh, Comhairle Ceantair, nó Toghligh Parlaiminte.

Southern Health and Social Services Council

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has investigated the reasons why legal action was taken against the Southern Health and Social Services Council in August 1998.
(AQW 1264/00)

Ms de Brún: Legal action taken against the Southern Health and Social Services Council related to a claim by two medical practitioners that they had been libelled in a letter written over four years ago, by the chief officer of the council. An out of court settlement in favour of the plaintiffs was finalised in October 1998. I do not consider it appropriate that any further investigation is necessary.

Bhain an chaingean dlí a cuireadh ar Chomhairle Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt le héileamh beirt liachleachtóirí gur leabhláiodh iad i litir a scríobh príomh-oifigeach na Comhairle níos mó ná ceithre bliana ó shin. Tháinigtheas ar réiteach as cúirt i bhfách leis na gearánaithe i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 1998. Ní shílím go bhfuil fiosrú breise de dhíth nó cuí.

Artificial Limbs

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her policy on making artificial limbs with lifelike silicone coatings available to patients in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 1267/00)

Ms de Brún: Silicone cosmeses are not currently provided by health and social services here. Green Park Healthcare Trust, which provides the regional prosthetics service, is developing criteria for provision, which will be submitted to the four health and social services boards for consideration. Provision will ultimately depend on available resources and other healthcare priorities.

Ní chuireann na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta anseo coisméisí sileacain ar fáil faoi láthair. Tá Iontaobhas Cúraim Sláinte na Páirce Glaise, a sholáthraíonn an tseirbhís phróistéiteach réigiúnach, ag ceapadh critéar don soláthar agus cuirfear iad faoi bhráid na gceithre bhord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta lena mbreithniú. Beidh an soláthar ag brath sa deireadh ar acmhainní a bheith ar fáil agus ar thosaíochtaí eile cúraim sláinte.

Doctors

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many additional doctors will be employed in Northern Ireland under; (a) the budget allocations and; (b) the national plan.
(AQW 1268/00)

Ms de Brún: It is a matter for health and social services boards, in conjunction with trusts and others to determine how best to meet local needs out of their available resources. This includes decisions on the numbers of doctors to be employed to serve those needs.

The national plan applies only in England.

Is gnó é do na Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta i gcomhar leis na hIontaobhais agus le daoine eile cinneadh a dhéanamh ar an dóigh is fearr le freastal a dhéanamh ar riachtanais áitiúla taobh istigh de na hacmhainní atá ar fáil acu. Tá cinntí maidir le líon na ndochtúirí atá le fostú le freastal a dhéanamh ar na riachtanais sin san áireamh.

Baineann an Plean Náisiúnta le Sasana amháin.

Hospital Beds

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current state of hospital bed provision in North Antrim and if she will make a statement.
(AQW 1269/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on average available and occupied beds for the Northern Board trust hospitals for the financial year 1999/2000 is detailed in the table below.

AVERAGE AVAILABLE AND OCCUPIED BEDS, NHSSB HOSPITALS, 1999/2000

	Average available beds	Average occupied beds
Coleraine	180.3	132.7
Dalriada	28	23.3
Robinson Memorial	23.6	20.2
Ross Thompson Unit	35	32.2
Route	67.6	30.9
Holywell	343	297.7
Whiteabbey PNU	24	19.5
Antrim	375.9	286.3
Braid Valley	75.6	67.3
Mid-Ulster	180.2	129.9
Moyle	45	38.1
Whiteabbey	163.1	150
Total	1541.3	1228.1

The Northern Board's winter plans, which I have approved, include provision for an additional 51 hospital beds for the duration of the winter months.

Tá eolas faoi mheánlíon na leapacha a bhí ar fáil agus a bhí in úsáid in Ospidéal Iontaobhas Bhord an Tuaiscirt don bhliain airgeadais 1999/2000 leagtha amach sa tábla thíos.

MEÁNLIÓN NA LEAPACHA A BHÍ AR FÁIL AGUS IN ÚSÁID, OSPIDÉIL BSSST, 1999/2000

	Meánlíon leapacha ar fáil	Meánlíon leapacha in úsáid
Ospidéal Chúil Raithin	180.3	132.7
Ospidéal Dhál Riada	28	23.3
Ospidéal Chuimhneacháin Robinson	23.6	20.2
Aonad Ross Thompson	35	32.2
Ospidéal an Rúta	67.6	30.9
Ospidéal Holywell	343	297.7
AS na Mainistreach Finne	24	19.5
Ospidéal Aontroma	375.9	286.3
Ospidéal Ghleann na Brád	75.6	67.3
Ospidéal Lár-Uladh	180.2	129.9
Ospidéal na Maoile	45	38.1
Ospidéal na Mainistreach Finne	163.1	150
Iomlán	1541.3	1228.1

Mar chuid de phleananna Bhord an Tuaiscirt i gcomhair an gheimhridh (pleananna atá ceadaithe agam) beidh soláthar ann do 51 leaba bhreise ospidéil i rith míonna an gheimhridh.

Hip Replacement Operations

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of hip replacement operations which took place in Northern Ireland over the past twelve months. (AQW 1270/00)

Ms de Brún: In the financial year 1999/2000 — the latest date for which information is available — 1,410 hip replacement operations were carried out at local hospitals.

Sa bhliain airgeadais 1999/2000 (an dáta is déanaí dá bhfuil eolas ar fáil), rinneadh 1,410 obráid malartaithe cromáin in otharlanna áitiúla.

Ulster Hospital Trust

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) confirm that the Ulster Hospital Trust made a detailed submission to her officials at the 14 December 2000 meeting; (b) give her assessment of that submission concerning the capital needs of the

Ulster Hospital Trust and; (c) outline when firm decisions will be taken to address its needs. (AQW 1271/00)

Ms de Brún: I can confirm that the Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trust set out its proposed strategic development plan for the Ulster Hospital at a meeting with my officials on 14 December 2000 and provided copies of their plan. A revised plan was forwarded to the Department on 10 January 2001. My Department is urgently assessing the detail of the plan, which proposes a major upgrade of the hospital phased over a seven-year period. When this has been completed I will consider the options available and announce my decision on the proposals as soon as possible.

Tig liom a dhearbhu gur leag Iontaobhas SSS Otharlanna agus Phobal Uladh a phlean forbartha straitéiseach d'Otharlann Uladh amach ag cruinniú le mo chuid feidhmeannach ar an 14 Nollaig 2000 agus sholáthraigh sé cóipeanna dá phlean. Seoladh plean leasaithe chuig an Roinn ar an 10 Eanáir 2001. Tá mo Roinn ag measúnú shonraí an phlean faoi théirim, plean a mholann móruasghrádú na hotharlainne a bheas á chéimniú thar tréimhse seacht mbliana. Nuair a chríochnófar seo, déanfaidh mé machnamh ar na roghanna a bheas ar fáil agus fógróidh mé mo chinneadh ar na moltaí a luaithe agus is féidir.

Essential Equipment

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to; (a) outline what requests were made during the months of October, November and December 2000 for the purchase of essential equipment by the Royal Group of Hospitals, Belfast City Hospital and the Ulster Hospital; (b) detail of what those requests consisted and; (c) detail what payments were made to each hospital in respect of those requests. (AQW 1272/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department received a request dated 16 November 2000 from the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust for critical items of medical equipment for the Ulster Hospital. These are required for anaesthetics and theatres, clinical diagnostics, woman and child health, specialist surgery, general medicine, pharmacy and acute elderly care. The total cost is estimated at £1.48 million. This is being considered for priority for funding.

No requests have been received for funding for essential equipment for the Royal Group of Hospitals or the Belfast City Hospital between October and December 2000.

Fuair mo Roinn iarratas dátaithe 16 Samhain 2000 ó Iontaobhas Ospidéal agus Phobal Uladh do bhaill ghéarchéimeacha de threalamh míochaine d'Ospidéal Uladh. Tá siad seo de dhíth d'ainéistéisigh agus d'obrádlanna, d'fháthmheasa cliniúla, do shláinte mná agus páiste, do mháinliacht speisialtóra, do mhíochaine ghinearálta, do chógaisíocht agus do ghéarchúram

seandaoine. Meastar gur £1.48 mhilliún an costas iomlán atá orthu. Tá machnamh á dhéanamh ar a dtosaíocht do mhaoiniú.

Ní bhfuarthas iarratas ar bith do mhaoiniú do threalamh riachtanach do Ghrúpa Ríoga na nOtharlann nó d'Otharlann Cathrach Bhéal Feirste idir Meán Fómhair agus Nollaig 2000.

National Board for Nursing

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the demise of the national board for nursing, midwifery and health visiting in Northern Ireland and of the proposed new nursing body for Northern Ireland to replace it.

(AQW 1273/00)

Ms de Brún: A review of the Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1997 identified a number of weakness in the current Act and the new proposals are aimed to modernise and strengthen professional regulation and make public protection paramount by increasing lay involvement to balance professional influence. The proposed new nursing and midwifery council will have tougher powers to tackle poor professional conduct and performance with streamlined procedures to ensure fitness for practice including quality assurance of professional training.

I wish to see the creation of a replacement body to the national board, as there is a need to establish local arrangements for overseeing the implementation of the standards set by the new council and for establishing an appropriate relationship with it. The responses to a consultation paper on the structure and functions of a new local body are currently being considered and I will come to a final decision in due course.

D'aimsigh athbhreithniú a rinneadh ar an Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1997 roinnt laigí san Acht reatha agus tá na moltaí nua dírithe ar nuachóiriú a chur ar an rialúchán gairmiúil agus é a neartú agus cosaint an phobail a chur os cionn gach ní trí tuilleadh gnáthdhaoine a tharraingt isteach mar chothromú ar thionchar an lucht ghairmiúil. Beidh cumhachtaí níos láidre ag an Chomhairle Altranais agus Chnáimhseachais nua atá molta chun tabhairt faoi dhrochiompar agus faoi dhrochfheidhmiú ghairmiúil agus beidh gnásanna á dtabhairt chun rialtachta lena chinntiú go mbeidh altraí oiriúnach don chleachtas agus beidh deimhniú cáilíochta maidir le hoiliúint ghairmiúil san áireamh.

