



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

Volume 9

(1 February 2001 to 11 March 2001)

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1 February 2001 to 11 March 2001

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 5 February 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

STREET TRADING BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: As no amendments to clauses 1 to 8 have been tabled, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group those clauses.

Clauses 1 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 9 (Discretionary grounds for refusing an application)

The Chairperson of the Social Development Committee (Mr Cobain): I beg to move amendment 1: In page 6, line 36, leave out "or".

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In page 6, after line 40 add

"or

- (iv) there are sufficient traders trading in the street from shops or otherwise in the articles, things or services in which the applicant desires to trade." — *[Mr Cobain]*

No 3 (amendment to amendment 2): Leave out from "street" to the end and add

"street, or at premises adjoining it, in the articles, things or services in which the applicant wishes to trade." — *[Mr Morrow]*

No 4: In page 6, after line 40 insert

"() it is believed that the preparation or sale of a specified type of article or thing would adversely affect the general amenity of the area." — *[Mr S Wilson]*

Mr Cobain: The Social Development Committee took evidence from a number of sources and considered the Bill in depth. In general, the Bill is welcomed by the Committee, as it provides for a modern and effective framework for the regulation of street trading in our towns and cities.

It is the Committee's belief that this Bill will have an important and enduring impact on modern trading in towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland. This Bill

is a long-overdue response to a rapidly deteriorating situation. Illegal trading on our streets has long been on the increase. There is huge opposition to the spread of unsightly street trading, which operates in flagrant disregard of existing but outdated legislation. This Bill represents a complex piece of legislation that deals with issues that have not been dealt with for well over 70 years.

The Social Development Committee is agreed that it is necessary to modernise legislation and introduce meaningful control over illegal street trading. It also wants to strive to add to the new sense of vitality and vibrancy that is developing in our towns and cities. As a Committee which is concerned with the regeneration of Northern Ireland's towns and cities, we want to play our role in encouraging ingenuity and new dimensions.

Therefore the Assembly needs to get this legislation right, not only for the health, safety and convenience of the public, but also for the sake of those street traders who bring a welcome blend of colour and character to commercial areas. To further this objective, the Committee is proposing two amendments to clause 9. The Committee feels that if, for example, there are already five people selling flowers in a particular location, or that there is a plethora of burger bars, a council may occasionally want to use this as grounds to refuse an application.

Difficulties with regard to planning legislation have arisen in the past due to a lack of an adequacy clause. These difficulties will also apply to street trading. There could be 10 burger bars or hot-food takeaways on one stretch of the road. Nothing can be done about that under the Bill as it is currently drafted. It may be suitable to have 10 pitches in a street, but it may not be desirable for them all to sell the same thing.

By way of illustration, the Committee believes that 10 burger bars in one street would undoubtedly have an adverse affect on an area's amenity due to odour, litter, noise and so forth. Adequacy could be used in that scenario. The Committee believes that it is essential for the Bill to have a clause covering the need for adequacy for certain types of street trading.

I ask the Assembly to fully support the Committee's views on this. I know that the Minister and his Department have subsequently considered the aspects of adequacy and my Committee's deep concerns. In light of this amendment, they have tabled their own amendment to ensure that this addition to the Bill is an effective and integral part of regulating street trading in our towns and cities. I commend the Minister and his Department for this, and I urge the Assembly's full support in endorsing these amendments.

Mr S Wilson: Are we dealing only with amendment 2?

Mr Speaker: The Assembly is dealing with the first group of amendments — numbers 1 to 4 — including the amendment standing in your own name.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the fact that this Bill has finally come before the House. It would be remiss of me if I did not pay tribute to Nigel Dodds, former Minister for Social Development, and to Maurice Morrow for bringing this forward.

During the direct rule period, councils across Northern Ireland waited approximately 5 years for this legislation's introduction. They highlighted the inadequacy of the existing street trading legislation and the fact that those who chose to trade illegally in town and city streets across Northern Ireland faced little or no sanction. Despite the urgency of the case, especially in Belfast — but in other towns across the Province too — the direct rule Administration showed no haste in bringing forward adequate and proper legislation. The fact that this legislation is before the House today is an indication that matters are responded to when local people are in charge of issues in Northern Ireland.

I want to make it clear that this legislation is not about stopping street trading. In many cases, street trading can add to the colour and vibrancy of a town and a city. It provides a different type of shopping experience, which many of us have viewed as an asset in other cities. However, the situation in Northern Ireland was that street trading was not an asset in many town centres; it had become a detriment to them. Indeed, the number of complaints and letters I have had would indicate that.

This piece of legislation is welcome, as there will now be effective sanctions for councils to use against those who choose to trade in our streets illegally. However, as with all pieces of legislation, and especially those drawn up by people who are not the actual practitioners of the law, there can be gaps.

One such gap will be dealt with by amendment 4, which is being moved in my name. It deals with the nuisance that can be caused by some activities, especially those that do not sit easily with the trading activities located beside them. For example, in a number of places across Belfast outdoor burger bars are located at the doors of shops selling clothes. Inevitably, food preparation creates a smell, which in many cases wafts into the premises and clings to the clothes. Those traders — who are paying substantial rates and who have a substantial investment in their business — find that their business is being affected detrimentally.

Although it may be a huge nuisance for the clothes shops in question, it would not constitute a nuisance as defined in the Public Health Act, because it does not lead to rodent infestation, or whatever. Therefore there needs to be a clause to give councils discretionary powers to look at that type of situation.

There may be a number of objections to this, and I want to deal with some of them quickly. When the Committee discussed the matter the first objection was that an amendment such as this would be so general that it could be

interpreted too widely and, therefore, would not make for good legislation. I suppose that suggestion also applies to the amendment that has been moved by the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee.

Looking at the Street Trading Bill, one can see that this argument is not unique to amendment 4. Indeed, the very nature of this type of legislation requires that you cannot be too descriptive — otherwise many types of activities could fall outside the legislation. For example, in clause 9 the first provision that a council may use to refuse an application is that the location at which the applicant wishes to trade as a stationary trader is unsuitable. It could be argued that that provision is fairly wide. Another provision is that if the trading would cause “undue interference or inconvenience”. Others provide for the revocation of a licence if someone “has persistently failed” to do something or other. None of those terms are defined.

Therefore anyone who says that this amendment will widen the legislation too much or will make it too vague fails to understand the very nature of the type of legislation we are dealing with. It cannot be prescriptive. If it were, it would not work because there would always be loopholes.

Another argument that has been made is that the amendment would discriminate against a particular kind of trader. For example, I have mentioned hot-food bars. The defence against that is bizarre. Those who say that this is not necessary argue that a council could stop all hot-food bars if it so wished. Indeed, it was suggested that a council should have the power to say that an activity is not permitted. A clause that gives a council some discretion and allows an activity in a suitable place is a better alternative to using the legislation as a sledgehammer and banning all activities that might cause the difficulties I referred to earlier.

10.45 am

Another argument suggested that if there were clothes shops on a street, that street should not be designated as being suitable for street trading. That is more all-embracing than the discretionary power suggested in the amendment.

It was also argued — and I found this bizarre — that since the Bill deals with public health matters there should be changes made to the public health legislation. However, the House is not dealing with the kind of nuisance that that is designed to deal with. The Bill is dealing with specific reasons for considering if a location is suitable or unsuitable for street trading. When the Social Development Committee discussed the Bill it was repeatedly stated that if there was already legislation in place to deal with an activity then one should go back to the primary legislation. In the Bill there are references to street trading interfering with car parking. One may therefore argue that the matter should be dealt with under traffic legislation. There are also references to traders

who use under-age people on their stalls, so it could be argued that it should be dealt with under child protection legislation.

There will be a certain amount of crossover in the legislation. The amendment gives councils the discretionary power to look at situations where they have to justify their reasons for making a decision if an appeal is made against that decision. That will be a problem. Therefore it is important that it is dealt with now and that effective legislation is introduced. In six months' time the Assembly will not want councils deciding that changes have to be made in health legislation or some other legislation. Those changes could take a year or two to get through.

Many street traders want to go into city centres to offer a different shopping experience and to add colour to them. However, there are others who seek to abuse the system and to use every available loophole. It is important that the Assembly introduce effective, watertight legislation that will enable councils to properly control the activities that go on in towns and cities.

Mr A Maginness: I support the amendments that have been presented by the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee and by Mr Sammy Wilson. The Assembly is aiming for controlled and regulated street trading. The amendments will assist in that and make effective control of street trading possible.

Members do not want to put anyone off the streets. We want to see people on the streets, trading in a regulated, controlled fashion. We do not want to see any illegal street trading, and this legislation will deal effectively with that.

Mr Wilson's amendment is a very valuable contribution. There is a problem. It may not be the most serious problem, but ordinary retailers in the centre of Belfast, Derry or other towns could have their trade adversely affected by the smells from burger stands, which will inevitably contaminate clothing and other items in their shops. It is a very effective amendment, but there may be other problems relating to the general amenity of the area. The legislation should also include a weapon to deal with that.

The argument is that clause 9(1)(a)(i) could deal with it. That is being put forward as an effective means for dealing with that problem or series of problems. That may well be, but Mr Wilson's amendment will deal with this problem. It will bring certainty to the legislation, and that is very important. It should also be remembered that this will be a discretionary power given to the council, and not something that will act as a total block or prohibition on the type of activity that could lead to a nuisance for ordinary retailers.

Amendment 4, together with clause 9(1)(a)(i), is a belt-and-braces exercise. If it cannot be dealt with under clause 9(1)(a)(i), then it can be dealt with under Mr Wilson's

amendment. It has particular value in strengthening the legislation, and Members should seek to strengthen it rather than allow some sort of vagueness or escape that would not deal with the problem of street trading.

Therefore I am happy to support amendment 4 and also amendments 1, 2 and 3.

Mr Dodds: We welcome the Consideration Stage of the Bill. When I was Minister, the Department for Social Development gave high priority to this Bill because we believed, and still believe, that illegal street trading is a major problem, particularly in Belfast city centre. It has been around for a long time and Belfast City Council, as well as other local authorities and councillors, has been anxious to see progress on reforming the law, which is totally inadequate as it currently stands.

Therefore we welcome the fact that we have reached this important stage in getting the legislation through the Assembly. I believe it will make a real difference. As Members will be aware, the current position is regulated by legislation, passed in 1929, that was designed for a situation totally different from that which currently prevails on our streets.

Every year, particularly in the run-up to Christmas, we see a flourishing illegal market. We can even see it in the city centre at the moment. I have received numerous complaints, as have others, about the way in which these stalls are operated, the total lack of regulation and of any proper health or hygiene standards appropriate to the selling of food, and the obstruction caused to users of the footpaths, particularly disabled people, mothers with prams and young children and the elderly. There is very little redress, in many cases, where goods of a shoddy or unfit nature are sold. There is very little comeback for those who purchase goods at those illegal stalls.

The centre of Belfast has been turned into some sort of shabby street market. In some of our prime retail areas, traders and shopkeepers paying very high rents and rates are being grossly disadvantaged by this sort of illegal activity. I want to stress, as others have stressed, that we are not against properly regulated street trading — it can add vibrancy and colour to our streets. But what is happening at present is simply unacceptable on a number of fronts and it has to be dealt with. I know from my own experience that Belfast City Council has tried and tried to enforce the old legislation, which has proved totally inadequate. At the same time, it has been looking at ways to encourage legal street trading and to encourage something that will add to our city centre and bring people in, rather than turning people off as the current situation does.

I welcome these proposals. I am glad that the Minister has listened carefully to the arguments that have been put forward by Members. I thank him for taking the time to meet with a number of us. I know that he has also spoken to the Committee about these issues. I believe

that the legislation as presented, which I hope will go through this House, will go a long way to ensuring that we do not have to endure another Christmas like those we have previously endured, particularly on the streets of Belfast city centre. I believe that this will make a real difference to illegal street trading.

I particularly welcome the clauses that ensure that councils will have real powers to seize goods that are being traded illegally. That will give councils an opportunity to put a speedy end to illegal street trading. After taking people to court, and in many cases trying to find out who they are, what their real names are and what their proper addresses are, you discover that at the end of the day all they receive is a rather small fine. It has proved totally inadequate.

I support the amendments tabled by the Committee and by Mr Wilson. I believe that he outlined very succinctly the reasons behind the addition of his amendment. It is important that there should be in this legislation the sort of provision that he has tabled to take account of the impact that the preparation and sale of certain types of articles, particularly burgers and hot food, have on the general amenity of the area. It is important that that is included in the legislation as one of the factors that can be taken into account. I hope that the House will support that amendment.

We have an opportunity, through this legislation, to make a real difference. It will be warmly welcomed and applauded by local authority and council officials who have to enforce action against illegal street trading. This will give them the ammunition and power to carry out that work for the benefit of our town and city centres and for our residents.

11.00 am

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow):

I want to acknowledge an important point that a number of Members have made, which is that this Bill cannot be interpreted as anti-street trading legislation. It is anything but that. It is an attempt to tidy up the situation.

I thank the Chairman of the Social Development Committee, Mr Cobain, for outlining why the Committee is bringing this amendment before the House. I understand the Committee's desire to allow district councils to have control over the proliferation of particular types of goods, and I am happy, therefore, to accept the amendment in principle.

However, the Department's legislative draftsman has advised that the wording of the proposed amendment is flawed as the definition of "street" in the Bill specifically excludes any area in enclosed premises. Therefore the wording "trading in the street from shops" would not be technically correct. The opportunity has been taken to replace the word "desires" with the word "wishes" since this would be consistent with similar provisions within the Bill such as in clause 5 (4)(b) and clause 9(1)(a). I

hope Members will accept the amendments. The changes will not, in any way, affect the content of the amendment — they are very much technical changes.

I thank Mr Wilson for explaining the reasons behind his proposed amendment to clause 9. The provisions of the Public Health (Ireland) Act 1878 deal with the issue of odours in a general way. However, they are totally ineffective in dealing with the problem of people selling burgers in the street — a concept that was unheard of when the legislation was introduced.

I understand the concern that odours from those traders could permeate shops, particularly clothing shops. This provision will provide councils with powers to deal with a very specific problem. Therefore I propose to accept the amendment. However, I have some reservations about the precise wording of the amendment. I want to consider that in greater detail, and I may bring forward refinements at the Further Consideration Stage. I do not think there are any other points that need to be dealt with at this particular point.

Mr Cobain: The Committee welcomes the Minister's comments — especially the intentions to strengthen and improve the quality and clarity of the legislation. I thank the Minister for his time and for his response to the Committee. I think everyone in the House will be pleased if the legislation, as it stands, goes through.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Amendment (No 2) proposed: In page 6, after line 40, insert

"or

- (iv) there are sufficient traders trading in the street from shops or otherwise in the articles, things or services in which the applicant desires to trade". — [Mr Cobain]

Mr Speaker: Because amendment 3 is an amendment to amendment 2, we will take amendment 3 — if moved — and vote on that and then vote on the amendment as amended, if it is amended.

Amendment (No 3)(amendment to amendment 2) made: Leave out from "street" to the end and add

"street, or at premises adjoining it, in the articles, things or services in which the applicant wishes to trade". — [Mr Morrow]

Amendment 2, as amended, made: In page 6, after line 40 insert

"or

- (iv) there are sufficient traders trading in the street, or at premises adjoining it, in the articles, things or services in which the applicant wishes to trade. — [Mr Cobain]

Amendment (No 4) made: In page 6, after line 40 insert

" () it is believed that the preparation or sale of a specified type of article or thing would adversely affect the general amenity of the area". — [Mr S Wilson]

Clause 9, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 10 (Revocation, etc. of street trading licences)

Mr Morrow: I beg to move amendment 5: In page 7, line 32, leave out ‘applicant’ and insert ‘licence holder’.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 6: In page 7, line 33, leave out “applicant” and insert “licence holder”. — [Mr Morrow]

No 7: In page 7, line, 40, leave out “applicant” and insert “licence holder”. — [Mr Morrow]

These amendments set out the circumstances in which a district council may revoke an existing street trading licence. As a licence will already be in existence, the provisions will only be relevant to licence holders. However, at three places in the clause, reference is being made to the “applicant”. The amendments correct those errors.

Amendment 5 agreed to.

Amendment (No 6) made: In page 7, line 33, leave out “applicant” and insert “licence holder”. — [Mr Morrow]

Amendment (No 7) made: In page 7, line 40, leave out “applicant” and insert “licence holder”. — [Mr Morrow]

Clause 10, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 11 to 16 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 17 (Unlicensed street trading)

Mr Morrow: I beg to move amendment 8: In page 13, line 8, insert

“() is the holder of a street trading licence and contravenes a condition of a kind specified in paragraph (a) or (c) of section 7(1);”.

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

No 9 (clause 21): In page 16, line 11, leave out “(a) to (g)” and insert “(b), (d), (e), (f) or (g)”. — [Mr Morrow]

Amendment 8 will make it an offence to engage in street trading without a full-term licence, or contrary to the terms of a temporary licence. Anyone doing so will be liable to have his or her goods and equipment seized by a district council.

The Bill, as currently drafted, makes it an offence for a licensed trader to trade in a location, or on a day, or at a time, not specified on the licence. However, it does not permit a council to seize the goods of the offender. That could leave the door open for unscrupulous traders to apply for a licence for one street, with the sole intention of trading in a more lucrative street. It could take several months to have the licence revoked, during which time the person could continue to trade illegally without the threat of seizure.

The most appropriate solution to the problem is my amendment to clause 17. This will make it an offence — under clause 17 — for a street trading licence holder to

trade in a different place, on a different day, or at a different time, to that specified in the licence. Persons reasonably suspected of committing an offence under clause 17 may have their goods seized. Licensed traders will therefore be brought under this sanction. A consequential amendment will be required in clause 21(a) to remove the reference there to paragraph (a) and (c) of clause 7 and bring it into line with clause 17.

Mr Dodds: I welcome the amendment. Clearly, there was clearly a gap in which those who obtained a licence for one location could move to another location. There would still be penalties under the original drafting of the legislation, taking the form of fines if prosecution were to result.

Clearly, one of the problems with the original legislation we are now reforming is that there are penalties in the form of fines but, by the time that people are taken through the courts and fined, the damage is already done and the illegal activity has been allowed to continue. This amendment will close that gap. It will ensure that powers of seizure will apply on the part of the local authority to those who have a licence to trade in one location but attempt to move to another. The amendment is to be warmly welcomed because that was clearly going to be a problem for councils. I commend the Minister for recognising that and for moving to close the gap. I trust that it will have the support of the House.

Mr S Wilson: I also welcome the fact that a considerable gap in the legislation has been closed by the inclusion of this amendment. As clause 17 stood, all that could have happened had someone obtained a licence, as Mr Dodds has said, is that he could have been taken to court and the maximum level 3 fine imposed. This shows the importance of being able to scrutinise legislation more closely in the House. In Belfast, we have often found that some of the unscrupulous traders are quite happy to go to court and to have a fine imposed — sometimes a number of fines. Then, when trading is a bit slack, they go to jail for a week or so instead of paying the fines, and that is the end of the story. This change will prevent that. Anyone with a licence who traded in the wrong place — perhaps used the licence to get the door open and then waltzed all around a town or city — will now no longer be able to do so, because the seizure powers will apply.

When we looked at this, the argument was that a council could revoke a licence. However, clause 10 states that a licence can be revoked only if a person persistently trades in the wrong place or breaks the terms of the licence. As Mr Dodds has said, someone who wished to abuse his licence by trading in a more lucrative patch than that originally designated for him has been able to keep on doing so for a considerable time before the council could revoke the licence. Fines have not been effective, and the revocation of a licence cannot be done immediately. In proposing this amendment, therefore, the

Minister has recognised that the legislation fell far short of what was required to deal with those traders who abused the conditions of their licences, and that is to be welcomed.

Mr Morrow: I do not wish to add anything to what I have already said. I understand that the two Members who spoke support the amendment enthusiastically, and I commend it to the House.

Amendment 8 agreed to.

Clause 17, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to clauses 18 to 20. I therefore propose, by leave, to put the question on those clauses en bloc.

Clauses 18 to 20 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

11.15 am

Clause 21 (Other offences)

Amendment (No 9) made: In page 16, line 11, leave out “(a) to (g)” and insert “(b), (d), (e), (f) or (g)”. — [Mr Morrow]

Clause 21, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 22 to 30 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Street Trading Bill, which now stands referred to the Speaker.

ASSEMBLY: ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Mr Speaker: I want to draw the attention of the House to the fact that three questions to the Minister of the Environment for this afternoon have been redirected. It was only at 9 o'clock this morning that the Business Office was advised that these questions — number 4, from Mr John Fee; number 9, in the name of Mr P J Bradley; and number 10, in the name of Mr Jim Wilson — had been transferred to the Department for Regional Development.

Advice was received earlier that question 5, in the name of Mr Kieran McCarthy, would be answered by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

I draw this matter to the attention of the House because it was a very late call, and Members who tabled other questions will need to know the facts. I have also asked that the matter be shown on the annunciator. It is not helpful to the House when calls of this kind are made at such a late stage.

Mr P Robinson: This seems to be occurring regularly. The Table Office in the House of Commons would not accept a question not properly directed. It is not the job of the Speaker to waste his time and, indeed, ours in going through this procedure regularly. Surely we can get a system in the Assembly and the Departments to ensure that every question on the Paper is directed to the appropriate Minister.

Mr Speaker: In fairness to the Business Office, I should say that the dilemma is that there is not always complete clarity on the part of Departments as to the boundaries for certain questions. On occasions, when the Business Office advises a Member that it believes his question to be outside the remit of one Department and within that of another, the Member is insistent that this is not the case. Usually, though not invariably, it turns out that the Business Office is correct.

Frequently, in the first instance, there is a lack of clarity on the part of Departments as to who precisely should take responsibility. I accept entirely that this does not make good use of the time of the Speaker or of the House. I trust that, as these issues are clarified, we will be able to set sound precedents.

Mr O'Neill: Is it not true that when a Member is denied the opportunity of putting his question on the day for which it is tabled, he gets a written reply, disadvantaging him in that he is not able to ask a supplementary?

Mr Speaker: The Member is entirely correct. It is also a disadvantage to the House, in that other Members too are unable to ask supplementary questions. When there is such a late call — as has happened on three questions — Members may have sought to be present to ask supplementary questions. This creates considerable

inconvenience for the House and is not satisfactory, which is why I have conveyed the matter to the Civil Service authorities.

Mr J Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. When I framed my question — you will obviously not permit me to go into detail about it — I was clearly drawing attention to a road safety matter in connection with reckless driving on the outside lane of the M2 in rush-hour traffic. It was clearly framed so as to be referred to Minister Sam Foster, as he is responsible for road safety. Somewhere along the way — and I have yet to discover where — the wording in my question was changed to “traffic-calming measures”. I can understand why someone might have wanted to change it, but it has resulted in the question being redirected to another Minister. It was a late call, and I was disappointed to be told about it only this morning.

Mr Speaker: It would be wrong to take up the House’s time to go into the detail of the matter, but if the Member looks at the three questions he will find that the common factor is road safety. That is why they were directed to the Department of the Environment. The response was that responsibility might lie with the Department of the Environment but that since all the questions sought action and the only Department that could actually do anything about them was the one with responsibility for the roads in question, the matter was being transferred. It is an interesting dilemma, but it is a decision of the Executive, and one upon which the House voted at an early stage.

Mr Bradley: Further to that point of order —

Mr Speaker: This is not an opportunity for those whose questions were not put to find a way of getting them on the record. However, if it strictly a point of order, I will take it.

Mr Bradley: It is a correction. I was only seeking information — not asking for anything to be done. Is it unreasonable to expect the Minister for Regional Development to take my supplementary question today and give me an immediate written reply?

Mr Speaker: The Member is one of the few I have heard who only asked for information and did not want anything to be done. That is an interesting proposition. The Member will receive a written response from the Minister, as his Colleague indicated. It will be received, I trust, at an early stage. If not, perhaps the Member will advise me so that I may take the matter up on his behalf.

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In relation to Mr Bradley’s comments, very often when one asks a question, it would be very foolish to expect something to be done — but we will leave that to one side. Following on from Jim Wilson’s comments, I know from my recent dealings with the Department of the Environment — having put a number of questions down

— that it is very quick to say that the matter is nothing to do with it. Mr Speaker, I would like you to analyse the way in which this matter has been dealt with by the Department of the Environment. The Department of the Environment does have responsibility for road safety measures, and it could at least have had the courtesy to give Members responses to their questions, even if only to the effect that it wanted to refer matters to the Department for Regional Development. The Department of the Environment does have a legal responsibility for road safety measures.

Mr Speaker: I certainly undertake to look at the matter. There may be a question as to whether this is a matter upon which the Speaker can rule. However, if there is concern or discontent on the part of Members — and from the response it seems that there is — there may be another appropriate avenue to address the matter. I will advise Members as to how they might raise the question — and the Floor of the House will not necessarily be the appropriate place.

Mr Foster: On a —

Mr Speaker: Is it a point of order.

Mr Foster: I just want to make it clear that —

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but I cannot allow the Minister to make a point. However, perhaps we will be permitted to proceed to the next item on the Order Paper.

Mr Hussey: I am awaiting a ruling on a point of order which is relative to this afternoon’s —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have sought to take that issue up with the Member outside. I will either do that or give a ruling at the beginning of Question Time today. I will say no more at this stage.

PLANNING (COMPENSATION, ETC.) BILL

Final Stage

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

That the Planning (Compensation, etc.) Bill (NIA 7/00) do now pass.

This Bill will repeal various provisions in the Land Development Values Compensation Act (Northern Ireland) 1965 and the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. It will also correct a minor drafting error in the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. Parts I and II of the 1965 Act have been obsolete for some time now, and the last records of any compensation paid under them date back to 1988. A repeal of these parts can be regarded, therefore, as a tidying-up exercise.

The more significant provisions in the 1965 Act, which are to be repealed, can be found in section 29. This section has been giving rise to significant payments by my Department for the past 10 years or more. Typically, we have been paying out approximately £100,000 per year, and the current liability is in the region of £1.5 million. Under this section, compensation can be claimed for a refusal of planning permission in certain circumstances laid down in the Act. This has mostly concerned the reconstruction of old buildings which were in existence on 4 November, 1965.

Planning decisions are made for the good of all the community, and there is no place in a modern planning system for compensation for the refusal of planning permission in any circumstances. As significant sums have already been paid out under parts I and II of the Act, and under section 29, this Bill will not repeal the recovery provisions in the Act. This means that where compensation has been paid and planning permission is subsequently given for relevant development on the site, the Department will seek to recover the compensation paid.

The provisions of the 1972 Order which are to be repealed provide for compensation for a refusal of consent for the alteration or extension of a listed building where the alteration or extension does not constitute development for the purposes of requiring planning permission. It makes little sense to compensate in respect of a control that was introduced to protect listed buildings, and there would be no claimants under these provisions.

The final purpose of the Bill is to correct a minor drafting error in the 1991 Order which relates to rights of entry. Those parts of the legislation which deal with compensation shall be effective from 23 October 2000, when the Bill was introduced in the Assembly. No claim for compensation will be paid in respect of a refusal of planning permission or listed building consent where such an application was made on, or after, this date. All

other claims will be processed in the normal manner. This is a straightforward Bill which removes both irrelevant and costly provisions from the statute book and corrects a minor drafting error. It will bring Northern Ireland's planning compensation law into line with that in the rest of the United Kingdom.

I thank Members for their contributions in the earlier stages. I am particularly grateful to the Chairperson and members of the Environment Committee, who carried out detailed, clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. I also thank the Committee for affording my officials the opportunity to give evidence during that scrutiny process.

The Chairperson of the Environment Committee (Rev Dr William McCrea): I thank the Minister for his consultation with my Committee on this Bill. Having discussed it, we decided that no amendments were necessary. I therefore put on record the Committee's agreement with the reasons for bringing Northern Ireland's legislation into line with that in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Planning (Compensation, etc.) Bill (NIA 7/00) do now pass.

The sitting was suspended at 11.29 am.

On resuming —

ASSEMBLY: ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: At the sitting of the Assembly on Monday 29 January, Mr Hussey raised a point of order in relation to the ruling that his oral question on rural proofing to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister was inadmissible. The question was ruled inadmissible on the grounds that it was a matter for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Deputy Speaker who was in the Chair at the time undertook to examine the issue.

I have taken advice on this matter and am satisfied that the Business Office was to decide that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was the lead Department. This has been confirmed in writing by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I have informed Mr Hussey of my decision.

However, his point of order raises a number of issues to do with convention on which clarification would be helpful to Members. First, appeals to the Speaker on the inadmissibility or otherwise of a question should in the first instance be made outside the Chamber. It would also be helpful if Members were to seek clarification on admissibility decisions from the Business Office before raising the issue with me.

Secondly, to ensure that the best use is made of Question Time, I remind Members that questions should be tabled to the Minister who has primary responsibility for the subject of the question — in other words, to the lead Department. The NNIA7 report of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister of 15 February 1999 contains some clarification of departmental responsibilities, and copies of that report are available from the Printed Paper Office.

Finally, insofar as there is a problem with clarifying departmental responsibilities or procedures for questions, I undertook this morning to explore the difficulties with which Members are confronted. I will advise the House further on these.

Mr Fee: On 18 December 2000 I raised an issue with regard to Standing Order 19(1). I was advised that where there is ambiguity about the responsibility of any Department, we should in the first instance take advice from the Business Office. This morning I was one of a number of Members whose questions were arbitrarily diverted to another Department. No notice was given, and in my view it was an extremely blatant attempt to subvert the authority of the Assembly. Standing Order 19(1) provides for a question to be asked of a Member of the Executive Committee relating to the public affairs with which his

or her Department is officially connected or to any matter of administration for which he or she is responsible. Surely when a question is tabled and published on the Question Paper, the Minister should explain in the Chamber why he or she is absolving him or herself of either total responsibility or the lead responsibility for answering it.

Mr Speaker: This matter was raised by several Members this morning. The problem centres round the question of ministerial responsibility and clarification of which Minister is the lead Minister and which Department is the lead Department.

Secondly, there is the question of timing. It was particularly disruptive for Members to learn only this morning that some questions would not be asked this afternoon. It was also disruptive for other Members whose questions were further down the list or who wished to put supplementaries. Accordingly, this morning I undertook to look into the matter, which I discussed briefly with the Business Committee at a lunchtime meeting. We will try to clarify the issue, but I am not persuaded that it will be possible to do so on the Floor of the House. This may take a little time, but we must clarify the matter for everyone's sake and for the better administration of the Executive and the House.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the end of the debate on the Garda Síochána on 30 January 2001, the question was raised whether this House has the right to discuss matters that are sub judice in another jurisdiction. The Deputy Speaker ruled that if a case might come before another jurisdiction this Assembly could not discuss it. I find that unacceptable.

It amazes me that any House that has no jurisdiction beyond its own can say that certain cases that are being heard in a court in a foreign country cannot be discussed by it. Madam Deputy Speaker Jane Morrice was to give the House an explanation, but as yet nothing has been forthcoming.

Mr Speaker: I was made aware of this matter. I have some sympathy with the Member's concerns about the tight ruling. The Assembly's legal advisers are deliberating on it, and I undertake to give a ruling as soon as possible.

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Speaker: Question 17, standing in the name of Mr Alex Maskey, has been transferred to the Department of Finance and Personnel and will receive a written response from that Department.

OFFICE OF FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Local Government Review

1. **Mr R Hutchinson** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail (a) the timetable for the fundamental review of the council tier of local government and (b) if it will be completed within one year. (AQO 700/00)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): As part of the Programme for Government, the Executive are committed to a comprehensive review of all aspects of public administration in Northern Ireland. The Executive intend to review the structures and functions of local government as part of that review. However, as decisions have yet to be taken on the timing of the review, I cannot give an indication of the timing of the specific local government element within it. The Executive have recently been involved in discussions about the details of the review, including the terms of reference, mechanisms for taking the review forward and the timescale.

We will need to have further detailed discussions on these points later this week in order to reach decisions that will enable the review to be progressed without delay. I anticipate being in a position to make a full statement on the details of the review to the Assembly in the coming weeks.

Mr R Hutchinson: Can the First Minister tell the House if he has made, or if he intends to make, a recommendation to the Secretary of State that the local government elections should not proceed in May?

The First Minister: May I remind the Member of the answer given by the Deputy First Minister to much the same question on 4 December 2000. The timing of local government elections is a matter of law, and under current law those elections are due to be held on the third Wednesday of May 2001. That will continue to be the position unless the Secretary of State decides to introduce amending legislation.

Dr McDonnell: Can the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister outline what progress has been made to date in preparation for the launch of this review, and, specifically, can the House be assured that the review will incorporate all aspects of public administration including central government and quangos as well as local government?

Moreover, can the First Minister indicate whether the review will last six months or six years?

The First Minister: I very much hope it will not last for six years. In fact, I am confident that it will not take six years. On the other hand, six months is more than a little optimistic. As I said in response to the original question, we are still looking at the timing. We are also looking at the scope, and the Member will recall that I said that we intend to be comprehensive. However, we will not reopen, as it were, the present departmental structures and responsibilities in the review. In effect, it will be a review of all aspects of public administration outside the existing departmental structure. However, it may have implications for the departmental structure because — and this is the really complex part, but also the exciting part of it — we will be looking at the mechanisms used outside the Departments to deliver services in a number of areas. That may involve changes which may mean more functions going to local government, but it may also mean functions coming to Departments. This is intended to be comprehensive.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Why does the First Minister want to hedge the answer to the first question? Is it not a fact, and one which comes from a very leaky Northern Ireland Office down the road, that his party has been advocating to the Secretary of State that the local government elections be postponed? Why does he hide behind the present law, telling us that it is a matter for the Secretary of State, when he is bending his ear to have them postponed?

The First Minister: As I said in my original — *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The First Minister: As I said in response to the original supplementary question, under current law the elections will take place on that date. It is entirely a matter for the Secretary of State if any amending legislation is brought forward. The Member who asked the question is an old enough hand in parliamentary terms to realise the implications of the timing. Indeed, if he was listening as clearly as he claims to have been to things said in my party, and particularly by me, he will know that I have been saying to my party Colleagues for some time that everybody should assume that the elections will go ahead on the named date. *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The First Minister: Furthermore, let me assure the Member that we look forward to the results of those elections, and of the general election. Those results, we are confident, will clearly demonstrate that the people of Northern Ireland support the agreement, support the Assembly and — *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: Order. If Members are truly interested in asking questions to which they want answers, a degree

of order is needed. I am finding it difficult to hear the First Minister's answers — and I am sitting beside him.

Mr R Hutchinson: On a point of order —

Mr Speaker: The Member knows that I do not take points of order during Question Time. I will take his at the end.

Equality Legislation

5. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to indicate a date for the introduction of legislation proposals designed to consolidate the provisions of current equality legislation.

(AQO 697/00)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Mallon): The Programme for Government contains a commitment to introduce a single equality Bill to the Assembly in 2002. As far as is possible and practical, that Bill will harmonise the existing anti-discrimination law on religious belief or political opinion, race, gender and disability. It will take into account developments in European Union law. The Race Directive, for the first time across Europe, provides comprehensive legislation dealing with discrimination on the grounds of race. The EU Equality Treatment Directive provides a framework for anti-discrimination legislation on the grounds of religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation.

Our aim will be to bring forward a Bill that will provide a framework relevant to Northern Ireland. In line with our Programme for Government commitments, we will be consulting widely on the scope and content.

2.45 pm

Mr C Murphy: I was given to understand that the Committee of the Centre was to expect some form of consultation document in early spring. Perhaps the Deputy First Minister could advise us if this is still the case, and if there is to be a delay, what is the nature of this delay.

Can he also assure us that when such proposals are brought forward there will be very widespread and full consultation not only with the Committee of the Centre but also with all other interested parties?