Ba mhaith liom a fheiceáil go gcruthófar comhlacht a ghlacfaidh áit an Bhoird Náisiúnta, nó is gá go ndéanfar socrúithe go haitiúil chun maoirseacht a dhéanamh ar fhorfheidhmiú na gcaighdeán a leagfaidh an Chomhairle nua amach agus chun go mbunófar an caidreamh cuí léi. Tá bhreithniú á dhéanamh faoi láthair ar na freagraí a fuarthas i dtaobh an Pháipéir Comhairliúcháin ar struchtúr

agus ar fheidhmeanna comhlachta nua áitiúil agus déanfaidh mé an cinneadh deireanach in am agus i dtráth.

Nurses, Midwives and Professions Allied to Medicine: Discretionary Points

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what funding is to be made available to pay for discretionary points for nurses, midwives and professions allied to medicine. (AQW 1274/00)

Ms de Brún: The resources for pay of staff are contained within the budget allocations made to health and social services bodies each year. No specific allocation is made for discretionary pay points.

Tá na hacmhainní airgid leis an fhoireann a íoc sna dáiltí buiséid a thugtar do na forais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta gach bliain. Ní thugtar dáileadh ar leith do phointí íocaíochta discréideacha.

Working Time Regulations

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what funding will be made available to pay for the implementation of the working time regulations such as annual leave payments and compensatory rest payments. (AQW 1275/00)

Ms de Brún: The cost of implementing the working time regulations has already been included in the allocations made to health and social services boards in 1999/00 and 2000/01.

Cuireadh an costas do chur i bhfeidhm na rialacha am oibre cheana féin leis na dáiltí a tugadh do bhoird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta i 1999-00 agus i 2000-01.

Morning-After Pill

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to; (a) confirm that the morning-after pill is to be made available in schools through the school nurse; (b) detail under which provision she made the decision; (c) detail when it became available, and; (d) outline what policy is in place regarding its regulation. (AQW 1280/00)

Ms de Brún: There has been no decision to make the morning-after pill available in schools through the school nurse. All school nurse activities on school premises are a matter for agreement with school headmasters and school boards of governors. However, I should point out that there are no nurses here who are entitled to prescribe the morning-after pill.

Ní dhearnadh cinneadh ar bith an piolla don mhaidin dar gcionn a chur ar fáil i scoileanna ón altra scoile. Ar chomhaontú le príomhoidí agus le boird gobharnóirí

scoileanna a bhraitheann gníomhartha uilig altrái scoile ar áitribh scoile. Caithfidh mé a rá, áfach, nach bhfuil altrái ar bith anseo i dteideal an piolla don mhaidin dar gcionn a ordú.

GP Services

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her plans to ensure that out-of-hours GP services are not impaired by severe weather conditions. (AQW 1286/00)

Ms de Brún: As independent contractors, GPs are responsible for making their own arrangements for services to their patients during the out-of-hours period. No specific concerns about severe weather conditions have been drawn to my attention.

Mar chonraitheoirí néamhspleácha, níl gnáthdhochtúirí freagrach as a socrúithe féin a dhéanamh faoi choinne seirbhísí dá gcuid othar i rith na tréimhse taobh amuigh de ghnáthuaireanta oibre. Níor cuireadh faoi mo bhráid buairimh áirithe faoi ghéarchoinníollacha aimsire.

GP: Out of Hours Calls

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to; (a) detail the number of calls each out-of-hours GP facility received each day during the period from 13 May 2000 to 10 June 2000; (b) the number of calls each out-of-hours GP received each day during the period from 13 December 2000 to 10 January 2001 and; (c) the number of calls for each of these periods that were dealt with by; (1) advice given over the telephone; (2) the patient visiting the out of hours clinic; (3) a doctor's visit; (4) despatch of an ambulance to bring the patient to hospital, or; (5) advice to the patient to make their own way to hospital. (AQW 1287/00)

Ms de Brún: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Níl an t-eolas san fhoirm a iarradh ar fáil go furasta agus ní fhéadfaí é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

GP: Out of Hours

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail; (a) the location of every out of hours GP facility in Northern Ireland and; (b) the number of out-of-hours GP facilities that are located on roads not on the Roads Service's gritting schedules. (AQW 1288/00)

Ms de Brún:

(a) The locations of the out-of-hours centres in each health and social services board area are set out below.

Eastern Board	Northern Board
The Old Casualty, Mater Hospital, Crumlin Road, BELFAST, BT14 6AB	6 Garfield Place, BALLYMENNA, BT43 6EH
The Bungalow, Forster Green Hospital, Saintfield Road, BELFAST, BT8 4GR	Ratheane Cottage, Ratheane Private Nursing Home, Mountsandel Road, COLERAINE
Balloo Training and Resource Centre, 94 Newtownards Road, BANGOR, BT19 1XZ	13 Station Road, MONEYMORE, BT45 7RA
	Whiteabbey Hospital, Doagh Road, NEWTOWNABBEY, BT37 9RH

Southern Board	Western Board
Moylinn Medical Centre, Legahory Green, CRAIGAVON, BT65 5DJ	Strabane Health Centre, Upper Main Street, STRABANE
Diamond House, 3 The Square, MOY, BT71 7SG	Lissan House, 41 Dublin Road, OMAGH, BT78 1HE
52A Belfast Road, Damolly, NEWRY, BT34 1QA	Tempo Road, ENNISKILLEN, BT74 6HR
	Limavady Health Centre, Scroggy Road, LIMAVADY, BT49 0NS
	Great James Street Health Centre, Great James Street, DERRY*
	Waterside Health Centre, Glendermott Road, DERRY*

* Great James Street Health Centre and the Waterside Health Centre provide out-of-hours facilities on a monthly alternating basis

(b) The Department for Regional Development has advised me that all but one of the above facilities are on main roads that are included in the Roads Service salting schedule. The exception is Moylinn Medical Centre, Craigavon, which is located on a non-salted road approximately 200 metres from a salted route.

(a) Leagtar amach thíos áiteanna na n-ionad a osclaíonn taobh amuigh de ghnáthuaireanta oibre.

Bord An Oirthir	Bord An Tuaiscirt
An tSeánroinn Taismí, Ospidéal Mater, Bóthar Croimghlinne, BÉAL FEIRSTE, BT14 6AB,	6 Plás Garfield, AN BAILE MEÁNACH, BT43 6EH
An Bungaló, Ospidéal Forster Green, Thamhnaigh Naomh, BÉAL FEIRSTE, BT8 4GR	Ratheane Cottage, Teach Priobháideach Altranais Bóthar Ratheane, Bóthar Mountsandel, CÚIL RAITHIN
Ionad Traenála agus Áiseanna Bhaile Aodha, 94 Bóthar Bhaile Nua na hArda, BEANNCHAR, BT19 1XZ	13 Bóthar an Stáisiúin, MUINE MÓR, BT45 7RA
	Ospidéal na Mainistreach Báine, Bóthar Dhumhaigh, BAILE NA MAINISTREACH, BT37 9RH

Bord an Deiscirt	Bord an Iarthair
Lárionad Sláinte Moylinn, Faiche Log an Choire, CRAIGAVON, BT65 5DJ	Lárionad Sláinte an tSratha Báin, An Phríomhshráid Uachtarach, AN SRATH BÁN
Teach na Cearnóige, 3 An Cheamóg, AN MAIGH, BT71 7 SG	Teach Leasáin, 41 Bóthar Átha Cliath, AN ÓMAIGH, BT78 1HE
52A Bóthar Bhéal Feirste, Damolly, IŪR CINN TRÁ, BT34 1QA	Bóthar an Iompaithe Dheisil, INIS CEITHLEAINN, BT74 6HR
	Lárionad Sláinte Léim an Mhadaidh Bóthar Scroggy, LÉIM AN MHADAIDH, BT49 0NS
	Lárionad Sláinte Shráid Shéamais Mhóir, Sráid Shéamais Mhóir, DOIRE*
	Lárionad Sláinte Thaobh na hAbhann, Bóthar Glendermott, DOIRE*

* Soláthraíonn Lárionad Sláinte Shráid Shéamais Mhóir agus Lárionad Sláinte Thaobh na hAbhann áiseanna taobh amuigh de ghnáthuaireanta ar bhonn míosúil malartach.

- (b) Thug an Roinn Forbartha Reigiúnaí le fios dom go bhfuil na háiseanna uile ach ceann amháin ar phríomhbhóthair atá san áireamh i sceideal salannaithe

na Seirbhíse Bóthar. Is é Lárionad Sláinte Moylinn, Craigavon an éisceacht atá ar bhóthar nach gcuirtear salann air, agus é 200m ó bhealach a gcuirtear salann air.

Occupational Therapy

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people waiting for an occupational therapy assessment and being seen within the charter standard of three months; (a) in Northern Ireland; (b) in each of the health and social services board areas, and; (c) in each of the health and social services trust areas. (AQW 1297/00)

Ms de Brún: Information is provided in the table below in respect of the charter standards for priority cases and other cases. Priority cases are defined as those people coming out of hospital and who at risk; those living alone and at risk; those living with a disabled/elderly carer or those terminally ill. The charter standard is that assessment should start within two weeks of being referred. Other cases are defined as non-priority cases and the charter standard is that assessment should start within three months of referral. The information is at 30 September 2000.

TABLE 1. PERSONS WAITING AND COMPLETED WAITS FOR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST ASSESSMENT.

Provider	Persons waiting for assessment - quarter ending 30 Sept. 2000	Completed waits - year ending 30 Sept. 2000			
		Priority cases waiting less than 2 weeks	Priority cases waiting more than 2 weeks	Other cases waiting less than 3 months	Other cases waiting more than 3 months
Down Lisburn	1,556	583	358	770	1,070
North & West Belfast	2,438	1,119	1,028	748	845
South & East Belfast	980	2,189	1,244	985	783
Ulster Community & Hospitals	1,007	954	61	1,531	763
EHSSB	5,981	4,845	2,691	4,034	3,461
Causeway	833	404	357	219	450
Homefirst	2,126	2,584	1,651	2,776	2,318
NHSSB	2,959	2,988	2,008	2,995	2,768
Armagh & Dungannon	504	885	180	549	596
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	1,135	533	306	312	300
Newry & Mourne	502	1,474	120	19	448
SHSSB	2,141	2,892	606	880	1,344
Foyle	720	589	536	702	1,141
Sperrin Lakeland	1,200	429	285	256	487
WHSSB	1,920	1,018	821	958	1,628
Northern Ireland	13,001	11,743	6,126	8,867	9,201

Tugtar eolas sa tábla thíos ar chaighdeán na Cairte do Chásanna Tosaíochta agus do Chásanna Eile. Sainmhínítear cásanna tosaíochta mar iad siúd ag teacht amach as an otharlann agus i mbaol, iad siúd a chónaíonn ina n-aonar agus i mbaol nó a chónaíonn le feighlí míchumasach/cnagaosta nó iad siúd a bhfuil

galar an bháis orthu agus is é caighdeán na Cairte gur chóir tús a chur le measúnú laistigh de dhá seachtaine i ndiaidh atreorú. Sainmhínítear cásanna eile mar chásanna neamhthosaíochta agus is é caighdeán na Cairte gur chóir tús a chur le measúnú laistigh de thrí mhí i ndiaidh atreorú. Tá an t-eolas ag an 30ú Meán Fómhair 2000.

TÁBLA 1. DAOINE AG FANACHT AGUS FANACHTAÍ CRÍOCHNAITHE DO MHEASÚNÚ TEIRIPÍ SAOTHAIR.

Soláthraí	Daoine ag fanacht ar mheasúnú -Ráithe ag críochnú 30ú M.Fó. 2000	Fanachtaí críochnaithe –bliain ag críochnú an 30ú M. Fó. 2000			
		Cásanna tosaíochta ag fanacht níos lú ná 2 seachtaine	Cásanna tosaíochta ag fanacht níos mó ná 2 seachtaine	Cásanna eile ag fanacht níos lú ná 3 mhí	Cásanna eile ag fanacht níos mó ná 3 mhí
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	1,556	583	358	770	1,070
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	2,438	1,119	1,028	748	845
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	980	2,189	1,244	985	783
Otharlanna & Phobal Uladh	1,007	954	61	1,531	763
BSSSO	5,981	4,845	2,691	4,034	3,461
An Clochán	833	404	357	219	450
Homefirst	2,126	2,584	1,651	2,776	2,318
BSSST	2,959	2,988	2,008	2,995	2,768
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	504	885	180	549	596
Pobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna	1,135	533	306	312	300
An tIúr & Beanna Boirche	502	1,474	120	19	448
BSSSD	2,141	2,892	606	880	1,344
An Feabhal	720	589	536	702	1,141
Sliabh Speirín	1,200	429	285	256	487
BSSSI	1,920	1,018	821	958	1,628
Tuaisceart Éireann	13,001	11,743	6,126	8,867	9,201

Date: _____

Signed and approved by the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Stroke Patients

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline; (a) the availability of access to specialist services for people suffering a stroke, and; (b) if she will make additional resources available for the treatment of this condition.

(AQW 1299/00)

Ms de Brún: There are stroke units in all four health and social services board areas:-

- (i) **Eastern board.** In the Royal Victoria Hospital all stroke patients admitted are cared for in two designated wards, with stroke rehabilitation centred in another. There are also stroke units in the Belfast City Hospital, the Ulster Hospital, while Lagan Valley Hospital provides a stroke rehabilitation unit. Discussions are ongoing at present between the board, the Royal Group and the Mater Trust about the further development of stroke services in the Belfast area.
- (ii) **Western board.** Services for stroke patients are provided in a 12-bed unit in the Erne Hospital. This provides for the acute and rehabilitation stages.
- (iii) **Northern board.** The main services for stroke patients are located at the Braid Valley Hospital, a 12-bed dedicated unit. Rehabilitation services are also provided for stroke patients in the geriatric unit at Coleraine Hospital.

- (iv) **Southern board.** There is a stroke unit in Lurgan Hospital. All stroke patients in this area are initially admitted to Craigavon Area Hospital and those deemed suitable for treatment and rehabilitation are transferred to the stroke unit in Lurgan.

It is a matter for health and social services boards, in conjunction with trusts and others, to determine how best to meet local needs, including those of patients suffering from strokes. Boards would be expected to meet the costs of such services from their budgets. However, I am aware of the historic underfunding of health and personal social services here, and I will continue to seek additional funding for the service as a whole in the future.

Tá aonaid stróic i ngach ceantar de na ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta:-

- (i) I **gceantar Bhord an Oirthir**, san Ospidéal Ríoga Viteoiria tugtar cúram do na hothar a ligtear isteach i ndá bhorda ainmnithe, le hathshlánú stróic lonnaithe i mbarda eile. Tá aonaid stróic in Ospidéal Chathair Bhéal Feirste, Ospidéal Uladh, agus Aonad Athshlánú Stróic curtha ar fáil ag Gleann an Lagáin. Tá cainteanna ann faoi láthair idir an Bord, an Grúpa Ríoga agus Iontaobhas an Mater faoi fhorbairt bhreise ar sheirbhísí stróic i mBéal Feirste.
- (ii) I **gceantar Bhord an Iarthair** cuirtear seirbhísí ar fáil in Aonad 12 leaba in Ospidéal na hÉirne. Freastlaíonn an t-aonad seo ar na céimeanna géara agus na céimeanna athshlánaithe.

(iii) I **mBord an Tuaiscirt** tá na príomhsheirbhísí d'othair a raibh stróc orthu lonnaithe in Ospidéal Ghleann na Brád, aonad dílis 12 leaba. Tá seirbhísí athshlánaithe curtha ar fáil d'othair a raibh stróc orthu san aonad geiriatrach in Ospidéal Chúil Raithin.

(iv) I **mBord an Deiscirt** tá Aonad Stróc in Ospidéal na Lorgan. Ligtear othair a raibh stróc orthu isteach chuig Ospidéal Craigavon i dtús báire agus iad siúd a shiltear atá fóirsteanach do chóireál agus d'athshlánú aistrítear iad chuig an Aonad Stróc ar an Lorgain.

Is ceist í do na Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta, i gcomhar le hIontaobhais agus eile, le cinneadh a dhéanamh ar an dóigh is fearr le freastal ar riachtanais áitiúla, san áireamh tá othair a bhfuil stróc orthu. Beifí ag dúil go mbeadh na Boird ábalta íoc as na costais dá leithéid de sheirbhísí óna mbuiséid féin. Is eol dom, áfach, tearc-chistiú stairiúil na seirbhísí sláinte agus pearsanta sóisialta anseo agus leanfaidh mé ar aghaidh ag iarraidh tuilleadh airgid don tseirbhís ina hiomláine amach anseo.

Residential and Nursing Care Beds

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the data her department collects concerning the availability of residential and nursing care beds in each of the health board areas; (b) how often this information is collected and collated, and; (c) in what form it is published. (AQW 1302/00)

Ms de Brún: The Department collects information on the number of available places funded at residential homes on an annual basis. This information is disaggregated by programme of care and trust, and is published annually in the Department's community statistics publication. Information on the total number of available beds in nursing homes, collected on an annual basis by the registration and inspection units of the health and social services boards, is also published annually in the community statistics publication.

Bailíonn an Roinn eolas go bliantúil ar líon na n-áiteanna atá ar fáil atá á maoiniú in árais chónaithe. Díbhailíonn clár cúraim agus iontaobhais an t-eolas seo, agus foilsítear go bliantúil i bhfoilseachán staitisticí pobail na Roinne é. Bailíonn ionaid chláraithe agus chigireachta na mbord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta eolas go bliantúil ar líon iomlán na leapacha atá ar fáil in dtithe altranais agus foilsítear go bliantúil i bhfoilseachán staitisticí pobail na Roinne é seo fosta.

Prostate Cancer

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of men

who have died from prostate cancer in each of the health board areas in the last year for which figures are available.

(AQW 1303/00)

Ms de Brún: The latest available information on deaths from prostate cancer is for the calendar year 1999 and is detailed in the table below.

Board of Residence	No. of Deaths
Eastern	96
Northern	53
Southern	26
Western	20
Total	195

Mionléirítear an t-eolas is déanaí atá ar fáil ar bhásanna ó ailse phróstatach don bhliain 1999 sa tábla thíos.

Bord Cónaithe	Líon na mBásanna
an Oirthir	96
an Tuaiscirt	53
an Deiscirt	26
an Iarthair	20
Iomlán	195

Foster Parents

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of foster parents available to adopt in each of the board areas for 1998-99 and 1999-2000. (AQW 1312/00)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl eolas ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh.

Relenza and Lysovir

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the costs to her department of; (a) Relenza, and; (b) Lysovir and if she will make a statement. (AQW 1320/00)

Ms de Brún: Relenza was licensed for use in September 1999. The community prescribing cost for the period from September 1999 to August 2000, the latest date for which data is available, amounted to £288. There is no information available about the prescribing of Lysovir in the community as this is either infrequently prescribed by general practitioners or, is currently not being prescribed. There is no centralised database on the prescribing of medicines in hospitals.

The prescribing of medicines in the health service is a matter for the clinical judgement of doctors, taking account of the needs of the patient and the effectiveness of the medicines concerned.