The Deputy First Minister: Two things will determine the feasibility of having such a consultation document ready for the spring. The first is the capacity to bring forward the consultation document in a proper manner. The second is the extent to which the two EU Directives will need to be incorporated and the implications of that. There will be implications for those Directives in relation to issues already in statute.

I assure the Member that there will be proper consultation, right across the board — in the Assembly, in Government Departments and outside of the political process. That consultation is going to be essential,

especially as this body of legislation, when it is finalised, will be in place for a considerable period.

Mr Attwood: The Deputy First Minister referred to two recent EU Directives on discrimination and race. Will he indicate whether any assessment has yet been made about the implications of those Directives for discrimination law in the North?

The Deputy First Minister: The Member is quite correct. The EU Race Directive, which is to be implemented in July 2003, will require some amendments to the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. This will include changing slightly the definition of indirect discrimination, extending protection from victimisation to ex-employees and removing the bar on receiving compensation in cases of unintentional, indirect discrimination. The EU Framework Directive will require amendments to be made to the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. We will be required to introduce legislation to deal with discrimination in employment on the grounds of age and sexual orientation.

Assembly Executive Committee

3. **Mr Gibson** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail (a) when the next meeting of the Assembly Executive will take place and (b) what issues will be raised with the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

(AQO 667/00)

The First Minister: The next meeting of the Executive will take place on 8 February 2001. It is important for the good working of the Executive that issues to be raised with, and exchanges between, Ministers remain confidential. Accordingly, it is not our policy to disclose what issues will be raised at Executive meetings.

Mr Gibson: In view of last week's legal decision, what new sanctions does he intend to apply to the representatives of armed terrorists in his Executive? Or does dealing with armed terrorists in his Executive have the same elasticity as the word "decommissioning"?

The First Minister: I advise the Member to read the judgement with greater care than he has evidently done so far. If he does, he will see that the submission that the Deputy First Minister and I are under a legal duty to make nominations was rejected. The court accepted that there was a discretion and set out the grounds on which that could be exercised, including the case of persons being considered unsuitable because they had failed, or were not doing enough, to implement parts of the agreement.

On that basis, I anticipate no immediate difficulty for myself. However, I noted with interest the Member's reference to elasticity. There could scarcely be anything more elastic than his party, which campaigned on an anti-agreement ticket but now sits here in numbers,

happy to participate with the people to whom he refers — at whom they are conspicuously not pointing fingers — in this House and its Committees. They are happy to go with them to Brussels, to America, even to Portavogie — *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Some of the less impressive habits of other places seem to be affecting Question Time here.

Rev Robert Coulter: On a serious note, can the First Minister give the Assembly his view on the recent terrible findings in the Redfern Report on the activities of Dr Dick Van Velsen at Alder Hey Hospital in Liverpool? Can he assure me, in the light of reports on the unacceptable practice of storing organs of deceased children without parental consent, that this has not happened in hospitals in Northern Ireland over the years?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have to intervene at this point. It is clear — although the question is not complete — that this matter is the responsibility of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and not the First and Deputy First Ministers, I refer Members to things which were said earlier. I cannot accept this question.

Rev Robert Coulter: May I finish the question, which I will link to the Executive?

Mr Speaker: Questions must be relevant, and we must not have irrelevant preambles. The Member may complete his question, which I trust will be relevant.

Rev Robert Coulter: Are the Executive taking the necessary steps to ensure that no such unforgivable and unauthorised mutilation will ever again take place in any hospital in Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: I am sorry I have to say that my first judgement was correct. This is a matter for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Therefore I cannot accept the question.

Mr McCartney: As someone with a degree of expertise who has read the judgement — *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: Practical expertise.

Mr Hussey: Modesty forbids him.

Mr McCartney: Modesty, Mr Speaker, must always give way to truth.

Mr Justice Kerr made it patently clear that the First Minister's decision to exclude members of Sinn Féin from the North/South Ministerial Council could not be sustained on the basis that breaching one part of the agreement in order to attempt the enforced fulfilment of another was not valid. Will the First Minister enlighten the House as to what he is now going to do, this ploy having failed as a means of forcing Sinn Féin to discharge its obligations in relation to decommissioning?

The First Minister: It is obvious, from the tone and the terms of the question, that the Member has let the

wish be father to the thought. I say so as one who has read the judgement — also with a degree of expertise — *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The First Minister: If the Member's memory were as good as the expertise he claimed, he would realise that in response to the earlier question I was quoting parts of the judgement.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am afraid that your Speaker is neither a lawyer nor the son of a lawyer, and we must therefore proceed to the next question.

Mixed Marriage Association

4. **Mr Ford** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline any meetings with the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association.

(AQO 709/00)

The Deputy First Minister: The First Minister and I have not met with the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association, nor have we been invited to. However, we understand that staff from the Community Relations Council for Northern Ireland, which funds the association and which is part of our Office, have met with them on five occasions during the past year.

We are conscious of the difficulties faced by people in mixed marriages, be they couples of different religious backgrounds or races. We are determined that people who find themselves under pressure and under attack in their own communities because they belong to a mixed religious or race marriage will have their cases heard fairly and that every attempt will be made to help them.

Mr Ford: I trust that the Deputy First Minister and his Colleague will find time for a direct meeting sometime in the next few months. Furthermore, I trust that they will take on board the problems caused for those brought up in mixed relationships by employment categorisation and the need to determine community background.

Will they acknowledge that those difficulties cause increasing problems for the growing number of people from mixed-marriage families? Will they ensure that something is done to end discrimination against the progeny of mixed marriages in the future?

The Deputy First Minister: The Member asks a very valid question. There is a factor, but the extent of that factor is something that will need to be scrutinised. We will do everything to ensure that no one is disadvantaged because they are part of a mixed marriage. We will ensure that the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland examines this issue too, so that the Member, together with every other Member and ourselves, will be satisfied with it.

Mr O'Connor: I will touch upon something that the Deputy First Minister mentioned in his response to Mr Ford.

Throughout the troubles some people were specifically targeted because they were members of mixed marriages. Has the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister examined this matter in order to help these people in a positive manner?

The Deputy First Minister: Over the last 30 years there was, in parts of Northern Ireland, a distinct trend of subjecting vulnerable people to substantial attacks because they belonged to mixed marriages and because of their housing situation.

With regard to the substance of the question, the Member will be aware — after he and other MLAs in the Larne area received a letter from ourselves — that, following an approach from the Department's community relations unit, the local district partnership has agreed to convene a preliminary meeting involving partnership members, officials from the community relations unit, Larne Borough Council officials, the Community Relations Council for Northern Ireland and the Mediation Network for Northern Ireland, to discuss steps they can take to improve community relations, particularly in the borough of Larne.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Member and other Members who represent that area for the way in which they have tried to help in a situation where obscene attacks have been taking place. These must be ended. We cannot have any sort of normal or stable society if people are attacked on any basis, be it race, religion, colour or creed.

Civic Forum

5. **Mr Wells** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the costs associated with the establishment and running of the Civic Forum.
(AQO 692/00)

The First Minister: The cost of establishing the Civic Forum was approximately £75,000. That covered the cost of filling the post of Civic Forum Chairman, which was widely advertised in order to attract the best possible field of candidates. The establishment costs also included costs to the nominating sectors, which placed advertisements in local newspapers to ensure the widest possible opportunity for everyone in Northern Ireland's community to apply for membership of the Forum.

In addition, some of the nominating bodies used the services of external consultants to manage their selection processes. The Forum's running costs, since its establishment in October 1999, have been £110,000. These include the secretariat staff costs and the costs of plenary and other Forum meetings.

Mr Wells: Will the First Minister accept that this is a scandalous waste of public money, that this residential home for yes-men, place-women and failed politicians is a drain on the public purse? The money could have bought 40 hip operations or two nursery units, and the Forum has achieved absolutely nothing since its inception.

3.00 pm

The First Minister: I am rather disappointed at the response. Consider the wide range of voluntary organisations that are represented in the Forum, either directly or through the various consortia that were formed. The Member, in his comments, has dismissed the churches, sporting bodies, voluntary bodies, the agriculture sector and industry. He has referred in abusive terms to the whole of civil society in Northern Ireland. That is rather sad.

Mr McClarty: The First Minister will recall that at the opening session of the Assembly on 9 October he said that he was looking forward to the development of a constructive relationship involving the Assembly, the Executive and the Forum. Is he able to give an assessment of how that relationship has developed since that date?

The First Minister: Since its establishment the Forum has been considering its own procedures. We have also, in consultation with the Forum, been considering measures to take forward the body's role and to enable it to consult on issues that it wishes to focus on and also to respond to requests for its views from the Executive and the Assembly.

As the Member knows, this issue will come to the Assembly tomorrow, when an appropriate motion — needed under the legislation — will be before the Assembly. I hope the Assembly will look favourably upon that motion and we will then be able to move into developing a dialogue with the Forum on social and economic issues. The Assembly will want to treat seriously the views of people who have given voluntarily of their time and expertise.

'All Truth Is Bitter' (Report)

6. **Mr McGrady** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to comment on the report 'All Truth Is Bitter' published by Victim Support Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO).
(AQO 671/00)

The Deputy First Minister: I commend the Member on the breadth and comprehensive nature of his reading patterns. The report was published following a visit to Northern Ireland by Dr Alex Boraine, vice-chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

We understand that Dr Boraine has had further involvement with stakeholder groups in Northern Ireland and that a project entitled 'Healing Through Remembering'

has been developed. We look forward to receiving a report on the project in due course.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his reply and accept his compliment. However, does he agree that the main recommendation of the report 'All Truth Is Bitter' requires further discussions in terms of truth and reconciliation? Can he indicate what provision by way resources and structure is being made to facilitate such discussions? Was there any movement to do that in the Assembly's December financial review?

The Deputy First Minister: There are two parts to the question. The first is what we can learn from the South African experience in terms of the publication by Dr Alex Boraine. It is too early to be definitive in relation to that, but most Members would agree that the opportunity is needed for the vast number of people who have suffered to be able to communicate that experience. That would be a first step.

Detailed proposals for expenditure are being finalised. It is important that the modest allocation of £320,000 — £200,000 from the October monitoring round and £120,000 from the December round — be used as efficiently and effectively as possible. Funding is most likely to be focused on project initiatives that can reach as many victims as possible. Potential areas include initiatives in the health field, capacity building, assisting the four trauma advisory panels, the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund and research on the needs of victims. Later this year, approximately £6.67 million will be available under a specific victims' measure in the European Peace II programme, and I trust that all groups will take the opportunity of trying to obtain funding from that source.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Does the Deputy First Minister believe that the programme to support genuine victims will be affected by the noises made by the First Minister when he seeks to inform his Colleagues that he may have to seek a fundamental review of the Assembly to a system in the Westminster election hopes?

The Deputy First Minister: I think I thank the Member for that question. I am not sure of its import, but its general thrust, I think, was to make the First Minister appear as the victim while I am answering questions about victims. The issue of victims affects the entire community.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Would the support be affected?

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Deputy First Minister: It is a very important issue. I have explained the thinking behind the reaction to the experience in South Africa and the funding arrangements. It is not an issue that should be used as a stick with which to beat anybody.

Mr Speaker: The time for questions to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is up.

The Deputy First Minister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With your permission, I wish, on behalf of the First Minister and myself, to refer to the debate on a children's commissioner for Northern Ireland, which took place last Tuesday. As Members will be aware, the First Minister and I were in Paris last Tuesday on official business. Owing to a breakdown in communications at official level in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, junior Ministers were not present to respond to Members at the conclusion of the debate.

We understand the concern expressed by a number of the Members who took part in that debate that Ministers from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister were not available to respond to the informed and useful contributions. We apologise for that. The First Minister and I assure the House that steps have been taken to ensure that such a situation will not recur.

Mr Speaker: On behalf of the House, I acknowledge the initiative of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in declaring that this will not happen again.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am concerned that the Deputy First Minister can make a ministerial statement at Question Time. As it was a ministerial statement, notice should have been given. I do not accept that the Department, with its overloaded personnel, could not have been represented in the House to address an important matter about the children of Northern Ireland, and I do not think that you should be congratulating the Deputy First Minister and thanking him for doing something that should never have been necessary.

Mr Wells: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You will recall that I raised that issue during the debate on the children's commissioner. The Deputy First Minister has not explained why no junior Minister saw fit to come to the Chamber and at least listen to the comments of the Members, even though there were two within the precincts of the House. Mr Haughey came to the Assembly, and spoke for about a minute, excused himself and then left. He did not remain and listen to Members' comments on this vital issue.

Mr Speaker: Order. Would that everything could run smoothly, properly and in a seemly way. On this occasion, it is clear that something inappropriate happened. The Deputy First Minister, on behalf of himself, the First Minister and the junior Ministers, tendered an apology to the House and said that procedures would be put into place to ensure that it would not happen again. It is much better that that should have happened than not.

We now find ourselves substantially late for the next round of questions that Members have taken the trouble to put down, and therefore we should move on. The Minister has made an apology, and it would be churlish to refuse it. The Minister is aware of the feeling of the House, and if he wishes to make a further statement he

will take the necessary action. We are now some 10 minutes late. I fully accept that that is not the fault of the House, but we should move on.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As the individual who raised this matter, I should point out that I asked the Business Committee to look at the situation where Executive Ministers had difficulty attending sittings of the Assembly at any time.

Mr Speaker: Order. What the Member wishes the Business Committee to look at is a matter for the Business Committee, not for the Floor of the House, and a matter for him to commune with his Whips about. However, if he speaks with them he is likely to find that they do raise these matters with their Colleagues on the Business Committee. It is not appropriate for us to continue on this matter. It has been raised, it is being dealt with, and we must now proceed.

Mrs E Bell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it a point of order or merely a continuation of the discussion that is beginning to develop?

Mrs E Bell: It is a point of order. As the proposer of the motion last week, I accept the apology and hope that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will read Hansard and take on board the comments reported therein.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Omagh Throughpass

1. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the start date for the final stage of the Omagh throughpass. (AQO 681/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): Following the publication of the notice of intention to make a direction order and the environmental statement for the proposed Omagh throughpass scheme in June 2000, the Roads Service has received a number of objections to and comments on these statutory processes. It will therefore be necessary to hold public inquiries to address the issues that have been raised. If there had been no objections and no need for a public inquiry the scheme could have commenced in 2001. The start date will now be dependent on the progression of the statutory processes and, as in all cases, funding.

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

Mr Hussey: I must express my disappointment, and the disappointment of many in the Omagh area, at the delay, particularly given the importance of this ingredient of the overall A5 provision. Can the Minister assure me that when the objections have been dealt with, funding will still be in place to complete the Omagh throughpass? What other schemes currently in the major works preparation pool may not proceed?

Mr Campbell: I appreciate Mr Hussey's concerns about road schemes in his constituency of West Tyrone and in the west of the Province as a whole. The House will be aware that I am continuing to press for additional funds so that each of the schemes in the major works preparation pool can be started, or will be constructed, in the next five years or thereabouts.

At this stage I cannot give a guarantee on the availability of funds. It was for precisely that reason that I raised the issue in Omagh — when I think that the hon Member was present — at a meeting of the Regional Development Committee. That was the first time I was informed about the possibility of a shortfall for major works preparation schemes in years two and three. I am continuing to press for funding so that the Omagh throughpass and the other schemes in the pool can be progressed as quickly as possible.

3.15 pm

Rev Dr William McCrea: I understand the disappointment of the Omagh people, and of the elected representatives for the Omagh area, concerning the Omagh throughpass. Can the Minister tell us when work on the Toome bypass will commence?

Mr Campbell: I congratulate the Member on raising the issue yet again — he has done it on innumerable occasions in the past few weeks, both privately and publicly. I am committed to maintaining sufficient pressure to try to ensure that sufficient funds will be available to progress all the schemes, including the Toome bypass. The hon Member, and the House, will be aware that over the past few weeks we have made further progress in the statutory processes in relation to the Toome bypass. We will make further steady progress along the line, but at the end of the day sufficient funding is required to provide the Toome bypass, the Omagh throughpass and all the other schemes. Without funding we cannot build roads.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answers. Given the fact that phase three of the Omagh throughpass is one of the four schemes that were put in jeopardy some months ago, can he enlighten the House about how discussions are progressing in trying to get some of the Executive programme funds for these schemes? Can he inform the House when the second phase of the Strabane bypass will start and when the Newtownstewart bypass will start? Are the design teams in the Department fully up to speed with these schemes?

Mr Campbell: I congratulate the Member on his inventiveness, as I do each of the other Members in campaigning for roads in their constituencies. I think that the hon Member will be aware that a number of the schemes he mentioned are being considered at the moment. In the fullness of time, I will make an application for Executive programme funding to try to progress some of the schemes. In relation to the individual schemes

that the Member mentioned, I will be investigating the possibilities of their start dates. I hope that he will accept that — for the same reasons as apply to the Toome bypass and the Omagh throughpass — I cannot today give a definitive start date for either the Leckpatrick or Newtownstewart schemes. I will write to the Member when I get a date, and I will update him on the progress being made on both schemes.

Port of Belfast

2. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail when he expects to announce a decision on the future of the port of Belfast.

(AQO 711/00)

Mr Campbell: I am currently consulting the Regional Development Committee on the findings of an economic appraisal of the various options for the future of the port of Belfast. Once I have the Committee's views and have had the opportunity to consider these and to consult, as necessary, with other interested parties, I should be in a better position to indicate when the announcement is likely to be made. I remain keen that this should happen as soon as possible.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he accept that these substantial delays in reaching a decision on the future of the port of Belfast are creating a great deal of uncertainty about investment in that area? Does he also accept that these delays are in danger of bringing this institution and his Department into disrepute among certain sections of Northern Ireland business?

Mr Campbell: I refute any allegations that the Department has been brought into disrepute although I fully accept the frustration that exists not only in businesses but also among other port users. This is because we have been unable to draw all the strands together to make a definitive statement on the future of the Port of Belfast.

I remain committed to ending that uncertainty. The Department is closer now to that goal than when I responded to the Member on the same issue in the autumn, and I hope to take account of his views, as well as those that other port users have expressed to me. It is paramount that we settle the future of the port of Belfast, and I am committed to doing that as soon as possible.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Minister agree that during this period of uncertainty, many port assets, especially the land at Harland & Wolff, are not being used to the advantage of the people of Belfast? More and more of this land is being released from shipbuilding without any systematic plan for the area. Can he assure the House that, whatever decision is made, lands at Belfast harbour will be put under the control of a more publicly accountable body than that which is responsible at present?

Mr Campbell: Some of the issues that the hon Member has raised are central to the future of the port of Belfast.

The Regional Development Committee and I are determined to protect the assets and land of the port insofar as it is possible and practical. This will be done in a way that is fair and equitable and delivers a positive future for all the people of Northern Ireland. These are some of the reasons for its having taken longer than we originally envisaged. But the Department is determined to protect the land and assets in line with previous commitments made in the Chamber.

Road Footpaths

3. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Regional Development to undertake improvements to footpaths beside roads where there has been a significant build-up in traffic in recent years. (AQO 725/00)

Mr Campbell: Schemes to provide new and improved footways are considered by my Department's Road Service for inclusion in minor road works programmes. Footways and other minor works proposals have to compete for the limited funding available. In assessing the priority of footway schemes, consideration is given to a number of factors. These include pedestrian counts; traffic volume; the potential for pedestrian and traffic growth; accident histories; environmental factors such as the presence of schools or churches; the practicality of constructing the schemes; and the cost of schemes and the availability of funds.

Mr Armstrong: Can the Minister confirm that his Department already possesses the relevant information or has available to him the necessary resources to enable him to make use of pathways that have not been used to their full potential for a long time?

Mr Campbell: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am not clear which footways the hon Member is referring to. He seems to be talking rather generally.

Mr Armstrong: Minister, I am speaking of the footpath — *[Interruption]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: We cannot have this sort of tennis match going on. If the Member writes to the Minister, he may be able to clarify things.

Mr O'Connor: On the issue of providing footways, will the Minister also consider the possibility of street lighting in areas where there have been accidents? Between Islandmagee and Whitehead, in my constituency, there has been a significant build-up of traffic and, indeed, fatalities. Sometimes footways themselves are not the answer. Street lighting is needed as well as or, in some cases, instead of footways.

Mr Campbell: I appreciate the Member's concern. This matter has previously been raised with me in correspondence and in the House. The Department is reviewing the provision of street lighting in rural areas. The issues raised by the Member will be looked at in

considering areas — particularly rural areas — for street lighting. I will ensure that his comments are passed on.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Minister consider assessing the stretch of footpath between Ballymena and the village of Cullybackey against the criteria that he outlined during the course of his first answer? Furthermore, will he undertake to compare that footway with the standards that he has outlined and inform me as to whether it meets those criteria and whether or not that substandard footpath can be upgraded so that pedestrians can be protected in that rural area?

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for his repeated representations in respect of this footpath. I will write to him outlining how that footpath stacks up in relation to those criteria.

Senior Citizens: Free Travel

4. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development to include a companion free travel pass facility in his pending free travel for senior citizens scheme, for the benefit of senior citizens who, for confirmed health reasons, require the assistance of another person when travelling. (AQO 659/00)

Mr Campbell: I am sympathetic to the needs of people with impaired mobility, but the resources made available in the Budget do not permit an extension of the concessionary fares scheme beyond the current proposals, which are to introduce free travel for older people, with part funding by district councils. "Companion pass" arrangements similar to those being proposed currently operate in the Republic of Ireland, although the package of benefits for carers in the Republic is different from that available in the United Kingdom. However, in both jurisdictions the benefits are available under social security arrangements and not from Departments responsible for public transport.

Mr Bradley: I am disappointed, but it is early days for this aspect of the scheme. The Minister referred to other Departments. I have already written to them, asking them to come on board with the scheme, but they absolutely refused. Can the Minister advise of any alternative plans that he has in place to assure our senior citizens that they will get a free travel service if the required 25% input is not forthcoming from district councils?

Mr Campbell: That question has exercised both myself and my predecessor. We are determined and committed to proceed with the free travel scheme. I have written to councils to establish whether or not they are prepared to involve themselves in this scheme. I hope that there will not be a negative response, given the number of councils that responded positively to the initial consultation. Eleven district councils expressed interest in the scheme, which, at that stage, involved 50% of the funding. Now that that has been reduced to 25%, I hope that a number of councils will respond

positively and that we will be able to implement the scheme as quickly as possible.

If they respond negatively we will have to look again at the scheme. I am absolutely committed to having a free travel scheme on public transport for elderly people in Northern Ireland.

3.30 pm

Mr Shannon: I think the Minister said that 11 councils responded. Can he confirm that number? Will he go ahead with the scheme if only a certain number of councils indicate a wish to proceed? If so, can he give us a timescale for implementation of the scheme?

Mr Campbell: As a result of the approaches and the publicity surrounding this scheme, some district councils have informed me that they are anxious not only to have the scheme but also to bring forward the date on which it will come into operation. I am in consultation with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of the Environment about interim arrangements involving part funding by district councils from April 2001, which is only two months away. I will write to councils giving details of that scheme.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On the question of someone accompanying a person who is unwell and perhaps not fit to travel too far without company, will the Minister take up the plan that has recently had great success, when a direct negotiation was made between Air France and the people concerned? In such a case Air France would give the ticket at half price to the person — taking the matter out of government but giving a good concession of 50%. Could the Minister not develop that a little when he considers free transport?

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for the information in relation to Air France. I have instructed my officials to try to establish other free and concessionary travel arrangements throughout Europe, including the one with Air France. We are currently accumulating a significant amount of information on the schemes available. All the information will help us to develop a better understanding and, we hope, to arrive at a free travel scheme that is not only a good scheme in Northern Ireland but is among the best in Europe.

Roads Infrastructure

5. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he is taking to address the underfunding of the road infrastructure and increase standards to an acceptable level. (AQO 668/00)

Mr Campbell: I am very conscious that I have inherited a significant road maintenance backlog and that existing levels of funding to maintain and improve the road network fall short of what is required. Substantial bids for the roads infrastructure were made last year in the 2000 spending

review. While some additional funds were confirmed as a result of that review, the indicative funding baselines for 2002-03 and 2003-04 continue to be significantly under-provided. In this context, therefore, I will shortly submit a bid for additional funding from the Executive programme funds and will continue to bid for the very necessary additional resources in subsequent spending reviews and at every other opportunity. In the meantime I assure the Member that my Department will continue to seek to make the best use of the resources currently available to develop and maintain the roads infrastructure.

Mr Gibson: I congratulate the Minister on his knowledge of the geography of West Tyrone. It is one thing to mention the Leckpatrick scheme, the Newtownstewart bypass, the Omagh throughpass, the Strabane bypass, the Ballygawley —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Gibson: If the funding is not forthcoming, is that an indication that the Executive have a policy of helping the rural community's rurality, of removing remoteness, of removing peripherality, or of denying the cohesion funds of the Peace II programme? If the funding is not forthcoming, then the Executive will truly have let the Minister down.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for his comments. Obviously, West Tyrone will be mentioned in this context, and there will be campaigns for road schemes right across the constituency. I assure the Member that those road schemes, in common with schemes in other areas, will be progressed by my Department as quickly as possible. We will be applying pressure to ensure that we have sufficient funding to allow each scheme in the major works preparation pool to be advanced as quickly as possible and to allow people across Northern Ireland to benefit from the work carried out.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister undertake to provide more resources to Roads Service engineers in Newry and Armagh to address the unacceptable condition of roads, especially minor roads, in my constituency?

Mr Campbell: The issue of rural roads is one that exercises both me and my Department because of the underfunding that has been prevalent for almost 30 years. Even though the Member asks me to single out Newry and Armagh, I do not think that he would expect me to apply a separate set of criteria to any one constituency, no matter how deserving he argues it is. I will, however, undertake to consider the matter of rural roads, and, obviously, I am going to press for additional funding. I will also explore, within the budget, measures that it may be possible to take to alleviate problems on rural roads.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's reply. The Minister knows that the majority of road users, who pay road tax, expect a half-decent roads network on which to

travel. Strangford constituents and Ards Borough Council residents rightly complain that they continue to be neglected. In view of the thousands — *[Interruption]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCarthy, please sit down. When discussing issues such as roads provision, Members should not take the opportunity to highlight specific cases in their constituencies. If they do, we will not be able to get through all the questions. It is an abuse of Question Time to focus on one's constituency.

Traffic Congestion (Downpatrick)

6. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to alleviate traffic congestion in Downpatrick. (AQO 664/00)

Mr Campbell: The Roads Service is working with local people, through the Downpatrick Transport Forum, to address traffic congestion and other issues in the town. Particular consideration is being given to a one-way gyratory system, which is being assessed using a computer-based traffic model. It is envisaged that the Roads Service will be in a position to commence a wider public consultation exercise on this proposal in the autumn of this year.

Mr Wells: Downpatrick people welcome the fact that the matter is being considered and that the Minister is to visit Downpatrick and Ballynahinch within the next few weeks to look at the problem. Will the Minister accept the urgency of the situation, which is strangling the economic life of Downpatrick and its hinterland?

Mr Campbell: I can confirm that I hope to be visiting the Downpatrick area within the next few weeks. In relation to the bypass for Downpatrick, referred to by the Member, the Roads Service is currently reassessing all potential major work schemes. This is being carried out with a view to compiling a schedule of schemes that could realistically be started in the next 10 years, taking account of the resources likely to be available. I hope to be able to publish the schedule later this year, and a bypass for Downpatrick will be considered for inclusion in that. However, as all Members will appreciate, the number of places in the schedule is limited, so there will be stiff competition among the many possible worthwhile schemes throughout Northern Ireland.

Traffic Signs: Irish Language

7. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the use of Irish on traffic signs. (AQO 698/00)

Mr Campbell: The use of Irish on traffic signs in Northern Ireland applies to a small number of tourism signs for attractions that are known and promoted solely by their Irish names.

Mr C Murphy: The Minister may be aware of the issue that prompts the question, namely the case where funding should have been provided to erect bilingual signs in the Ring of Gullion — clearly an area where there is appropriate demand. That was scuppered by Roads Service's refusal to allow Irish on the road signs. Can the Minister inform us, in line with his Pledge of Office — particularly section (c) — what steps he has taken, or plans to take, to promote the use of the Irish language or to seek to remove, where possible, any restrictions that discourage the development of the Irish language?

Mr Campbell: I have consulted my Department in relation to multilingual signage and asked for some information on the likely cost of changing existing signs. I am informed that the cost of changing signs throughout Northern Ireland would be several million pounds. Because of that, I have no intention at present of proceeding along that route.

Mr McMenamin: Will the Minister consider introducing road signs similar to those in the Republic of Ireland? These incorporate Irish and English and show the distance in kilometres, in line with European legislation.

Mr Campbell: As I said, I have asked officials in my Department to consider the possibility of multilingual signage. I have already set out the indications that I am getting. Given the finite nature of resources, of which the hon Member and every other hon Member in this House must be only too well aware, I have no intention, at this stage, of spending very scarce resources on multilingual signage. That money could be much better used in improving the roads infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister agree that it is a greater priority to refurbish existing road signs throughout the Province that have been damaged by the Department of the Environment's grass-cutting activities, particularly those that have become part of the hedgerows? Can he assure me that, in light of the terrible casualty figures for 2000, maximum effort is being put into the erection of sufficient signage and identification of accident black spots throughout the Province?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am not sure that that is relevant to the question.

Mr Maskey: Mr Armstrong was allowed two supplementary questions, yet Michelle Gildernew was denied even one supplementary to the question put by Conor Murphy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As you know, Mr Maskey, it is not normal to take supplementary questions from Members of the same party.

Mr Maskey: I draw your attention to the fact that Mr Billy Armstrong asked a supplementary a moment ago even though he had asked a question previously. I think that you should be checking all the conventions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We are coming very close to the end of the time available, and there are several people who wish to put questions to the Minister.

Road Safety (West Belfast Schools)

8. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans to survey schools in the West Belfast constituency in relation to road safety in the vicinity of the schools. (AQO 732/00)

3.45 pm

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service surveys traffic conditions at schools as and when necessary. Where appropriate, it arranges for suitable measures to be put in place to improve road safety. As part of this ongoing work, and in response to representations received about road safety issues, officials carry out regular site visits and arrange meetings with schools, local elected representatives and members of the public to discuss problems and liaise on possible solutions.

Mr Maskey: I acknowledge that officials from the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development have been involved in a series of meetings in West Belfast. These officials have said that they would like to follow through the school-by-school survey in which they have been involved. Can the Minister confirm that his Department will continue to carry out this survey and assess the other schools in West Belfast which have not yet been covered?

Mr Campbell: I am aware of a recent meeting in the West Belfast area where the issue highlighted in the question was discussed. Roads Service officials who were at the meeting pointed out that a multi-agency approach is often needed when considering road safety matters. This is illustrated by "the three Es" — education, which is given by road safety education officers of the Department of the Environment; enforcement, which is the responsibility of the RUC; and engineering, which is the responsibility of the Roads Service. Of course, my Department remains keen to investigate promptly any specific problems or issues which may be raised with it by assessing what contributions safety engineering might make. This approach is exemplified by the forthcoming meeting between Roads Service officials and the principal of the Holy Child Primary School in West Belfast to discuss traffic management and road safety engineering issues.

Traffic Congestion (Lindsay's Corner)

9. **Mr J Wilson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to address traffic congestion during peak periods at the junction of the A57 Ballyclare-to-Templepatrick road and the B59 Ballyrobert-to-Doagh Road, known locally as Lindsay's Corner. (AQO 677/00)

Mr Campbell: The Roads Service plans to carry out a minor works scheme to improve the sight lines for motorists emerging onto the main A57 from the direction of Doagh village. Acquisition of the necessary land is being finalised and, subject to these legal formalities being completed, the Roads Service hopes to start work on the site during April 2001.

Mr J Wilson: Can the Minister assure me that he will take immediate steps to bring this project forward, given that some potentially suicidal traffic manoeuvres are being made at this junction? As the Minister admitted in his answer, this junction has a high density of traffic and very heavy vehicles going to and from the Larne ferries. Drivers who want to get onto the main thoroughfare are stopping in the middle of the road on the white lines. I need the Minister's assurance that he will do everything possible to bring this scheme forward.

Mr Campbell: I suppose the short answer is yes. The scheme that I mentioned was presented to Newtownabbey Borough Council in May 2000, following consultation in autumn 1999. The acquisition of the land necessary for the scheme took longer than was originally expected, but I hope that the scheme will be in place very shortly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The time is up. We will move on to questions to the Minister of the Environment.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, in relation to your ruling against Mr McCarthy, Mr Deputy Speaker. Outside Question Time, how can Back-Bench Members ask important questions about issues affecting their constituencies?

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is ample opportunity to put that question in writing to the Minister.

My point was that if a question is put with regard to a specific area, we could go round the Assembly, with each person asking about his constituency, and we would be unable to move down the list of questions.

Mr R Hutchinson: There were 30 seconds left on the clock during which I could have asked my question. On several occasions the time has run out after a Minister has started to give an answer. Why was I not allowed to ask my question?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time will be lost for the next set of questions if we continue to run late, and that is unfair.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not understand why you are taking these points of order now. I was ruled out of order and was told that I had to wait until the end of Question Time. Can you bear with me for a minute or two — [Interruption]

Mr Deputy Speaker: I cannot hear Dr Paisley because of the background noise.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The boss told me when he was in the Chair that I would not be permitted to make my point of order until the end of Question Time. To my

surprise he broke his ruling and allowed the Deputy First Minister to make a point of order which was completely out of order according to our rules — it should have been a ministerial statement. Having done that, he then would not let me speak. He said "No, you will have to wait until the end." Then suddenly you, Sir, more gracious, more compassionate, more full of mercy — because you are a Back Bencher and know that you need that facility — took Mr Kennedy's point and opened it up.

I have no objection; I think that points of order should be taken after questions. However, why should I, having put a question at the beginning, have to wait until the end? Mr Mallon wanted to run away and do other things. That is why he made his point of order and got away with it. I do not want to sit here listening to questions from Mr Maskey, for I am not a bit interested in them. I want to get my question answered.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must first thank the Member for his kind and gracious words. I understand, Dr Paisley, that you are quite right. I have always understood that points of order are taken on the half-hour at the end of each set of ministerial questions. If I am wrong on that, I will, of course, notify you, but that is my understanding of the way this House has operated in the past and should operate today.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Does that mean that I cannot make my point of order? I was on my feet; I was ruled out of order by the boss and told that I would have to wait until the end to put it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I can only repeat what I have said already. You can put your point of order on the half-hour or at the end of Question Time.

Mr McCarthy: I have a point of order. I feel mistreated. My question was not about specifics; it was a general question. Had it been about a specific area, I would have been out of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCarthy, your points have been noted.

Mr Maskey: I do not want to be taking up too much of Dr Paisley's time here. Will you explain something for me, Mr Deputy Speaker? You denied Ms Gildernew's request for a supplementary question because you said you were not taking supplementary questions from the same party. However, Mr Billy Armstrong had a question and was able to ask two supplementary questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is not normal for supplementary questions to be taken from the party that posed the original question. If that has happened, I will look at it and respond to you. [Interruption]

Mr Hutchinson, please sit down. I am taking no further points of order.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Planning Applications

1. **Mr Close** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the progress he is making in clearing the backlog of planning applications. (AQO 704/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): The Department of the Environment has made good progress in reducing the backlog of planning applications. The latest complete set of statistics is for the end of December 2000, and it indicates that the backlog has been reduced by 11%. This represents significant progress towards the target in the draft Programme for Government to eliminate the backlog by the end of 2002 and represents good use of the additional funding I have been able to allocate to this work. The reduction has been achieved despite a further 4% increase in 1999 in the number of planning applications compared with the previous year.