Ceadúnaíodh Relenza le haghaidh úsáide i Meán Fómhair 1999. Ba £288 an costas iomlán ar a ordú ar oideas sa pobal don tréimhse ó Mheán Fómhair 1999 go dtí Lúnasa 2000, an dáta is deireanaí a bhfuil eolas againn air. Níl eolas ar bith ar fáil faoi ordú Lysovir sa phobal óir is annamh a ordaíonn liachleachtóirí é ar oideas, sin nó ní ordaítear é faoi láthair. Níl lárbhunachar sonraí ar ordú leigheas ann sna hospidéil.

Braitheann ordú leigheas ar oideas ar bhreithiúnas cliniciúil dochtúirí, ag cur san áireamh riachtanais na n-othar agus éifeacht na leigheas i gceist.

Foster Parents

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children seeking foster parents in each of the board areas for years 1998-99 and 1999-2000. (AQW 1329/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on the number of children seeking foster parents is not available in the form requested.

Níl eolas ar líon na bpáistí atá ag iarraidh tuismitheoirí altrama ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh.

Foster Parents

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any changes she intends to make to the adoption and foster parent regulations for Northern Ireland. (AQW 1340/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department is considering a number of changes to these regulations and I hope to bring forward some proposals shortly. These would deal with matters such as the membership of adoption panels; more openness in the assessment of prospective adopters; the provision of information by agencies to adoptive parents about the child; and the prevention of people convicted of specified offences from becoming adoptive or foster parents.

Tá mo Roinn ag machnamh roinnt athruithe ar na rialacháin seo agus tá súil agam cuid moltaí a thabhairt ar aghaidh ar ball. Phléadh siad seo le hábhair ar nós ballraíocht phainéil uchtála, tuilleadh oscailteachta in uchtaitheoirí ionchais a mheasúnú, gníomhaireachtaí faisnéis a sholáthar do thuismitheoirí uchtála faoin leanbh agus cosc a chur ar dhaoine a ciontaíodh i gcoireanna sonraithe ó bheith ina dtuismitheoirí uchtála nó altrama.

Castledearg Ambulance Station

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans for Castledearg ambulance station. (AQW 1345/00)

Ms de Brún: The ambulance service trust has reached agreement with the new landlords to remain on the existing site in Castledearg. A business case is now being developed to improve accommodation at Castledearg ambulance station as part of the trust's overall estate strategy. The trust has recently spent £3,000 on improving facilities at Castledearg ambulance station.

Tháinig Iontaobhas na Seirbhíse Otharcharr ar shocrú leis na tiarnaí talún nua le fanacht ar an suíomh reatha i gCaisleán na Deirge. Tá cás gnó á fhorbairt anois, atá mar chuid de straitéis fhoriomlán eastáit an iontaobhais, le cóiríocht ag staisiún otharcharr Chaisleán na Deirge a fheabhsú. Chaith an t-iontaobhas £3,000 ar fheabhsú áiseanna ag staisiún otharcharr Chaisleán na Deirge ar na mallaibh.

Cattle: Over Thirty Months Old

Ms Morrice asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps she is taking to ensure that consumers are not eating meat from cattle that are over thirty months old.

(AQO 562/00)

Ms de Brún: The Food Standards Agency is responsible for food safety here and works closely with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development which acts on the agency's behalf in enforcing BSE controls in abattoirs here.

All food on sale here must comply with the food safety requirements of the Food Safety (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. Broadly this legislation demands that food must not be rendered injurious to health; must not be unfit for human consumption or so contaminated that it is unreasonable to expect it to be used for human consumption.

The over-thirty-month rule is the key legal mechanism which prohibits the sale of meat for human consumption from cattle aged over thirty months at slaughter and is implemented here by the Fresh Meat (Beef Controls) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996. The regulations are enforced by officers of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and district councils.

Particular concern has been expressed about imported beef. Consequently the agency here wrote to enforcing authorities in November asking them to step up checks on consignments of imported beef from countries with a known BSE risk to ensure compliance with the over-thirty-month rule. The agency specifically asked enforcement authorities for details of any breaches. To date none have been reported. The agency is continuing to monitor the situation.

Tá an Ghníomhaireacht Caighdeán Bia freagrach as sábháilteacht bhia anseo agus bíonn sí ag obair go dlúth i bpáirt leis an Roinn Talmhaíochta agus Forbartha

Tuaithe a ghníomhaíonn ar son na Gníomhaireachta chun na rialúcháin i n-éadan ESB a chur i bhfeidhm sna seamlais anseo.

Caithfidh gach cineál bia atá ar díol anseo a bheith de réir cheanglais an Food Safety (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. Is é atá á éileamh go ginearálta sna ceanglais go gcaithfidh bia gan a bheith curtha sa riocht go ndéanann sé dochar don tsláinte; go gcaithfidh sé gan a bheith mí-oiriúnach lena thomhailt ag daoine, nó gan a bheith chomh héillithe sin go mbeadh sé míréasúnta a bheith ag súil go mbainfí úsáid as mar ábhar tomhailte ag daoine.

Is í an Riail Os Cionn Tríocha Mí an phríomh-mheicniocht dlí a thoirisceann feoil ó callach atá os cionn tríocha mí d'aois nuair a mharaítear iad a dhíol i gcomhair a tomhailte ag daoine agus is tríd an Fresh Meat (Beef Controls) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996 a chuirtear an riail i bhfeidhm. Cuireann oifigigh de chuid na Roinne Talmhaíochta agus Forbartha Tuaithe agus na gcomhairlí ceantair na rialacháin i bhfeidhm.

Tá inní ar leith á cur in iúl faoi mhairteoil a allmhairítear. Ar an ábhar sin, scríobh an Gníomhaireacht anseo chuig na húdaráis forfheidhmiúcháin i mí na Samhna le hiarraidh orthu breis seiceála a dhéanamh ar lastaí mairteola a allmhairítear ó thíortha a bhfuil priacal aitheanta ESB iontu chun a chinntiú go gcomhlíontar an Riail Os Cionn Tríocha Mí. D'iarr an Gníomhaireacht go sonrach ar na húdaráis forfheidhmiúcháin mionsonraí cásanna ar bith a thabhairt di inar sáraíodh an riail. Go dtí seo níor tuairiscíodh aon chás den chineál. Tá an Gníomhaireacht ag déanamh faireacháin ar chúrsaí i rith an ama.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Walsh Visa Programme

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to confirm the total cost of setting up and implementing the Walsh Visa Programme. (AQW 1207/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): Since the programme was introduced in January 2000 the development and implementation costs of the Walsh Visa programme are as follows:

1999-2000	£103,385
2000-01 (to end December)	£665,645

These figures cover the cost of provision of training in the pre-departure phase in Northern Ireland and the support provided to participants in the US.

Client Management Scheme

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail; (a) the numbers currently on the various options of New Deal disaggregated by religion, gender and age, and; (b) by electoral ward and parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 1214/00)

Dr Farren: Information on the progress of participants through New Deal is kept by the Department on its client management system (CMS).

Statistical data from CMS are not currently available pending resolution of data and IT issues. It is anticipated that publication will resume before the end of the current financial year: in the meantime I am providing figures based on management information.

I attach Table 1 which gives a breakdown of the numbers on the New Deal for 18-24 Year Olds and the New Deal for 25+ by option and gender: more detailed age data and religion is not currently available. Table 2 gives a breakdown of the numbers by job centre area as a proxy for geographical breakdowns requested.

I look forward to the re-establishment of the statistical series on New Deal in the near future. All previously published data, including the information given in the attached tables, will be subject to revision at that time.

TABLE 1(A): NUMBERS ON OPTION BY GENDER – NEW DEAL FOR 18-24 YEAR OLDS

	Male	Female	Total
FTET	274	176	450
Environmental Task Force	104	6	110
Voluntary Option	279	186	465
Employment Option	199	114	313

TABLE 1(B): NUMBERS ON OPTION BY GENDER – PILOT NEW DEAL 25+

	Male	Female	Total
Employment Subsidy	514	121	635
Intensive Activity Period	585	91	676
Education and Training Opportunity	188	40	228

Note: data relate to w/e January 12th 2001

TABLE 2(A): NUMBERS ON OPTION BY JOBCENTRE – NEW DEAL FOR 18-24 YEAR OLDS

	FTET	Environmental Option	Voluntary Sector Option	Employment Option
Andersonstown	41	6	23	16
Antrim	7	6	9	3
Armagh	0	0	0	0
Ballymena	4	0	1	9

	FTET	Environ- mental Option	Voluntay Sector Option	Employ- ment Option
Ballymoney	15	5	2	12
Ballynahinch	17	5	2	10
Banbridge	5	0	2	1
Bangor	3	1	2	2
Belfast East	10	1	2	12
Belfast North	3	5	25	8
Belfast South	33	1	32	24
Carrickfergus	28	8	23	24
Coleraine	6	2	1	4
Cookstown	6	6	6	11
Downpatrick	1	0	6	8
Dungannon	17	2	3	7
Enniskillen	7	0	1	7
Falls Road	21	1	12	16
Kilkeel	36	11	31	8
Larne	1	0	1	0
Limavady	7	6	6	0
Lisburn	3	12	16	14
Waterloo Place	3	3	4	6
Waterside House	21	2	71	20
Richmond Chambers	3	1	20	7
Lurgan	32	6	91	12
Magherafelt	4	1	3	3
Newcastle	2	1	1	7
Newry	5	0	2	3
Newtownabbey	14	3	2	10
Newtownards	7	0	5	6
Omagh	8	7	5	3
Portadown	28	1	5	9
Shankill Road	1	0	4	3
Strabane	15	3	15	2

Note: data relate to w/e January 12th 2001

TABLE 2(B): NUMBERS ON OPTION BY JOBCENTRE— NEW DEAL 25+

	Education and Training Opportun ity	Intensive Activity Period	Employment Subsidy
Andersonstown	10	58	27
Antrim	1	27	19
Armagh	0	7	18
Ballymena	11	12	39
Ballymoney	6	6	22
Ballynahinch	1	2	3

	Education and Training Opportun ity	Intensive Activity Period	Employment Subsidy
Banbridge	1	5	4
Bangor	6	15	43
Belfast East	3	18	13
Belfast North	25	72	12
Belfast South	8	47	31
Carrickfergus	2	13	11
Coleraine	1	12	32
Cookstown	1	0	7
Downpatrick	9	15	20
Dungannon	13	2	6
Enniskillen	37	28	35
Falls Road	7	111	16
Kilkeel	0	2	4
Larne	0	6	5
Limavady	0	5	22
Lisburn	0	5	15
Waterloo Place	14	29	20
Waterside House	8	5	18
Richmond Chambers	17	39	18
Lurgan	1	3	8
Magherafelt	0	2	29
Newcastle	1	7	14
Newry	10	30	40
Newtownabbey	6	12	9
Newtownards	1	14	8
Omagh	14	16	12
Portadown	0	10	17
Shankill Road	9	23	8
Strabane	5	18	30

Note: data relate to w/e January 12th 2001

Numbers in Higher Education Institutions and Further and Higher Education Colleges

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the number of students currently enrolled in full time further and higher education colleges and universities by religion, age, gender and parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 1215/00)

Dr Farren: As at 1999-2000, the composition of the full-time student population at Northern Ireland higher education institutions and at the Northern Ireland further education colleges was:

(A) RELIGION

	Higher Education Institutions (NI domiciled only)		Further Education Colleges	
Protestant	7,215	29.1%	8,945	37.1%
Roman Catholic	9,798	39.5%	11,527	47.8%
Other	594	2.4%	248	1.0%
No religion/ not stated	7,188	29.0%	3,412	14.1%
Total	24,795	100.0%	24,132	100.0%

(B) AGE (AS AT 31 AUGUST 1999)

	Higher Education Institutions	
18 years & under	4,623	16.0%
19 years	5,650	19.5%
20 years	5,695	19.7%
20021 years	4,510	15.6%
22 years	2,583	8.9%
23 years	1,496	5.2%
24 years	852	2.9%
25 years	558	1.9%
26-29 years	1,209	4.2%
30-39 years	1,223	4.2%
40-49 years	378	1.3%
50-59 years	59	0.2%
60 years & over	10	0.0%
Age unknown	64	0.2%
Total	28,910	100.0%

	Further Education Colleges	
16 years & under	6,965	28.9%
17 years	6,967	28.9%
18 years	5,189	21.5%
19 years	2,476	10.3%
20 years	1,072	4.4%
21 years	461	1.9%
22 years	226	0.9%
23 years	130	0.5%
24 years	88	0.4%
25 years	74	0.3%
26-29 years	165	0.7%
30-39 years	207	0.9%
40-49 years	88	0.4%
50-59 years	14	0.1%
Age unknown	10	0.0%
Total	24,132	100.0%

(C) GENDER

	Higher Education institutions		Further Education Colleges	
Male	11,942	41.3%	12,306	51.0%
Female	16,968	58.7%	11,826	49.0%
Total	28,910	100.0%	24,132	100.0%

(d) Parliamentary Constituency

The postcode information held for students is not of sufficient quality to allow student data to be disaggregated by parliamentary constituency.

New Deal

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the numbers of successful New Deal completions that have resulted in full-time employment and the numbers who have returned to claiming social security benefits.

(AQW 1218/00)

Dr Farren: Information on the progress of participants through New Deal is kept by the Department on its newly introduced client management system (CMS).

Comprehensive statistical data from CMS are not currently available pending resolution of some difficult data and IT issues. It is anticipated that data will become available in the next few weeks and that publication will resume thereafter. Once all of the issues have been resolved, a timetable will be drawn up which will outline when detailed information will become available for release.

I regret that in the absence of data from CMS it is not currently possible to answer your question.

Administrative Data Sets

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to list the administrative data sets held by the Department and its agencies and detail whether these data sets provide qualitative data at enumeration district, electoral ward level, by district council area or by parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 1261/00)

Dr Farren: The Department for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment maintains a range of administrative data sets for the purpose of carrying out its functions.

Where the data includes a post-code as part of the address this can be aggregated to all specified geographical units subject to the requirement to respect the confidentiality of the data subject. The success of this exercise depends on the quality and coverage of the postcode data and would involve considerable time and cost. The postcode information in some of the databases held by this Department is currently not of sufficient quality to allow aggregation to the specified geographical units.

All Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments maintain a range of records on their staff for the purposes of carrying out their functions as employers. Many of the records for individual members of staff are held on computerised systems, which are managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel on behalf of Departments and their respective agencies. These records include personnel, payroll and training records, applicant records for recruitment competitions and superannuation records for retired civil servants. Such records are not managed in a way that routinely provides data sets by enumeration district, electoral ward, district council or parliamentary constituency.

Data sets maintained by the Department include postcodes and are listed as follows:

- HESA (higher education statistics agency) student record.
- HESA first destination supplement.
- HESA non-credit bearing data set.
- HESA individualised staff data set.
- HESA finance statistics return.
- Further education statistical record (FESR).
- Further education leavers survey (FELS).
- Further education funding formula data set.
- Further education awards system (FEAST).
- Individuals who participate in worktrack and Enterprise Ulster.
- People who have received redundancy payments or insolvency payments from the Department and individual/bodies interested in developments in employment legislation for consultation purposes.
- The Labour Relations Agency and the Office of the Industrial Tribunals and the Fair Employment Tribunals (OITFET) on applications for tribunal hearings, and/or arbitration and conciliation.
- Client management system (CMS) and training information management system (TIMS) are currently used by jobcentre staff, headquarters staff and training organisations (TIMS only) to administer employment service, careers service, New Deal, Jobskills and Bridge to Employment activities, and certain elements of worktrack. These computer systems, therefore, hold information in the following areas :
 - client information; employers; vacancies; schools; training organisations; and training courses.
- The training courses' category is not associated with a postcode but this can be inferred from the training organisation delivering the course. The information provided within each category is illustrative.
- Management development programme providers are required as part of their contract to maintain data sets on programme participants. Where programmes are

administered by management development staff, similar lists of participants are held within the branch.

A general database is held to facilitate invitations to business events/annual conferences.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Roads Service

Ms Nelis asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail Roads Service expenditure on minor and major works and roads maintenance programmes per district council area over each of the last ten years.

(AQW 1117/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): The attached tables show Roads Service expenditure on minor and major road works and road maintenance on a district council basis during the period 1989-90 to 1998-99. Regrettably, because of changes to internal financial systems arising from the re-organisation of Roads Service in 1999-2000 the information for that year is not yet available on a district council basis.

However, major works are prioritised on a Province-wide basis, not on a divisional or district council basis, against a broad range of criteria such as strategic planning policy, traffic flows, number of accidents, potential travel save times, environmental impact and value for money. Minor works funding is allocated on a needs-based priority approach using indicators such as population, weighted road lengths and number of accidents.

Areas of comparable populations do not necessarily have comparable roads either in terms of distance or indeed classification.

ROAD MAINTENANCE (CASH PRICES)

DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA	89/90 £k	90/91 £k	91/92 £K	92/93 £K	93/94 £K	94/95 £K	95/96 £K	96/97 £K	97/98 £K	98/99 £K
Antrim	2,516	2,477	2,056	2,735	2,613	2,734	2,068	2,482	2,835	2,636
Ards	2,125	2,197	2,120	1,923	2,447	2,925	2,607	2,530	2,091	2,314
Armagh	2,748	3,533	3,336	3,447	3,273	3,714	3,859	3,758	3,561	3,468
Ballymena	2,079	2,404	2,428	2,612	2,500	2,556	2,831	3,621	3,886	3,101
Ballymoney	1,346	1,358	1,269	1,275	1,355	1,192	1,386	1,470	1,433	1,620
Banbridge	1,841	1,831	1,766	1,937	1,981	2,115	2,143	2,019	2,038	2,002
Belfast	10,204	10,056	9,824	9,854	9,250	10,852	11,569	11,115	11,804	11,233
Carrickfergus	1,007	925	803	986	1,016	1,143	939	976	1,068	1,373
Castlereagh	2,162	2,094	2,131	2,117	2,360	2,626	2,548	2,547	2,911	2,688
Coleraine	2,271	2,572	2,624	2,671	2,730	2,908	3,047	3,072	2,862	2,993
Cookstown	1,456	1,541	1,515	2,083	2,222	3,163	3,388	2,220	2,064	2,021
Craigavon	2,640	2,874	2,768	3,067	3,312	3,501	3,823	4,210	3,897	3,621
Derry	2,951	3,143	3,267	3,613	3,156	3,729	4,083	3,758	4,100	3,810
Down	3,400	3,497	3,109	2,867	3,068	3,278	3,225	3,096	3,006	2,696
Dungannon	2,701	2,780	2,554	2,801	3,039	3,193	3,437	3,572	3,111	2,967
Fermanagh	3,014	3,398	3,302	3,143	3,509	3,665	3,884	3,992	3,977	3,938
Larne	1,289	1,625	1,390	1,717	1,386	1,465	1,419	1,146	1,581	1,691
Limavady	1,223	1,371	1,431	1,504	1,617	1,870	1,965	1,976	1,972	1,976
Lisburn	5,071	4,505	4,549	4,925	5,221	4,991	5,296	5,179	4,915	4,006
Magherafelt	1,757	1,912	1,670	1,898	1,727	1,871	1,804	2,191	1,990	2,149
Moyle	995	1,341	1,144	1,250	1,051	1,123	1,195	1,364	1,118	1,353
Newry & Mourne	3,533	3,739	3,451	3,697	3,492	4,045	4,246	3,931	3,968	3,557
Newtownabbey	2,683	3,445	3,263	3,533	3,317	3,414	3,681	3,667	3,520	2,600
North Down	1,706	1,966	1,710	1,666	1,810	2,558	2,543	2,527	2,215	2,628
Omagh	3,121	3,038	2,970	2,991	3,413	4,246	4,128	4,421	4,032	3,589
Strabane	2,258	2,500	2,228	2,212	2,767	2,653	2,882	3,453	2,955	3,194

NOTE: Road maintenance includes structural maintenance, routine maintenance, maintenance of highway structures, traffic maintenance, street lighting maintenance and car parking maintenance.