Mr Close: I welcome the progress that has been made to date. Can the Minister tell the House what progress has been made with the backlog of area plans, particularly the Lisburn area plan? Does he not agree that by the time this area plan is published, it may well be redundant, overtaken by the Belfast metropolitan area plan?

Mr Foster: I do not want to make excuses, but although the Planning Service actively recruited during 2000, as we enter 2001 it still falls short of its full complement by 54 professional staff. In relation to area plans, the programme set out in the Planning Service's corporate and business plan provided for full coverage for all of Northern Ireland by 2005. We are on schedule to achieve this target, and I recently launched the Belfast metropolitan area programme, which will cover the Belfast, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Lisburn, Newtownabbey and North Down Council areas.

Mrs Courtney: I have listened carefully to the Minister's response. Does he not agree that in the past developers have used, or have been forced to use, the Planning Appeals Commission as a means of accelerating their developments and that this has worked against the interests of third-party objectors, namely residents, and has often resulted in unnecessary friction between planners, developers and the local community? Can the Minister give an assurance that his Department will encourage local planners to make area decisions, thus avoiding lengthy planning appeals and ensuring that local economic development schemes are not held up unnecessarily?

Mr Foster: Hold-ups are annoying, and we would like a fluid planning programme. It should be borne in mind that the determination of planning applications by the Planning Service also requires timely advice from key consultees such as the Roads Service, the Water Service and the Environment and Heritage Service. The

Planning Service is actively working with its consultees to see how the consultation processes can be improved, especially by the use of new technology and by sharing information across Departments. We want to expedite all planning applications.

Mr B Bell: In the Minister's response to Mr Close, I was pleased to hear him state that the backlog had been reduced by 11%. The Programme for Government commits the Executive to clearing the backlog by December 2002, which is less than 24 months away. Will the Minister give an assurance that this target will be met?

Mr Foster: There are no absolutes in this world. The target in the draft Programme for Government is the end of 2002. I expect that this target will be met. However, it will depend on some stability in the number of applications received over the next two years and on the ability of the Planning Service to recruit planners.

Curran Bog

2. **Rev Dr William McCrea** asked the Minister of the Environment if he will undertake to designate Curran Bog a special area of conservation (SAC) as it is one of the best bogs remaining outside the current SAC network and larger than any other bog. (AQO 683/00)

4.00 pm

Mr Foster: I have no plans at present to add Curran Bog to the UK's list of special areas of conservation. Those are selected on the basis that they represent sites of international importance for nature conservation. The UK Government propose to submit a total of 43 sites that include active raised bog habitat to the European Commission as candidates for areas of special conservation. Nine of those sites are in Northern Ireland.

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), which advises the UK Government on conservation matters, considers that this number of raised bog sites represents a sufficient proportion of the total resource, includes the most important sites and provides sufficient geographical coverage across the UK. Curran Bog has been designated as an area of special scientific interest (ASSI) and will continue to enjoy the protection that that brings.

As the Member knows, in the next few weeks I expect to publish a consultation paper on measures to strengthen the management and protection of ASSIs.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Some time ago a private firm was given planning permission to excavate at the adjoining Ballynahone Bog. After representations from myself and others, planning permission had to be withdrawn, for which the Department had to pay several hundred thousand pounds in compensation. In light of the Ballynahone protection and the proximity of Curran to Ballynahone, is it not important that Curran is given the special protection that such a designation would entail?

Mr Foster: The issue to which Dr McCrea refers was before my time in the Department — it was during direct rule. Therefore I cannot give him a direct answer. All I can say is that Curran Bog has not been selected as a candidate for designation as an area for special conservation because a high proportion of the bog has been cut for peat and also because of its close proximity to Ballynahone, which has a greater proportion of intact bog.

Mr Armstrong: Further to the Minister's comments, has any thought been given to financial recompense for landowners on an annual basis? I draw his attention to the fact that farmers already receive money for habitat improvement. Perhaps a similar payment could be paid annually to the farmers who own the bog and the surrounding areas.

Mr Foster: Just a short answer: we have no plans afoot to do as the Member requests.

Tree Preservation Orders

3. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of tree preservation orders made in the Lagan Valley constituency in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQO 691/00)

12. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of tree preservation orders currently in effect in Northern Ireland. (AQO 693/00)

Mr Foster: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission I will take questions 3 and 12 together.

Since 1975 my Department has made a total of 219 tree preservation orders (TPOs), all of which currently remain in effect. My Department does not keep records of tree preservation orders made on a constituency basis. However, from the information available I can say that over the last five years two tree preservation orders were made in the Lisburn area, two in the Ballynahinch area, and one in the Dunmurry area.

Ms Lewsley: I thank the Minister very much for his answer. Does he agree that there have been times when developers have felled trees to make way for new developments without asking for any expert opinion or report? If so, has his Department imposed any penalty on such people?

Mr Foster: I am aware of weaknesses in current tree preservation order legislation, particularly with regard to enforcement powers. I am, however, considering proposals to strengthen those powers to ensure that courts, when determining the level of fine, have regard to any financial gain that has resulted from the offence.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister share the concern that many people in the Province have about the slash and burn activities of many developers, who move in and destroy mature trees before lodging a planning application? The Minister wrote to me this morning to say that he

had plans to update the legislation on TPOs. Can he tell me when will that happen and whether it will be by way of amendments to the planning legislation or by way of free-standing legislation, which the House can debate?

Mr Foster: Articles 64 and 65 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 give my Department discretionary powers to make tree preservation orders for a number of purposes, including the protection of woodland areas.

A tree preservation order prohibits cutting down, topping or lopping protected trees without the Department's consent. The proposals that we are putting forward shortly may include provisions to make it easier to use injunctions to prevent tree-cutting operations from continuing, and to make it an automatic requirement to replace trees protected by a tree preservation order that have been removed or destroyed without consent. Trees in a conservation area will also be given the same protection as trees covered by a tree preservation order. These amendments are being considered along with a range of other proposals affecting planning law in Northern Ireland. This legislation will be introduced at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister agree that the present legislation is not capable of responding to those individuals and companies wishing to take down or remove trees? Further to his response to Mr Wells, I want to raise the issue of people who cut down trees at the weekend or at night. Can his Department respond quickly to circumstances like that and is it possible to ensure that sufficient officers will be available to carry out the work?

Mr Foster: We abhor any trees under a preservation order being cut down — in fact, we abhor it anywhere that it is destroying the landscape. We take action when possible, but it is not always easy to accomplish that. I can assure the Member that we look at the matter pedantically and take action where and when we can. We do not agree with such destruction at all.

Mr Davis: In answer to Ms Lewsley, the Minister made the point that he is looking at the current legislation. In answer to Mr Wells, he talked about bringing in legislation at the earliest opportunity. He talks about the earliest opportunity to improve enforcement. Can he not give us a more specific timescale?

Mr Foster: It is very difficult to be absolute in these instances, and it would be wrong of me to give a specific time or date. I can assure the House that we will pursue this with utmost haste.

Redevelopment (Belfast): Planning Application 2/2000/0520/F

6. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister of the Environment if he intends to hold a public inquiry into planning application 2/2000/0520/F in respect of major redevelopment between Royal Avenue and Donegall Street.

(AQO 695/00)

Mr Foster: This application was designated as a “major” under article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 on the grounds that, if permitted, it would affect the whole of a neighbourhood. This empowers the Department to cause a public local inquiry to be held and to hear representations from all interested parties before a decision is reached. Alternatively, the Department may issue a notice of opinion on this application, in which case the applicant is notified of the decision that the Department is proposing to take and is given the opportunity of a hearing before the Planning Appeals Commission prior to a final decision being issued. This case has raised many issues which need further consideration before a decision can be made on whether a public inquiry is necessary.

Mr S Wilson: Is the Minister aware of the growing frustration with the way that the Planning Service of the Department of the Environment is holding up major developments in Belfast city centre, which has not had any major development for 15 years? Given that some article 31 applications have been with the Department for over two years, will the Minister now give an assurance that article 31 will not be used as a delaying tactic in this case? Also, will he assure the House that this application will not be judged by its likely affect on a scheme not yet submitted, as has been suggested by the Belfast Regeneration Office?

Mr Foster: My Department does not endeavour to hold up any applications. There is a lot to go through when such applications come forth. There are four applications which affect Belfast city centre.

This application was received on 25 February 2000 from Dunloe Ewart (Cathedral Way) Ltd. An environmental impact assessment was requested on 8 March 2000. It was advertised on 25 August 2000 and neighbours notified on 24 August 2000. Due to changes in the application description, it was re-advertised on 20 October 2000 and neighbours were re-notified. Eight letters of objection were received following this advertisement process. It was designated as a “major” under article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 on 28 November 2000.

Solicitors acting for Dunloe Ewart (Cathedral Way) informed the Department by letter dated 21 December 2000 that it was their intention to seek a judicial review of the Department’s decision to apply article 31 to this application. As far as I am concerned, this is the only application we have for planning permission in the city centre.

Brownfield and Greenfield Development

7. **Ms Hanna** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the proportion of houses built on (a) brownfield and (b) greenfield sites in each of the last five years, and the optimum target for brownfield development over the next five years. (AQO 726/00)

Mr Foster: No historical information is available on the proportion of houses built on brownfield or greenfield sites. The Department for Regional Development, in its response to the recommendations of the independent panel’s public examination of the regional development strategy, considered that an aspirational target of 40% should be set for accommodating new housing on brownfield sites. This target, if it remains in the final regional development strategy, will be reflected by my Department in the provision of future housing and development plans. At that time appropriate systems will have to be put in place to monitor progress against this target.

Ms Hanna: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he share my concern that the target set in the Belfast metropolitan plan for development of brownfield sites is 40%, whereas in Great Britain it is being increased to 60%? Does he agree that the proposed 60% greenfield development in that plan is unsustainable?

Mr Foster: A lot depends upon the regional development strategy, which we will have to work with. The advantages of brownfield developments include encouragement to reuse buildings — which I think the Member will accept — reduction of dereliction and discouragement of crime. It brings new households to ageing communities, thus adding new children to local schools, and new members to local clubs, churches and community organisations. It reduces the number of people commuting longer distances from the edge of over-expanding towns. It reinforces public transport services in towns. It reduces the consumption of greenfield sites and natural resources. There are great advantages in brownfield sites, and this is what we will be working on. Whatever is built on brownfield sites will help reduce the pressure on greenfield demand.

Mr Savage: Does the Minister appreciate that improved protection for areas of special scientific interest — especially around those brownfield sites — is bound up, in the public mind, with interest in the right to roam around those brownfield areas and brownfield sites? Will he comment on that?

Mr Foster: It is a difficult question. I am not sure what exactly the Member is getting at. The Planning Service is very pedantic and very objective in dealing with applications. I assure him that nothing is done in a reckless fashion.

Mr S Wilson: I am alarmed with the answer the Minister has given to Ms Hanna’s original question. He has outlined the virtues of brownfield sites, but he is telling the House that 84,000 new homes over the next 20 years are going to be built on greenfield sites. Will he tell the House what he intends to do to get the percentage of houses built on brownfield sites up to the same level as in the rest of the United Kingdom? Will he allow higher densities? Will he permit fewer car-parking spaces for houses in the inner city? What other measures

does he intend to introduce to increase the number of properties on brownfield sites, which he told this House are advantageous to inner city communities?

Mr Foster: I assure the Member that we do not take these things lightly. I cannot give him an absolute answer at this particular stage. However, planning applications are treated objectively and in context of what is happening around them. We will not take any applications in a light manner. These are difficulties which the Department faces at this particular time. They are not easy to solve, but we take decisions in a very objective and planned fashion.

Pollution

8. **Mrs Carson** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the resources available for policing incidents of pollution. (AQO 719/00)

4.15 pm

Mr Foster: My Department's Environment and Heritage Service operates a 24-hour response to inland and coastal pollution throughout Northern Ireland. A Freephone pollution hotline allows the public to report pollution incidents. Key staff are on call at all times. The emergency pollution officer heads a team of six staff in Belfast, and he also has available to him the services of 41 field staff employed by fisheries boards and district councils across Northern Ireland. These field staff spend approximately 30% of their time on pollution response work.

These resources have increased significantly over recent years. The number of field staff employed by district councils has increased from nine to 29 over the last 10 or so years. The team of staff at headquarters, who deal specifically with pollution prevention and response work, has increased over the same period from three to six. A further three staff are due to join the team over the next few years in response to new pollution prevention and control responsibilities.

Of course, prevention is better than cure, and I have been significantly increasing the resources available for work in this area and in a number of related areas of activity in the water quality unit in the Environment and Heritage Service. Over the next two financial years, through budget increases and the retention of regulatory receipts, I plan to increase the size of the water quality unit in the Environment and Heritage Service by 33, thereby raising staff levels from 44 to 77, which is a considerable increase. These staff will be involved in a range of existing and new work areas in the unit. This will include activities such as pollution prevention and control, discharge regulation and monitoring of water quality.

Mrs Carson: I thank the Minister for his extremely good reply. I am delighted to hear that staff numbers will increase from 44 to 77. That is really going to do something. The need for effective policing on the waterways was recently highlighted in my own constituency

of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, where a considerable amount of farm slurry went into a swallow-hole near the scenic Marble Arch caves at the source of the Cladagh River. This resulted in thousands of fish, and the Erne and Melvin hatchery, being destroyed. It wiped out the brown trout native breeding stock as well.

Does the Minister believe that the present fines are enough to deter potential polluters? Is he satisfied that the penalties are strong enough? Will there be any educational programmes to make farmers and country users more aware of the effect that slurry, in particular, and other substances have on our river life and fish stocks?

Mr Foster: The maximum fine for pollution is presently £20,000. In recent years the courts have demonstrated an increasing tendency to impose fines approaching this maximum for polluters found guilty of serious pollution offences. Polluters found guilty in court of causing pollution are liable for compensation costs, including the costs of restocking where a fish kill has occurred and of any clean up. These costs can be large and frequently exceed the fines imposed by the court. At this stage I am satisfied that the penalties available to the courts through both fines and costs are sufficient to act as a deterrent if rigorously used.

With regard to the education process, there are no plans as far as the Department is concerned to educate people. We hope that people show a degree of responsibility rather than irresponsibility.

I am very aware of the pollution incident in the Marble Arch area of Fermanagh, and I deplore it. Farm slurry which was dumped into a hole in the ground contaminated local streams, including one feeding a fish farm which was used primarily to breed native stock for the Erne system. Thousands of fish were killed, and there may be longer term effects on fish fry and breeding stocks. This is a major setback to restocking plans in the Erne system. Therefore I have instructed my officials to pursue their investigation of this incident vigorously. The farmer involved has been identified, and the statutory samples have been taken with a view to prosecution.

Mr O'Neill I also welcome the increase in public resources poured into this area. Does the Minister agree that this has perhaps been the worst year on record for pollution incidents in our rivers all over Northern Ireland and that the burden falling on staff is huge? Would he consider using some of this resource to help with the training and empowerment of voluntary bailiffs, who could report pollution incidents?

The evidence indicates that given the time from when an incident is discovered until it is reported and a sample is taken the chances are that the source will not be proven. If angling associations and groups of that nature had voluntary bailiffs who had the necessary training to take samples, and who could take those

samples as incidents are detected, people could be brought to book more readily.

Mr Foster: We would like to get to grips with those people who irresponsibly pollute waterways, wherever they might be. We have no plans at present to teach people or help voluntary groups. We feel that the Department, with the increase of staff I have referred to earlier, should help to ease the situation considerably.

Last year 2,573 pollution incidents were reported to the Environment and Heritage Service. On investigation, 1,699 were confirmed. The difference between reported and confirmed pollution incidents can be accounted for largely by natural phenomena being mistakenly reported as pollution or by the fact that some minor incidents can be so short-lived that, by the time pollution response staff arrive on site, any evidence of pollution has gone.

Environmental Protection Legislation: Consultation

11. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister of the Environment if he will make it his policy, in liaison with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, to ensure that the farming community will be consulted in relation to new legislation to protect the environment.

(AQO 669/00)

Mr Foster: My Department enjoys an excellent working relationship with farmers, their representatives and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. In the past, it has consulted successfully with farming bodies on a range of policy proposals. Most recently farming representatives were fully involved in the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Advisory Group, which, last autumn, submitted proposals to me for a Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy. On 23 January I announced in the Assembly my intention to consult on measures to strengthen existing legislation for the protection and management of areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs).

I will ensure that farmers' representatives, landowners and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, as well as others interested in protecting the environment, are fully consulted. The protection of sites in the future will be best achieved through partnership with landowners and other relevant interests. I will continue to apply the principles of full and open consultation with all interested parties on any further legislative proposals relating to the protection of the environment.

Mr Gibson: I welcome the Minister's statement that he enjoys the support and encouragement of the farming community. The difficulties with regard to tree protection orders (TPOs), special areas of conservation (SACs) and those areas that are still designated ASSIs include identification of the locality and protection by fencing and the identification of the rare trees.

Very rare trees may be identified on a map, but developers and the men with the chainsaws normally do not carry maps. Therefore there must be other ways of identifying trees that are to be preserved. This was particularly relevant in the case of Knocknamoe in Omagh, where there were some specialist trees in the estate. What efforts will the Minister make in relation to identification and proper protection?

Mr Foster: We will do all we can to ensure that people are aware of the special areas of control, whether they relate to trees, ASSIs, or otherwise.

A consultation paper will review the protection and management of ASSIs, and it will pose questions about the nature of management agreements, the continued payment of compensation, and action to deal with third-party damage. I suggest to Mr Gibson and representatives of the farming and landowning communities, as well as other interested parties, that comments could be given through that arrangement over a three-month period.

We are seeking partnership with all concerned for the protection of any of these species. I ask Mr Gibson, through his channels, to ensure that those issues will be brought forward in the consultation document.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

14. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the steps he is taking to give greater protection to areas of special scientific interest. (AQO 675/00)

Mr Foster: As I indicated during the debate on 23 January on the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, there is a range of actions under way to improve the protection of special sites. I am grateful for the additional resources made available in the recent Budget for work on environmental protection and nature conservation. Some of that money will be available to support payments to landowners, voluntary bodies and district councils for the management of designated sites. That funding will enhance the Department of the Environment's ability to encourage good conservation management at the designated sites.

The Department of the Environment is committed to producing a Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy following the recent receipt of the report of the Northern Ireland biodiversity group. Its recommendations include proposals for protecting special sites and priority habitats. My officials will take full account of the group's recommendations as they prepare that strategy.

The Department will continue to work closely with other Departments whose responsibilities have an important bearing on the natural environment. One important example is integrating conservation into policies for the countryside and the rural environment.

I intend to consult on proposals to strengthen the existing legislation for the protection and management of ASSIs. A consultation paper will be published in the next few weeks.

BUILDING REGULATIONS 2000

The Deputy Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee (Mr Leslie): I beg to move the motion standing in the name of the Committee Chairperson:

That this Assembly annuls the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 (SR 389/2000).

Members may wonder why a building regulation is being presented by the Department of Finance and Personnel. It is one of the consequences of the way in which Departments were divided at devolution. It is perhaps a little curious that this division moved from the Department of the Environment to the Department of Finance and Personnel. However, that is where it is, and therefore it is a matter for the Finance and Personnel Committee.

The Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 Statutory Rule was laid in the Assembly on 15 December. There was no pre-drafting scrutiny — it was not brought to the Committee for pre-drafting scrutiny prior to that, although the consultation on the contents of the regulations occurred in the middle of 2000. As Members are probably aware, once a rule has been formally laid with the Assembly, a Statutory Committee can do only one of two things with it: approve it or seek its annulment by the Assembly. There is no facility for amending a statutory rule. Consequently, the Committee found itself with what one might describe as a nuclear option. That was to annul the rule, given the Committee's dissatisfaction with quite a number of its terms.

It will be of great benefit to Ministers if Committees are encouraged to engage in the pre-drafting scrutiny of statutory rules because Committees can provide extra eyes for the Ministers. That would lead to some improvement in a number of the regulations. Committees have the time to look into issues, and they can spend time mulling over them and taking evidence on them. That time is not necessarily available to Ministers. In particular, it was not available to the Finance Minister on 15 December when the Budget was being finalised. That was one of the busiest times of the year for the Minister, and for the Finance and Personnel Committee, which was also under considerable pressure at that time to deal with the Committee Stage of the Government Resources and Accounting Bill. That Bill will be coming before the House for its Consideration Stage very shortly.

Therefore, the timings were unfortunate, but I encourage the Finance and Personnel Minister and other Ministers to engage in some form of pre-drafting scrutiny with their Committees when looking ahead to the tabling of regulations.

This will be constructive and in the best interests of all concerned. I will deal with the substance of the regulation, but I am conscious that some other members

of the Committee may want to comment so I will try to set out the general territory.

4.30 pm

The Committee is in no doubt that many provisions in the statutory rule are well worth having and will be improvements to the current regulatory environment. However, the Committee as a whole was concerned about the way the provisions for protecting domestic properties against radon gas have been framed. At present, existing protection is provided by the designation of areas. The new regulations would change the designations. Some quite considerable new areas would become designated and other areas, which were previously designated, would become undesignated. The mode of designation is done on a grid square, which may be handy from a survey point of view, but it is not necessarily helpful when you are looking at building lines or the area of a development.

Radon occurs naturally and is a particular problem in areas where uranium and similar heavy elements in the underlying rock decay and produce other radioactive products that pass into the air. Radon gas increases the risk of lung cancer — I will discuss the statistics later.

As soon as the Committee had sight of this statutory rule, members immediately alighted on the radon issue and were concerned about it. Consequently, the Department was asked to provide expert guidance, and evidence was also taken from building regulators. Our concerns were underlined and reinforced by the evidence we heard.

I thank the Department of Finance and Personnel for their efforts. It was a short timescale, but a great effort was made to explain the technical background, and papers were swiftly provided for the Committee to consider the matter in more detail. It became apparent early in the process that the Committee should seek to annul this statutory rule, and, due to the timetabling of Assembly business, it was important that the motion be put down.

The Committee noted that the regulations relate to domestic dwellings, and members were concerned that they would not apply to non-domestic properties such as schools, libraries and leisure centres. Considerable numbers of people use those buildings and there would be risks to their health if the appropriate defence against radon were not put in place.

This statutory rule assumes that a survey of radon gas levels, based upon what is really an imperfect system of assessment, is sufficient to exclude large parts of the countryside from inclusion in the designated areas. The Assembly may be interested to hear that the Chief Building Control Officers' Forum shares the views and concerns of the Finance and Personnel Committee. In its submission it stated

"Designated areas are determined on the basis of the probability of radon being present in that area. New houses which are not in a designated area may still have a radon problem."

When you look at the map you immediately find yourself asking why there is a clear area in the middle that seems to be surrounded by areas that are designated as having a radon risk. This led the Committee to conclude that the most sensible thing to do, given the widespread incidence of radon and the uncertainty of measurement, would be to designate the whole of Northern Ireland as a radon affected area.

Regulations should therefore be put in place requiring all new dwellings, and the other buildings which I mentioned earlier, to be protected against it.

In this context you clearly have to look at the cost of these measures. This was done during the consultation process. The figure generally quoted as the normal cost for making the necessary improvements to the foundations is between £100 and £150 per house. This figure applies if you do it before the house is built; the situation is far worse and more expensive if you have to do it retrospectively. However, the Chief Building Control Officers' Forum said that it could cost up to £400 per house to provide a high degree of protection. This seems to be the maximum figure.

That is not the only element of these building regulations that adds to the cost of building houses. A number of other measures also increase costs. One relates to the guarding and protection of steps and ramps from impact — that is estimated to cost £100 but could cost up to £600 — and another relates to glazing on ground floors, which is also expected to cost about £100. A further regulation requires disabled access to be available at all ground-floor-level dwellings, which is expected to cost £1,100 per dwelling. However, when you look at the evidence gathered during the consultation process, you will find that of the three independent building contractors consulted, two opined that the likely cost would be rather more than that, and that where houses are built on a slope the cost could be several thousand pounds. A number of those consulted expressed the view that it was perhaps excessive to require every dwelling to have such access. When you add all of those things up, you can see that a number of the measures in here will add to the cost of building.

However, the Department's own medical statistics show that in Northern Ireland about 60 deaths a year are believed to come from radon-related lung cancer. Various statistics have been provided about the probability of contracting lung cancer in this way. The lifetime risk of contracting lung cancer induced by radon at the action level — the level or concentration at which it triggers the existing regulations — has been estimated by the Imperial Cancer Research Fund as 1% for non-smokers. These statistics can be quite hard to extrapolate accurately; in brief, they set the maximum risk of contracting lung cancer during one's lifetime at one in 10,000 in the lowest-risk areas. The actual figure is bound to be rather lower, however.

When put in perspective, the figure of 60 deaths per year from lung cancer that may result from radon represents quite a high probability. For instance, the number of deaths occurring from new variant CJD in the whole of the United Kingdom is lower than that. We have spent billions of pounds of public money on slaughtering cattle on the basis that there might be some connection between BSE and new variant CJD. In addition, hundreds of millions of pounds of agricultural profit have been swept away. I do not think the argument that it costs somewhere between £100 and £400 per house — albeit of private money, not public money — is a good one for suggesting that measures should not be taken to protect against radon. When all of that is taken into account, it is the view of the Committee that the present limited provision in the rule, which leaves out large areas of Northern Ireland from designation as a radon area, is unsatisfactory.

The Committee is unanimously agreed that the building industry should be required to provide radon protection to new dwellings in all parts of the country. We also ask the Minister to look again at the apparent omission of non-domestic properties and, in particular, places where children and young people gather — such as schools, libraries and leisure centres, not to mention hospitals — in the context of these regulations.

I dislike regulations almost as much as I dislike taxation. I firmly believe that we would be better governed if there were considerably less of both. There is probably a tendency — perhaps as a result of direct rule, aided and abetted by belonging to the European Union, which is a regulation-designing factory — to churn out these regulations. They receive very little or no scrutiny and we are then burdened with the cost of the consequences. Perhaps a lesson comes out of this episode: we have to find the time to look closely and carefully at the number of regulations we are passing.

In conclusion, in view of the inadequacies that I have outlined, I recommend to the Assembly that it should support the Department of Finance and Personnel Committee's motion for annulment of the rule.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions to Ministers took up some of the time allocated to this motion. I am afraid that I am going to have to limit speeches to seven minutes, which will enable us to hear from the Minister and have a winding-up speech and a vote.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. Although I am a Committee member I am against the prayer of annulment going ahead. The building regulations, some of which Mr Leslie has mentioned, are a package. Therefore we cannot take out the piece of the package that we are not happy with and ask for the rest of the regulations to go through. They have to be passed as a package, which is why I will not be supporting this prayer of annulment.

I do not deny that radon is a very serious issue, but in some areas where there are high incidences of radon there is no protection. These regulations will give them immediate protection. The Minister has said that he might consult further on radon, so these regulations may be amended further down the line.

It is also important to discuss other issues included in these building regulations, with particular regard to disability access. I have often said that people with disabilities have been discriminated against in Northern Ireland for many years. This would have been a positive step for them. Under the proposed regulations, homes and ground floor accommodation will be upgraded from habitable to visitable. Therefore I propose that the regulations go forward.

The regulations also propose to introduce more up-to-date fire safety codes relating to means of escape and back-up power supply to domestic smoke detection systems. Considering the number of fire-related deaths in the past couple of months, it would be remiss of us, as an Assembly, not to put those regulations into place as soon as possible.

If these regulations go forward today, then they will be implemented from 1 April. If we vote for annulment, they will not be in place until April 2002. If we support these regulations, with the hope that there will be further consultation and an amendment further down the line, the operative date will be May 2002.

Because of the entire package, including the provisions relating to immediate protection from radon, disabled access and fire precautions, we should support the regulations.

4.45 pm

Mr P Robinson: Many who will speak in the debate would, no doubt, have preferred it if the Minister had spoken earlier in the debate, so that they could have tailored their comments appropriately, in the knowledge of the position that he intended to adopt.

It might be useful if I were to point out to those who are not members of the Finance and Personnel Committee that there was — without exception — an acceptance on the part of the Committee that the risk was of a sufficiently high level for the matter to be treated with some urgency. So far as I am aware, there was no division among members of the Committee about the desired result.

There are, however, some procedural difficulties. I could characterise the division in the Committee as one between pragmatists and idealists. Some members realise that half a loaf is often better than no bread. However, because of the procedures, the Minister can tell the Committee that there can be no cherry-picking with the statutory rule — that it is all or nothing — and that there will be a consequence if we proceed with an annulment. The consequence would be a delay in the bringing into force of measures for the protection of the areas of

Northern Ireland that are at highest risk from radon, as well as of other beneficial parts of the regulations, including those relating to disabled access. That is the downside; the upside is that the Department would come under additional pressure to deal with the issue in a more general way for Northern Ireland, as opposed to the present piecemeal approach. Many members of the Committee would be unable to tell the Minister how we would vote on the measure; we must wait until we hear the Minister's response. The Committee would like a firm commitment from the Minister that he will take action soon to meet the Committee's concerns.

There are cost ramifications for the end user; any costs placed on the builder of a house will be passed on to the purchaser. If, on further investigation, it appears that there is no risk to certain areas of Northern Ireland from radon gas, why should people in those areas be required to have protection from something from which they are not at risk?

Thus far, the consultation has been narrow. In correspondence with the Committee, the Minister put his hands up and recognised that the Committee should have been given an opportunity to consider the matter prior to the statutory rule's being laid before the House. That would have allowed the Committee to hear views from a wider range of people, in addition to the building control officers and the Department. It would also be necessary to have the views of the construction industry.

Undoubtedly that can take place if the Minister agrees to take on board the issue and to have further and wider consultation. Eyebrows would be raised if, without there being scientific evidence of people being under threat, we were to say that, regardless of that, protection had to be made available. The bottom line for many of us is that it would be unwise for the Assembly if the Minister were to show a willingness to meet the Assembly's position, to have the regulations annulled. In those circumstances those areas which are at highest risk would, in effect, be denied for at least a year the protection that they would have under these building regulations. It would be a strange set of circumstances were the Committee to say that in order to have a wider protection we were going to take away that protection for at least that period from those who most need it.

Having been on both sides of the fence, I say by way of advice — not of warning — to the Minister that the Committee feels that it has not been well treated in this issue, and in other respects. The Minister could relieve the Committee of some of its anxieties by firming up the remarks he will make to the House. I suspect that unless he goes a little further than he has thus far, there are those on the Committee who will feel obliged to divide the House on the matter. As a Minister, I am sure that at this stage he must be wondering what the outcome of that would be, given the precarious numerical circumstances of political parties in this House. In all circum-

stances the Minister would be best served were he to give as firm an undertaking as possible that he will carry out the fullest of consultation and that he will consider each of the other parts of Northern Ireland with a view to as soon as possible bringing forward regulations that will meet any further need identified by his investigations.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I do not want to repeat the comments and sentiments of other Members, but, similarly, I would welcome any assurances that the Minister could give us so that we do not have to seek this annulment.

I have two further points to add to what is almost a questionnaire. Radon, like many other things, does not recognise borders. I have already asked the Minister what exchanges he has had with his counterpart in the Twenty-six Counties, and I await his response. We are told that, close to the border, there are areas of high radon contamination. Without repeating any points, I would like assurances with regard to the designation of areas as radon-affected.

I support the idea of further consultation on, and consideration of, this matter in the months ahead. If, for example, a developer were moving on a piece of property, only part of which was designated as radon-affected, would the highest levels of protection be required on any development on all of that site? I sought assurances from Department officials, but they were unable to give me a positive response. That question, therefore, needs to be addressed. We have been told that the designation issue is an administrative nightmare. For most Members who raised concerns, however, the issue was whether the entire area needed to be designated as radon-affected. Quite simply, further consideration is needed, and I am happy to support the general view of other Committee members if the Minister will assure us that we will have this consultation in the months ahead.

Mr Close: From my standpoint, I am afraid, I require — and will be looking for — more than simple assurances. This issue is a very serious one — it involves lung cancer. According to the Department's figures, every year in Northern Ireland 60 deaths are caused by radon-related lung cancer — 60 deaths per annum. I would consider even one such death as being too many, but 60 deaths is far beyond that. We have a responsibility to do everything in our power to ensure that there will be no deaths through cancer in Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, we are living in a society, and among countries, where there is a radiation smog through which people are battling day and daily for their health. There are high-tension power lines and radio-telecommunication masts — I could go on. We have one of the highest rates of cancer in the Western World, and people ask why.

We have here an opportunity to do something about the situation — we can designate Northern Ireland as a radon-free area and thus take the necessary steps to

prevent, wherever possible, those 60 deaths. The issue of finance should not be brought into the debate. What price would anyone in the House put on a human life? It is impossible to do that. That is the number one issue which makes me insist that this annulment go through today. Simple assurances are not enough.

But there is another issue: how the Assembly and its Committees have been dealt with over the past couple of years, and how they are to be dealt with in the future. How often have we heard comments such as “Yes, it would have been beneficial if we had had the time to come to the Committees to consult with you and to allow you to perform your statutory function”? How often have we said that the time allocated to us was totally inadequate?

We had another opportunity to do this when consultation was taking place. Let us look at the claim that there was a need to carry out further consultation with other organisations. I have a list here of some 58 organisations that were consulted on these regulations in draft form. Many of these organisations said to the Department that they wanted all of Northern Ireland to be designated a radon-free area. Yet we are told today that there needs to be more consultation. That “more consultation” can only mean consulting with the very same people who are on this list and have already been consulted.

What is the point of consultation when it is not listened to? Surely the most important people to be consulted on this are the building control officers who day and daily implement these regulations. What did the group of building control officers tell us? They said that Northern Ireland should be designated a radon-free zone. They told us that the current faffing around with regulations is leading to confusion with builders and has created a loss of credibility in the eyes of members of the building control profession. For example, sites previously designated as requiring radon protection are, under these new regulations, no longer deemed to need that protection. What sort of message is that sending? One day you are in, and the next day you are out. We have grey areas in Northern Ireland — in certain local government areas a field will be in, while the next will be out; one side of a road will be in, and the other will be out. What sort of confusion is that going to lead to?

What is the solution? Let these regulations go forward and, after a period of time, introduce yet further regulations to change yet again that which would have been in being for a matter of months.

5.00 pm

The whole thing is farcical. A clear message has to go out that the Assembly and its Committees are not nodding dogs, rubber stamps or whatever terminology you want to use. A Northern Ireland Assembly in now in situ and we are here to represent the views of our electorate. If people decide, for whatever reason, not to consult us or give us opportunities to be consulted, the onus to rectify

the situation will be left fairly on their shoulders. This Assembly cannot be treated like a dogsbody. There were plenty of opportunities to consult with the appropriate Committee, but someone, somewhere, decided not to bother.

The Committee has suggested that we wait for the Minister’s response to see whether we pursue this issue or not. I understand that specific assurances were sought from the Minister and that he gave a reply in which he was quite specific and said that he could not give us the precise assurances we were seeking. The Minister gave us our answer, and the Committee should therefore stand by its concern for the people of Northern Ireland and insist that this annulment take place.

Mr Hussey: I support the prayer of annulment which has been proposed by the Deputy Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee.

The issue of inadequacy in the processing of new building regulations has quite properly been laid before the House, and we have no option but to consider this prayer of annulment. The great difficulty facing us is the fact that the majority of what is contained in the proposed new regulations is not contentious and, indeed, will lead to improved safety provision for all users of domestic properties and enhanced access for the disabled. Therefore it is fair to say that there is no desire to throw the baby out with the bath water. I sincerely trust that in his response to this debate the Minister can offer proper reassurance to the House that this will not happen.