MINOR ROAD WORKS (CASH PRICES)

DISTRICT COUNCIL	89/90 £K	90/91 £K	91/92 £K	92/93 £K	93/94 £K	94/95 £K	95/96 £K	96/97 £K	97/98 £K	98/99 £K
Antrim	118	90	286	293	419	811	816	351	601	477
Ards	262	197	211	311	383	369	279	340	432	417
Armagh	362	350	502	363	881	809	812	566	614	1,004
Ballymena	386	548	170	577	552	818	653	627	813	523
Ballymoney	156	152	203	219	171	396	387	256	184	220
Banbridge	393	739	304	238	371	379	307	589	465	337
Belfast	849	1,148	875	1,150	1,037	1,165	927	1,067	1,711	1,502
Carrickfergus	227	162	280	51	309	114	200	490	354	309
Castlereagh	467	344	437	324	582	476	525	305	257	421
Coleraine	312	414	312	526	979	1,013	803	495	521	559
Cookstown	192	129	149	208	383	338	373	233	268	165
Craigavon	250	211	335	334	535	540	365	486	471	611
Down	361	396	251	388	680	802	649	678	827	403
Dungannon	259	221	169	244	379	456	469	366	432	375
Fermanagh	313	312	244	383	596	655	1,031	432	613	608
Larne	203	120	131	193	202	344	184	70	84	153
Limavady	223	261	319	355	457	607	505	327	184	259
Lisburn	449	515	495	732	909	700	963	559	927	594
Derry	328	488	322	464	904	301	345	568	875	588
Magherafelt	467	345	238	204	775	286	380	272	486	225
Moyle	211	168	168	102	152	230	149	184	194	132
Newry and Mourne	447	523	302	739	890	998	731	1,101	954	614
Newtownabbey	382	430	246	597	963	1,189	759	822	699	381
North Down	297	224	304	237	407	441	465	262	285	509
Omagh	455	284	276	303	698	584	577	643	340	161
Strabane	373	222	194	209	541	416	506	219	287	282

NOTE: Minor works includes minor road improvements, transportation measures, traffic management, accident remedial and minor bridge strengthening schemes.

MAJOR ROAD WORKS (CASH PRICES)

DISTRICT COUNCIL	89/90 £K	90/91 £K	91/92 £K	92/93 £K	93/94 £K	94/95 £K	95/96 £K	96/97 £K	97/98 £K	98/99 £K
Antrim	1,730	1,339	342	245	1,415	523	197	166	2,526	113
Ards	27	692	62	136	75	26	103	66	0	36
Armagh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymena	81	54	116	40	113	320	128	1,427	670	1,627
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	0
Banbridge	91	64	1,198	95	93	58	120	4	66	5
Belfast	5,427	3,931	7,208	7,621	12,475	10,890	4,476	4,475	2,897	1,401
Carrickfergus	84	126	163	19	144	697	98	502	1,412	205
Castlereagh	604	934	988	144	82	53	1,148	1,567	268	1,010
Coleraine	213	783	456	49	589	38	43	140	39	10
Cookstown	0	4	0	6	4	1	0	1	0	0
Craigavon	70	768	1,591	311	15	13	0	4	36	127
Down	210	80	22	64	128	150	2	445	1,018	325
Dungannon	65	204	238	60	43	3	0	11	936	90
Fermanagh	216	916	245	105	16	21	126	24	762	1,836
Larne	0	0	13	0	0	0	49	0	0	0
Limavady	430	56	64	222	653	424	95	53	11	0
Lisburn	1,634	1,987	2,306	276	597	369	566	867	1,441	334
Derry	655	268	1,300	1,367	381	858	469	40	146	174
Magherafelt	0	11	1,684	395	188	25	19	39	307	156
Moyle	0	1	0	17	0	0	0	0	10	0
Newry and Mourne	1,120	516	63	30	1,261	4,177	5,872	2,122	874	632
Newtownabbey	616	181	261	12	156	356	397	7	577	300
North Down	345	37	610	1,291	226	13	44	61	18	0
Omagh	2,264	1,587	130	330	107	795	2,050	1,148	71	104
Strabane	598	906	989	1,167	150	7	34	343	1,380	118

NOTE: Major works includes major road and bridge strengthening scheme.

Disabled Parking in Newry

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans, in relation to the Newry area, to; (a) increase parking facilities for the disabled; (b) improve access to car parks for the disabled; (c) improve public transport; and; (d) improve public transport for the disabled. (AQW 1166/00)

Mr Campbell:

- (a) As part of their programmed alterations to public car parks in Newry, my Department's Roads Service propose to increase the number of designated disabled parking bays in the following car parks:

	Existing	Proposed
Canal Bank 1 (ie Soho Island)	0	2
Canal Bank 2 & 3 (ie opposite the Buttercrane Centre)	3	5
Basin Walk	0	2
New Street	0	1
Kilmorey Street	2	4

The number of such bays is based on the level of demand in each car park and the car park's overall size.

- (b) Roads Service propose to carry out a number of improvements to the above car parks, including the provision of drop kerbs as necessary to improve access for people with disabilities. It is hoped that these improvements, including the additional parking bays, will be completed during the current financial year.

- (c) There have already been substantial improvements to public transport in the Newry area. The new Newry bus centre, costing £1.7M, was officially opened in November 1999. In addition, Translink has introduced three additional bus routes in the Newry area supported by the rural transport fund. Looking to the future; plans for a new railway station are at design stage and, in the interim, a new building, which incorporates a heated passenger waiting facility, toilets and ticket office has been provided. Translink also advise that, depending on the availability of rolling stock, they will be examining existing timetables with a view to improving rail services.
- (d) Discussions are taking place between Newry and Mourne District Council and Translink with a view to establishing an 'Easibus' service in Newry town. Many other improvements will provide better facilities for the disabled; for example, the provision of new, low-floor buses and the eventual new facility at Newry railway station will all have increased accessibility for people with disabilities.
- (c) The Roads Service study referred to in (a) concluded that the existing parking facilities within the town centre are sufficient to meet the future parking needs of the town and, consequently, there are no proposals to provide additional parking facilities at this time. However, Roads Service proposes to modify some of the current waiting restrictions and this is likely to result in a modest increase in the number of on-street car parking spaces in the town centre.
- (d) A number of Roads Service schemes to improve access to car parks have been completed or are ongoing, for example; an improved entrance layout at the Lower Water Street car park and a vehicle ramp linking Lower Water Street and Abbey Way car parks have been provided; traffic signs giving directions to town centre car parks were provided within recent years; a car park leaflet which includes a map showing the location of the car parks was published last year; and environmental improvements, currently ongoing in the car parks on either side of the bus station, include the provision of additional footpath links to improve access between the car parks and adjacent streets.

Traffic Management in Newry

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans, in relation to the Newry area, to; (a) improve traffic management; (b) decrease congestion on the main routes into the town; (c) increase parking facilities, and; (d) improve access to car parks.

(AQW 1167/00)

Mr Campbell:

- (a) Following consultation with Newry and Mourne District Council, my Department's Roads Service finalised a transportation and parking study of Newry in 1999. Flowing from this study:

work is nearing completion on a scheme to provide 2 lanes of traffic in both directions from Downshire Place to Water Street; design work is at an advanced stage to introduce traffic signals in place of roundabouts at William Street and Abbey Yard, and; the potential for improvements in the Merchants Quay/Sugar Island area and Sandy Street are currently being investigated.

- (b) Roads Service has recently installed a computer system to control and co-ordinate the operation of traffic signals on the main north/south route through Newry. This system is designed to assist traffic progression and currently operates during the morning and evening peak periods. Roads Service intends to develop the system in future to take account of traffic patterns at other times. In addition, the traffic management improvement schemes referred to above are also intended to improve traffic progression.

Roads Service Funds

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the criteria used to allocate Roads Service funds to the divisions within the Department.

(AQW 1204/00)

Mr Campbell: The budget available to my Department's Roads Service includes funds for major and minor capital works and for the maintenance of the road network.

In the case of major capital works, funds are not allocated on a divisional basis but are allocated for schemes that have been prioritised and included in the Roads Service major works preparation pool. Schemes are prioritised on the basis of their assessment against a broad range of criteria such as strategic planning policy, traffic flows, number of accidents, potential travel save times, environmental impact and value for money.

As regards minor capital works, funds are allocated to each of the four Roads Service divisions on a needs-based priority approach using criteria that take account of the length of roads, number of accidents and population.

As to road maintenance, funds are allocated across Divisions on the basis of need, using weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity. For example, the indicators used to allocate funds for the resurfacing of the non-trunk road network take account of the amount of travel on the network in each Division, the condition of the network in each Division and the carriageway area in each Division.

Sewage Overspill: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of incidents of raw sewage overspill in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area in each of the last five years. (AQW 1236/00)

Mr Campbell: Raw sewage overspills from Water Service infrastructure can occur in a variety of ways. They include; discharges from the normal operation of combined sewer overflows during periods of heavy rainfall; overflows to sea or waterways arising from problems at treatment works or pumping stations; small overspills arising from sewer blockages; and out-of-sewer flooding resulting from equipment failures, sewer collapses, or inadequate capacity to deal with the volume of rainfall.

Water Service does not have records of the number of incidents in each of these categories. The available information in respect of incidents in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area is as follows:-

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Reported pollution incidents resulting from sewage overflows to sea or waterways	3	2	2	0	4
Properties flooded internally from sewage overspill incidents	-	-	2	2	6

Water Service also has records of the number of customer complaints relating to blocked sewers and flooding over the past 3 years:-

	1998	1999	2000
Blocked Sewers	414	465	624
Flooding	19	69	111

The flooding complaints include all those reported to Water Service irrespective of the cause and will include multiple complaints about single incidents. The complaints also include flooding caused by surface water or overflowing watercourses as well as out of sewer flooding.