By now Members will be well aware of the major area of concern to those of us who support the prayer of annulment, namely the regulations dealing with protection against the harmful effects of radon gas. I am not satisfied with the proposed regulations dealing with radon. As has already been said, we in the Committee have received support from the Chief Building Control Officers’ Forum in Northern Ireland. Departmental officials suggested that opposition to their proposed new regulations might be politically motivated — I think that is with a small “p” — but I am sure that everyone will agree that Northern Ireland’s chief building control officers have no axe to grind and that their opinions, based on technical expertise, should be taken seriously.

Radon gas can kill; it is therefore a matter of great concern that proper protection against its effects is in place for all the people of Northern Ireland. I live in an identified radon risk area, and it is not unusual in west Tyrone to find radon readings eight times in excess of the recommended maximum level. I have attended funerals of constituents whose early deaths were understood to have been caused in part by the effects of radon gas. I therefore have no hesitation in supporting the regulations to protect against radon. My concern is the lack of coverage for the rest of Northern Ireland.

Recent investigations by the National Radiological Protection Board indicate that every county in Northern

Ireland is affected by radon. The Assembly and the Minister have a duty of care, a duty to ensure that the effects of radon are minimised throughout Northern Ireland and not just in areas where the risk is perceived to be greatest. The regulations contain a radon risk grid, and some areas are designated as not having a high enough risk to deserve proper regulatory cover.

I do not accept that, and neither does the Chief Building Control Officers' Forum. Moreover, I would maintain that assumption rather than proper scientific investigation designates sections of the risk grid.

Effective protection at new-build stage costs a couple of hundred pounds, but to remedy radon intrusion in an existing building can cost thousands. Given the concerns that have arisen today, I urge the Minister to confirm that he intends to investigate further statutory rules that could extend radon designation to cover all of Northern Ireland, thus affording proper radon protection to all our citizens. He should also include non-domestic properties in radon protection regulations.

Finally, I ask the Minister to assure the Committee and the House that, in future, Committees will be given a proper opportunity to consider and scrutinise matters fully, prior to any rule's being laid. While awaiting the Minister's response, I support the prayer of annulment.

Mr Shannon: I want to dwell on the issue of radon gas, specifically because it is a distinct problem in the area I represent — both in the Assembly and on Ards Borough Council. There is a real need to bring the legislation forward now.

Radon gas is a natural killer — you cannot smell, see or taste it, but it is doing you harm. Mr Hussey mentioned the funerals he has attended in West Tyrone of people who have died as a result of it. It is a silent killer, responsible for 60 lung cancer deaths in the Province, as other Members have said. That shows the magnitude of the problem it creates for many of the people we represent. The gas is radioactive and can enter any building easily. It can seep through the ground or pass through floorboards, and when it becomes trapped in buildings without sufficient ventilation its effect on lung tissue can be lethal. That is what is happening in certain parts of our Province. While one sleeps, radon gas continues to percolate inside and outside houses and other property.

Many areas of the Province, apart from my constituency of Strangford, have a problem with this gas. In some areas it is more apparent and lethal than in others. In parts of east Down, radon concentrations need to be constantly monitored. One Member made the point that levels of radon could be up to eight times higher in parts of his constituency. There are areas in my constituency in which they are equally high.

The Department of the Environment provides free radon tests, but only for households considered to be at

high risk. Tests to households in less affected areas normally cost £35.

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Member share my concern that building control officers experience great difficulty in enforcing the statutory rule when the designated areas defined in the regulations do not coincide with district council and building control areas?

Mr Shannon: I thank my Colleague, the MP-in-waiting for Strangford, for her comments, which were well made. Indeed, the building control regulations, as well as the environmental health regulations, were to be the subjects of my second point.

I want to highlight the £35 charge. Grants should be made available to those households with restricted finances. People on benefits, or those who need help, should qualify, so that tests can take place. Perhaps the Minister could comment on that in his summation of today's comments.

Communities should not be left open to the health dangers associated with radon gas. That is why the co-operation of property surveyors, building control officers and environmental health officers is required to oversee the prevention of gas seeping into buildings. My Colleague referred to the issue of gas becoming trapped and therefore posing a health threat to those living in the house. The Building Regulations 2000 need to be established, setting out the new requirements that all new buildings, whether residential, commercial or public, must have radon measures installed, such as proper ventilation and underfloor extraction.

In the areas where radon gas is a problem, what about schools, health clinics, health centres, community centres — areas where young people, adults and parents all meet on a regular basis? What about the threat to their health? We want to address that as well.

It is important to recognise that building control areas do not necessarily match the council areas. Therefore, we need a co-ordinated policy. My Colleague referred to that. It is also the responsibility of the Government to increase the profile of this particular natural problem. The Government might not have highlighted this in the way that they should have. They must be more proactive in showing where the problem is. They must publish documentation and assistance that are easily read and understood by those people who have a particular interest or concern. That would enable members of the public to begin to take their own measures to combat the problem. Make them aware of it, show them how you can help, and then take it forward.

Peace of mind is so important. The public needs to be assured that the threat to its health is being addressed. The onus is on the Department, and in this case upon the Minister, to confirm that those directly under radon exposure can be protected. We must have that as our first goal.

Mr McCarthy: I am not a Member of the Finance and Personnel Committee, but I have great concerns. I will support any proposal coming out of the Assembly or the Committee that will minimise or eradicate the health risks associated with radon gas as soon as possible.

I have raised this serious problem with our Health, Education, Environment and Social Development Ministers, and now with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. While all Ministers recognise that there is a problem, no one has really got to grips with the very serious radon threat. To date, no Department has really taken action to seriously tackle the problem. I hope that the Assembly will insist that time is of the essence.

I am not going to go over what has already been said. The Members who have spoken have said it very well. Private dwellings are of great concern, especially in the radon-affected areas at the moment. However, little or nothing has been said of public buildings until now — we have raised the profile in the Chamber today. People are required to be in those buildings for many hours at a time. I raised the issue of schools in particular. Again, little or no action seems to have been taken.

We must bear in mind the effects of this gas, which can only be discovered after a prolonged period. A recent survey in the Republic revealed that some 400 schools out of 1,700 had a serious level of radon. Immediate action was taken. To date, as far as I am aware, schools in Northern Ireland have been ignored. So many young people in the schools could be at risk.

In Northern Ireland, there are an increasing number of cancer sufferers. We all wonder what is causing that increase. Here we have the knowledge of the cause of lung cancer. It has already been said that some 60 people in Northern Ireland have died as a result of radon gas. That is enough for this Assembly to take immediate action, throughout Northern Ireland, and ensure that our people will not fall victim to radon gas.

As I understand it, representations have been made by over 50 organisations. The chief building control officers in Northern Ireland have made their case — very strongly, as I understand it — to the Committee. Surely they are the people to whom we should listen. The Assembly must act upon the officers' vast experience; we simply cannot afford to wait any longer.

5.15 pm

Mr Weir: I share many of the concerns expressed by my Colleagues on the Finance and Personnel Committee. We are being asked to choose between the lesser of two evils: if we simply accept the building regulations as they stand and withdraw the prayer of annulment, we could be accepting unsatisfactory regulations.

Many of the related issues have already been raised. We could be taking a gamble with public health. Regulation relating to radon appears to be a movable feast; there is

no universally agreed acceptable level of risk. For example, the English and Welsh regulations refer to areas with a more than 3% chance of radon contamination; in Scotland, the figure is 1%, as with these regulations. The danger is that we will take a risk with public health, and that may be viewed as a very foolish decision in a few years' time.

The fact that the system is based on a grid reference using square miles, means that we face a ridiculous situation in which a particular house may be covered by the regulations but the house beside it may not. Building control regulators have said that that would create administrative problems.

For some parts of Northern Ireland — albeit a small percentage — the figures are not available; the squares on the map are blank, simply because there has not been adequate investigation in those areas. One set of squares might be covered by the regulations, and, right beside them, others would not. I am not sure that the House should accept such a partitionist solution, if I might use a phrase that has more resonance for Members opposite. The Assembly should not allow a situation in which some parts of Northern Ireland are covered and some parts are not.

I must temper those remarks. Despite the fact that the best evidence available was provided by building control, there was, during consultation, no universal acceptance that all of Northern Ireland should be covered. At the moment, I am inclined towards the view that all of Northern Ireland should be covered. I want to hear more details and gather more evidence before making up my mind as to whether Northern Ireland as a whole should be covered.

If we accept the prayer of annulment, as suggested by other Members, we will delay other important aspects of building control regulation relating to fire safety and disabled access. Even then, the issue is not absolutely black and white. During the consultation, there was not even universal acceptance that the building regulations were completely right on the matter of disability access.

If the Assembly annuls the regulations, it will delay, by up to a year, the provision of protection to the areas that are most strongly affected by radon. As Mr Hussey said, we must be careful that we do not throw the baby out with the bath water. Mr Close read out a long list of people who were consulted, dating from the start of the consultation process in April 1998. However, one of the most blatant omissions from the list is the Northern Ireland Assembly. I appreciate that the Assembly did not exist when the consultation began, but it has been in existence for two and a half years. Yet the Assembly's only opportunity to consider the regulations has come at the tail end of the process, giving us only a short time to decide whether the regulations should be annulled or accepted.

The Assembly did not have the opportunity to look at these at the pre-drafting stage. With proper investigation at that stage, we could have avoided many of the problems

that have arisen today. We could have weighed up the opportunity for amendments. However, now we find ourselves in the position that we either have to fully accept these regulations or get rid of them.

Like other Members, I will be listening very intently to what the Minister has to say with regard to the assurances he can give. The Minister should draw some comfort from the fact that, with the exception of his Budget statement, Members have rarely been so keen to listen to his closing remarks.

I would like a re-examination of the matter. There are, in particular, two important issues. First, the consultation must genuinely include the views of the Assembly, which have been largely ignored until now.

Secondly, if we get the assurances that consultation will happen and that new regulations will be looked at, that consultation must be genuine and the views of practitioners taken on board. We do not want a situation in which the Department starts with a predetermined attitude as to the areas that should be covered and at the end of the process simply rubber-stamps that, having gone through the process of supposed consultation.

If the Committee takes the view that it is not going to push this to an annulment, then this is very much a test case. If consultation turns out simply to be a facade, the Committee will not be so kind to the Minister in the future when deciding on the issue of annulment. I wait with anticipation to hear what the Minister has to say.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I welcome the opportunity to make a statement on what is clearly an important matter. I recognise and understand from the arguments that have been voiced here today and previously at Committee meetings the strong feelings that Members have on the radon issue. However, let us remember, with regard to building regulations, that it is not the only issue we need to consider.

I do not wish to minimise in any way the fact that when radon concentration is high it poses a serious risk to health. Members have spoken today in strong and advised terms about that risk. Measurements of radon levels in homes have been undertaken, as Members have indicated, by the National Radiological Protection Board for several years, and the results have been published periodically. Over 15,000 results are available, and these provide substantial information on the distribution of radon levels in homes throughout Northern Ireland. This data forms the basis for the National Radiological Protection Board's most recent advice to Government on the level of radon in homes.

On the basis of a comprehensive survey and report by the board in 1999, it was decided to include radon protection measures in the next update of building regulations. The survey report — which again some Members touched on — was based on five kilometre squares of the Irish

grid, and it classified Northern Ireland into four area categories: first, areas where less than 1% of dwellings were above the level at which action is considered necessary to prevent possible damage to health; secondly, areas where 1% to 3% of dwellings were above the action level; thirdly, areas where 3% to 10% of dwellings were above the action level; and fourthly, areas where more than 10% were above the level.

The National Radiological Protection Board recommended that all areas with a risk above 1% should receive protection against radon. Identical recommendations were made by that board for England, Scotland and Wales. The Northern Ireland building regulations laid on 15 December 2000 — the subject of today's prayer of annulment — require that all new dwellings in areas carrying a risk factor of above 1% should have protective measures at construction stage to prevent the ingress of radon.

A comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom, where regulations have now been introduced, shows that Scotland has adopted the same standard as is proposed for Northern Ireland. England and Wales — as Peter Weir mentioned — will introduce protective measures only in areas where 3% or more of dwellings are above the level at which action is necessary to prevent possible damage to health.

I have acknowledged the concerns expressed by the Finance and Personnel Committee — which have been reinforced by Members this afternoon — that the present building regulations exclude certain areas of Northern Ireland, primarily in County Antrim, parts of Armagh and Down and the Greater Belfast metropolitan area. Members were also anxious that the regulations excluded non-domestic properties such as schools and hospitals.

I have very carefully considered the strong representations made, and I am persuaded that it would be appropriate to take a fresh look at the radon issue. An appropriate period should be allocated to further examine the arguments, such as those that have been suggested today, for a change of policy. That is only proper, so that the views of others, including the construction industry — as mentioned by Peter Robinson — health practitioners and the public can be sought in a proper consultation exercise. I have also indicated to the Finance and Personnel Committee, through Mr Leslie, that I am happy to formally refer the issue to the Committee for its advice. That would also allow a full investigation through that channel.

It was also suggested that allowing a wider consultation on proposals to extend the effect of the regulations would not be beneficial. Seamus Close suggested, on the basis of previous consultations, that nothing new could be gained from a wider consultation. The previous consultation had the proposals that are currently in the regulations as its favoured option. That may have coloured

the response rate to the consultation — not least when one looks at what local councils replied to the previous consultation. It is possible that some people in some areas did not see their status or circumstances being changing by the recommended option, so they did not make a response.

Given that the Assembly is talking about a different proposal, it should subject it to specific consultation. The Assembly is not just talking in any new consultation about extending the protection for dwellings to the whole of Northern Ireland but, as the Committee requested, also considering non-domestic properties. The nature of that proposal would be different, and the span of interest in it could be different. Therefore it must be recognised that there is a need for further consultation. If this proposal has the merit and worth that Members attach to it then it is worthy of having the same proper consultation that the measures in the regulations to date have had.

5.30 pm

Some Members recognised that during consultation on the regulations not everyone was of the view that not extending the protection to the whole of Northern Ireland was a problem. Some people would feel that where there is no real evidence to suggest a risk, there would be no particular requirement to extend a protection. That view may well express itself again in a further proposal or consultation. We also need to remember that there are other interests at Government level that would need to be reflected in any wider consideration.

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

Some Departments have particular interests in the areas of non-domestic properties. The Housing Division of the Department for Social Development would have an interest. It previously gave a view supporting the approach currently being provided for in the regulations. Therefore any proposal to look at things differently would interest the Department for Social Development.

Mr Shannon mentioned that the Department of the Environment provides a free test service for houses in designated areas. That Department would be interested in the implications of the whole of Northern Ireland effectively becoming a designated area. Therefore within government, there would need to be some further consultation and consideration of these proposals.

I feel that I am dealing fairly and sensitively with the Committee's concerns, while reflecting that there are no shortcut answers. These measures need to be subject to the full and proper consultation that people would expect in relation to any other regulations. I hope that in such circumstances the motion for annulment of the Building Regulations 2000 will be withdrawn.

When the Committee discussed the matter on 30 January, members were anxious to ensure that other provisions in

the regulations, such as access for the disabled, should be introduced without delay. We must remember that those provisions fulfil certain requirements under disability discrimination legislation. They would be safeguarded in the event of annulment proceedings being dropped.

By allowing the building regulations to stand with effect from 1 April 2001, approximately 50% of the Northern Ireland area would have radon protection measures in place. If the regulations were to be annulled that would not be the case.

Mr Close said that no assurance would satisfy him. He made the point after he had, in very strong and fair terms, stressed the importance of the health risk of radon and talked about the number of deaths per year. If we annul the regulations we will, in effect, delay protection for the areas in which it is most obviously needed. Therefore the urgency and importance that Mr Close attaches to this matter would not be best served by annulling the regulations. In fact, it would be quite a perverse way of trying to accommodate or reflect that urgency. Surely it makes more sense to take the current regulations, affording the added protection that they require and then, in turn, building on that through the consideration of the measures that the Committee is now asking us to consider. Let us remember that the motion is not only concerned with the protection against radon, but with other measures such as safety.

Some measures deal with windows and glass and others with fire safety, including battery power back-up for hardware; smoke alarms; and safe exits. I thought people would want to see this sort of safety measure progress, but an annulment mechanism will stop all of those key safety measures and safety improvements. As I have said, the regulations say that dwellings must be accessible to people with disabilities. I thought that Members would want to see this key improvement implemented.

If we are to annul these regulations and recast new ones on the wider basis recommended by the Committee, a process of consultation will still be required which will involve examining all these measures again. Depending on the issues involved, this will probably make it a more protracted consultation than the focused process which is all that would be required for the specific, additional measures sought by the Committee.

Some Members have said that finance should not be an issue. This is not an issue of public finance; it is really a question of private finance. The burden will tend to pass to the end user despite the initial costs borne by the construction industry. Some responses to the previous consultation questioned the appropriateness of provisions such as disabled access, for instance, and suggested that their cost would be burdensome. If today's proceedings were to fall in favour of annulling these measures and consulting on the additional measures

proposed by the Committee, the case would be reopened on all these matters with wider consultation on the entirety of the regulations.

I ask the House, and the Committee in particular, to have regard to the fact that people in the House and the Committee do not seem to have a particular problem with what is in the regulations. On the contrary, they have a very legitimate and soundly expressed problem with what is not — repeat: not — in the regulations. We should proceed with the contents of the existing regulations and then pursue what is left out through a timely and concentrated consultation exercise.

I must remind Members that these regulations will be subject to European approval as well. While I have undertaken to refer the matter formally to the Committee, it could take several months for Europe to respond. That is one of the reasons for my not pretending to be in absolute control of a specific timetable.

Mr Close mentioned that I had been asked by the Committee to give an assurance of one absolute outcome by a specific date and that I had resiled from giving that specific assurance. On the very good grounds that I have already outlined, I simply could not give that assurance. Other interests and factors are involved. However, I believe that we can approach this in a time-effective way.

I fully appreciate the points that have been made about the consultation process. In particular, I recognise that the Committee wants to be assured that on future occasions its role will be invoked in a much more significant way and at an earlier stage in the preparation of statutory rules. I assure the Committee and the House that this point is well taken.

I hope that I have made the necessary acknowledgements of the positions outlined by the Committee. I have addressed some of its concerns and dealt with the serious arguments commending provisions contained in the regulations. I hope that, on this basis, the Committee will feel able to withdraw its motion. If it does not feel able to do so, I hope that the Assembly will endorse a delay with these regulations and note that I have already committed myself to pursuing other areas of outstanding concern to the Committee.

Mr Leslie: I thank Members for their contributions to the debate. I extend particular thanks to members of the Finance and Personnel Committee for having managed to act in concert, without having arranged to do so, and for assembling a fairly well thought out set of arguments which reflect the Committee's concerns.

I am pleased that the Minister seems to accept the thrust of the Committee's proposal in what I believe is a vital area of public safety, and I also note his undertaking in relation to pre-drafting scrutiny. I would have been more comfortable with the Minister's remarks had he spent slightly less time talking about the extent of further consultation that is needed. However, I do believe this matter to be sufficiently worthy to merit it, and I appreciate that, if this regulation is laid, the process of consultation cannot start until the regulation comes into force in April. If it does start then, it will be possible to lay an amended regulation towards the end of the year, which could come into force by April 2002. Therefore, if it were to emerge from further consultation and consideration that it was deemed appropriate to designate the whole of Northern Ireland as a radon-affected area, it would be possible to make a regulation to that effect by next April.

I acknowledge the Minister's remarks about the value of bringing the other matters covered by this regulation into force by the earlier date of April 2001. The Committee, throughout its deliberations, was entirely aware of the significance of achieving this.

In the light of the undertakings which the Minister has made to the Assembly, and having taken the temperature of the Committee members — for this involves our revisiting our earlier decision to move the motion — I think it appropriate for me to ask leave of the Assembly to withdraw the motion of annulment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Leave to withdraw requires unanimous consent. *[Interruption]* It is clear that there is not unanimity, so I shall put the Question.

Question put and negatived.

Adjourned at 5.45 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 6 February 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

GROUND RENTS BILL

Further Consideration Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):

This Bill has come a long way since its introduction on 5 June 2000. While it is in many respects a technical Bill, it is, as I indicated during the Second Stage debate, nonetheless an important one. It has been thoroughly debated, both in the Assembly and without, and I reiterate my thanks to the Finance and Personnel Committee for its most thorough scrutiny of the Bill. That was a long and arduous process, involving 12 separate Committee sessions, and I place on record my thanks to all the members and former members of the Committee who contributed so effectively. In particular, I thank the Chairperson of the Committee, Francie Molloy, for his very effective work in relation to the Bill and the Deputy Chairperson, James Leslie, who, as well as taking a strong personal interest in the many issues raised, spoke to the Committee's amendments in the Assembly last week.

The central aim of the Bill is to simplify the conveyancing process by facilitating the move from leasehold to freehold ownership of residential property.

Mr Speaker: At this stage it is simply a question of dealing with the clauses formally as there are no amendments.

Mr Durkan: Points were made last week that some Members believed were outstanding. I would be happy to address these but would be more than happy with a formal process.

Clauses 1 to 33 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Ground Rents Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

FISHERIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I am not clear that there is someone present to deal with the Further Consideration Stage of the Fisheries (Amendment) Bill. I am advised that the relevant Minister is en route. I trust that it is not becoming a traditional route of delay.

Mr Dodds: Is the First Minister or the Minister of Finance and Personnel, or anyone else, in a position to deal with this Bill, or are we going to be delayed until the Minister turns up?

Mr Speaker: If the Minister is not available, and if one of her colleagues is not in a position to move, we will have to proceed to the next item of business.

Mr P Robinson: Are there any amendments?

The Junior Minister (Office of the First and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): In certain American state legislatures the Speaker entertains the House with a joke.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that kind suggestion. I am concerned to ensure that the House itself does not become a joke. That is more of an issue.

I understand that we now have the Minister.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is very helpful to find supplied through the Business Committee those nice little schedules with the estimated time that each item of business will occupy. It is helpful to Ministers and others who, obviously, have other matters to attend to, that there is an indication of when they are expected to be here. On occasions like this it would be helpful to Ministers generally if the practice were for indicated timings to be adhered to.

Mr Speaker: The First Minister is pointing up the problem. Indicative timings are given in order to be helpful. They are not actual timings. If people regard them as having substance, the problem will be that no timings can be given. On several occasions people have not been available on time.

Mr Dodds: It needs to be emphasised, as you, Mr Speaker, have done, that the indicative timings referred to by the First Minister are simply that — indicative timings. All Members have been told that if business finishes earlier than was expected, we move to the next item. Ministers should be aware of that by now. In particular, the First Minister should know, and, if not, perhaps his Chief Whip could inform him.

There was the debacle that the Deputy First Minister referred to yesterday. He had to apologise to the House. Here we have another example of the contempt with which certain Ministers treat the Assembly.

The First Minister: Further to my point of order, Mr Speaker. It is a pity that serious discussion was interrupted by a point of order that we all had to listen to. Handling the business of the Assembly would clearly be more difficult without indicative timings. The thrust of my point is that it would be better, from the point of view of good management, if the indicative timings had a minimum value. That is what happens at Westminster. Timings are given for the Adjournment debates in Westminster Hall. If a debate ends early they do not call the next one immediately but wait until the time that has been set for it. There would be merit in our adopting a similar procedure.

Mr Speaker: Of course, that does not apply in the case of legislation, which is what we are now engaged upon.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I was in the House. My indicative time was 11.30 am. I was in my room upstairs. At 10.35 am I got a message. I regret it if the House has been inconvenienced, but I was here and ready to — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Rodgers: My Bill is being taken almost an hour before the indicated time. I do not think anyone could say that I was negligent, for I was ready to be here at least 40 minutes before the time allocated.

Mr Speaker: It seems that there is substantial misunderstanding on the part of a number of Members, Ministers and their private offices as to indicative timings. I have instructed my office to try to assist in this matter, and a number of seminars are being held for private secretaries to explain the situation. The misunderstanding has caused disruption for Ministers and other Members. We shall try to attend to it.

Clauses 1 to 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Fisheries (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

CIVIC FORUM

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): I beg to move the following motion:

That this Assembly agrees that the Civic Forum shall offer its views on such social, economic and cultural matters as are from time to time agreed between the Chairperson of the Forum and the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

In addition, the Civic Forum shall be invited to offer its view on specific social, economic and cultural matters where the Assembly has by motion so requested.

Several months ago, when the question of this motion and of the making of arrangements to obtain the views of the Forum was first mooted by officials, my reaction was one of surprise, as I thought that this whole procedure was somewhat otiose. However, we are obliged by the agreement and the legislation to go through this process. The Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 both provide for a direct and immediate relationship between the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the Civic Forum.

10.45 am

The agreement states that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will, by agreement, provide administrative support for the Forum, and — and I am coming to the main point — the Northern Ireland Act 1998, in section 56(1), says:

“The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister acting jointly shall make arrangements for obtaining from the Forum its views on social, economic and cultural matters.”

One might have thought that those arrangements could be fairly open and informal, but subsection (2) says

“The arrangements so made shall not take effect until after they have been approved by the Assembly.”

A consequence of the legislation, therefore, is that in order to fulfil our statutory obligations, and for the Civic Forum to function in the way that was envisaged, it is necessary that proposed arrangements be formalised by way of a motion which must be brought before the House for its endorsement. Although this may appear to be a formality, it is in fact vital for the functioning of the Civic Forum that a motion which provides for arrangements to take the views of the Civic Forum on the matters that it is entitled to consider be passed by the House.

The Civic Forum is one of the institutions established by the Belfast Agreement, and it underpins the principle of inclusivity on which the agreement is based. In shaping the Civic Forum, we tried to give effect to that principle of inclusivity by arranging a broad membership from civic society. On 16 February 1999 the Assembly approved proposals set out in a report brought forward by the Deputy First Minister and me on the establishment of the Civic Forum. As proposed in that report, the Civic

Forum, comprising a chairperson and 60 members drawn from 10 specified sectors, has now been established.

The Forum is a unique body, and, given the range of members which has been pointed to it, there is undoubtedly a broad spectrum of views and experience that can help to inform the way in which Northern Ireland is governed. The Civic Forum will enable the Executive and the Assembly to engage in a structured, formal dialogue with important sectors of the community in the social, economic and cultural spheres. It will provide a channel for information to flow from a broad sector of civil society and for views to be expressed on social, economic and cultural matters.

The Forum has started work; it has met twice in plenary format and has identified its early objectives and work priorities. It has endorsed its vision statement. It has already given an important response to the Programme for Government, which we are considering carefully, and it has also decided to examine issues of poverty, peace building and lifelong learning. In bringing forward the motion we were conscious of the need to fulfil our legislative requirements in a way which reflected how we want to work with the Civic Forum, and for that reason we consulted with the Forum on it. The Forum is in agreement with it. Indeed, we amended our original motion to reflect the views of the Forum. It is important that the Forum should not be unduly constrained in its work, either by the Executive or by the Assembly.

The Deputy First Minister and I have always been sensitive to the need for the Forum to be an independent body which can bring independent views to the political process. For example, apart from our personal nominations, we were anxious to avoid a situation in which we were directly involved in the nomination process. While we accepted responsibility for overseeing the nominations to the Forum to ensure that fair and open procedures were adopted, the responsibility for those nominations lay with the organisations involved. I know that some parties have reservations about the motion today and that they are anxious that the Deputy First Minister and I will try, in some way, to stifle the scope of issues which the Forum itself may wish to consider, or that we will, in some way, veto the work which the Forum decides to do.

I want to assure Members today that that is certainly not our intention. Indeed, let me state without equivocation that the Deputy First Minister and I will not try to prevent the Forum from taking forward any item that it wishes to. Members may be interested to know that an earlier draft of the motion which was put to the Deputy First Minister and me for approval was more restrictive. It said that the Forum should offer its views on such social, economic and cultural matters as were referred to the chairperson by the First and Deputy First Ministers.

I regarded that as unduly restrictive. I said then, and I repeat today, that it is difficult for me to envisage our

refusing to hear views on a subject defined as “social, economic or cultural.” Therefore, with the agreement of the Deputy First Minister, I suggested that that sentence be recast to remove the requirement that the First and Deputy First Ministers agree the matters which the Forum can raise. We also engaged in consultation with the chairperson and members of the Forum on how the arrangements for obtaining views might better provide for a two-way flow of proposals between them and the Deputy First Minister and me.

The Civic Forum has itself approved the arrangements contained in the motion. That proposal provides for a work agenda to be jointly agreed by the chairperson of the Forum, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. It is not a mechanism for a veto. It provides for dialogue and for an agreed agenda to which the Executive, the Forum and the Assembly can work in a co-ordinated way. The chairperson of the Forum also believes that it provides the best basis not only for agreeing the Forum’s priorities but also for resourcing its work. Clearly, resourcing will relate to the work programme itself.

Of course, the Assembly will also want to develop its relationship with the Forum, to avail of its experience on social, economic and cultural matters. The terms of this part of the motion explicitly reflect the views of Forum members, who were understandably concerned that the requirement to take on work from the Assembly could overstretch the Forum’s resources and prevent its developing a coherent work programme. The motion therefore allows the Forum discretion about the issues remitted by the Assembly which it chooses to address.

In recognition of the views of the Forum, and at the request of its members, the Deputy First Minister and I have agreed that these arrangements will be reviewed at the end of the year alongside the already planned review of the Forum’s other arrangements. The review will, of course, allow for the views of the Assembly to be taken into account, and its outcome will be the subject of a report to the Assembly. In the course of developing our relationship with the Civic Forum I trust too that Members of the Assembly will give thought to how that review should be conducted.

We have also been considering ways in which the Forum can become more involved in providing views to Ministers and Departments. One proposal is for the Forum to be advised when Departments are carrying out public consultation exercises on relevant matters. The consultation documents could then be copied to the Forum, and it would be for the Forum itself to decide to which of these to respond.

Allow me to summarise, then, the key points which I hope the Assembly will take into account when considering the motion. First, the motion has been agreed with the Forum itself. Secondly, it will preserve the independence of the Forum. Thirdly, neither the Deputy First Minister

nor I has any intention of preventing the Forum from addressing any issue it wishes to address, subject of course to resource considerations. These points illustrate our determination to allow the Forum the freedom to set its agenda. The arrangements will be subject to a review at the end of the year, and I believe that they provide a sound basis on which to proceed. It is now necessary for us as an Assembly to approve the motion and allow the Forum to get to work on the social, economic and cultural matters on which its advice will be so valuable.

Mr P Robinson: I beg to move amendment 1: In line 1 delete all after “shall” and add

“consider and offer its views only on such social, economic and cultural matters as are from time to time determined by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and approved by the Assembly, or are determined by resolution of the Assembly, or are proposed by the Civic Forum and are approved by the Assembly.”

The First Minister has made reference to what he described as an earlier draft of limited scope. I assume the earlier draft had his approval.

The First Minister: No.

Mr P Robinson: I am sure, even from a sedentary position, that response will be recorded in Hansard.

The earlier draft was brought to the Business Committee and put on the Order Paper. It now seems that anything that comes from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has not been cleared by the Ministers; the Business Committee, therefore, should ignore anything that has not been approved by the two Ministers.

But the First Minister is right when he says that the earlier draft was of more limited scope. The difference between the earlier draft and this one is the addendum on the Order Paper, which tilts towards the existence of the Assembly itself.

The basic question that the Assembly must consider is the nature of the body known as the Civic Forum. In this Chamber there are many opinions on what kind of body it should be. Of course, there are those of us who believe that there should not be a Civic Forum, who believe that it is a waste of time and money and who believe that the appointment of cronies of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to a body to discuss certain issues is of no real value to the Assembly. If we are to be honest with ourselves and the outside world, we should recognise that there is no shortage of advice from people who have an interest in issues that are within the purview of this Assembly.

Almost every day we receive invitations from bodies who want to give us their views to attend functions in the Long Gallery or wherever in this Building. All they need is an Assembly Member to sponsor the event, or they can even arrange a venue somewhere other than in the Building. No restrictions are applied to any group that takes an

interest in social and economic matters on how they may influence the Assembly and, indeed, the Executive.

There is no need for the Civic Forum. Interested parties already know how to get their message to the Assembly and its Committees. This structured body is unnecessary and wasteful.

The second question concerns the make-up of the Civic Forum. Clearly, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have appointed a sanitised group that overwhelmingly reflects their views of society. The Forum is not representative of the community as a whole. In effect, it is made up of people who nod their heads in the direction of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. If we take advice from a body that does not represent the community as a whole, what value does it have? First, it is of limited value to have any group, and even more so to have a select group, that largely takes the view of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, having been appointed for that purpose. Indeed, one of the groups that most represents Unionism was deliberately excluded by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

11.00 am

I also want to deal with the body's *modus operandi*. The nature of the body, if we approve the First and the Deputy First Ministers' proposal or, even worse, if we approve the Alliance Party's amendment, will be what the First Minister termed “an independent body”. However, it is independent not only because it can give its opinion — though I have questioned that — but also because it has a life of its own.

It was never the Assembly's intention, I hope, to create a second Chamber. We have had experiences of that in the past in Northern Ireland. When certain individuals in the first Chamber appoint a second Chamber, it becomes merely a matter of patronage. The nature of the body we are creating is important because it will have a life of its own. That was not implicit or explicit in the agreement or in the legislation. It is fairly clear in both that it would be giving opinions on matters on which it was asked to give opinions. It was not to decide for itself what it was going to consider and then give its views on to the Assembly.

That is a critical difference because of the issue of prioritising its work. If the body decides its own programme and the First Minister gives it work, or if the Committees or the Assembly give it work, which issue should take priority becomes a problem. Even worse than that, I suspect, the Civic Forum could decide that the First Minister's or the Assembly's issues were less important than the ones it was dealing with and, consequently, offer its views on its chosen matters. We need to be very careful that the body being created does what the Assembly wants it to do and nothing else. The basis of our amendment is that the Assembly should have control

over the body. The body should only consider those matters referred to it by the Assembly.

Under the First Minister's proposals a conflict is created. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, along with the Civic Forum chairperson, can decide the matters on which the Civic Forum can offer its views. The Assembly can do likewise. I imagine that many Members will have important issues — perhaps in their constituencies, or else general ones. I suspect that they will put forward suggestions about matters that are of some public interest and that the Assembly may feel it necessary to approve such suggestions. A workload will build up. The conflict is already there, with the Assembly on one hand and the First Minister on the other, both pumping in work to the Civic Forum. The Civic Forum is not excluded from making decisions about its own workload also.

Under the amendment that I have moved, the Assembly would be in control. The First Minister may have ideas. He can bring them to the Assembly, and the Assembly will determine whether they are referred to the Civic Forum. The Civic Forum may have views on what it should be discussing, but those will need Assembly approval. Likewise, any Member who has a view can also bring it to the Assembly for approval. In that way we will have some order in the proceedings, and the Assembly can prioritise the work that the Civic Forum should have. I can think of nothing worse than a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister appointing their cronies to a civic forum and then determining what those cronies discuss.

Of course, the First Minister says that attempting to direct and control this body is the last thing on his mind. The reality is that if he is going to be the one providing it with its workload, clearly he is not going to go out of his way to give it issues to deal with that might embarrass him or cause him difficulty. That is why the control of the Assembly is essential in these matters. It is not good practice to have two different masters, as proposed by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

The Alliance Party's proposal is even worse. It is saying that a Committee can produce work for the Civic Forum, as can the Assembly, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Forum itself. The only way this can be properly ordered is for the Assembly to have overall control of the content of the items the Forum can consider and offer its views on and, indeed, of the priority those matters are given.

I hope I have raised issues that have not been decided by the Whips beforehand and that there will be some degree of open-mindedness by Members in determining how the procedures will operate in practice. What is being offered by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is open to future conflict between the Assembly and the Civic Forum, between themselves and the

Assembly and, I suspect, between the Civic Forum and themselves at a later stage as well. What my amendment proposes will ensure that the Civic Forum gives its views only on matters approved by the Assembly by one of three separate routes. Each would have equal weight and validity, and give the Assembly its proper role. It should be accountable for any body set up under it.

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

Mr Ford: I beg to move amendment 2. In paragraph 2, line 2, after "Assembly" insert

"or any of its Committees"

and at end add

"The Civic Forum may also offer its view on any social, economic and cultural matters where it so resolves."

The motion from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is welcome, and it would be more welcome if it had been slightly fuller and somewhat earlier. I have no difficulty in commending the motion to the House, although I would go further and recommend the second amendment, which would considerably strengthen it. The First Minister referred to some of the issues, and perhaps we will hear more from him and his Colleagues during the course of the debate.

The amendment stands in the name of Jane Morrice and myself. For the benefit of those who do not know, Jane Morrice is a member of the Women's Coalition and not of the Alliance Party. I am sure she would wish to share the opprobrium being heaped upon the Alliance Party by Peter Robinson in proposing the first amendment. In this corner of the Chamber, at least, we believe that the Civic Forum is important and has a significant role. Our two parties have been firm supporters of that separate and independent role for the Civic Forum. We wish to see it implemented to the full, and that is why we put forward the amendment.

The arrangements being made for the Civic Forum flow from the agreement and the requirement to try to institute new arrangements which are fully inclusive across this society. As a Member of this Assembly, I make no apology for saying that a democratically elected body must have primacy. Indeed, in the case of legislation it is clear that we have the exclusive right. However, I do not believe that we are the fount of all wisdom in this society. There are other people in this community who have positive and useful ideas to put forward to us, whether informally, as has been suggested, or formally.

The formal mechanism for that is the Civic Forum. It brings civic society, in all its strengths, into the structures of government, and that will be a major benefit to us. A different perspective from those of us who are democratically elected will also be a benefit. It will enable us to view things in a wider way and look at different possibilities.

I would like to look at some of the comments that have been made over the last year or so. The Civic Forum, after its meeting of 6 December 2000, highlighted that one of its eight functions was

“to make a distinctive and challenging contributions to social, economic, cultural and environmental matters affecting Northern Ireland.”

I do not believe that it can be distinctive and challenging if it has to be hidebound in the way it operates. In January 1999 the initial report by the Civic Forum study group to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, suggested that

“the Civic Forum should respond to policy issues being addressed by the Assembly but might also consider social, economic and cultural issues on its own initiative.”

That was a clear follow-through from the number of submissions made to it.

The Belfast Trades Union Council stated:

“The Forum will, of its own initiative, debate and consider issues and come to its own conclusions”.

On the other side of the economic divide, the CBI suggested:

“A pro-active role is needed for the Civic Forum — it should not be just consultative”.

This is a clear indication of the kinds of views that are coming in, despite whatever differences those two groups may have. The opportunity they see is that the Forum could take its own initiative, and therefore be more beneficial to the structures of society.

Other comments have been made in the same way. Some of the groups which have rather smaller representation clearly see it as important. The Northern Ireland Council on Ethnic Minorities stated:

“The Forum has the ability to initiate its own investigations and reports, as well as commenting.”

NICVA, representing a broad range of community activity, said:

“The understanding of voluntary and community groups is that as a consultative mechanism, the Civic Forum would be able to place issues on the agenda and to offer its reflection, experience and knowledge.”

That is what we need from the Civic Forum — not something too hidebound within the Assembly structures or at the beck and call of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Indeed, they have commented on 25 September 2000. The Deputy First Minister said in this Chamber:

“The Civic Forum has to be different. It has to have its own mind and it has to bring an independent view to the political process. I hope it will.”

On the same day, the First Minister said:

“There is a clear responsibility on us to make arrangements for obtaining the Forum’s views on a number of matters. Those

arrangements could take several forms — they do not have to be exhaustive. It does not necessarily follow that the arrangements made to enable the Assembly to take the views of the Forum are exhaustive of what the Forum does.”

That is our view, and it does not seem to quite come through in the motion as proposed, although, in proposing it, the First Minister has gone some way to address our concerns, specifically in the way he highlighted the term “independence”. That is something that we would see as very necessary. I hope he can amplify on that a little bit more, later in the debate.

The First Minister: I just wish to repeat to the Member what I said in proposing the motion. I said that I found it very difficult to envisage circumstances in which we would not want to hear the Forum’s views on any matter coming within its remit on social, economic and cultural matters.

The motion is in its present form because of the need to have a degree of co-ordination and a programme. The programme itself will have resource implications, and we have to be concerned about that.

I want to make the point that the motion, in its current form, after consultation with the Forum, and with the agreement of the Forum, is the motion that the Forum wants. We brought forward the motion that it wants. I suggest to the Member that this Assembly perhaps should be cautious before imposing upon the Forum a motion that it does not want.

Mr Ford: I take the First Minister’s comments with some interest. I am not sure whether the Civic Forum was actually consulted as to whether it wanted wider powers or whether it merely wished to be offered something narrower, which it had accepted gratefully. Perhaps — and it seems on this occasion we do at least have the presence of the First Minister — when he makes his winding-up speech he will be able to tell us whether he accepts that the thrust of our amendment is actually contained in the remarks that he made at the beginning, has made just now and, it is to be hoped, will make again later.

Is he going to tell the House clearly and simply that, although not explicit in the motion, the wide-ranging powers of the Forum to take its own initiative are what he and the Deputy First Minister envisage for it? That is something that would make a considerable difference to the way we view the motion as it currently stands.

I will speak briefly on the other amendment. Superficially, there are some similarities between the amendments. However, anyone hearing Mr Peter Robinson’s speech will be aware that there is little agreement. They have approached it from a different direction than us. We have major concerns with any suggestions that the Civic Forum must be bound by the Assembly. The whole point of having an independent Civic Forum is that it has a degree of independence. It is slightly ironic

that, while the First Minister hints about independence, the other amendment seeks to constrain the Civic Forum to what the Assembly agrees it should do.

11.15 am

There seems to be some concern in Mr Robinson's proposal about the business of the Civic Forum and what might be thrown at it. To some extent, our Committees are similar — a variety of responsibilities are thrown at them. They have clear legislative responsibilities, which they cannot divert from. They can initiate inquiries on their own account and are lobbied by a number of groups from different directions. However, most of the Assembly's Committees are managing and ordering their business fairly well. The Civic Forum will probably be as capable in ordering its business as the Assembly Committees. Given the way we ran business in the House this morning, I am unsure if we are well placed to advise others on how to run theirs.

We seek maximum independence for the Civic Forum in co-operation with the Assembly and the Executive. Our amendment will make some difference to that, although the First Minister's comments may go some way to address those concerns. However, we do not accept the thrust of amendment 1. At this stage, we are still in favour of amendment 2.

Ms Hanna: I welcome the motion from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I welcome the fact that it was agreed with the Civic Forum. There are signs that we are slowly moving away from the fixation on constitutional matters and towards an engagement with the economic, social and cultural issues that affect everyone in the community.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The Member says that the motion was agreed by the Civic Forum. When did the Civic Forum meet to agree the motion?

Ms Hanna: I am afraid that I do not have that date. However, the First Minister indicated in his statement that there was agreement.

Given that these issues have been somewhat neglected for several years, there should be a sufficiently large agenda for the Forum to work through for many years to come. Indeed, I believe that the Forum — in response to the mood of the public — should inject some urgency into its deliberations. In order to capture the public's imagination it should assemble and lay out its work programme. The Assembly and the wider community should not be comfortable with everything the Forum may say, and I hope its views will be challenging and innovative, for those are precisely the characteristics needed to find solutions to our problems.

In order to widen the scope of the Forum, I make a special plea that it should consider the role that Government structures and civic society here could play in fostering the concept of international development. I am aware

that this is a reserved matter, but, as chairperson of the cross-party committee on international development, I would like to see some engagement with Third-World issues ultimately. I want them to be interwoven through all Government Departments in the same way as targeting social need.

We saw the recent devastation caused by the Indian earthquake, and many individuals have responded generously. However, I would like to see a response from the community as a whole. I ask the Civic Forum to take the issue on board. I will frame an appropriate motion to that end in due course. We have hard-won expertise in dealing with disasters. We have built up expertise in long-term development that could be transferred to developing countries in a mutually beneficially way.

I wish the Forum well. It is important that we hear and learn from diverse opinions.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I would like to know when the Forum met to agree the motion. We are entitled to know that.

Mr P Robinson: Give it to us now.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Tell us. I will sit down and let the First Minister answer. No, he does not want to answer. What is the use of bluffing the people outside the Assembly and of telling us that the Forum has agreed this resolution when the Forum did not have a meeting and did not agree this resolution? It may have been agreed with the chairperson, but it definitely was not agreed by the Forum.

People are saying that they are fighting for the rights of the Forum. If it was the right of the Forum to have a meeting and say that it agreed this resolution, why did it not have such a meeting? Does the Assembly say that the next time that the Forum tells us to agree a resolution, we have to agree it? Has this Assembly no independence? That is the key to this whole matter.

It is completely untrue for people to say that that body represents the whole of the civic community. I wonder how many sections of the community have no representation on that Forum. The people who make that claim put other people beyond the pale. What about the Loyal Orange Institution? It is a very large organisation, yet it has no representation on this Forum. It is therefore beyond the pale, because we are told by the Alliance Party that all real civic interests are on this Forum.

I know some things that happened when people were being picked for this Forum, especially in regard to the smaller church bodies in the Province. If the powers that be could have had their way, the smaller denominations would have had no representation on the Forum. Only after battling to get position were the smaller denominations given a — *[Interruption]*.

Dr Birnie: Since the Member is unhappy with the failure, as he sees it, to have direct representation of the

Orange Institution, why did his party not put down an amendment to that effect when this went through the House in mid-February 1999?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: There was no point in putting down an amendment.

Let us talk about the churches. How were the churches going to be represented on this body? How were the smaller denominations that would call themselves evangelicals going to be represented on this body? It was by the pushing of the First Minister of an evangelical minister of the Irish Presbyterian Church, whose church was already represented on the body. I am not going to discuss fully the things that I know, but at another time I will. The smaller denominations dug their heels in and told the Irish Presbyterian minister concerned — who was the nominee of the Northern Ireland Office to chair the meeting — that he would not be on the Forum representing evangelicals because the smaller denominations had the right to have a voice on that body.

Let no one tell this House that the body was established to give representation to all views. It was brought into being to ensure that there would be no views of those who were opposed to the agreement. However, it did not succeed in the one instance of the smaller denominations.

Why is the Assembly, which is the elected body, being told that it must pass this resolution because it is the resolution of the Forum? The Forum has no right to dictate to the Assembly on what it should pass or not pass. We have been told — as the First Minister told the Alliance Party — that we cannot really oppose this because it is what the Forum has asked us to do.

There was a resolution that came before the Business Committee of the House. It was withdrawn by the First Minister, according to what we were told by the Speaker of the House. It was withdrawn because the First Minister said that he did not agree with it. Where did it come from? Who provided it to be put on the Order Paper? Why was it withdrawn just before the Order Paper was printed? Those are matters that the House should be given information on. Why hide those things if all in the garden is rosy and everything is open and above board? Why is the Assembly not told the whole story?

Why was the Assembly not allowed to approve an agenda that was already approved by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister? What were they afraid of? The Assembly is an elected body, and it has the right to know what that non-elected body decides upon. There are some people who are vocal in their support of the Civic Forum, but they do not have much basis in the electoral world that would give them respectability in any other sort of meeting. Therefore, they need not say that somebody in the organisation wants this or that, when they themselves scrape into the House.

The Assembly should have authority over those who are put into positions and paid public money to advise the Assembly on any matter. Their advice should be on subjects that the Assembly seeks advice on.

The Assembly should not roam round the world as if it were a replica of another body of which I am a member — the European Parliament. That Parliament roams round the world every time it meets. Its members go here, there and yonder and pass resolutions which are unheard and unheeded. The civic body should have its agenda agreed by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and not by its chairperson.

The First Minister: I am sorry that it has taken so long to obtain the answer that the Member sought earlier in his speech. In my introduction of the motion I said that the motion was agreed at a meeting of the Civic Forum. Dr Paisley asked when that meeting had taken place. It took place at Balmoral on 20 December. The Forum discussed the Programme for Government and also discussed and agreed the motion. On the same day the Forum's management committee too agreed the motion.

I will also look at whatever information is available to my office regarding the matter of the smaller churches to which Rev Dr Ian Paisley referred. That was not known to me, but I will make enquiries.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is nice to know that to get information one has to screw it out of the First Minister. Why did he not say that in his speech? He had to go and find out when the meeting occurred. I said that the Assembly was entitled to the information. It has now been told that the Forum discussed the motion at a meeting and suggested that it was proper.

Mr P Robinson: It is alarming that a body set up to give its views to the Assembly met in December, had a view on the way forward but did not tell the Assembly that view. It appears that the Forum whispered its view in the ear of the First Minister alone.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Stranger things will come out, when the First Minister does not know that his own office appointed the chairman of the meeting for the smaller denominations. A letter from his office went directly to them explaining the arrangements.

The First Minister had better make some enquiries about what is happening in his own office. That is obvious when he comes to the House and has to wait so long to find out about that meeting. I also want to put on record that I have my suspicions that the motion, as we have it today, came from the Civic Forum.

11.30 am

I will enquire of members of the Civic Forum about whether they discussed this exact motion. Why did the management committee have to discuss it if the whole Forum discussed it and said that that was what it wanted?

The House needs to know the exact wording of what was given to the First Minister. Was it conveyed to him in writing? Were the words of the motion contained in that letter? That is what we are asked to believe today. I want it to be clear that when the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister approve the agenda, it will have to go to the Assembly. I want it to be clear that the Assembly, which will be advised by the Forum, should have the right to say which topics advice is required on. Will the Assembly have reports that it does not want advice on — for example, those that it has already made decisions on? The time has come for proper clarity on the matter. Why was the motion, in draft form or whatever, suddenly taken off the Order Paper, only for us to come back to it today?

Because of the way in which it was handpicked and constructed, the Civic Forum will not do a necessary job. It is weighted entirely in one way to back up a policy which puts gunmen into government and which seeks to destroy the constitution of this country.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

It is very illuminating to hear Dr Paisley talk about a body which he has opposed from the outset. Now he tells us that he will consult with it on how it conducted its business with regard to the motion — *[Interruption]*.

Check your own comments.

In case hon Members do not recall his words, Dr Paisley said that he would go and ask the Civic Forum people —

Mr P Robinson: No, he did not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Maskey: Check Hansard. It is also interesting —

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The record will clearly show that Dr Paisley said that he would consult with members of the Civic Forum, not with the Civic Forum.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We will look into that point.

Mr Maskey: That point of order was very interesting. In Mr Robinson's earlier remarks he said that it was never the intention to have an upper house. I think those were his words, but I am prepared to check Hansard in the morning or to be corrected by Mr Robinson. He was not involved in the discussions on the Civic Forum and the Good Friday negotiations, unless perhaps he wants to acknowledge that he had some kind of proximity discussions with someone or other at the time. He is not really in a position to talk about the intentions behind the establishment of the Civic Forum.

I support the motion on behalf of Sinn Féin. That support is primarily based on the assurances given in the Executive and in the Chamber this morning. I oppose the amendment tabled by the Member from the DUP on the basis that

the DUP has always opposed the Civic Forum. The DUP has been very consistent on that, and that is fair enough. That is its right. However, we will oppose anything that the DUP wants to do to restrict the functioning of the Civic Forum, as I am sure many others will.

We oppose the amendment tabled by Mr Ford and Ms Morrice because it is unnecessary. Members will acknowledge that the assurances given by the First Minister this morning satisfy most of their concerns.

In his comments this morning the First Minister exaggerated his embracing of the need for the Civic Forum and the kind of functions that most Members want to see.

As people have already pointed out, the original motion coming to the House — or at least going on the Order Paper — had to be withdrawn because of objections that it was clearly going to restrict the work of the Civic Forum. My party's view is, quite simply, that the elected representatives here are ultimately responsible for legislation and for carrying out the wishes of the people who return us by way of the ballot box.

Nevertheless, we are very supportive of the need for a Civic Forum to ensure that we have a more inclusive way of doing business in our society. Therefore our very clear and fundamental view on the Civic Forum will always be on the basis that it is, and should be, an independent body. We welcome, and want to see, the Civic Forum adopting a challenging role in society as a whole.

We oppose anything that seeks to restrict the work of the Civic Forum. We are very satisfied with the assurances that we have received from our Ministers in the Executive and from the First Minister this morning. I welcome the First Minister's comments and his assurances to Members that there will be no attempt whatsoever to restrict the work of the Civic Forum. We will not be supporting amendment 2, because Assembly Committees already have the right to invite submissions from any organisation, or individual, with a particular interest in any matter that the Committees are enquiring into.

Committees have invited views from a range of organisations, and we have also had situations where organisations and individuals have requested the opportunity to address the various Committees. After all, we are supposed to be sitting in public session quite often. Amendment 2 is unnecessary, but we are very happy to support the motion from the First and Deputy First Ministers.

Mr Ervine: I support the amendment in the name of the Alliance Party and the Women's Coalition. I suppose that there are those of us who have scraped — as it has been described — into the Assembly or into political life. So far as I know, most of us took either third, fourth or fifth place and most of the sixth places were actually taken by the larger parties. One could argue that some of them say that they do not want to be here, but I get the

impression that they could limbo dance under the closed front door with a top hat on.

This admonishment of the small parties and the Civic Forum is all very well. I would like to define that a little. I know some members of the Civic Forum who can talk in joined-up language, and who can do joined-up writing. They can actually speak without a script. They are people who manage affairs in banks, trade unions and churches, and who make practical efforts on a day-to-day basis, thus undoubtedly proving their capacity as citizens of this society to make a contribution.

I get confused when we ask citizens to make a contribution. Very often I hear the DUP or the less inclusive democratic parties of small nature — the UUAP, the NIUP, the UKUP and all those p's with very few conveniences — use the word “inundated”. They use that word a lot. When there is an issue of concern for society they are inundated by phone calls and suggestions from concerned members of their constituency that there is something wrong. Fair enough — politicians have to listen to the people. So, when we decide that there should be a group of people who are strategically placed to feed politics from the ground up rather than from the old, tired, unworkable politics from the top down, we are told that we should not listen when we are inundated. They really cannot have it both ways.

I am terribly worried. From the wording of the DUP amendment, it seems to me that the DUP actually trusts the nefarious, evil and reprehensible First and Deputy First Ministers more than it trusts the bad and terrible Civic Forum. There would seem to be that suggestion.

Mr P Robinson: Why?

Mr Ervine: Well, that is how it seems to me, but there was a suggestion that it is perfectly all right for the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to direct what the Forum should do.

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ervine: No.

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ervine: Not at this moment.

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ervine: I will give way later.

Mr P Robinson: He has made an allegation.

Mr Ervine: I will give way later.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member is not giving way.

Mr Ervine: It is my choice. I will freely give the information I have when Dr Paisley gives the stuff about the ecumenical people that he held back. However —

Ms Morrice: Evangelical.

Mr Ervine: Evangelical? Oh, sorry, perhaps he would not have wanted them on the Forum at all. Well, all those “e”s — you get mixed up. Touché.

What we are seeing from some Members is the “Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man” attitude. They say “Politics is my job, and don’t you be thinking of doing it. Away, and do what you do — churchman or trade unionist or whatever. Don’t be entering my regime, don’t be coming here and making any remote criticisms of what we might do or, indeed, offering us ideas on what we should do.” Basically, that is what this is about. They are afraid of the dark. They are afraid of the positive attitudes that can come from those people. If someone were to be a shining light on the Civic Forum, would they be a threat?

I remember social development workers were always considered by some elements to be threats from all sides. Usually the parties with plenty of votes felt more aggrieved that community development officers existed and made some kind of commentary. One feels that we are seeking a self protection process.

On a more positive point, it was our hope and our dream and — certainly at the creation of the Civic Forum — our belief that we could have a group of people in society who might well be our alter ego in some ways. They might listen in places that we do not get to. They might develop attitudes and opinions worthwhile for us to hear. They could have fed us politics from the ground up. Not that any of us are devoid of being told by many people what is wrong on a daily basis, but it could be done in a structured, common-sense way, embracing many elements of society. I cannot, for the life of me, believe that we need to be afraid of such a concept. I think it was the Deputy First Minister, Séamus Mallon, who in a previous speech indicated that if they are going to be a crowd of nodding ducks then they are wasting their time and ours.

I value that the Civic Forum has been created because there is a paucity of civil society in relation to political affairs in Northern Ireland, especially within the community from which I emanate. There is not a civil society of great strength upon which we can rest our politics. We need to be challenged. We need to have others moving in similar fields and realms, especially on issues such as culture, economics and social affairs. It can be of no harm to this Chamber — no harm to the Executive — for those people to be developing attitudes, understanding what the people say, and moving around this country taking evidence from large numbers of people in public. What is to be afraid of there?

On another positive note, although not directly about the Civic Forum, the DUP did not want a Civic Forum, and it made that very clear. In fact, it was alluded to today. It also did not want the Northern Ireland Assembly. I suppose that you can take some comfort that if it uses

the same effort to collapse the Civic Forum as it has to collapse the Assembly, then the Forum will grow to old age. That is a reality.

11.45 am

What we are hearing from the DUP is “Why is it not all in our hands? Why don’t we hold it all? Why don’t we control it all? Why would we allow these people?” You can hear that those people are distrusted, not because of who they are but because of who they are not. We have heard “Who they are not” referred to substantially in earlier speeches.

The people of Northern Ireland have a right to be heard. Political representatives are the natural vehicles for that, but there is a capacity for that alter ego of the Civic Forum to add to what we do, not diminish it; to benefit what we do, rather than detract from it. Those of us who are not afraid of the Civic Forum are often those who argue that it should have a broader and more sweeping capacity to stick its nose in where it wishes — within its remit, of course. The amendment that I support, in the names of David Ford and Jane Morrice, shows that.

There are parties in the Executive that will support the motion credited to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and there will be those in the Executive who will oppose it. We must talk to those who oppose it first. I have tried to address my remarks to them. Those parties in the Executive who support the motion must bear in mind the nature of opposition in this Chamber. Opposition has difficulty being heard and difficulty encouraging and engendering movement in our Government. Why do we propose that there are those outside this place who can be our alter ego? It is because we are frightened of the fiefdom — not any fiefdom that could be created by the Civic Forum, but a fiefdom that could, and just might, be created by the four large parties in this Chamber.

Those of us who want openness and the opportunity for interaction in society will support the amendment in the names of David Ford and Jane Morrice. We must stop playing games about what we want to collapse and what we do not like, and get on with business. Has it gone unnoticed that the DUP is shifting its language and its position? It is not “Collapse” any more; it is “Listen to our concerns”.

Ms McWilliams: It is worth remembering how the Civic Forum came to be in the first place. Its establishment has been a long process. It was useful to hear Mr Peter Robinson remind us that it initially came about as a result of the agreement. It is on record that the DUP is opposed to that agreement and everything that is in it. Its position of opposition has been on record from then on.

However, I cannot find anything that reconciles that position with the DUP’s current position: “We did not like the agreement. We did not like the legislation. In

fact, we did not like the working party that was established to decide on the sectors.” For the record, it is not right to call people cronies when they have voluntarily given their time to participate in social, economic and cultural decision-making in this society. Nonetheless, the DUP took that view, and now it is saying that its disagreement with the Civic Forum is not because of the agreement, the legislation, the working party or the sectors that took so much time in deciding who should go forward, but rather because some of the evangelical churches are not fully represented or the loyal institutions are not represented.

Clearly, its current position is derived from that. I always find it amusing when someone uses the words “We must be in control.” In this case, that does not surprise me, given that the Member who was speaking was Mr Robinson. I am often left wondering whether he wants the Assembly to have control of the various institutions we seek to establish, or himself. It would be great if we reached the stage of trying to “empower” people, rather than “control” them.

I am, however, very heartened that the Civic Forum has now been established, and it is extremely important to remind ourselves that participatory, as well as representative, democracy is good for this country. One of the reasons for the Civic Forum was that many people felt politically homeless. As a result of the bitter constitutional difficulties we faced, they did not feel that the time had come for them to engage in the political parties that currently existed. Many of them were very active politically — with a small “p” — in their work for informal politics. It is only right that as a result of that model of conflict resolution we produced, which has become known as the Belfast Agreement or the Good Friday Agreement, those people have a voice. They will perhaps be the stabilisers of the fast speed bike that was agreed in 1998.

I also take heart from the fact that resources have been set aside for the Civic Forum. If you are not in, you will not get any money to do what you wish to do. That would have happened had the Forum not been mentioned in the agreement. We had to work extremely hard on those last nights before the agreement to protect our wording on the Civic Forum and to ensure that it made its way into legislation. I am aware that the Northern Ireland Act 1998 says, as the First Minister told us earlier:

“The arrangements so made shall not take effect until after they have been approved by the Assembly”.

I am heartened that this provision relates mainly to resources. The Assembly should have a view, since the budget for the Civic Forum is initially decided by the Assembly, and it will come to the Floor. However, it is right that the Forum should be given a certain amount of independence on social, economic and cultural matters — wide ranging as they are. The two can, therefore, be reconciled.

I am heartened that the First Minister says that he has no intention of restricting the work of the Civic Forum. The motion which came before the Business Committee at an earlier stage was aimed at doing exactly that. Nonetheless, the reason I support the amendment in the name of Mr Ford and Ms Morrice is to take issue with something which Mr Maskey said. The original motion, put down today by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, is still restrictive. It still suggests that a motion so requested has to be placed before the Assembly. The Civic Forum's work on the Programme for Government did not come as a result of a motion in the Assembly. By putting that motion down, therefore, the work of the Civic Forum is still restricted, whereas Mr Ford's and Ms Morrice's amendment further opens it.

There are several points to which I would like the First Minister to respond. I am heartened that he says that there will be a review of the Civic Forum. Anyone who is reluctant to participate in, and support the work of, the Civic Forum will have another opportunity to participate when that review takes place. A working party was formed in which Assembly Members expressed views on how the work of the Civic Forum should go forward. I will be interested to see if those who chose not to become members of that working party — the DUP was one such party — participate in the review.

The First Minister has said that this review will take place after one year. Does he refer to the establishment of the date of the Civic Forum or to this year, 2001? The Civic Forum should be able to do some of its work before that review.

I also make a plea for more effective liaison between the Civic Forum and the Assembly. I agree that if the Civic Forum had been asked for its views on this motion, perhaps there could have been better liaison between the Assembly and the Civic Forum. I would like to see more formal liaison mechanisms. However, I am heartened by the First Minister's comments. I will support the amendment.

Mr Poots: I am speaking as a Member of the legislative Assembly and not as Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre. This motion was never presented to the Committee, so members had no opportunity to give their views on it. It is, however, good to see the Junior Minister, Mr Nesbitt, with us — *[Interruption]*.

Mr P Robinson: Is the Member saying that a matter which is the responsibility of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and, by the admission of the First Minister, worthy of being put before the Civic Forum, was never put before the Committee of the Centre?

Mr Poots: Yes, I can confirm to Mr Robinson that this matter was never brought before the Committee of the Centre. Obviously, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister thought it more important to take the issue to the Civic Forum than to bring it to

the public representatives who are supposed to be scrutinising that Office.

As I have said, it is good to see the Junior Minister, Mr Nesbitt, here. He is a bit like the Scarlet Pimpernel:

“We seek him here, we seek him there”,

but seldom can he be found. It is good to see that he is here and looking so well. We were concerned for his well-being.

If we want to look at the basis for the Civic Forum we need to go back to the 1996 Forum elections. We had previously heard much about accountable democracy, especially from the Ulster Unionist Party. I took it that accountable democracy meant exactly that, and that it did not mean more quangos or more people who could not be called to account by the electorate. So, we had the 1996 elections which gave top-up positions for the 10 parties that achieved the highest percentage of the votes. Those top-up positions included people who were unable to be elected in the normal way. The Labour Coalition was nominated, wherever it has gone, as were the UDP, the Women's Coalition and the PUP. We know that the Women's Coalition has been detrimental to the community. Then we had talks and negotiations — *[Interruption]*.

Ms McWilliams: That will get us more votes.

Mr Poots: Yes, there might be another 10 votes for the Women's Coalition.

During the talks process a number of these parties realised that in a normal election they would not be returned, so they decided to introduce a fallback position, which is the Civic Forum. Mr Ervine, in his 10-minute speech — if you could call it a speech; it was more bluster and codswallop — made a lot of noise but delivered very little. He made many accusations against the DUP and its stance on the Assembly and the Civic Forum.

I will make it abundantly clear what our position is on the Assembly. The DUP has always supported a devolved Administration for Northern Ireland. However, we do not support a devolved Administration that lets terrorists into government. Those two facts will remain at the centre of our policy. We believe in devolved government, in accountable democracy and in having a situation in which people can come to their politicians at a local level where decisions can be made. We also believe that there is no place in government for people who are closely aligned to, or are apologists for, terrorist organisations. On that point Mr Ervine will fundamentally disagree with our party.

What the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister propose is less public accountability — it is a triumvirate of the two Ministers and the chairperson of the Civic Forum, who will make decisions which will not come before the Assembly. I am surprised that some of the

parties want the Assembly to have less influence and want the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to exert more influence than the Assembly. For that to come from the smaller parties, which often cry about this very thing, surprises me. I ask them to reconsider their position. In this case, they should seek to give the Assembly more authority and reduce that of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. They should take the opportunity to put their money where their mouths are.

12.00

As I understand it — and perhaps this can be confirmed later — the Civic Forum has had some problems in getting quorums for its committees, a number of which have had to be cancelled. Perhaps the First Minister should have been more careful when choosing who was going to represent him. For example, look at the representation that Mr McMichael has given in his council. He never attends it. The fact that the Civic Forum is having problems getting quorums comes as no surprise, given the record of some of the individuals appointed to it. I am not sure whether Mr McMichael has attended the Civic Forum. All I know is that he certainly does not attend his council.

Yesterday we were told that it cost £75,000 to set up the Civic Forum, with £110,000 having been spent thus far on running costs — a total of £185,000. That would have paid for about 47 hip operations. That would have created more nursery places for children. That could have employed another 12 nurses. We have lots of problems and needs in our society. We have people crying out because the roads are not gritted. However, it is OK to throw £185,000 at the Civic Forum. What has it achieved so far? I am not aware of any achievement that can be accredited to it. We may be at an early stage, but it should be producing something tangible and beneficial to the community if the money is going to be spent on it. The Civic Forum is a waste of taxpayers' money.

Politicians should be at the beck and call of the general public if they are doing their job right. Many of us in the Chamber have constituency offices. I am not sure what some others do with their office costs allowance — they seem to be able to use it up, but they do not have constituency offices. Many of us do have constituency offices in which we hear the views of the public. In my constituency, I have received a mass of letters concerning, for example, the closure of the railway between Crumlin and Knockmore. I do not need someone from the Civic Forum to tell me about the problems that will be created if Translink is to close that line. My constituents are telling me about that. I have had many letters about the transfer procedure for children from primary to secondary school. Again, I do not need the Civic Forum to tell me what my position should be on that, because my electors are telling me the position that I should be taking. The opportunity is there for them.

A cabal has been created of people who are, in general, in tow with the pro-agreement parties in Northern Ireland. There has been a little tokenism — a couple of individuals have been included who would not necessarily be supporters of the Belfast Agreement. However, by and large, we have a group of people who support the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and who will be directed by them. What we will hear from the Civic Forum is not in reality what civil society wants. We will hear in May, all being well, what civil society wants, because it will have the opportunity to come out and express its opinion at the polling booths. I am quite positive that, among the Unionist community, it will not be expressing support for the Belfast Agreement.

In talking to people on the ground, both pro-agreement and anti-agreement, I often hear people saying that we need an Assembly in Northern Ireland, irrespective of whether it is this Assembly or the sort of Assembly that we would like to see, which would not involve having terrorists in government. I have yet to hear someone — be he pro-agreement or anti-agreement — say that we need a Civic Forum. I have not once heard anyone challenge me or criticise the position that we take. I do not think that there is a demand for the Civic Forum, but it has been constituted under the terms of the Belfast Agreement, so we will have to live with it. However, the work it does should be controlled by the Assembly rather than by the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the chairperson of the Civic Forum alone.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The First Minister has stated that the proposed arrangements for the Civic Forum, as it is within the remit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, need to be formalised. He also stated that the Civic Forum has met twice, set up its programme of work and given an important response to the Programme for Government, which we would also like to hear. The First Minister also stated that he and the Deputy First Minister have consulted with the Forum and that the arrangements which they have put in place shall be reviewed at the end of the year. He did not, however, indicate which year. He also said that the Civic Forum supported the motion, that he and the Deputy First Minister supported the independence of the Forum and that they had no intention of preventing it from addressing whatever issues it chooses.

I welcome the First Minister's statement on the independence of the Forum. However, he did not address the relationship between the Civic Forum and any independent consultative forum that may be appointed by a North/South Ministerial Council. The motion and the amendment of Mr Ford and Ms Morrice uphold the independence of the Forum to offer its views on such matters as it chooses and on such matters as the Assembly chooses. The motion clearly defines and expands the role of the Civic Forum from its original narrow remit within

the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to give it a more complementary and progressive relationship with the entire Assembly. I am sure that the Assembly will benefit from that.

Of course, this does not square with the DUP's assertion that the Civic Forum is a second chamber. Indeed, if the DUP had discharged its obligations under the Good Friday Agreement and involved itself in the working parties set up by the Assembly to determine the role and remit of the Civic Forum, it would know that it is not a second chamber — that that was never on the agenda. Given the DUP's involvement here, I think that one Chamber is enough.

One of the tasks of the working party was to examine the role, remit, composition and relationship between the Civic Forum and the Assembly. Sinn Féin's proposals at that time, contained in our report to the Assembly, supported the Good Friday Agreement by stating that a consultative Civic Forum should not be limited to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister or it would become nothing more than a performing poodle. We agreed that, within the new dispensation of the agreement, the Forum should have the potential and the freedom to develop its own work programme, and the second part of the motion makes provision for that. It should also be able to set its own tasks, make its own reports and act as a bridge between the grass-roots communities and the Assembly, or "between people and politicians", as Mr Ervine eloquently put it.

We argued that this would not happen if the Civic Forum were constrained in any way. I welcome the comments by the First Minister on the independence of the Forum and the fact that a review of these arrangements will be carried out if this independence is not upheld. It is important that the Assembly establish the parameters in which the Civic Forum shall interrelate with Ministers and Members. If the Assembly, by motion, requests the Civic Forum to offer its views on specific social, economic and cultural matters, that will be a step towards addressing the democratic deficit which has given us 50 years of Unionist misrule and 30 years of fly-by-wire British Ministers and their quangos. To Dr Ian Paisley's comments about lack of representation, I respond "Your party did not participate."

I support the motion.

Ms Morrice: I would like to explain why Mr Ford and I proposed this amendment. Mr Ford has explained it in great detail; I want to stress again that the intention behind the amendment is to ensure the independence of the Civic Forum. I am very pleased to hear Mr Ervine, Mrs Nelis, Mr Maskey and others mentioning the importance, in principle, of the independence of the Civic Forum.

We must make sure that this independence is never compromised. In spite of what has been said on the Floor this morning, the value of the Civic Forum lies in its

power to put forward a non-party political position. As such, that opinion is and should be hugely valued by the Assembly, in spite of what Members of the DUP will say.

We have said that the Civic Forum will act as a support for the work of the Assembly, its Committees and the Executive. This is a positive thing. The Forum will provide hands-on or grass-roots expertise and experience of many different sectors. It will be an effective and expert support service for the Assembly on the development of legislation, administration and policy.

Many contributors have said that this body adds value. That is exactly what I believe it does. As Members know very well, the Women's Coalition pushed to get the Civic Forum created by having it included in the Good Friday Agreement. It is important; it is value-added; and it offers new thinking and alternative options.