Administrative Data Sets

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the administrative data sets held by the Department and its agencies and detail whether these data sets provide qualitative data at enumeration district, electoral ward level, by district council area or by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1262/00)

Mr Campbell: The following administrative data sets are held by the Department for Regional Development and its Agencies:

Water Service customer billing system
Water Service work management system

Both of these databases contain postcode details, so that the data can be aggregated to all the specified geographical units subject to the requirement to respect the confidentiality of the subject.

Schools on Non-Gritted Roads

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how many; (a) primary schools, and; (b) post-primary schools, are on roads that are not on the Roads Service's gritting schedule. (AQW 1276/00)

Mr Campbell: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost. As you will be aware from my statement in the Assembly on 15 January 2000, I have initiated a review of my Department's current policy on the salting of roads. The review will examine the implications of salting school bus routes.

Armagh City Bypass

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has plans for a road bypass of Armagh City. (AQW 1278/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's major works preparation pool does not currently include plans for a bypass of Armagh. However, Roads Service is currently assessing a number of potential proposals, including schemes, which together would form a bypass of Armagh, for possible inclusion in its 10-year forward planning schedule. I hope to publish that schedule later this year.

Road Bridge at Creggan

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) his plans to improve the road bridge on the B30 Newry to Crossmaglen road at Creggan near Crossmaglen; (b) the number of occasions the bridge has required repair or reinstatement as a result of vehicle impact, and; (c) his plans to construct a new bridge on the B30 at Creggan. (AQW 1279/00)

Mr Campbell: Roads Service inspected the bridge in question in June 1999 as part of its general bridge inspection programme. The bridge was found to be in good structural condition and capable of taking normal construction and use heavy goods vehicles — 40 tonnes with effect from 1 January 1999. There are therefore no plans to improve the bridge or to construct a new bridge at that location. However, Roads Service does intend to improve sight visibility to the west of the Donaldson Road and the B30 Newry to Crossmaglen road junction adjacent to the bridge. The work, which is due to commence this month, will enhance awareness of the bridge.

The bridge was damaged in 1996 and 2000 as a result of road accidents and subsequent repairs were carried out.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Occupational Therapists

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of house holders presently awaiting visits by occupational therapists in relation to adaptations in; (a) Strabane District Council area and; (b) Omagh District Council area. (AQW 1163/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): The occupational therapy service is the responsibility of the Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive will make referrals to the service as a result of applications for adaptations from Housing Executive tenants and through private sector grant applicants who require work. The chief executive of the Housing Executive advises me that at 31 December 2000 the number of householders awaiting visits by occupational therapists as a result of a direct approach to the executive in relation to adaptations was as follows:

	Omagh District Council	Strabane District Council
Public Sector*	139	83
Private Sector	130	56
Total	269	139

* This figure only represents Housing Executive tenants who have made their initial request for an adaptation through their local Executive Office. Some tenants make their initial approach directly to the occupational therapy service, of which the Housing Executive has no record.

House Adaptations

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current average waiting time being experienced by house holders awaiting adaptations in Strabane and Omagh district council areas from the time of initial application and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1164/00)

Mr Morrow: This information is not available in the form requested.

When the Northern Ireland Housing Executive receives an application for an adaptation either from its tenants or through private sector grant applicants it refers the matter to the occupational therapy service of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for assessment. The chief executive of the Housing Executive has advised that it measure the waiting time

for adaptations for its tenants from the date of receipt of the occupational therapist's recommendation until the work commences. The average waiting times, therefore, for the public sector tenant in the 30 months to the end of September 2000 in Omagh and Strabane district council areas was 31 weeks. In the case of the private sector the average waiting time is 12 weeks in Strabane district council area and nine weeks in Omagh district council areas. The time is measured from receipt of the occupational therapist's recommendation to the issue of a schedule of works for tendering.

The Housing Executive is concerned about the length of time people are having to wait for adaptations. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Housing Executive officials undertook a joint and fundamental review in autumn 2000. The preliminary report was approved by the Housing Executive's board in December 2000 and is due to be presented to the Northern Ireland housing council this month. Work will start on the implementation of a number of recommendations at the same time as the report is circulated for consultation and prior to the publication of a final report, which is planned for March 2001.

Glenfield Housing Estate

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the latest position in relation to the phased scheme to be implemented at Glenfield Holding Estate in Carrickfergus. (AQW 1193/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. However, the chief executive advised me that the Housing Executive's board approved the overall strategy for the Glenfield estate in November 2000. Design drawings for the first phase of the strategy will be submitted to the board within the next three months. If the proposals are approved, the tendering process will begin with work estimated to start in the spring of 2002.

Compensation for Housing Executive Tenants

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to compensate Housing Executive tenants who have been living in temporary accommodation for over twelve months due to delays in the Northlands/Drummoy/Ederney/Salia renovation scheme in Carrickfergus. (AQW 1196/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. However, I am advised by its chief executive that tenants who have been living in temporary accommodation during renovation work for longer than the anticipated decanting period, will be assessed for exceptional payments upon returning to their homes following satisfactory completion of the improvements.

Windmill Estate

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to explain the delay in the planned scheme to refurbish Windmill Estate in Carrickfergus and if he is aware of any other delays to planned schemes in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area. (AQW 1242/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. However, I am advised by its chief executive that tenders received for the refurbishment work in Windmill Estate, Carrickfergus, were high in relation to the scheme estimate. This caused a delay in the scheme, as negotiations took place with the contractor in regard to cost savings.

There were also delays to schemes in Victoria (Phase 1) and Woodburn (Phase 4) estates.

Houses For Decant Purposes

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive properties currently held or used for decant purposes in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area.

(AQW 1245/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. However, the chief executive advises that there are 68 housing executive properties being used for decant purposes in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area.

Housing Executive Rent Arrears

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail; (a) the total amount of rent arrears owed to the Housing Executive; (b) how the total amount arose; (c) which areas have the highest proportion of tenants in arrears, and; (d) what steps he is taking to address this situation. (AQW 1258/00)

Mr Morrow:

(a) The rent arrears owing to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for the last two years is as follows:

1998-99	£13.3 million
1999-00	£14.6 million

(b) Rent arrears have arisen as a result of the following:

- (1) An accumulated historical debt comprising tenants who refuse to pay their rent. This was being managed annually on a downward trend.
- (2) More recently a reduction in housing benefit uptake as a result of formerly unemployed tenants finding work has meant an increase in the amount of cash to be collected from tenants who previously had nothing

to pay. Many of those tenants are in low-income employment, which makes debt recovery very difficult.

- (3) There has been a significant increase in the identification of overpayments since 1996 and in particular over the last year due to the Executive's success in detecting fraud. More recently, the Executive has implemented a series of data matching exercises — checking income information with other agencies — resulting in the identification of tenants who, as a result of non-disclosure of information, were overpaid benefit. Given that the amount overpaid in individual cases can be high the recovery period is long.
- (4) It is Housing Executive accounting practice to debit rent accounts with housing benefit overpayments, which are deemed to be recoverable from tenants.
- (5) The voluntary and compulsory methods at the Housing Executive's disposal are in some instances very slow in recovering arrears.
- (c) The areas having the highest proportion of tenants in arrears at 31 March 2000 were:

1.	Carrickfergus	17.4%
2.	Newtownabbey 2	16.6%
3.	Larne	15.9%
4.	Waterside	15.5%
5.	Limavady	15.3%
6.	Newtownabbey 1 (Rathcoole)	14.6%
7.	Bangor	14.6%
8.	Belfast (West)	14.4%
9.	Newtownards	14.0%
10.	Belfast 7 (South)	13.9%

- (d) I have agreed with the Housing Executive that debt recovery should be one of its most important priorities. Therefore a target of ensuring that total arrears at 31 March 2001 do not increase beyond the figure at 31 March 2000 is included as a key performance indicator in the Housing Executive's current business plan.

Unfortunately, due largely to the Housing Executive's success in detecting housing benefit fraud, arrears this year are increasing. In response to the increase in arrears, the Housing Executive carried out a review of its policies, procedures, working practices and monitoring arrangements. The proposals have received board approval and are in the process of being implemented. The main changes are as follows; more rigorous monitoring and reporting, including greater publicity for court action taken against debtors; implementation of additional debt prevention techniques, in particular, the provision of money advice services — debt counselling — for tenants; introduction of “nil charge weeks” policy at some point

in the future to help tenants with household budgeting at the two to three specific times of the year when they encounter a significant increase in normal expenditure, eg, Christmas. Under this policy the annual rent/rates charges would be collected over a shorter number of weeks. Finally, there is the initiation of recovery of possession action against all tenants with serious arrears who refuse to pay their rent.

The Housing Executive's arrears recovery performance compares well with that of large landlords in GB, and on the latest information available they are ranked 110 on the rent debtor's league table — No 1 being the worst.

Benefit Forms

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the steps he is taking to simplify benefit forms. (AQW 1283/00)

Mr Morrow: Benefit forms are constantly reviewed by the Social Security Agency and work is currently underway to simplify a number of claim forms. Customers with difficulty can also contact their local Social Security Office for help with completing forms. Alternatively arrangements can be made to call at their home.

The welfare reforms and modernisation programme will, over the next few years, see a much simpler and more streamlined application process introduced for all benefits. It will provide customers with a range of choices on how to claim, including the facility to take claims by telephone.

Child Support Agency: Complaints

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average waiting time in Northern Ireland between a complaint being referred to the independent case examiner for the Child Support Agency and the beginning of the investigation into that complaint. (AQW 1285/00)

Mr Morrow: The average waiting time in Northern Ireland between a complaint being referred to the independent case examiner for the Child Support Agency and the beginning of the investigation into that complaint for the year 2000-01 is currently 16 weeks.