Mr P Robinson: When the Member uses the word "pushed", she indicates that there was some resistance. Who was resisting the formation of the Civic Forum?

Ms Morrice: The use of the word "pushed" is to show how enthusiastic the Women's Coalition was to get this important issue through.

The Civic Forum should be about problem-solving and alternative thinking — I again refer to this corner — and, boy, do we need alternative thinking in Northern Ireland.

I want to refer quickly to some of the points made during this debate, starting with those made by the First Minister. I would like to quote him on his assurances that he and his Office are prepared to give independence to the Civic Forum. He said that it would be difficult to think that they would ever want to refuse to hear the views of the Civic Forum, and that means, when you turn it round, that the Forum can express its opinions on virtually whatever its members want. They have the freedom to set their agenda, and that is vital. We cannot restrict them — a point that we want to push with this amendment.

It was very enlightening of Ms Hanna to introduce the issues of Third-World development and international relations to the Floor of the House. This sort of issue is vital, and it would be worthwhile to explore whether it is possible for the Civic Forum to look at these matters, although they are reserved. I say "Why not?"

Dr Ian Paisley suggested that we talk about international matters and raised the matters of the European Parliament. He referred to the fact that the European Parliament roams around the world. I assume he was implying that roaming amounts to a waste of time. I must ask the good doctor why on earth he stands for election to the European Parliament every time one is called if he thinks that it is wasting its time roaming around the world. Why on earth does he then roam around between the seats of two Parliaments?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The European Parliament is convened on Thursdays. Members discuss all these issues, and they roam around the world. I do not roam around the world with them.

12.15 pm

Ms Morrice: I thank the Member for giving us that assurance. The European Parliament may not roam the world, but my understanding is that it moves from place to place and that Members move with it.

Mr Maskey and Mrs Nelis said that they were satisfied with the assurances they received from the Executive. As non-Executive Members, we need those assurances on the Floor of the House and on the record.

Mr Ervine, with his references to limbo dancing, gave a colourful presentation. He and Ms McWilliams spoke about the insulting way in which members of the Civic Forum were referred to as “cronies”. It is totally inappropriate to describe the people who give their time and energy to the Civic Forum in this way. Mr Ervine also spoke about the real ability of the Civic Forum to work hard for the good of this society.

As Ms McWilliams said, there is a need for greater liaison between the Assembly and the Civic Forum. I understand that the junior Minister will be winding up. I would appreciate his taking up this point. Undoubtedly, there is little interaction.

Mr Poots asked what the Forum had done. It is hard to know exactly what the Forum is doing because there is no cross-fertilisation between the Civic Forum and the Assembly. Mr Poots is not in the Chamber, but I would like to assure him that the Forum is doing things. Later this month it will launch its response to the Programme for Government. It is not the kind of support that the DUP spoke about for the Executive, but the Forum will cast a critical eye over the document, and its response will be valued.

Mr P Robinson: An issue has been raised that goes to the very heart of the privilege of this House. Today we are debating the mechanisms by which the Civic Forum should be asked to offer its views to the Assembly. But here we have a Member telling us that the Civic Forum has already decided not only on how it will operate but also on a topic that it intends to give its views on — namely, the Programme for Government. That is a breach of the privilege of this House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will look into the issue and come back to you, Mr Robinson.

Ms Morrice: I would like to remind Mr Robinson that the whole community was asked to comment on the Programme for Government. What is very important is the need for some formalised contact between the Assembly and the Civic Forum.

More interaction is needed, not only in the Executive but also on the Floor of the Assembly and in Committees. Mr Poots talked about the need to give the Assembly more authority. I agree with that aspect of Mr Robinson’s amendment. We are not just trying to give the Assembly more authority; we are trying to share that authority among the Executive, the Assembly and the Committees and to allow the Civic Forum to use its initiative. Its right to give opinions on matters it believes are of importance is necessary in order to underline its independence within its remit of the social, cultural and economic issues set out in the Good Friday Agreement.

I will conclude by saying once again that, from what we have heard, the First Minister did attempt to give us the assurances we are looking for. We would be grateful if those assurances could be underlined in the winding-up, because that is what the amendment is about. A warning was given about the First Minister’s saying that the Civic Forum has the freedom to set its agenda. I think the point he made was that it has the freedom to set its agenda, subject to resources. I would be grateful for an explanation of exactly what that means. So far we are concerned, it is important that the Civic Forum has the freedom to set its agenda, and we would like to have that clarified. We are looking forward to hearing what the junior Minister has to say.

The sitting was suspended at 12.23 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr P Robinson: This debate has raised some interesting and important matters which were not obvious at the beginning of proceedings. Two in particular need to be dealt with by those winding up on behalf of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

The first relates to a claim made by the First Minister that the motion was what the Forum wanted. He repeated that claim on several occasions during the debate. Indeed, when an SDLP Back-Bencher took it up, my party leader asked, in an intervention, how such a claim could be made as the Civic Forum had never voted on or discussed this matter. There were remarks — if they could be called that — or gestures from a sedentary position by the First Minister, which indicated that what my Colleague had said was quite inaccurate. This was followed up by an intervention from the First Minister when my Colleague spoke. The First Minister said his claim was inaccurate, that the Civic Forum had met on the issue and, not only that, he was able to give us the date — 20 December 2000 — as the record will show.

This information is inaccurate. The First Minister has misled this House, and he should be brought to the Assembly to apologise. The Civic Forum did not meet on 20 December 2000. Indeed, there have been only two

meetings of the Civic Forum in plenary session. The first was in October in the Waterfront Hall, and some Assembly Members went along to see the occasion. The second was held in Cookstown, around 6 December. The motion the First Minister was waving, saying it had the approval of the Civic Forum, was never brought before that meeting. A motion was brought to that meeting for information only, but it was not discussed or voted on.

Peculiarly enough, it was the motion that the First Minister denied any responsibility for during his speech. It was the motion I referred to in my earlier comments — the one that was brought to the Business Committee, the one the First Minister said he had not approved. However, somebody in his office sent it to the Business Office and indicated that this was for the business for the following week. It was later withdrawn. Not only was it sent to the Business Office for inclusion on the Order Paper of the House; it was also sent to the Civic Forum. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind about that — I have the Civic Forum agenda. It has that initial motion on it, the one the First Minister said did not get his approval or, I assume, the approval of the Deputy First Minister either.

We now know that this was a motion approved of by the First Minister. It would never have been sent to the Civic Forum or the Business Office had it not got that approval. It is obvious that he wants to disown it now — for what reasons, I am sure we will discover later. The critical issue is that neither the earlier motion nor the later motion was ever brought for the approval of, or discussion by, the Civic Forum at any of its meetings.

The First Minister may have had a word in the ear of the chairperson he appointed, but the matter was certainly not subject to the approval of the Civic Forum. When he comes to this Assembly and claims that the blessing of the Civic Forum is upon his motion, he is being untrue. The Forum has never approved of the motion that he put before the Assembly today.

Even if the Civic Forum had approved it, what difference would that have made? Does the First Minister believe that because the Civic Forum says “This is how we want to deal with our business” we have to jump to accept this decision? Does he believe that, in some way, it is calling the shots? Who is running the Civic Forum? Are they running the Assembly, or is the Assembly running them? According to the First Minister, if the Civic Forum wants it, the Assembly should give it. Of course, nothing should be further from the truth.

These problems arise, I suspect, because Members do not know what the Civic Forum is doing. How could they? They should go along to the Library of the House of Commons and see how it is spending hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers’ money, yet does not have even a minute of any meeting of the Civic Forum.

What was the purpose of the Civic Forum? To give its views to the Assembly. Yet we cannot even find out

when it met, where it met and what it did when it met. This is a body whose single charge is to provide its views to this Assembly.

Ms Morrice: Will the Member agree that it would, therefore, be very valuable to set up a formal procedural mechanism whereby there could be co-operation and an exchange of information between the Assembly and the Civic Forum?

Mr P Robinson: The Member heard my comments and views on what would be appropriate for the Civic Forum. While it is in existence, it needs to be controlled and ordered. Certainly, the mechanisms that are presently in place are quite inadequate. A body such as the Civic Forum is a complete waste of time. When one looks at the plethora of bodies and organisations in Northern Ireland that deal with Government matters one wonders how anybody in his right mind could have produced such a body.

We have representatives from Northern Ireland in the European Parliament. We have representatives, from this House and outside in Northern Ireland, in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. We have this Assembly. We have 26 local councils, 11 Government Departments, Statutory Committees and Standing Committees — probably over 20, perhaps 30, Assembly Committees of one variety or another. We have the British-Irish Council, the North/South Ministerial Council, a range of implementation bodies, sectoral meetings and a vast range of quangos. And on top of that, they want a Civic Forum. It just seems that we are a trifle over-governed — aside from the issue of the body’s size and the waste of expenditure it involves.

I see my Friend wants to say something on this matter.

Mr McCartney: Does the hon Member think that there is a grave danger of Northern Ireland ending up with many more chiefs than Indians and that, soon, the membership of these august bodies will outnumber the electorate?

Mr P Robinson: Some people out there will be quite offended if they are not given a position on one of these bodies. They will probably be able to go to the Human Rights Commission and claim that they have been discriminated against because they are not on one of the quangos that have been set up.

That was the first serious matter that was raised, and to which I referred. The First Minister needs to apologise to the Assembly for misleading the House by indicating that he had the Civic Forum’s approval of his motion, when clearly that was not the case.

The second serious matter arose in the speech of the Member for North Down, Ms Morrice. I do not know if the claim made by the Member is accurate. However, I raised a point of order at the time, because if it is accurate, it represents a serious breach of privilege. The hon

Member's claim was that the Civic Forum was going full steam ahead to provide its views on the Programme for Government to the Assembly. That is interesting, because today the Assembly is deciding the mechanism by which the Civic Forum will be asked to provide its views. Therefore, according to the hon Member for North Down, the Civic Forum has decided that it is going to do its own thing in advance of any decision being taken by the Assembly. It has decided what it is going to look at and give its views on. That is a serious breach of privilege. It is already taking on a life of its own.

A second serious matter arises from that. When I raised the point of order, the Member, in an attempt to excuse herself or the Civic Forum, said that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister had asked the whole of society for its views on the Programme for Government. That is not, of course, the case. They asked the whole of society for its view on the draft Programme for Government, and that is a critical difference, because this Assembly — wrongly, in my view — decided to approve the Programme for Government. Therefore, according to the Member for North Down, a body which was set up to give its views to the Assembly is now second-guessing the Assembly and judging whether the Assembly has done its job properly or not. That is not the business of the Civic Forum. That matter must be clarified in order to determine whether or not the information provided by the Member to the House was correct.

Both matters — that raised by the Member for North Down and the First Minister's inaccuracies — go to the heart of the lack of available information on what this body is doing. This is a clear indication that it is not fulfilling the one charge made to it, which was to provide its views.

I want to deal with another matter, and I am glad to see Dr Birnie in his place. Dr Birnie thought that he would provide us with some of his wisdom. In an intervention, the Member asked my Colleague Dr Paisley why he had not put down an amendment which would have allowed members of the Orange Institution to be represented on the Civic Forum. Either the Member was trying to be mischievous or he was acting in ignorance — perhaps both. Of course, there was no need to put down an amendment. The range of bodies produced in the report made allowance for Orange Order representatives to be included, because cultural interests were to be catered for —

Dr Birnie: What was the problem then?

Mr P Robinson: The Member will find out very quickly what my problem is.

There was no prohibition on the appointments that the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister could make. There would have been no difficulty if they had wanted to include an official representative from the Orange Institution. When the statement was eventually

made, no one in the House could procedurally amend it. We have no right to decide who the members of the Civic Forum are. Only the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have that right. The Assembly's role is to approve or disapprove. We disapproved. We voted against it, and after the event we did the right thing and put down a motion in the Assembly which criticised the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for excluding a significant section of Northern Ireland's community.

The next comment came from a Sinn Féin/IRA representative, who seemed to think that I was not entitled to make any comment on what the intention was — either in the legislation or in the agreement — as far as the workings of the Civic Forum were concerned. I contend that I am so entitled, unless of course he is saying that the agreement sought to hide the intention behind the Civic Forum. If the agreement did not seek to hide the intention behind the Forum, then I am entitled to read the agreement and work out what the intention was. If there was no subterfuge in the intention, I am entitled to read the agreement and work out its signatories' intention with regard to the Civic Forum. I must say that my record of working out the intentions of those who signed the Belfast Agreement is far better than the First Minister's — as the courts have recently demonstrated.

Arising from that, the Sinn Féin/IRA representative concluded that because the Alliance Party and its close Colleagues in the Women's Coalition had put down an amendment to include the Committees as the bodies that could give work to the Civic Forum, it was nonsense. Why was it nonsense? He said it was because the Committees had the right to get the views of individuals and groups and, therefore, the Forum was unnecessary. That goes to the heart of my argument. This Assembly has the right to get the views of anybody in civic society on any matter. And whether it has the right to or not, civic society is giving its views on all of these matters daily.

2.15 pm

The Sinn Féin/IRA representative said that if it is coming to you, and you have the right to get it and hear it, and then all the rest is unnecessary. He is underlining the fact that the body is unnecessary because provisions are already in place for hearing the views of civic society. This is an unnecessary and costly duplication.

The next comment came from the PUP representative who read us a homily, which is not unusual. I was annoyed with him because I asked to intervene in his speech, and he refused at that point saying that he would let me intervene later, but then he sat down without doing so. I understand why he did that — his argument could not stand up. His argument was that the DUP by its amendment was showing that it had more trust in the hated First Minister and Deputy First Minister than in the Civic Forum. If he had read the amendment he would have seen that the "hated First Minister and Deputy First Minister"

were being made subject to the will of the Assembly. They were being hauled back from their original motion.

The amendment was significantly different from the original motion. The original motion allowed the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to take these matters forward on their own volition. The amendment requires them to have the approval of the Assembly, in exactly the same way as the Civic Forum was required to have the approval of the Assembly if there were matters that it felt were proper to have discussed. So, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister were being dealt with in precisely the same way, and, because neither of them was trusted, it was subject to the will of the Assembly itself.

That would have been the reply had the Member for East Belfast had the grace and manners to give way to me when I sought him to do so. I do not know if his tongue was embedded firmly in his cheek when he spoke, but he suggested that there were people in this House who would see the Civic Forum as a threat. That comment caused some hilarity on this side of the House. I cannot see too many of my Colleagues shaking in their shoes at the prospect of Gary McMichael coming out of his forced retirement to take them on at the polls — or because of any other of the individuals that are there.

I will deal with his general view. He said that these are people who can make a speech without having it typed up for them, and who can do joined-up writing. Therefore, he thinks that we should get their views and that they cannot be considered to be cronies. One can have a well-educated crony. The ability to do joined-up writing does not stop people being cronies. Making speeches without having to refer to prepared manuscripts does not stop them from being cronies. None of those things are essential to someone being a crony.

The Member's next comment concerned the anti-agreement Unionists' position. He said that by being in the Assembly they were in some way supporting the existence of the Assembly and did not want to bring it down. Let me deal with that matter, because it seems to be of an organised type by a number of individuals, which will probably be their only defence in the run-up to an election.

In any democratic society, if one wants to democratically defeat a proposition that one finds to be anathema, there are options available. In this case the DUP considers that there are three. One option is to get the Ulster Unionist Council to live up to its manifesto commitments and ditch the deal. That is never going to happen. It is not going to happen because, at the height of the question, the Ulster Unionist Council did not take the opportunity to stop armed terrorist representatives from being in the Government. The Ulster Unionist Council voted in favour of letting them into the Government without decommissioning taking place.

The second available option is to get 60% of Unionists in the Assembly to veto the process. If that were done, the DUP would have succeeded in doing what Mr Ervine did not want it to do. The DUP tabled a motion that could have united Unionism more than anything else. The motion proposed to exclude those who were still engaged in acts of terrorism from being in government. Those people are still running guns into the country from Florida and, only a week ago, were caught in possession of loaded weapons in Cork in the Republic of Ireland. However, when the DUP brought the motion before the House, 55% of Unionists — a clear majority of Unionists in the Assembly — voted for their exclusion, but not the 60% that was required.

That leaves only the electoral annihilation option — the defeat of the First Minister and his team at the polls and the democratic defeat of the Belfast Agreement. That is the option that the DUP is choosing.

Ms Morrice: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Member explain what relevance this has to the motion?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I was also having difficulty relating it to the motion. Mr Robinson, you are straying from the motion.

Mr P Robinson: This is interesting. It is a remarkable intervention. Why was it not made when the allegation was made by her Friend Mr Ervine? It seems that it is in order to have the remarks made by Mr Ervine, but it is out of order if I try to reply to them. People will read for themselves the level of consistency in that approach.

I am not sure why Monica McWilliams, the leader of the Women's Coalition, spoke. Perhaps it was to draw attention to the parentage of the Civic Forum and to take what she might consider to be credit for its existence. However, her Colleague's remarks show that there was no all-party desire within the negotiations for the Belfast Agreement to have a Civic Forum. In fact, I heard one Ulster Unionist describe the inclusion of the Civic Forum as something "to keep Monica quiet". On that basis, this extra tier of "government" exists only to please one of the negotiating parties to the Belfast Agreement, who did not seem to get anything else that she asked for during the process. Her contribution today was an attempt to take some ownership for it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Does my hon Friend agree that the Forum is made up of people who wanted a place but who could not get directly elected?

Mr P Robinson: It is very clear, particularly in the appointment of the UDP representative, that that is the case. There are many groups and organisations represented in the Civic Forum whose views I am sure Assembly Members will be happy to hear. Those views can be heard at any time, any day of the week. There is nothing to stop any representative from the churches, trade unions

or business organisations from coming to see Assembly Members, and they do so. In spite of the Civic Forum's existence, the bodies and groups represented on the Civic Forum still come to Assembly Members and give their opinions on matters that are before the House or on those that they wish to have brought before the House. It is duplication and an unnecessary and costly element to our society.

In conclusion, I commend the amendment to the House. Nothing said during the debate will take away from the amendment's validity. At its very heart, it requires the Assembly to determine the business that the Civic Forum will consider, and its priorities, rather than have the Forum pressurised into dealing with various issues thrown at it from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Assembly, its Committees and the Civic Forum itself. It is nonsense to do business in that way. The business should be under the control of the Assembly, the body whose views it should take into account and not question in the way that the Member for North Down suggests. The Civic Forum should provide its views solely to the Assembly on matters that the Assembly seeks to have its views on.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): Mr Deputy Speaker, I note that Mr Robinson spoke for 25 minutes. I trust that you will give me the same latitude.

I would like to thank the Assembly Members for their contributions to the debate — and I mean that most sincerely, as Hughie Green used to say. Even DUP Members have contributed significantly to the general mirth of the nation.

The Civic Forum is one of the key elements of the Good Friday Agreement. Therefore, it is very important that it be given a credible role to play in the process that we are engaged in. That role is one of providing independent views from a broad range of sectors in our society. It has become evident during today's debate that some Members have sincere reservations about the motion tabled by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I want to clarify the situation and give an absolute assurance to those Members.

The First Minister made it clear in his statement this morning that arrangements for the review of the Civic Forum will be completed within the year — by 21 October. That is the assurance that some Members sought. All concerns and representations will be taken into account at that stage. I will quote from the First Minister's statement to allay the other fears over the independence of the Civic Forum and its freedom to pursue its own agenda:

"Indeed, let me state without equivocation that the Deputy First Minister and I will not try to prevent the Forum from taking forward any item that it wishes to."

The First Minister went on to say:

"That proposal provides for a work agenda to be jointly agreed by the chairperson of the Forum, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. It is not a mechanism for veto."

He continued

"The chairperson of the Forum also believes that it provides the best basis not only for agreeing the Forum's priorities but also for resourcing its work."

Resourcing was raised on several occasions. The suggestion was made that the Civic Forum would be limited by its resources — that is to say that it would be given a certain allowance and forced to live according to its wits on the basis of the allowance made to it. That is neither the point nor the position. The following is the wish of the Civic Forum, as well as of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. If they, following discussion and consensus, agree on a set of priorities — according to the wishes of the Forum and according to the priorities as seen by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister — that will then set the agenda for finding the resources necessary to accommodate that agenda.

That is quite a different picture from the one painted by some Members this morning.

2.30 pm

The First Minister said this morning that the chairperson of the Civic Forum had been assured that the Assembly would not stifle the work of the Forum. He accepts that, and the Civic Forum has approved these arrangements, which we believe will be beneficial to all parties. Let me quote further, just in case there is any doubt about the position. The First Minister also said — *[Interruption]*.

Mr P Robinson: Nonsense. Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Haughey: Is it customary for a Minister — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not think that it is customary during the winding-up speech. Please continue.

Mr P Robinson: It is absolutely customary.

Mr Haughey: I am no expert on parliamentary procedure, but I thought that when a Minister was winding up a debate — *[Interruption]*.

Let him have his say; it will add to the mirth of the nation.

Mr P Robinson: I do not know whether the Member was listening when I made my remarks. I made it very clear that the First Minister had been inaccurate. The Civic Forum has never seen this motion. The Civic Forum has never voted on or discussed this motion. The Junior Minister is repeating the inaccuracies of the First Minister. Would he not like to reconsider his position?

Mr Haughey: I would not like to reconsider my position at all. I will get round to that issue in a moment.

I return to quoting what the First Minister said this morning:

“First, the motion has been agreed with the Forum itself. Secondly, it will preserve the independence of the Forum. Thirdly, neither the Deputy First Minister nor I has any intention of preventing the Forum from addressing any issue it wishes to address”.

I hope that those words, taken from the First Minister’s statement this morning and repeated now by me to this House, will allay the anxieties of those who have genuine concerns here and who are not out to play a party game for party advantage.

It is sad, deplorable and very regrettable to see the intellectual decline of a hitherto fine body of men, and a woman — the DUP. It is sad indeed to see the decline of the intellectual powers of Mr Peter Robinson — a man who was renowned for the rigour of his analysis and the vigour of his mind. Out of respect to his friends and family, who must be distressed at his present state, I will devote my time only to a number of the most obvious of the absurdities that he came out with this morning.

First, he said that the Civic Forum would be a complete waste of time and money and that there was ample opportunity for all groups in society to make their views known to the Assembly and its Members. He then went on to argue that the Orange Order had been deliberately excluded from the Civic Forum and that it ought to be included. He went on to mention other Loyal Institutions. I am no expert on the other Loyal Institutions, but I understand that they include the Apprentice Boys of Derry, the Royal Arch Purple, the Independent Orange Order and a number of other bodies. If all of these other bodies were to be included in the Civic Forum, and Dr Paisley — *[Interruption]*.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Haughey: I am not giving way any more.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is a point of order, Mr Haughey. You are requested to give way.

Mr McCartney: Is it in order for the Minister to repeat statements that are patently and clearly inaccurate, misleading and — at the risk of using unparliamentary language — untrue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Haughey must be given the opportunity to rebut the statements that were made earlier.

Mr Haughey: Mr Deputy Speaker, it is my clear recollection — and I think that Hansard will bear it out —

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. How can you say, in all sanity, that the Minister is entitled to rebut things that have been said when they were not said, as the record will make clear? Why does he not come to the real issue — this meeting of the Forum? When did it meet, and when did it give approval to this?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley, I do not believe the latter part of that to be a point of order. I will look at Hansard. Can we please let Mr Haughey continue.

Mr Haughey: Mr Deputy Speaker, I have a very clear recollection that the words “Loyal Institutions” were used. Now I am no expert on the Loyal Institutions, but I understand that they embrace the bodies that I have referred to. If all these bodies were to be included in the Civic Forum — I refer to the statement made by Dr Paisley about a number of bodies and sectors in civic society not represented in the Forum, and I think that Hansard will bear that out as well — that Dr Paisley and Mr Robinson wished, would that not double or even treble this scandalous waste of money that they complain about?

The second absurdity given voice to by Mr Robinson was that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister appointed their cronies to the Forum — that the Forum was “sanitised” by the deliberate exclusion of those whose views did not accord with those of the First and Deputy First Ministers. In fact, 54 of the 60 members of the Forum were appointed by processes devised by those sectors of society themselves, over which neither the First Minister nor the Deputy First Minister sought, had, were given or wanted any influence whatsoever. They were appointed independently. If it should be the case that those members of the Civic Forum broadly reflect the views of civic society — more than 70% of whom are in favour of the agreement — then DUP members will simply have to live with that, as they do generally in the community at large.

However, it seems strange to me that Mr Robinson, having claimed that this body was appointed by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and consisted largely of their cronies, then went on to complain that it would be far too independent and that it could not be given any freedom to look at issues that it might wish to look at because it might be far too independent. One must deplore and regret the decline of the powers of Mr Robinson, but that is a matter for his party and his associates to deal with.

Let me move to a finely crafted and intellectually compelling address to the House by my Colleague and Friend Carmel Hanna, who suggested that the Forum might be enhanced by an ability to look at Third-World issues and regretted that perhaps, under present arrangements, it might not be as outward looking as it should be. May I suggest to Ms Hanna, and the House, that in addressing European issues the European Union takes a close interest in Third-World issues such as aid and assistance and that those might well fall within the competence of the Forum to address.

I turn now to the issue that has given rise to the most hue and cry from DUP Members: when this issue was looked at by the Civic Forum. The First Minister assured the House that the Civic Forum addressed this issue on

20 December at Balmoral. Mr Robinson is perhaps technically correct in that it was not — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Haughey: Mr Peter Robinson used the terms “grace” and “manners” when talking about the intervention of the First Minister earlier. Of course, grace, manners, good humour, tolerance and open-mindedness are so characteristic of the DUP that one understands entirely Mr Robinson’s point of view. With regard to this uncharacteristic guffawing and bellowing, one has to wonder just how deep it goes — *[Interruption]*.

Rev Dr William McCrea: The more you say, the better.

Mr Haughey: The venue was Balmoral. The date was 20 December. It was not a plenary meeting of the Civic Forum. All members of the Civic Forum were invited to the meeting. It was a very full meeting of the Civic Forum, and all members of the Civic Forum had an opportunity to look at the issue. This fact totally destroys the argument made by the DUP.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the veracity of the First Minister — a spokesman of the House — is such an important issue, perhaps he will now tell us what the motion before this non-plenary meeting was.

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

Mr Haughey: The point-of-order system is being abused because these people do not wish to listen to — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Are you embarrassed? Do you want to be?

Mr Haughey: Embarrassed? Does Dr McCrea understand the meaning of the word “embarrassed”? I doubt it. I hope that the time consideration will make allowances for all of this codology.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you inform the House how long this debate can go on? Please inform the Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, Dr Paisley, that is not a point of order. The debate will go on until 4.00 pm.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Go on. The more you say, the better.

Mr Haughey: That is something that I could not say for you, Dr McCrea. If you had kept your mouth shut, this country would be a safer place.

The First Minister commented on a number of the drafts of the motion that were prepared by officials. He considered some of these earlier drafts to be too restrictive in terms of the freedom that would be allowed to the Civic Forum. The original motion — which was submitted to the Business Committee — was a draft which had not

yet been considered by the Executive. The Business Committee was aware of that. On foot of the discussion at the Executive, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agreed to consult the Civic Forum on the motion before tabling it. The proposed motion was, therefore, withdrawn.

The motion was amended at the suggestion of the Civic Forum. The reason for this was that the second paragraph of the motion was regarded as being too restrictive or uncomfortable for it. It was concerned at the potential for being overwhelmed with requests for consultation from the Assembly. It was decided that built into the second paragraph should be the words “shall be invited” so that the Forum could, if necessary, prioritise the requests being made. The Forum further asked for the arrangements to be reviewed, and the Executive, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister were glad to agree to that.

2.45 pm

Peter Robinson referred to the Civic Forum as a potential second chamber. The Forum’s officials have assured us that they have no intention of trying to be a second chamber. Rather, they want to be a resource to those who are developing policy. They want to be a body with the time and space to deliberate on difficult or cross-cutting issues and to provide a view that reflects the considered response of a diverse range of interests in this community.

An allegation was made that the Forum was hand-picked by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I have already dealt with that issue. The evidence is there that processes were set up in order to ensure that the Forum would be representative of a broad range of interests in the community.

There has been a considerable misrepresentation of the situation regarding the Orange — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am not prepared to speak against the background of this cacophony.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have called for order several times. Please continue, Mr Haughey. I know that it is difficult with this background noise. *[Interruption]*. Order.

Mr Haughey: There has been considerable misrepresentation of the position vis-à-vis the Orange Order. The Orange Order was invited to be part of the consortium that nominated members to the Forum. The report agreed by the Assembly provided that the cultural traditions group of the Community Relations Council, along with major cultural organisations, should be invited to form a consortium for the purpose of nominating four individuals from the cultural sector. It was anticipated that the major cultural organisations would include the Orange Order. No applications were received from organisations directly related to the Orange Order, or from the Orange Order itself.

In a Forum of 60 members it will never be possible to represent every single interest in the community, but among the members now appointed there is undoubtedly a very broad spectrum of views and experience. A formal review of the structures and effective operation of the Forum will be carried out within one year of its becoming operational. That will provide an opportunity to reconsider the membership.

A further point made by Mr Robinson and Dr Paisley was that the Assembly should control the Forum agenda. I know that control plays a very big part in the thinking of the DUP, but not such a large part in that of other Members of this House who are properly, and in a principled way, democratic. The DUP is saying that it does not want to hear what it does not want to hear. I have to say that that is a major surprise, coming from people with the reputation for open-mindedness, tolerance and the fair consideration of all points of view that has become so justly characteristic of the Democratic Unionist Party.

David Ervine made reference to the ability of the Civic Forum to stick its nose into the affairs of the general community. That is exactly what the Forum was set up to do — to stick its nose into all kinds of affairs, and to let this Administration know the views of a wide range of interests in the general community.

Monica McWilliams said that the Forum had its origins in the agreement, and, as the First Minister said, there is no intention of attempting to fetter or circumscribe the independence of the Civic Forum in regard to the work that it chooses to undertake.

Mr Poots referred to quorums. As I understand it, the Civic Forum does not have a quorum system, and we are not aware of any Forum meeting that had to be abandoned because of the lack of a quorum. If Mr Poots has any evidence or information to the contrary, perhaps he would make it available to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Dr Paisley referred to the question of the smaller evangelical Churches. The five Church nominees were selected by a process developed by the Churches Consortium. The Churches Consortium had 12 members and was chaired by an official from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. It was made up of five representatives from the Irish Council of Churches, five from the Roman Catholic Church, one from a grouping of churches known as the Caleb Foundation, and one from an organisation of smaller evangelical groups known as ECONI. They agreed that the five nominations would be as follows: two from the churches associated with the Irish Council of Churches, two from the Roman Catholic Church, and one from the smaller evangelical denominations. To fill the last place, an advertisement was placed in the regional papers, so that anyone from any of the smaller evangelical churches could apply. The representative from the smaller evangelical churches on the Forum is Pastor David McConaghie.

The allegation has been made that the Forum is simply a fallback for people who failed to be elected to the House. Members of the Civic Forum were appointed on the basis of their experience and ability to contribute to discussions of important social, economic and cultural matters. The six appointments made by the First and the Deputy First Ministers were intended to complement the selection of the nominating bodies. Representations were made to the First and the Deputy First Ministers and any perceived gaps were filled.

If the Member who raised the issue is referring to the leader of a political party — Gary McMichael — it was considered desirable for the UDP to be represented in the Forum by its leader. The First Minister was perfectly entitled to make that decision.

The question was raised about why the Civic Forum was to give its views on the Programme for Government before proper arrangements were in place. The drafting team for the Programme for Government had to complete its consultation by 15 January 2001. Arrangements for the Civic Forum were not in place by that date, and in the interim the First and Deputy First Ministers invited the Civic Forum to respond to the draft Programme for Government.

I would also point out that there have been 160 responses to requests to comment on the Programme for Government.

That covers most of the points that were made. I recognise that much of the brouhaha that came from the DUP Benches has nothing to do with the Civic Forum at all. It has more to do with the party's ongoing search for some kind of partisan advantage. That this disfigures the business of the House on a regular basis will come as no surprise to Members.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Haughey: No. I have all the information I need.

I should also refer to the further point made by Mrs Nelis in connection with the North/South consultative forum. At the last plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, in September 2000, it agreed to initiate a study on the North/South consultative forum. Progress is being made on the study, and a report will be made to the next plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, following which a statement will be made to the Assembly.

If I have missed any points — and some serious points were made here today in spite of all the brouhaha — I will search Hansard and make sure that the Members who raised them get a written reply.

In conclusion, I commend the motion to the House.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: There is still time left. I take it that Members, as in another place, can use that time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No Member has asked to speak after the winding-up speeches. On that basis, I will put the amendment Question.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: That does not matter. In another place, they just have to stand up and can use the time.

Mr McCartney: Of course, the reason no Member put his name down to speak after the closing speech of the Minister is that no one could anticipate whether the Minister would use all the time available. However, in another place, it is quite in order, if a Minister's closing speech does not utilise the time allotted for the debate, for anyone else who wishes to speak to be allowed then to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The convention in this place is different from that in another. The convention here has always been that when a Minister has finished his winding-up speech the Question is put.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister seems to think that when he is winding up he should give way to nobody. I tried to make him give way. I want to put it on the record that what I said in the House about the other churches was the truth. I know all about it. What he said was totally inaccurate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: In fact, it was not just inaccurate — it was false.

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

3.00 pm

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 25; Noes 59.

AYES

Fraser Agnew, Paul Berry, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, 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, Denis Watson, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Alex Attwood, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Esmond Birnie, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Joan Carson, Seamus Close, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, David Ervine, John Fee, David Ford, Sam Foster, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, Derek Hussey, Billy Hutchinson, John Kelly, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Alban Maginness, Seamus

Mallon, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, David McClarty, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Alan McFarland, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dermot Nesbitt, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney, Jim Wilson.

Question accordingly negated.

Mr Ford: In view of the assurances given by the Minister I seek leave to withdraw amendment No 2. Unlike Members of the DUP — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: Unlike Members of the DUP, Mr Deputy Speaker — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member who moved the second amendment has sought leave to withdraw it. Are Members content?

Several Members: No.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and negated.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 57; Noes 28.

AYES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Alex Attwood, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Esmond Birnie, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Joan Carson, Seamus Close, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, John Fee, David Ford, Sam Foster, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, Derek Hussey, Billy Hutchinson, John Kelly, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Alban Maginness, Seamus Mallon, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, David McClarty, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Alan McFarland, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dermot Nesbitt, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney, Jim Wilson.

NOES

Fraser Agnew, Paul Berry, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, 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, Patrick Roche, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that the Civic Forum shall offer its views on such social, economic and cultural matters as are from time to time agreed between the Chairperson of the Forum and the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

In addition, the Civic Forum shall be invited to offer its view on specific social, economic and cultural matters where the Assembly has by motion so requested.

3.15 pm

Mr P Robinson: I wish to raise a point of order. As it may require some sort of consideration, I will be happy to wait for a ruling.

During the course of our debate on the Civic Forum the First Minister made statements which clearly were inaccurate. They were compounded by the Junior Minister in his response. The Library does not have any minutes of Civic Forum meetings, but I have received paperwork via a member. That paperwork makes it clear that the issues which the First Minister and the junior Minister indicated had been raised, discussed and decided upon by the Civic Forum were never on its agenda and were never decided. The House has been misled. The Speaker should look into the matter and decide if flagrant disregard of accuracy is permissible for an Assembly Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Obviously, I cannot respond to that immediately. Please make those papers available to the Speaker's Office. We will examine Hansard.

DRAFT FINANCIAL INVESTIGATIONS ORDER

The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee (Mr A Maginness): I beg to move

That the report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the draft Financial Investigations (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 referred by the Secretary of State be submitted to the Secretary of State as a report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

As Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee I have the role of presenting the Committee's report to the Assembly. I will declare an interest before progressing further. As a barrister, I am a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland and of the Bar of Ireland.