As soon as the agency is aware of a potential independent case examiner case it commences its own investigation. The customer is contacted and every effort is made to resolve the issues of concern as early as possible.

Of the eight cases referred to the independent case examiner during 1999-2000; one was rejected by the independent case examiner's office; one complaint was

withdrawn by the client; and six were accepted for investigation following the initial review.

Means Testing for Pensioners

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how many more pensioners will be means tested in the next financial year under measures announced in the pre-budget statement. (AQW 1290/00)

Mr Morrow: The Social Security Agency is unable to estimate how many more pensioners will be entitled to the minimum income guarantee as a result of the new rules that come into effect from April 2001. However, the Agency will continue to actively encourage uptake of the minimum income guarantee through a range of measures to ensure that all pensioners claim and receive all the help they are entitled to.

Reduce Fuel Poverty

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the steps he is taking to reduce fuel poverty. (AQW 1291/00)

Mr Morrow: I am introducing a new domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES), which will provide a comprehensive package of insulation measures for vulnerable private sector householders in receipt of an income or disability based benefit. The new programme will also include, for over 60s private householders on income-based benefits, improvements in both insulation and heating standards. Following the appointment of a scheme manager, new DEES will start on 1 April 2001, commencing a lead in period covering scheme marketing, tendering and client registration, for the installation of physical measures on 1 July 2001.

In addition, my Department, in partnership with a number of organisations, has been operating fuel poverty pilot schemes in parts of Belfast, Londonderry, Armagh and Dungannon where there is severe social and economic deprivation. Whilst reducing fuel poverty in these areas, the schemes have enabled the Department to test matters for the introduction of the proposed new statutory DEES scheme.

Fuel poverty in public housing is not as highly concentrated as the private housing sector therefore responsibility for addressing the issue will rest with the social landlord. My Department will be liaising with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and housing associations to ensure that mechanisms are in place to address fuel poverty in the public sector.

Social Security: Fraud

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how much fraud cost the social security system during the last financial year for which figures are available. (AQW 1292/00)

Mr Morrow: The Social Security Agency has been measuring levels of benefit fraud across all benefits since 1998. Findings to date show that fraud costs about £73 million, or 3%, of benefit expenditure annually, excluding pensions. Fraud is minimal in pensions benefits where it is not possible to provide a statistically valid figure.

Administration Costs

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the percentage of the social fund spent on administrative costs. (AQW 1293/00)

Mr Morrow: No part of the social fund budget is allocated towards administrative costs. The costs are met from the Social Security Agency's running costs budget and have no impact on the social fund budget, which is used entirely to make payments to customers.

Child Support Agency: Complaints

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail for the financial years 1996-97, 1997-98, 1998-99, 2000-01 to date; (i) the number of complaints referred to the independent case examiner for the Child Support Agency from Northern Ireland; (ii) the number of complaints where an initial review was completed, and; (iii) the number of complaints where a substantive investigation took place following the initial review. (AQW 1301/00)

Mr Morrow: The office of the independent case examiner (ICE) opened in April 1997, therefore the earliest information available is for the year 1997-98.

	Number of complaints referred	Initial review completed	Substantive investigation took place
1997/8	13 – 4 not appropriate to ICE	9 – 2 failed initial review	7
1998/9	11	11 – 5 failed initial review	6
1999/00	8 – one not appropriate to ICE	7 – one complaint withdrawn by client	6
2000/01	22 – 4 not appropriate to ICE	18 – 12 failed initial review – one withdrawn by client	0 – 2 currently under investigation – 3 awaiting investigation

Carers

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline which group of carers for the elderly will benefit from the recently announced changes in benefits for carers. (AQW 1304/00)

Mr Morrow: Carers aged 65 and older who meet the normal entitlement conditions will be able to get invalid care allowance. Carers whose rate of basic retirement pension is less than the rate of invalid care allowance will benefit, as will carers receiving the pensioner minimum income guarantee, who will receive the carer premium. Those carers who work on a part-time basis and whose income does not exceed the current earnings limit of £50 per week will also benefit as this limit will increase to the level of the lower earnings limit, which is currently £67 per week. Carers earning between £50 and £67 who would not be entitled to invalid care allowance under the current rules will also be able to claim.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what recent steps he has taken to counter benefit fraud. (AQW 1307/00)

Mr Morrow: The Social Security Agency has a comprehensive fraud strategy, which contains an extensive programme of initiatives designed to secure the gateway to benefits and to detect and eliminate fraud already in the system. The strategy includes: tightening up evidence requirements to ensure that only valid claims are accepted; more regular reviews of existing cases to ensure that circumstances have not changed; use of data matching techniques; working with the Inland Revenue and Housing Executive for co-operation and sharing of information to improve joint-effectiveness; and an improved training package for all fraud staff.

The Agency has earmarked over £40 million to be invested in this programme over the next three years. In the last two years for which figures are available more than £72 million was saved.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in Northern Ireland who are in receipt of disability living allowance as a life award, broken down by rate. (AQW 1321/00)

Mr Morrow: The latest available figures show that 97,843 people living in Northern Ireland are in receipt of disability living allowance for an indefinite period — formerly called a life award. The attached table gives a breakdown of the awards by rate.

TABLE OF DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE INDEFINITE PERIOD AWARDS BY RATE, AT NOVEMBER 2000

Rate of Award	Number in Receipt
High Rate Care & High Rate Mobility	20,878
High Rate Care & Low Rate Mobility	4,868
High Rate Care Only	599
Middle Rate Care & High Rate Mobility	23,419
Middle Rate Care & Low Rate Mobility	10,070
Middle Rate Only	2,454
Low Rate Care & High Rate Mobility	13,557
Low Rate Care & Low Rate Mobility	2,733
Low Rate Care Only	7,640
High Rate Mobility Only	10,190
Low Rate Mobility Only	1,435
Total	97,843

Urban Regeneration

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the progress he has made in developing the new strategy for urban regeneration. (AQO 619/00)

Mr Morrow: My officials have been working for some months on a revised strategy for urban regeneration policies and actions, the main plank of which will be a new integrated programme which addresses the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland along the lines embraced by New TSN.

An over-arching urban regeneration strategy document is currently being finalised for discussion with other Government Departments whose future co-operation and involvement is vital to the success of the proposed new arrangements. My Department will also be consulting more widely on the new strategy in the coming months. That will involve Assembly structures, other elected representatives, and key partners and stakeholders in the public, private and community/voluntary sectors.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Recruiting Full Time Staff

Mr McGrady asked the Assembly Commission to detail the policies and procedures it has adopted in recruiting full-time staff and to make a statement.

(AQO 588/00)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Dr O'Hagan): As you were not able to be present for questions, the Assembly Commission has agreed that I should provide a written response to your question.

In February 1999, the New Northern Ireland Assembly endorsed the Shadow Commission's principles governing the employment of staff. These were:

- the promotion of the commitment to equality of opportunity and fair treatment in all of the Commission's recruitment practices;
- the commitment to public advertisement for all vacancies; and
- the establishment of a discrete cadre of Assembly staff, which is not just an off-shoot of the Northern Ireland Civil Service but which reflects the wider Northern Ireland community.

As part of its human resource strategy, the Assembly Commission has adopted the recruitment principle of selection on merit on the basis of fair and open competition. This principle is applied to all Assembly recruitment competitions and adherence to this principle maintains the integrity of the Assembly and cultivates an environment in which applicants for Assembly posts will have confidence in knowing that they will be treated equally and fairly.

The recruitment principle is the foundation upon which the Commission's recruitment procedures are based and it ensures that:

- advertised posts attract as wide a pool of applicants as desired;
- all applicants are afforded equality of treatment during the course of their candidature in recruitment competitions; and
- only the most suitable candidates will be appointed to Assembly posts.

The following will serve to illustrate the robust and defensible nature of the Commission's comprehensive range of recruitment policies and procedures, which enjoy the confidence of the Assembly and the wider community:

- All vacancies in the Assembly are subject to public advertisement in the local Northern Ireland daily newspapers and, when appropriate by advertisements in the UK and Republic of Ireland national papers. Advertising coverage for each post is determined by the Assembly Commission.
- All job advertisements include the Assembly Commission's equal opportunities statement, which pronounces the Commission's commitment to fairness, equity and selection on merit and welcomes all eligible candidates.
- All job criteria are decided and clearly defined by the selection panel — and the Commission for selected posts — before the job is advertised. The criteria are justifiable against the requirements of the job. Additional criteria cannot be introduced thereafter.

- iv. Application forms are designed to seek only information relevant to the assessment of candidates against the criteria specified for the job.
- v. All members of selection panels — including members of the Assembly Commission — have received interviewing skills and equal opportunities training.
- vi. Selection panels comprise male and female representatives and are composed of people from more than one community background.
- vii. Panel members assess each candidate only against the specified criteria and only on the basis of performance at interview and such information on the candidate presented to the panel as part of the selection process.

- viii. Pre-employment checks into health and criminal records are conducted in respect of all candidates being considered for appointment.

The first advertisements for Assembly posts appeared in January 2000. To date, 13 recruitment competitions have been run on behalf of the Assembly Commission for posts such as Researchers, Transcribers, Assembly Clerks and the Clerk to the Assembly. Over 5000 application forms have been issued in response to the advertisements; 1500 application forms have been processed; and nearly 60 appointments have been made.

For information, a statistical breakdown of applicants and appointees by gender and community background is provided in the attached tables. I hope that you find the information informative.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY RECRUITMENT STATISTICS AS AT 19 JANUARY 2001

APPLICATIONS RECEIVED JAN – DEC 2000:

Applications	Male	Female	Protestant	Roman Catholic	Not Determined
1433	644(45%)	789 (55%)	686 (48%)	653 (46%)	94 (6%)

APPOINTMENTS MADE:

Appointments	Male	Female	Protestant	Roman Catholic	Not Determined
59	36(61%)	23 (39%)	22 (37%)	31 (53%)	6 (10%)

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