It might be helpful for Members if I set out some details on the workings of the Committee. The Assembly established the Ad Hoc Committee on 11 December 2000 with the remit to consider the draft Financial Investigations (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 and to report to the Assembly. The draft Order aims to make the present legislation more effective and strengthen the measures available to deprive convicted criminals of the profits from their criminal activities.

The Committee's first meeting was held on 19 December 2000, and we met another four times — all in public session. The Committee considered the draft Order and debated its purpose, and the changes to the legislation. As a result of extremely tight deadlines, the Committee decided to invite 16 organisations to provide written submissions. These are listed in the report provided to Members. The Committee received 11 written submissions and took oral evidence from Customs and Excise, the Northern Ireland Bankers' Association, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the RUC and the Law Society of Northern Ireland. This was a well-balanced and good spread of organisations considering the tight deadlines the Committee faced.

For the sake of completeness, all the written submissions, the minutes of evidence and the minutes of proceedings have been included in the report. After hearing oral evidence on 8 January and 9 January, the Committee carried out an article-by-article consideration of the draft Order on 16 January.

Overall, a majority on the Committee supported the draft Order and backed the drive to prevent criminals profiting from criminal activities. However, individual Committee members had concerns, particularly in relation to solicitor/client confidentiality and legal and professional privilege. These are recorded in the report.

I will deal more specifically with the individual draft articles. There are eight articles in the draft Order, and there was a general welcome for the instrument. There was no disagreement over the principle that it is right and proper to prevent criminals profiting from their

unlawful activities. The Ad Hoc Committee believed that the law should be strengthened to deal more effectively with criminals who used more sophisticated means to dispose of their ill-gotten gains. That degree of increased criminal sophistication was emphasised by the RUC in its oral and written submissions to the Committee and in the evidence presented by Customs and Excise.

3.30 pm

There was no division in the Ad Hoc Committee regarding articles 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 and 8 of the draft Order. However, there was division in the Committee on article 6, which deals with general solicitor circulars and which I will address at a later stage. Although there was division in the Committee and a fairly robust debate, business was conducted in a good and responsible manner by all members.

The draft Order is intended to amend the Proceeds of Crime (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 and aims to prevent criminals from benefiting from their criminal activities. Evidence given by the RUC and Customs and Excise indicates that the Order has been increasingly effective in achieving its aims.

Draft article 3 amends article 49 of the 1996 Order. This was generally agreed by the Committee. The draft article enables a Customs and Excise officer — the equivalent of a superintendent in the police force — to apply to a County Court for the appointment of a financial investigator to assist him. It also makes new provision for the County Court to authorise named police and Customs and Excise officers to exercise two of the powers available to financial investigators, namely the power to undertake a trawl of all financial institutions and solicitors. These are referred to as general bank and solicitor circulars.

The Committee raised no objection to article 3, which deals with the appointment of police and customs officers. However, other points of concern were raised, and the Committee made the assumption that these concerns could be addressed. However, members did emphasise that those empowered under the amended draft article should be properly trained and au fait with the code of practice governing the activities of financial investigators. The Committee noted the concerns of the Northern Ireland Bankers' Association, which gave evidence to the Committee — and in particular, its concern about the time period for compliance with general bank circulars.

The Committee recommended that there be some mechanism whereby the code of practice can be amended to include an application for an extension of the time period for compliance in line with the views expressed by the Northern Ireland Bankers' Association. The association's supplementary written submission is on page 71 of the report. The final paragraph states:

"Apart from section 3.13 in the Code of Practice there is no provision for an application for an extension of time. In our submission we drew the Committee's attention to the potential additional work which the proposed new legislation would create. The Member Banks

would therefore welcome that an extension to the current 28 day period is written into the proposed new legislation. We trust that this clarifies the submission."

While the Committee understood the concern of the Northern Ireland Bankers' Association, it did not seek to include in the legislation any provision for the extension of time for compliance with a bankers' order. However, in case of the Bankers' Association and the problems that might face bankers complying with time limits, the Committee suggested that a mechanism whereby the code of practice could be amended to include an application for an extension of time for compliance should be part of the code of practice.

Draft article 4 amends article 50 of the Proceeds of Crime (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 to provide financial investigators with the same rights of access to material under a production order as are currently available to the police. The Committee had no objection to draft article 4.

Draft article 5 amends schedule 2 to the 1996 Order. The effect would be to broaden the power of a financial investigator to require a bank to provide him with specified information. The amendment broadens the power so that such a requirement could be imposed on any person carrying on relevant financial business, as defined by the Money Laundering Regulations 1993.

That amendment broadens the area of investigation of a financial investigator to include any relevant financial institutions, and not just banks. That is a material change in the legislation. Those who submitted evidence to the Committee said that they would welcome that change and thought that it would be helpful in the fight against crime. It also broadens the range of information that the banks or financial institutions must provide. The Committee had no objection to draft article 5.

Draft article 6 enables a financial investigator, where he believes that a person has benefited from serious crime, to require a solicitor to confirm whether, during a specified period, the person was his client in respect of non-contentious business such as the purchase of land or property or the carrying out of investments, et cetera. If so, the solicitor would be required to provide certain information about his client and the nature of any transaction that was made.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Article 6 caused division in the Committee. However, there was a majority in favour of the draft amendment and there were various arguments on both sides. Article 6 represents the most contentious part of the draft Order. It represents a new area in which a financial investigator can investigate. He can conduct a trawl of solicitors throughout Northern Ireland in an attempt to get information on certain types of non-contentious business carried out by solicitors on behalf of people who may be involved in criminal activities.

I refer Members to the RUC's written submission on page 77. It says

"It is the RUC's submission that since their introduction in 1996 financial investigation powers have been used to good effect. They are used in selected cases only, following a determination that the appointment of a financial investigator could substantially enhance the investigation. An example of their assistance is the identification of 1,232 previously unknown accounts connected to those persons under investigation.

We would contend that the proposed new powers will enhance the effectiveness of the existing powers. In particular, the ability to trawl all financial institutions should prove of benefit, as will the ability to require a solicitor to confirm if a person was his client and to obtain details of transactions carried out on his/her behalf in respect of certain types of businesses."

The RUC's submission is strongly in favour of the draft article, and the submission speaks for itself. However, I refer to page 74, paragraph (f) of the Human Rights Commission's written submission, which states:

"Article 6, by inserting a new para. 3A into Schedule 2 to the 1996 Order, provides for trawls to be made amongst solicitors for information. The Commission has concerns about this provision because it interferes with the lawyer-client relationship, which is normally sacrosanct. Even though para. 4 of Schedule 2 to the 1996 Order preserves legal professional privilege, it is not clear on present case-law authority that this would extend to justifying a solicitor not furnishing the information demanded under the new para. 3A. The Commission is not persuaded that this amendment to the law is yet required, especially in view of the fact that the Government has not explained why it is required in Northern Ireland but not elsewhere in the United Kingdom and why the proposal was made without first taking the views of legal bodies in Northern Ireland as to whether there was a need for it."

That reflects the view expressed by the Human Rights Commission. I refer Members to page 80 and 81, which deal with the Law Society's written submission to the Ad Hoc Committee. At paragraph 3.4 it states:

"For example, we draw attention to the powers conferred by Article 6 of the proposed Order. From the Explanatory Document it is clear that the purpose of these provisions is to enable speculative 'trawls' to obtain information about transactions conducted generally by solicitors for clients. The operation of these provisions will almost certainly involve infringements of confidentiality and privacy not just of the person under investigation but of those persons with whom the person under suspicion has had legal dealings."

In the summary on page 81 the society invites the Committee to consider supporting the position of the society on the following points:

- "(a) to acknowledge the importance of safeguarding the public interest in the principles of solicitor-client confidentiality and legal professional privilege;
- (b) having regard to the importance of those principles, to affirm that these should not be interfered with lightly, without careful consideration of other options or without the provision of effective safeguards;
- (c) that any legislation on the lines proposed or, at a minimum, implementation of those provisions affecting solicitor/client confidentiality and legal professional privilege should not be brought forward pending full and meaningful consultations between the NIO and the Law Society;

- (d) that if and when legislation on these matters is brought forward, it should not be by way of Order in Council;
- (e) that legislation on these matters should not be applicable to Northern Ireland on a selective and experimental basis."

3.45 pm

I think that summaries fairly the view expressed by the Law Society to the Ad Hoc Committee. I believe that it represents the views of those who found this particular article unacceptable.

Despite the disagreement that I indicated was within the Committee, the majority of members accepted draft article 6 and were content with it. However, the Committee went on to say that, although it was agreed at first, there was no clear definition of what is termed "non-contentious business" in the draft Order, and it recommended that this phrase should be clearly defined.

The Committee also said that the Secretary of State should enter into full and meaningful consultations with the relevant organisations before the implementation of the draft Order, and that the code of practice for investigators should be updated. In my view, that would represent both sides of the argument and the views of the Committee as agreed.

The recommendations have been outlined in the report, which was unanimously agreed by the Committee. The recommendations are a tribute to the perseverance of Committee members. Despite the very limited time period, the Committee worked very hard and energetically to deal with all the issues conscientiously. I commend the individual members of the Committee for their assistance and, in particular, the Deputy Chairperson, Mr Billy Bell.

I thank all the organisations for their written and oral evidence to the Committee. A number of the submissions and preparations for oral submission, as well as written submissions, were produced during the Christmas and new year holiday period. The organisations put a very special effort into preparation, and I thank them for that. I also thank the Assembly staff for their support and assistance throughout. In particular, I would like to thank, the Committee Clerk for his work and direction.

Finally, I invite Members to support the motion.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee (Mr B Bell): I want to thank the Member for North Belfast, Mr Alban Maginness, for chairing the Committee. It was a very difficult job, but it was one which he tackled with enthusiasm and great ability. He had the full support of other Committee members in chairing those meetings.

Before dealing with the contents of the Committee's report, I would like to draw Members' attention to one other issue, which I think was touched on by the Chairperson. It relates to the very tight deadline that was set for the Committee's work. By the time the membership of the Committee was agreed, and taking into account the Christmas recess, we had only three weeks to consider

this very difficult and detailed piece of legislation, hear evidence and produce a report.

That timescale was totally inadequate. It was only because of the tremendous amount of time and effort given to the task by Committee members and staff that the Chairperson was able to present the report today. It is absolutely necessary that a more realistic timescale be allocated to a Committee of this kind to enable it to carry out the task. Committee members should be commended for the efficient way in which they conducted their business. A genuine and concerted effort was made to achieve consensus. That was difficult at times but, where it was possible to achieve such consensus, that has been reflected in the report.

This is an important piece of legislation. It will redress the balance between the criminal and the law-abiding citizen. The proposed legislation will enhance the effectiveness of the powers available to Government to prevent criminals from profiting from unlawful activities, a principle that has my full support. In Northern Ireland it is especially important that we tackle the mafia-style culture that has developed. We must cut off the lifeblood that sustains criminal activities.

As Mr Maginness said, a majority on the Committee was in favour of the introduction of the Order. However, individual members had reservations about some of the details, and the Chairperson has highlighted the proposed changes to the Order that would take account of such concerns.

During the Committee's deliberations I was concerned to ensure that the balance of the measures should be in favour of law-abiding citizens. I was also keen to ensure that we did not create any potential loopholes through which those who profit from illegal activities could escape. Of course, there were concerns about issues such as solicitor/client confidentiality, but I think that the report has addressed such issues constructively, striking the right balance between criminal and law-abiding activities. However, it was important that we should keep our eye on the main issue and make it as difficult as possible for criminals to enjoy their ill-gotten gains. We wanted to send out a clear message to that effect, and the report has achieved that objective.

I commend the report to the Assembly.

Mr S Wilson: I endorse the comments of the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson on the help that was given to us as we compiled the report. The work was done at a difficult time — during the holiday period — and a great deal of effort went into arranging attendances by witnesses, supplying members with written submissions, conducting meetings and writing the report.

The Assembly staff involved in that have our thanks and congratulations, as do those who took the time over the Christmas period to get a written submission to the

Committee — regardless of what we think of those submissions.

This is an important piece of legislation. The RUC — which will be one of the main organisations to benefit from the extra powers — made it quite clear that this was a necessary piece of legislation. The police need it to enhance the effectiveness of the 1996 Order. As they said — although after reading some of the submissions I began to wonder if they were right in this assessment — no good argument can be advanced as to why individuals should profit from their illegal activities. Because of the range of professional advice that is now available to criminals, it is possible for them to engage in illegal activity, to benefit from it, to hide the gains and to snub their noses at the rest of law-abiding society.

I was disappointed by the balance of the arguments and by the almost knee-jerk reaction of the usual suspects, who feel that they must rise to the defence of the criminal underdogs, as they see them, on almost every occasion. I want to address some of the Chairperson's remarks. Anyone who listens to the news or watches what happens — not just in the inner city, though perhaps it is more evident there — will know of the sophistication that paramilitary organisations now have in laundering their ill-gotten gains, whether from protection money, racketeering, drug money, robberies or whatever else. It is not possible to deny that we must have some means of ensuring that those ill-gotten gains can be seized from those people once the illegal activity has been identified.

I live in the inner city myself, and it is evident to me that some individuals are clearly living beyond their means. They are driving cars that they could not afford on the limited income that they appear to have on the surface. In some cases they are flaunting their wealth. They appear to be local heroes because of their wealth, despite having no visible means of support. Clearly, we must have some way of dealing with that problem.

4.00 pm

A year and a half ago a Housing Executive house three streets from mine was raided in search of drugs. The police came across £330,000 in cash. I do not know whether that was a month's takings, a week's takings or a lifetime's takings, but for someone with no job to have that kind of money available to them shows the level of money that can be earned through criminal activities. It is an affront. It is all well and good for those who represent, or claim to represent, the liberal wing of society. It is all well and good for those persons from the leafy suburbs to talk about keeping the balance right — "We must protect confidentiality between solicitors and their clients." It is all well and good for them to protect the rights of those who are caught up in a web of criminal intrigue, but it is an affront to those who get up in the morning, go out and work, pay their bills and try

to keep the law. It is an affront that those people who decide to engage in criminal activity can benefit from it. I therefore agree with the RUC that this legislation is required. It is the RUC which has to deal with this issue, day in and day out, and it says that it is essential. The Customs and Excise officials also told us it was essential that the powers be extended to them. We have to listen to those who deal with this problem on a regular basis.

I was disappointed by the contribution from the Chairperson of the Committee. I timed that section of his speech in which he defended the views of the Human Rights Commission and the Law Society. Its contents certainly did not reflect the views of the Committee. As far as I remember, when this issue was discussed in the Committee, there was a majority decision that these powers should be extended, in their totality, throughout the Order. One dissenting voice was heard, and that was the Chairperson's. In his speech he gave almost a third of his time — and I timed it — to making the argument that was supported by only one person in the Committee.

I want to comment on some of the arguments he put forth. The discussion centred around the question of whether the powers of the trawl for information should be extended. I noted the Chairperson's use of the rather weighted term "the speculative trawl for information". Should this be extended from banks to solicitors? I want to make it clear to the House that there is no mention in the legislation of a "speculative trawl". Having spoken to the police, who have been engaged in these trawls, as far as bankers have been concerned, since 1996, I am quite clear that the trawl is far from speculative.

Police officers first have to build up a case, and then they have to go to a County Court magistrate and show that they cannot progress the case further unless they have this additional information. The County Court magistrate then cross-questions them to ensure that it is absolutely necessary that they get these powers. Only then will the powers be extended to the police or, now, to the Customs and Excise officers. It is not, therefore, a speculative trawl, in which one simply throws out a net and hopes that some information will arrive. It is focused and happens only when the police or Customs and Excise officers find that their investigations cannot go any further without additional information. That is not an unreasonable power to give.

Secondly, it has been argued that this measure will shatter the very foundations of the legal system. I hope I am not over-egging the pudding — I accept that the Chairperson did not actually use that terminology — but the idea has been expressed that, somehow or other, if this power were extended, the fragile balance in the law, where confidentiality exists between a solicitor and his client, would break down, which would be to the detriment of the legal profession.

When the Law Society's representatives appeared at the Ad Hoc Committee I asked some questions about

that. It was quite enlightening. If one looks at page 47 of the report, one will see that they admitted that confidentiality between the client and the solicitor is not absolute. There were circumstances in which they would, and could be required to, disclose information. Mr Kinney said:

"My understanding is that, under the terms of the 1996 Order, if I have any suspicion regarding any transaction that comes to me in the course of my business, I have an obligation to report it."

Confidentiality is not absolute. Mr Kinney continued:

"However ... where there is a clear criminal intent and no doubt about it, then it should be disclosed."

Those are two instances where confidentiality can be breached and where information would be disclosed. All that the Order is doing is going that step further. It is stating that when the police have reason to believe, and can prove to a County Court judge, that there is criminal activity going on, and they need further information to proceed in the case, then they can apply for a trawl for information relating to that situation.

A lot of play has been made about the submission made by the Human Rights Commission. I become more and more disappointed the more I hear. The ordinary person in the street begins to wonder what kind of world some of the advocates of the various human rights organisations live in. It seems that their knee-jerk reaction is to regard any extension of powers to the establishment and to the state as a bad thing.

I will give one instance. When the chairperson of the Human Rights Commission came to the Committee he talked of his concerns about the legislation. I will not discuss all of those concerns. One illustrates the point I wish to make about the knee-jerk reaction. On three occasions in the commission's submission, the chairperson talked about the need to change the code of practice. He was asked what particular changes he would like to see. He was asked to be specific. His answer was most revealing. He pointed out that he could not be specific because he did not have a copy of the code of practice. He had not even read it, yet he was recommending changes to it.

To the ordinary person who wonders about the balance in all of this, that kind of knee-jerk reaction does not do any credit to any submission — it undermines a submission. Suffice it to say — though there are many other issues I could have raised — I believe that the vast majority of the Committee felt that not only was the legislation needed, but it should have gone far further. Some other Members may wish to take up the whole question of the Criminal Assets Bureau in the Irish Republic and the powers that it has. We did not get a chance to investigate that. I think that we were a bit worried about the response we received from the Human Rights Commission on whether the powers that the bureau might have would be allowed to stay. We will not get any thanks from the general public if we are seen in any way to wish to protect

those who benefit from their ill-gotten gains, very often those ill-gotten gains having resulted in the destruction of whole neighbourhoods. We would not get any credit for wanting to water down any legislation which would then curtail the ability of the police or the authorities to recover the gains from those people. I, therefore, support the content of the Order.

The majority of the Committee supported all of the content of the Order. Despite the references which have been made to the Chairperson, in the end article 6 was supported by the Committee. We did ask that non-contentious business be defined. That is reasonable enough. We indicated that, as was the case in 1996, the people who will be affected by it will be consulted as to how it might best be implemented. The principle was firmly supported by the vast majority of Committee members.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacú le tuairisc seo an Choiste ar an Ordú um Imscrúduithe Airgeadais chomh maith, agus go háirithe ba mhaith liom tacú go mór leis na moltaí atá ann ón Aire.

I too support the Committee's report on the Financial Investigations (Northern Ireland) Order 2001, particularly the recommendations which it makes to the Secretary of State. I, on behalf of my party, have no difficulty with enabling appropriate authorities to have the ability to identify and confiscate the proceeds of crime. I say that at the outset to pre-empt any remark which may follow.

I thank the Chairperson for giving the detail of the Order, which will save me referring to the particular articles. The Chairperson's report was a fair reflection of the Committee's debate and the submissions which were made, as the report itself is a fair reflection of the work of the Committee.

Whether there was any point to the establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee and its deliberations will be determined by whether the Secretary of State gives due recognition to the report and its recommendations. I say so because the draft Order is already in place. It has already been drafted and has been through both Houses in Westminster. When the Secretary of State receives the report from the Assembly the Order will simply require his signature to bring it into effect, if that is what he decides to do. There is, therefore, a question about the usefulness of the operation of the Committee. It will depend upon whether the Secretary of State takes on board its recommendations.

The Financial Investigations Order itself is a significant extension of powers which already exist under the Proceeds of Crime (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. Some consider the powers available under the Proceeds of Crime Order 1996 to be draconian, particularly article 49, which relates to the appointment and powers of a financial investigator. That part of the Proceeds of Crime Order is unique to the North of Ireland. It does not apply

in England and Wales. It does not apply in Scotland, which has a different legal system. Similar powers of investigation are not available in the South of Ireland. The significant extension of those powers, which will be given by the Financial Investigations Order, will also be unique to the North of Ireland. We are told that there is an intention to bring a Bill before Westminster to put the powers of investigation in England and Wales on a par with those available here.

Others have asked why this Order is being brought in as an Order in Council. As a consequence, it does not undergo normal parliamentary debate and scrutiny. We are being delivered a ready-made package, following a lack of, or no, consultation.

4.15 pm

We heard evidence from a wide range of people, and a number indicated that they were not consulted prior to the drafting of this Order. They had no opportunity to examine the study carried out on the exercise of the existing legislation — the Proceeds of Crime (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Law Society of Northern Ireland, Liberty and other organisations said there was no consultation prior to the drafting of the Order.

Other Members have pointed out the pressure of time on the Committee to deal with the issue, and that also applied to the people giving evidence. This matter was referred to the Assembly at the end of November by the Secretary of State. By the time the Committee was approved, appointed and had begun its work, it had barely three weeks to prepare a report for the Secretary of State by 12 February. The people we talked to had little time to study the legislation and had no prior consultation on the drafting. Many, including the Law Society of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, did indicate that their response was provisional, given the time restraints. In particular, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission raised a number of points. It prefaced what it had to say about the Order by stating that it was in favour of the principle of identifying and confiscating the proceeds of crime — it had no difficulty with that principle.

When we talk about the rights of the individual — and I will probably use this term several times — we are not necessarily talking about somebody who is the subject of an investigation. We are not talking about somebody who, on the balance of probability, may or may not be a criminal. We are talking about the rights of every individual who may be affected by the legislation. To listen to some, one might think that this legislation is only going to be used against those who are benefiting from drugs or some other illegal activity and have vast sums of money. This legislation will apply to us all. When we talk about the rights of the individual, we are talking about any individual. The rights of the individual

need to be balanced against the need to empower the authorities to identify and confiscate the proceeds of crime. There are potential implications for an individual's right to privacy.

The article that attracted most discussion was article 6. I must correct the Member who said only one person expressed reservations about article 6 and the Committee's response to it. In my recollection, the Chairperson suggested that the Committee had little response apart from the point about the clarity of definition of "non-contentious business". I certainly made it clear that it was my wish that the Committee include in its response to article 6 recommendations to the Secretary of State. I wanted him to address the lack of consultation by carrying out meaningful consultations with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Law Society of Northern Ireland on the concerns they had expressed to the Committee. The Chairperson did support that view, but he did not initiate that response with regard to article 6.

I am not going to go through all the articles. Article 6 is the most significant one. There are consequences for other parts of the Order. The legislation allows the appointment of Customs and Excise officers with certain powers of investigation, namely the power to issue general bank circulars or solicitor circulars. Article 6 extends the subject of a circular to solicitors' practices.

We now have the issue of solicitor/client confidentiality and legal/professional privilege. The Law Society of Northern Ireland feels that is an important principle. It did not say that the nature of the system of law would be shattered by the introduction of the Financial Investigations (Northern Ireland) Order 2001. However, it said that it believes it to be a further encroachment on the principle of solicitor/client confidentiality and legal/professional privilege.

They went on to explain that, at present, solicitors are subject to the provisions of the Proceeds of Crime (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 and they can be required to produce information and documents relating to the activities of individuals under investigation or transactions they may have carried out. Solicitors are already subject to such provisions. However, under the Proceeds of Crime (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, there is specific protection given to the principle of solicitor/client confidentiality and legal/professional privilege.

I refer to schedule 2(4) of the Proceeds of Crime (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, which clearly determines when it is appropriate for a solicitor to give information and when it is not, because of legal/professional privilege. However, the same safeguards are not in the provisions of the Financial Investigations (Northern Ireland) Order 2001. The explanatory document refers to the enabling power of a trawl — for that is what it is. Any general solicitor circular issued will be issued to each solicitor's

practice in the North of Ireland on the basis of the identification of a person under investigation.

The Northern Ireland Bankers' Association indicated in its submission that when its members are given the identity of a person they may have to consider other similar names, aliases and a number of potential addresses of the identified individual under investigation. This is in order to ensure that they comply with the requirements of the Order and stay within the law. That, we can assume, will also apply to solicitors, as regards the application of this Order.

With respect to solicitor/client confidentiality, if the person being targeted for the purposes of investigation has made hundreds, thousands or millions of pounds from the proceeds of crime — be it from drugs or anything else — so be it. However, there are the rights of other individuals who may have been involved innocently in transactions with that individual. People with similar names may be identified. Information about their personal business and transactions will also have to be produced. That is why the Law Society, in the explanatory document which accompanied the Order, referred to it as a trawl. Because of the very wide nature of that trawl, which article 6 will enable financial investigators, members of the police and Customs and Excise to carry out, the Law Society has expressed concerns about solicitor/client confidentiality and legal/professional privilege.

The Law Society also stated that it was not opposed to the concept of identifying or confiscating the proceeds of crime. It made the point that there should be meaningful consultation with the Secretary of State before the implementation of the Order.

I leave my remarks there. The report reflects the business carried out by the Committee and the views of the Committee fairly well. I ask Members to support the report. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Close: I will join in the commendations of the Assembly staff in particular. It is fair to say that they strived far beyond the normal call of duty to enable this report to be produced, and to provide assistance for the Committee in the preparation of this report, coming as it did at the festive season.

I also want to underline the comments of previous Members who drew attention to the fact — not for the first time — that, while the Assembly is often put in the position of having to present complete reports or commentary on pieces of legislation, it often has little or no time to perform its function adequately. I had occasion to draw attention to this fact yesterday, and it happens again today.

Yet again, the message must go out loudly and clearly that there is a Northern Ireland Assembly to represent the people of Northern Ireland now. It shall not be, and should not be, treated with the type of contempt which

seems to be becoming practice. Many of us are getting sick, sore and tired of this sort of behaviour. It is important to underline and stress that point every time that it happens, so that the slow drip might eventually get through to those who wish to sideline the voice of the elected representative.

The proposals in the Financial Investigations (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 strengthen and amend powers which are provided for in the Proceeds of Crime Order (Northern Ireland) 1996. Their intention is explicit — to prevent criminals profiting from unlawful activity. Everyone in the House, without exception, should share the view that we have a responsibility to ensure that criminals do not profit from crime.

It is essential that criminals are deterred from their inclination to commit crime. The only way we can ensure that that will happen is to send out the strong and unambiguous message that crime does not pay. What can people see if they adopt the guise of the proverbial dogs in the street, which are often mentioned, and use their eyes and ears to look around? Any reasonable and sane person can see that the law, as it exists, is failing. It is failing society, and, because it is failing society, it appears to be assisting the criminal. That must end.

As mentioned earlier, some people have a lifestyle that totally belies their only apparent source of legitimate income. In many cases, their only current source of income is the dole or social security benefits, and yet they drive around in flashy cars and take their families on holidays to sunny climes. They demonstrate it more, and do much more, than we poor Assembly Members can possibly afford to do. Yet there are those outside who poke fun at us and say “Look at how much they are earning.” When will we be able to afford holidays to sunny climes, to drive around in flashy cars, or to own numerous pieces of property in this city? Can we say that it all came from legitimate businesses — businesses over which no one would put a question mark?

We must ensure that the law is strengthened if we genuinely want to create a safe and just society. The existing law has been described as draconian, yet it is failing us. Is proof needed? The proof lies in the fact that crime — the mafia-style culture referred to earlier — is increasing. Do not accept my word for it, Madam Deputy Speaker. For example, look at the drugs seizures, which have escalated by a hundred fold over several years.

The law is inadequate and needs to be strengthened if we are serious about producing the type of society that we want.

4.30 pm

We must prevent criminals from profiting from their crime. Much of the profit from crime is used to finance further crime; it has a multiplier effect. That must be stopped, sooner rather than later, or we will be seen as

being insincere about what we are endeavouring to do. Most crime is motivated by profit, so we must do all in our power to reduce and eliminate the profit motive. The report that we are discussing is a further step in that direction, but it is just a step. We must go further towards civil forfeiture, if we are to deal adequately with the growing problems that confront society. Reference has been made to the Criminal Assets Bureau in the South of Ireland, and there is also the example of legislation such as the RICO laws, introduced by the FBI to deal with the Mafia in the USA.

If we are serious about protecting the human rights of every decent man, woman and child, we must get the balance right. At the moment, the balance is tilting in favour of the criminal; if it were not, criminals would not be profiting to the extent that they do. We have suffered 30 years of terror: is it too much to expect that as we move, we hope, normality, we do so as the type of society of which we can be proud? That is not too much to ask.

Some who came before our Committee, although recognising the need to deal with crime, questioned the need to legislate in Northern Ireland in advance of the rest of the UK. They said that they did not have evidence that it was necessary here. I have a simple reply to that: I aspire — I hope that the whole House aspires — to a type of society in Northern Ireland that is better than that found in some cities in the rest of the UK. That is not too much to ask. We should set our sights higher, and we should strive daily to ensure that our legacy to future generations is a society of which they can be proud. To do that, we must emphasise that, in Northern Ireland, crime does not pay. If we do not succeed in that, we will have been wasting our time.

The civil rights of the individual are important; I would uphold them to the nth degree. However, a balance must be struck between the civil rights of those who commit crime and the civil rights of those who suffer as a result. There is an old legal maxim:

“He who comes to equity must come with clean hands.”

That should be put up in lights. People who want to use the law should ensure that they are not breaking it and are not merely seeking loopholes.

Members of the Assembly, as potential legislators, should also be prepared to look under every stone to see what worms are wriggling underneath and deal with them accordingly.

The Assembly should aspire to the words of Willie Hofmeyr, head of the Asset Forfeiture Unit in South Africa. He said:

“Offenders smiled when they got 15 to 20 year jail sentences which they regarded as an occupational hazard, but they literally burst into tears when they lost their favourite Rolls Royce, the family home, the kids’ private education, the wife’s luxurious lifestyle. Police have started seeing forfeiture as a way of hurting and getting at these guys.”

That should be the Assembly's goal if it is going to clean up society and do away with the Mafia culture that is continuing to spread its tentacles.

Mr Ervine: Some form of explanation is required in order to give Members an impression or understanding of my experience of the Ad Hoc Committee. I remember saying that the insertion of certain provisos — for example, that the Secretary of State might have a chat, consultation or dialogue with people from whom the Committee had already heard — was a cop-out. It was rather like saying “The majority of us have made this decision, but if you can get the Secretary of State to pay attention you may have a chance.” I felt that that was alien, but I was prepared to take a benign view and accept that, even though there was not unanimity in the Committee, there was a substantial majority.

In my experience of the Ad Hoc Committee, its Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson and members performed with excellence. However, the Chairperson protests too much today — there was too much emphasis on the minority position. If I were in a similar position I would suggest a minority report. It is unfortunate, but I concede that, for the most benign reasons, the majority of the Committee agreed that those who wished to should talk to the Secretary of State — not to be heard, but to feel, at least, that they had their day. That is what will happen.

I am concerned that all of this boils down to what solicitors say about the solicitor/client relationship. I accept that solicitors are exalted people and that law is an exalted and trusted profession. However, solicitors did not make it so; society founded that process. Now society is saying that, even though solicitors are an exalted and trusted people in an exalted and trusted profession, it is going to make another profession. What is wrong with that?

Society is going to make investigators who will, I imagine, be as trustworthy as solicitors, and who will not talk in the golf club about the cases they are investigating — just as the solicitors do not talk about the clients they represent. Is there some besmirchment on other human beings that they are not to be deemed capable of behaving with the calm rationale of solicitors? Is that what is being said?

Some solicitors have said that the time frames for doing a trawl on one person or more are difficult for a one- or two-man business to achieve. I understand that it takes time. However, I am almost insulted when solicitors tell me that the balance that has to be weighed up between civil or human rights and the need to protect society boils down to what they think the solicitor/client relationship is or should be.

We asked the bankers if they believed that society has lost faith in the banking system because of the Proceeds of Crime (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. The answer was a clear, unequivocal “No”. If a bank manager — someone who knows your business and who would not talk about you over his gin and tonic in the golf club, yet is able to

deal with the police and investigators trained for the job — does not feel that his profession has been besmirched, why should solicitors feel affected by the Order?

It is not really the criminal whom we want to protect; it is the people whom the criminal may have financial dealings with. Solicitors may handle the affairs of such people quite innocently even though the person at the other end of a financial deal is nefarious. The innocent would have no knowledge of that. If a drug dealer, or someone involved in another form of illegal amassing of wealth, reads Hansard tomorrow, he may say to himself “The more I do deals with clean people, the safer I am.” Essentially that is the logic of what is being said. The dirty person may do the deal with a clean person, but because we care so much about the clean person's privacy we cannot follow the trail of financial impropriety of the person under investigation. It is ludicrous.

The Members who have spoken specifically in favour of the Order's going forward seem illiberal compared to some of our Colleagues who are not remotely illiberal. I am sure that Committee members have privately questioned whether we are doing the right thing.

I do not want to keep picking on my Colleagues or solicitors, or on the legal fraternity in general, but no lawyers live in my street. I live in a working-class Housing Executive street. There are no lawyers in it, but there are drug dealers not far away. There are those who can ply their trade, play loud music and are virtually untouchable because of their strength and power in those working-class communities. A solicitor cannot hear that and does not see it. When we ask for powers to be given to a section of our society whose job it is to catch criminals, we get those who defend criminals saying that it is not a good idea. In fairness, we must give people the tools to do the job. We do not ask lawyers to catch criminals; we ask investigators to catch criminals. Unless we give them the tools to do the job, then, as my Colleague Mr Close has said, they will fail. Sammy Wilson made the point that some Members believe that the suggested legislation is not proactive enough.

Let me give you an example that goes further than that given by Mr Close. He identified what the dogs in the street — which, by the way, are pups, so we know a bit about them — know about the person living nearby who has all the trappings of wealth and is on unemployment benefit. He is safe as long as he is not caught perpetrating a crime. In other words, as long as he does not get caught committing a crime, he can have as much wealth as he wishes, provided it is not perceived that he is a money launderer. One can be proactive about money launderers, but one cannot be proactive about the ones whom you can see.

4.45 pm

That is illogical. Let us look sneaky and beaky about the ones we cannot see, because they are very clever and

careful. They make paper trails, which is why we need legislation to follow them. Here they are, right in front of our faces, and we are not allowed to do anything about it. The ordinary people where I live will be saying that it does not add up and asking why somebody does not go and rap his door. Somebody who has the strength and the power should rap his door and ask where he keeps his money, where he got his money and what he does every day that gives him the capacity to live the way he does. The bookies? The lottery? Society says that you are not allowed to do that.

The best we have is what is before us. In paragraph 4 of its submission, the Law Society of Northern Ireland questioned why this measure is only being introduced here. I can only give my own assessment of that, because I had no dialogue with the Secretary of State when this was being planned. I imagine that in Glasgow, Cardiff or London it has taken time for drug and criminal networking to blossom. They have not done that well at stopping it over there. I suggest that we are not as far down the line on the issue of drugs as they are, but we sure as hell are catching up. The reason that this is being implemented in Northern Ireland is that we have structures ready and waiting — perhaps not waiting any more — that are quite capable of becoming, overnight, drug cartels that would frighten the life out of you. I am talking about elements of paramilitarism.

At this point I will give a glimpse of my former life. In mid-Ulster in 1994 I was in a very heated debate about issues relating to ceasefires with a group of people who have since become that exalted wonderful group the Loyalist Volunteer Force. They were not that then, but they have become that. They tried to tell me that they thought drugs were a good idea for financing the war. There are some stupid people among them who fell for the idea that it was for the great cause, and they moved in the direction of drugs. I do not say this simply to vilify them, even though they are eminently worthy of vilification, but because if they masquerade as drug dealers to feed and fuel the war, history tells us that you cannot build a war economy and not go to war.

That is why this swift, serious and, if you like, draconian legislation is required. I hope that that will serve as an example. Believe me, it is a real one. It applies to almost every area in this country. I live in Belfast, where heroin is freely available. Strangely enough, in what might pass in any society for small towns that are considered to be beyond urban development, in rural society — the Bible belt, as it is called in many countries — real hard drugs are available and have been for some time.

We used to watch American movies where all the bad things happened in the big cities. Belfast is our equivalent of a big bad city. I wonder how easily we have polluted the rest of this society. Belfast is actually cleaner, in some respects, than some of our very small towns.

What I am trying to explain is that this problem — while not as severe, so far, as in some areas of the British Isles and further afield — is escalating quickly and happening virtually on everybody's doorstep. Criminals who ply the nefarious trade not just of drugs but of all crime that amasses wealth are doing very well. In the past 12 months there have been two major drugs seizures with a street value of £1 million each. When somebody imports such things, he has to feel that he can afford such a loss. And those who feel that they can afford to lose £1 million must be quite wealthy. In this tiny, parochial society that always thought that such things only happened in the big, bad world, all of this is happening round the corner. Unless we can put the purveyors of this terrible and stinking trade into retreat, we will suffer the consequences for a long time. Worse than that, our children will suffer them.

In closing, let me point out that irrespective of what the rest of the United Kingdom does, we have to keep pace with our responsibilities to broader society. If that means putting people beyond their ease, making them look over their shoulder, making them suffer logistically, then we must do that. I do not believe we have any other option.

I reiterate my disappointment that the legislation is not proactive enough. However, I imagine that at some future date the Assembly — given the evidence that it sees outside and that some do not see, as one of my Colleagues has noted — will be brought back to this subject again and again. We have not seen the last child who will die from drugs. Let me put it as starkly as that: we have not seen the last child who will die from drugs. And when those deaths occur, the responsibility will lie in this Chamber. We might tell people that it is Adam Ingram's job as Security Minister or that the responsibility lies at Whitehall, but no matter what constituency we Members represent, it will be the responsibility of this House. Therefore, we will revisit this matter again and again, and we will get to the point where we will be fundamentally more proactive than we have been in the legislation that I commend to you now.

Mr A Maginness: I think there is universal support for this report. A theme in most contributions was that the Committee worked to a very tight time frame, which was imposed by others. A strong message should go from the Assembly to the Northern Ireland Office and the Secretary of State that we should be given a reasonable amount of time to react to proposals from the Government. That is a theme which everyone can support.

I want to thank Mr Billy Bell for his comments. The Committee strove to reach a balanced report. There were differences of opinion in the Committee, although I do not think that they were as great as some contributors seemed to think.

Nonetheless, the Committee worked hard to try to achieve a balance. First, there was total agreement on

the need for such legislation. Secondly, there was also total agreement on the Committee's reservations and concerns which can be seen at the end of its report.

I am disappointed that my presentation today has been criticised as being unbalanced. If there was an imbalance, it was not done deliberately on my part. I guard jealously the neutrality of chairmanship. As a Chairman, I have always tried to be balanced and to extend that impartiality to reports.

However, in a report it is important to present the Committee's arguments. A majority in the Committee took the view that article 6 should be supported. I fully accept that and I do not want to detract from the strong views expressed by members. The fact that I do not share that view played no part in my presentation today. I wanted to present a balanced view without damaging the views expressed in the Committee.

Mr Sammy Wilson mentioned "speculative trawling" — a term he attributed to me. That expression came, in fact, from the Law Society of Northern Ireland's submission. It was not a personal remark. So far as shattering the foundations of the legal system is concerned, surely even Mr Wilson accepts that that was over-egging the pudding.

The report is a good one. Good work was done by all the Assembly Members who attended meetings and made contributions. I accept the comment by Mr McNamee that when Orders in Council and this type of legislation are being dealt with, the value of this method of investigation can be questionable. However, it is the responsibility of the Government to take us seriously and to demonstrate that the introduction of legislation through Orders in Council is not an attempt to evade proper debate, consultation and participation by local legislators.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the draft Financial Investigations (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 referred by the Secretary of State be submitted to the Secretary of State as a report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Motion made:

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

CARRAIGFOYLE PAEDIATRIC SUPPORT UNIT

Dr Adamson: I am grateful to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for her presence.

I should like to address the Assembly in my own County Down Gaelic, which may be a wee bit hard for some Members to understand, but perhaps they can look at Hansard afterwards.

5.00 pm

D'oibrigh mise mar dhochtúir leighis i measc an phobail ar feadh 30 bliain. Is speisialtóir i bpéidiatraic mé. Agus anois tá lúchair mhór orm bhur n-aire a tharraingt ar Carraigfoyle Paediatric Support Unit. Tá an t-aonad iontach seo faoi lán seoil le 19 mbliana. Cuidíonn sé go mór le taca thar barr a thabhairt do pháistí míchumasacha agus dá gcuid tuismitheoirí. Tá mé millteanach buartha faoi na hathruithe atá á bplé faoi láthair agus tá na tuismitheoirí iontach míshásta leo fosta.

As a practising medical doctor — you will be glad to hear — who has specialised in paediatrics for the past 30 years, I have great pleasure in bringing before the House the far-reaching case of Carraigfoyle paediatric support unit. This superb unit has now been in existence for 19 years and provides a number of support services to disabled children and their parents. I would like to address the issue of the impending changes to its service, and the resultant dismay of parents.

The recent announcement that two major aspects of the work at Carraigfoyle would be altered leaves a tremendous gap in service in Belfast for our most disabled paediatric patients. The team at Carraigfoyle, including social workers and play therapists, has recognised the needs of the most severely disabled children in our society and has built an unrivalled support team for the children and their families during the critical pre-school years. More recently, the unit obtained even greater expertise in the evaluation and management of challenging behaviour, especially of children in the autistic spectrum. The care provided in Carraigfoyle far transcends anything that could be set up in a hospital. The total package far exceeds the sum of the parts. It is quite disturbing to think, therefore, that this model is now being discarded at the very time when other trusts in the United Kingdom are realising its benefits.

Another great strength of the Carraigfoyle paediatric support unit is that through careful planning, children and families facing similar difficulties are brought together and can share information, learn together and support each other. It is, therefore, quite unacceptable that the Pippins day support service and the Apple Lodge overnight respite service will both go.

Carraigfoyle staff have always demonstrated an appreciation of other services through their regular sharing

of information with, for example, the education sector and the learning disability nurses. Nothing in our area even comes close to providing the model of care which Barnardo's has given, recognising and anticipating as it does the needs of our most vulnerable and pressurised families in their most vulnerable years.

My greatest worry is for the children with severe and complex disabilities. These children generally suffer from spastic quadriplegia, and most of them have severe learning disabilities, coupled with epilepsy and feeding problems. Carraigfoyle's Pippins group provides a nursery on two mornings a week for these children in the two-year gap between their first birthday and pre-school provision in a special school. The support given to the parents of these children is invaluable. They especially appreciate the transport that is provided to the nursery and the great consistency in the staff who deal with their children, so that both the parents and the children become very familiar with them.

I am not aware of anywhere else in north Down and Ards that provides this sort of service. The only similar place I know of in south and east Belfast is Segal House, and it does not take children from the north Down and Ards area.

In Carraigfoyle the children have regular therapy from multidisciplinary teams and the paediatricians regularly see the therapists at the child development centre in the Ulster Hospital. Therefore, a holistic service is available to families, which would be difficult to reproduce in another setting.

Carraigfoyle has continually stepped in to provide support just when it was needed. By the time children are a year old, the parents are just starting to realise the extent of their problems and are already exhausted by a first year, which is usually packed with medical problems.

Carraigfoyle has also provided important therapy for children with autism. Barnardo's is planning to expand that work, which is also necessary as pre-school provision for children with autism is generally abysmal. While I agree that that service needs to be expanded, I am concerned that it will be at the expense of severely multiply handicapped little persons, who do not appear to be so politically fashionable at present.

The parents are extremely concerned about the loss of another facility provided by Carraigfoyle, and that is the overnight respite in Apple Lodge — a small unit in the Carraigfoyle complex. Apple Lodge takes three children a night, and one of its main features has been consistency in the carers looking after the children, meaning that the children are always cared for by a loving and familiar staff. Two staff are on duty at night, which is obviously important for the safety of the children and which reassures the staff themselves when dealing with fragile young persons.

It would be perverse to suggest that this is institutional respite in any way. Parents have always regarded it as a home from home for their children, especially in those early days before exhaustion has completely set in. Many parents are understandably anxious about leaving their children with anyone else. In Carraigfoyle, by the time they have overnight respite they usually know the staff and the system well, and that reduces parental anxiety.

The fashionable thing nowadays is to talk about respite, either with another family or in a child's own home. I have major concerns about this for the small group of physically frail, multiply handicapped little persons, who are mostly served by Carraigfoyle. First, respite in a family's own home is not likely to provide complete rest for parents, although it is better than nothing. It will be very difficult for the local trusts or Barnardo's to find people willing to take frail, multiply handicapped little persons into their homes. It is difficult enough to find enough foster parents for ordinary children, let alone for those who are likely to have convulsions, require tube feeding or are on multiple medications.

In an ideal world it would be lovely for children to have respite care with a skilled, competent carer in their own homes. However, that is not going to be possible. I am extremely concerned that those children are going to lose out. I am worried that respite care provision for children will follow the same path as provision for mental health patients and for children in social services care. If respite were reduced for those families, I would be worried that the children would end up spending more and more time in hospital, which is not at all desirable — I have worked there for most of my life.

Parents have also told me that a major advantage of the Carraigfoyle paediatric support unit is its simple reliability. They are not dependent on one respite carer who may be ill or have family illness or problems. In Carraigfoyle, someone will always fill in.

I must commend Barnardo's, which has provided a higher percentage of the funding for the Carraigfoyle paediatric support unit than it usually does for similar projects. Nevertheless, that means that if Barnardo's withdraws or redistributes its funding, the trusts will have to put in more resources.

My firm impression is that the board wants to have more "bricks-and-mortar" respite, to extend respite services to older children and to provide more services for autistic children without increasing any funding. I am, therefore, very concerned that there will be a small group of severely handicapped, vulnerable little persons and their families who will lose out. I am extremely annoyed that these parents, who already have enough to cope with, have been put in this position.

In liaison with my paediatric colleagues, whose lives have been dedicated to the health and well-being of children and young people, I must register my disapproval

of any attempt to close Carraigfoyle or to reduce any of its services.

Dr Hendron: It is a pleasure to join with Dr Adamson in his support for Carraigfoyle paediatric support unit. He began by speaking in, I think, Ulster Scots. That confused me, because I thought that he was speaking Irish, but perhaps the Minister will be able to clarify that.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): It was Irish.

Dr Hendron: I have a little Irish, but I would be afraid to use it here.

Dr Adamson: It was Ulster Irish.

Dr Hendron: I beg your pardon.

I am well aware of Dr Adamson's long experience of dealing with children with disabilities. Although I have had some experience in those matters myself, it does not compare with his.

I salute the work that Barnardo's has done in this regard, and in others, for children in Northern Ireland and far beyond. It has been providing this service for disabled children since 1981 — 20 years of high-quality service. In 1998 the Eastern Health and Social Services Board produced a commissioning document about integrating disabled children more fully into the community.

Dr Adamson spoke about children and families. It is very important in this day and age that respite care should be available for disabled people, be they adults or children. I appreciate that this can be a major problem, given the massive financial constraints on the Health Service. I know that the Minister would support these ideas in principle, but when it gets down to the question of hard cash the story is a different one. We have seen families who look after a disabled child, and any organisation that can help them on an ongoing basis deserves credit and our thanks. The love of a mother, father, brothers and sisters for a disabled child is immense, and people who look after a disabled child must get every possible support. Respite care is very important.

Dr Adamson also mentioned children who have epilepsy or convulsions, or who are on multiple medication. It takes a lot of diligent care to make sure that they are properly looked after. He referred to Apple Lodge. I am not familiar with Carraigfoyle, but I know that it has provided consistency in care and that people see it as a home from home for these children. Families have felt that a child was really being looked after, and it was more like a second home for them.

Dr Adamson has made all the main points, but I want to mention a few principles. It is very important that disabled children be looked after in their community, as far as possible. They should be able to be included in their community and to do the same things that non-disabled children can do; they should be able to live

with their parents unless this is not in their best interests; they should be able to go to their local playgroup, nursery and school; they should be able to use the same leisure and community facilities as everybody else, but have alternative forms of care, where necessary, which are family-based; and they should be able to express their views and have them taken into account when decisions are being made about their lives. Finally, they should be able to receive the necessary kinds and levels of support to enable them to do these things.

Over the years, Barnardo's has provided these services specifically for disabled children, and Carraigfoyle is one such service. These are excellent services of the highest quality. However, while initially they were at the forefront of developments, they are now replicated in trust provision across Northern Ireland.

5.15 pm

I support what Dr Adamson has been doing. If there is any way that the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee can be of help on this particular matter, we will be delighted.

Mr S Wilson: I will not be speaking in Ulster Irish, Irish or any other kind of Irish — first, because I could not; secondly, because I would not.

I congratulate Dr Adamson on drawing this issue to the attention of the Assembly. I have had some involvement with some parents who are seeking to persuade Barnardo's to reverse its decision and keep this facility open. I am not an expert in the present medical theories on the best way of looking after youngsters with severe disabilities and who are very fragile.

I come to this from two bases. First, looking at the strength of the case Barnardo's has made and, secondly, looking at the information given to me by those who benefited from this particular facility. I fear that Barnardo's has used the report commissioned by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board in 1998, wherein, quite rightly, people said that they did not wish those with handicaps to be isolated from society; they wanted them to be integrated as much as possible. I took a cursory look through the findings. Nowhere was there any indication that people wanted to see those specialist facilities that were supportive of families with extremely fragile children removed — nowhere. Barnardo's has used that as an excuse. A closer examination is required. If Dr Hendron is saying that the Health Committee might want to look at this, then one of the starting points might be Barnardo's own contention that it is only responding to public demand. I do not believe that there is any evidence for that.

Dr Hendron read out the list of principles laid down by Barnardo's — what it believes the rights of disabled children should be. All very worthwhile and high-sounding — the kind of thing we would want to support. However, I have had the privilege of attending meetings,

more as an observer and listener than as one with a great deal of expertise. The parents I have heard have told me that the type of support services they are able to obtain at Carraigfoyle are a kind of lifeline.

In fact, one parent used that term. This “lifeline” enabled them to keep on giving support at home to their children, to meet the principles Dr Hendron read out. We cannot afford to ignore the views of the parents who, day in and day out, live with the disabilities their youngsters suffer from.

The third point I want to make is that Barnardo’s has made a great play on the consultation document and on the views expressed by those consulted. However, the one thing I have found lacking in the document is the degree of consultation it had directly with the people who you would have thought it should have been responding to most — the parents who actually had youngsters at Pippin or Apple Lodge.

There is a huge gap in the degree of consultation. Many parents indicated to me that it was not so much a case of consultation, but simply Barnardo’s communicating a decision it intended to make. I have received a document from Barnardo’s today in which it tries to outline in detail why it has made the decision. It was based on the principle of caring in the community and on the fact that there was this input into the consultation documents. It is bereft of any indication that parents did not want it.

The irony is that one of the reasons it gave in the document for ending the service — which was sent to a number of Members who it suspected would be involved in this debate — was that the service has become so popular that many trusts have replicated it. I would have thought that if a number of trusts had identified that this was the kind of care parents were looking for, and had gone on to provide it, that was a reason for maintaining and not concluding the service.

Ultimately, when I look at this document I become cynical. Buried in the middle of it is the fact that the unit costs £350,000 per year. I ask myself a question which has been asked in the Assembly on several occasions. Is the commitment to care in the community more about saving money than giving disabled children and their families a better deal?

Moreover, Carraigfoyle is located just down the road from the Assembly. It is in an area of very prime demand for building land. It is on a prime site and I suspect it comprises about 4 acres. In east Belfast terms, it would be worth between £0.75 million and £1 million. One has to ask if economics is behind this decision. Does Barnardo’s see a comparison between a cost of £350,000 per year and an income of perhaps £3 million or £4 million? That income could be providing it with a revenue stream rather than incurring it a cost.

I note that the Minister is in the Chamber today. One thing that we need to discover is whether or not the

decision was driven in any way by an indication to Barnardo’s from the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, or the various trusts, that they were no longer prepared to pay for the service. I tried to find that information and ascertain the facts, but I was unsuccessful. It would be useful to have that matter clarified. Did Barnardo’s see that it was going to be more difficult to receive payment for the services being provided in these facilities? Did the trusts and boards indicate that they would use their own facilities instead of Barnardo’s?

I want to comment on the human side of this issue. Dr Adamson outlined the services provided — nursery provision and some important residential care for one or two nights per week. This has enabled parents who had the intensive task of looking after youngsters to be relieved of that burden for a time. It has given them time for themselves and some respite; it has allowed them to get a breather or perhaps a night out. However, it is important to note that at the same time they knew that — to use Dr Adamson’s term — their “fragile” children were in the hands of people who knew how to care for them and who had their children’s confidence because they regularly attended Apple Lodge.

That is an important safeguard and lifeline for parents who give intensive care to their youngsters. It is not sufficient to say that they can be put into some kind of temporary foster care — I am not an expert on this, so that is probably not the right term — which allows them to go to different people’s homes for a night. I learned from many of these parents who love their youngsters so dearly that they were not prepared, or did not have the confidence, to take the risk of farming their youngsters out to people who might not have the expertise to look after them. Indeed, some of the youngsters might not be happy with strangers. The residential element is all-important. One argument made against it was that it is only available for children up to the age of 10. Surely that is better than not having it at all.

I do not want to go through any more of those arguments put forward by Barnardo’s, which I regard as unsatisfactory. I hope that I have outlined the case to the best of my ability.

I trust that this debate will have several results. First, it should draw attention to what I feel is an arbitrary decision by Barnardo’s, without sufficient reference to the parents of the youngsters involved.

Secondly, I hope that we can clear up some questions about the nature of the role, if any, that the Eastern Health and Social Services Board played in this decision. Was it the board’s document that sparked this off? Did the Eastern Health and Social Services Board push Barnardo’s in a particular direction because of recommendations in that document? Was there a financial consideration? Did the Eastern Health and Social Services Board indicate that its contribution to the facility was

going to be cut off? I hope that we will receive answers to some of those questions.

Thirdly, I hope that this debate will give despairing parents real hope that their public representatives have taken their point of view to heart.

5.30 pm

Mr Irvine: I have to declare an interest. A member of my family works for Barnardo's at Carraigfoyle.

Carraigfoyle has been going for 19 years, and I have been aware of it for nine years. For nine years I have known that the work that went on inside Carraigfoyle was wonderful. Thanks to the integrity of the staff I have not known much else. I cannot know all the details and the individual circumstances, because that is a very private matter between the parents and those who assist them in caring for their children. I am loath to go too deeply. I praise my Colleague for bringing up this issue. He articulated my sentiments in relation to Carraigfoyle better than I ever could — especially those that I understood.

I ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to pay due attention to my declaration of interest. My Colleague Sammy Wilson hit on some very important points. I think that he already knows that to suffer as the parents do is massively compounded when the value of your child's care is measured in terms of money or land. If it happens to be at the top of the Belmont Road, then it is both, is it not? That is the reality of the situation.

So far as I am concerned, the management of Carraigfoyle is a management. A manager is a manager. I am minded to tell what I know about the confusion that existed around Carraigfoyle when questions were being asked both by parents and staff. In the early days, smoke and mirrors seem to have been used quite effectively by the management at Carraigfoyle to cause confusion and to avoid answering the questions. It was almost like Chinese water torture: a drip on a stone, where nothing was actually said but at some point you worked out yourself that things were not going well.

Then came the admission Ian Adamson described: the abandonment of wonderful facilities that are not, to my knowledge, replicated anywhere in the immediate area of this Assembly, nor are likely to be, because they have their own ambience, I imagine. Certainly, the staff there are totally and absolutely committed.

To say that I care and that my party will support it is never enough when dealing with what Ian Adamson eloquently described as "vulnerable little persons". He described them not as disabled children, or as those who cannot talk or feed themselves, but as "vulnerable little persons". They are "wee people" who deserve everything that this society can give them.

I fear that we will never know whether this is the fault of management being managers on the basis of the difficulties that finances create for every manager, or

whether it was sparked off by the Department. If we tried to find out, we would end up with the smoke and mirrors again, because the decision was not made in the open. The decisions were not made with the parents or the staff. In fact, you might ask where the decisions were made.

I cannot believe that anybody directly involved with Carraigfoyle was remotely consulted. That worries me, and perhaps when she speaks the Minister will clarify, at least from a departmental point of view, where the blame — if we can use that word — lies.

Either way — and Ian Adamson has summed this up — in respect of Carraigfoyle we have been offered a fait accompli. Unless there is a serious intervention, we have a fait accompli from which there is no way out.

Rev Robert Coulter: The four Members who have already spoken have highlighted most of the major points, and I congratulate them on that. Members are not here to make party political points; they are here because there is an underlying humanity which cries out that young people who cannot help themselves need to be given the help of those who are able-bodied.

The situation in Carraigfoyle not only affects those little people who need that help but also the parents who, from the birth of their child and through the early years, have looked after and suffered with them through their disabilities. The points that would call from us the deep emotions of our hearts are not only that the children need help but that the parents need respite. It means a lot to parents to get a full night's sleep in the knowledge that their child whom they dearly love is being professionally cared for in Apple Lodge. In supporting the continuation of the facilities at Carraigfoyle and Apple Lodge, Members are assisting in some way to continue that help which the parents are calling for.

Design teams may be up and running, but most of the parents — and I have talked to some of them and have been deeply impressed by their sincerity — have little faith and feel that they are nothing more than a cosmetic exercise. I am interested in what the response of the Eastern Health Board will be regarding the provision of alternatives for users of Carraigfoyle. As yet — and perhaps it is my fault — I have been unable to lay hands upon that information. Perhaps the Minister will enlighten the Assembly.

Many questions have been asked about the attitude of Barnardo's, and I pay tribute to its work over the years. No one can point the finger and say that Barnardo's has been short on its care. However, when I look at the situation in Carraigfoyle, I wonder, like the other Members who have already spoken, what the motive behind it is. Is it generated by finance? The service is being wound down and there have recently been a number of voluntary redundancies, including the social worker who was made redundant. Family support services are no longer

available. It is being run down to such an extent that the future of the unit is not viable. It generates questions in our minds and makes us ask why Barnardo's is doing this. Those questions must be answered.

My Colleague Dr Adamson, the Lord Mayor of Belfast; the Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee, Dr Hendron and David Ervine have covered a lot of ground on this subject, but all of us are together on one point. We need answers to the questions. Why is this being done now, and what is being put in its place?

Sir Reg Empey: Everyone who has been involved in this case understands that the professionals in the public sector and in Barnardo's are in the profession for the good of those who are suffering, to alleviate that suffering and to assist the families in a compassionate way. However, having attended some meetings with parents — as Colleagues have also done — I could not fail to be moved by the situation in which these families found themselves and by the emotion that was being expressed. I felt that the professionals, and perhaps even Barnardo's, did not fully appreciate that the service that they were providing was such a benefit to the families concerned. Anyone who attended those meetings and listened to people's concerns and distress would naturally turn to see why this is happening and how it can be alleviated. It is a natural human emotion. My Colleagues will confirm that everyone approached the matter with that in mind.

We understand that there are economics and that there are different ways in which these matters are dealt with nowadays. Things move on. Methods of assisting, such as care in the community, have been introduced, and there have been many good ideas. However, with the greatest respect to Barnardo's — which has a reputation throughout the country which is second to none — I must place on record that I did not consider the methodology that it adopted in handling this issue to have been the best possible practice. That is not meant to denigrate in any way any person involved in Barnardo's. I think that Barnardo's would admit that the way in which the matter was handled was not necessarily best practice in this day and age, and it could have been better dealt with.

There is one other matter that we need to clear up. There is a perception in the community that there is a financial issue surrounding the site — that it is an extremely valuable site for housing redevelopment. That perception may be true or false, but I hope that there is no suggestion that that financial aspect is one of the motives behind the closure. Barnardo's has advised us that that is not the case. It believes that there are better ways of delivering a service to the families than the current method, although it has to be said that that service, the professionals who work in the home, the help and the caring atmosphere are greatly appreciated and have impacted indelibly on these families. It will be

hard to replace that in any new system, however well-intentioned. Nevertheless, I hope that it is possible to get that issue out of the way. The response will involve the health boards, the trusts and the charity itself.

There appears to be the potential for crossed lines and for overlap. Very often the danger in these cases is that the people for whom the service is to be provided sometimes fall between the crevices of such a situation. I hope that that will not happen in this case. We want to do our very best for these families and for the children so that they can have the best possible quality of life. I repeat that nothing that we are saying is in any way intended to denigrate, criticise or do anything to harm the reputations of any of the people involved.

We are working from the assumption that everybody is doing their best. However, I believe that the methodology adopted has left some families feeling that things have not been done by the best method or that the solution put forward as an alternative to the services provided is not necessarily one that they want.

5.45 pm

Ms de Brún: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is seirbhís riachtanach í an cúram faoisimh do chúramóirí má tá siad le leanstan ar aghaidh ina rólanna cúraim.

Tá Carraig Feabhail á reachtáil ag Barnardo's chan ag na SSSP. Is faoi atá an cinneadh faoi dhruidim le déanamh. I ndiaidh 20 bliain de sheirbhís dhílis rinne Barnardo's aithbhreithniú ar oiriúnacht an chineáil faoisimh chónaithe a thairgeann sé i gCarraig Feabhail do pháistí an-óga faoi mhíchumas foghlama. Gan amhras, bhí neamhfhoiteacht an áitribh chun a chríche ar cheann de na cúiseanna a spreag Barnardo's aithbhreithniú a dhéanamh, ach ba léir ó ráiteas coimisiúnaithe Bhord an Oirthir i 1998 ar sheirbhísí faoisimh do pháistí faoi mhíchumas foghlama go raibh rún ag an bhord scéimeanna bunaithe ar theaghlaigh a leathnú ar fud a cheantair agus iad a dhíriú ar pháistí óga. Ba é freagra Barnardo's go raibh rún aige a aird a bhogadh ó sholáthar sainseirbhíse don ghrúpa seo páistí agus an iomad seirbhís uilíoch eile a fhorbairt do pháistí uilig, seirbhísí a bhéas á ndíriú agus á soláthar i gcomhphobail áitiúla.

Tá seo ag cur le polasaí na Roinne gur chóir do scéimeanna faoisimh a bheith samhlaíoch, freagrach, solúbtha, ionrochtain go háitiúil agus oiriúnaithe le riar ar riachtanais cúramóirí.

Cúis aiféala é nuair a tharraingtear siar seirbhís ar bith, agus tuigim inní tuismitheoirí faoi dhruidim ar feitheamh Charraig Feabhail. Ní hionann sin agus a rá, áfach, go bhfágfar na páistí atá ag baint leasa as na seirbhísí reatha agus a dtuismitheoirí gan a athrach de sholáthar. Aonad trí leaba é Carraig Feabhail agus den 21 pháiste atá á úsáid faoi láthair tá seisear le himeacht idir anois agus mí Dheireadh Fómhair ós rud é go bhfuil

siad os cionn 10 mbliana d'aois anois. Dearbhaítear domh go bhfuil Bord an Oirthir, ag cur lena ráiteas coimisiúnaithe de 1998, gníomhach ag taiscéaladh socruithe eile don 15 a bhéas fágtha.

Tuigim go bhfuil rún ag an bhord cur lena bhuiséad chúram faoisimh le réimse roghanna eile a chur ar fáil. Do na páistí sin a ba mhó a bhainfeadh tairbhe as an chineál seo cúraim, tá aonaid faoisimh thar oíche eile ann cheana féin. Ar na moltaí forbartha reatha tá méadú ar sheirbhís ionchomórtais in Aonad Faoisimh Pháirc na bhFeá ó cheithre oíche sa tseachtain go seacht n-oíche sa tseachtain. Mar sin féin, dúirt an bord go bhfuil fonn air, agus é ag iarraidh géilleadh do mhianta cúramóirí, réimse níos leithne tacaíochta a sholáthar lena n-áirítear an soláthar a b'fhearr le cúramóirí iad féin, is é sin soláthar ina dtithe féin.

Ar ndóigh, caithfear scéimeanna mar seo a riar go cúramach. Os rud go bhfuil caidreamh duine le duine i gceist, caithfear coimirce a chur in áit, chan amháin le húsáideoirí na seirbhíse a chosaint ach le cosaint, tacaíocht agus oiliúint na foirne agus na n-oibrithe deonacha a chinntiú. Tabharfar aghaidh ar shaincheisteanna den chineál seo mar chuid den phróiseas i bhforbairt na straitéise do chúramóirí atá ar siúl faoi láthair.

Deirtear liom go bhfuil súil ag an bhord, arís ag géilleadh do mhianta cúramóirí, soláthar faoisimh fóillíochta agus saoire a mhéadú, rud a rachas chomh mór chun sochair do pháistí agus a rachas sé chun sochair do chúramóirí.

Ó thaobh airgid de, ó rinneadh Aire díom d'éirigh liom cuid maoinithe bhreise a bhaint amach do sheirbhísí mhíchumas foghlama. Soláthraíonn an Clár do Rialtas do fhoirne comhphobail feabhsaithe a éascóidh daoine a athshocrú ón áit ina bhfuil siad go dtí an cúram sa chomhphobal. Níl mé ag maíomh gur leor sin agus leanfaidh mé ar aghaidh ag déanamh tairisceana ar acmhainní breise agus cuirfidh mé ar fáil a dtig liom le cuidiú le boird agus iontaobhais riar ar na tosaíochtaí seirbhíse.

Respite care is an essential service for carers if they are to continue undertaking their caring roles. The Carraigfoyle unit is operated by Barnardo's and not by the health and social services. The decision about closure is for Barnardo's to make. Therefore, some of the questions relate specifically to that organisation, but I will address some of the points that Members have raised during the debate.

Barnardo's has, after some 20 years of devoted service, reviewed the appropriateness of the form of residential respite services that it offers at Carraigfoyle for young children with learning disabilities. Although the inadequacy of the premises for that purpose was doubtless a contributing factor in prompting Barnardo's review, the Eastern Board's 1998 commissioning statement on respite services for children with learning disabilities signalled the board's intention to extend family-based schemes across its area and to target these at younger children.

The question raised about the value of the site is a matter for Barnardo's. But, as I have said in relation to the inadequacy of the present premises, in addition to the revenue costs there would have been significant capital costs in bringing Carraigfoyle up to proper standards.

Barnardo's did not approach the health and social services for additional funding. Indeed, the Eastern Board has earmarked an additional £275,000 to expand respite services in its area. Therefore, the Board has made it very clear that it is willing to incur extra expenditure on respite services in its area.

However, I referred to the Eastern Board's commissioning statement on respite services for children with learning disabilities. In response to that statement, Barnardo's indicated its intention to move its focus from the provision of a specialist service for this group of children to developing many other universal services for children, targeted and delivered in a local community context. That would be in keeping with departmental policy that respite schemes should be imaginative, responsive, flexible, locally accessible and tailored to meet the needs of carers.

The withdrawal of any service is to be regretted, and I can understand parents' concerns about the pending closure of Carraigfoyle. I agree with the points made by many Members about the value of the services that have been provided by Barnardo's at Carraigfoyle over the years. However, I do not agree with suggestions that the children and parents currently benefiting from Carraigfoyle's services will be left without alternative provision. I have been assured, by the boards and by Barnardo's — and I know that this will have been indicated in some of the briefings to Members — that they do not intend to leave people without alternative provision.

Carraigfoyle is a three-bed facility, and of the 21 children currently using it, six are due to leave between now and October as they are over 10 years of age. I have been assured that the Eastern Board is actively exploring alternative arrangements for the remaining 15 children, in keeping with its 1998 commissioning statement. I understand that it intends to increase its respite care budget, as I have said, to provide a range of alternative options. For those children who would benefit most from this type of care, there are already other overnight respite facilities.

Current development proposals include the build-up of a comparable service at Beechfield respite unit from four nights per week to seven nights per week. However, I have been told that the board is anxious to provide a more diverse range of support including — and Members have referred to this — the preferred provision in the service users' own homes.

Such schemes do need careful management. Given the one-to-one relationships that they entail, safeguards must be put in place not only for the protection of service

users, but for the protection, support and training of staff and volunteers to ensure the highest possible standards for this service. Such issues will be addressed as part of the process of developing the strategy for carers which is currently under way.

With regard to what will happen to children using the day therapy services when these are withdrawn, the Eastern Board is looking at alternative provision. The paramedic input is funded by the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust. It is hoped that the trust will be able to find a suitable local arrangement to accommodate the needs of children who avail of these services at Carraigfoyle. I am informed that the board wishes to increase leisure and holiday respite provision, which is as much to the benefit of the children as the carers. There is also a wish to ensure that alternatives are provided which will be acceptable to those who wish to see those services.

On the wider question of funding, I have, since becoming Minister, managed to secure some additional funding for learning disability services, and the Programme for Government provides for enhanced community teams with regard to learning disability generally, which will facilitate the resettlement of patients.

I do not pretend that this is enough, but I will continue to bid for additional resources and provide whatever I can to help boards and trusts meet the service priorities. I am absolutely assured that the boards, the trusts and the voluntary agencies caring for this particularly vulnerable group of children are planning their services with the needs of both the children and their families in mind.

Adjourned at 5.57 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 12 February 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY MATTERS SUB JUDICE

Mr Speaker: During a debate on a motion moved by Mr Danny Kennedy on 30 January, a point of order was raised by Mr Ian Paisley Jnr concerning the conduct of debate as regards matters that are sub judice. Mr Paisley suggested that Madam Deputy Speaker's ruling prevented Members from citing cases that were under discussion in another jurisdiction. Madam Deputy Speaker undertook to clarify the situation and to make a ruling on the matter.

I wish to make some general points on the conduct of debate. Quite apart from the sub judice rule in Standing Order 68, it is open to the Speaker, or a Deputy Speaker, in controlling a debate, to remind Members of the need for caution in making reference to specific individuals whose personal safety may be placed at risk. It is also the responsibility of the Chair to try to ensure that even where strongly held views are put forward in robust debate, it is done in a manner which maintains a measure of dignity.

As regards Mr Paisley's specific point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker said that she made her ruling on 30 January in the interests of caution, and that she would judge each point as it arose. However, I wish to rule with some further clarity on Standing Order 68.

The sub judice rule provides that certain matters should not be referred to in a motion, debate or question. The scope of the Standing Order itself is fairly narrow. In particular, it does not apply to contemplated or hypothetical proceedings, nor does it apply to investigations. In criminal matters, the sub judice rule applies from the moment a person is charged until the verdict and sentence have been announced. The rule resumes when notice of appeal is given, and applies until the appeal has been decided. In civil matters, the sub judice rule applies from the time the case has been set down for trial, or otherwise brought before the court, until judgement is given.

The basis of the rule is the prevention of prejudice to the outcome of actual, as distinct from possible, criminal

or civil proceedings. References to specific individuals who have not been charged, or who have already been sentenced, fall outside the scope of Standing Order 68. I consider that the sub judice rule applies to proceedings before the courts of Northern Ireland. In regard to criminal cases originating in Northern Ireland, appeal may be made to the House of Lords and beyond. Therefore, if a Northern Ireland criminal matter has been appealed to the House of Lords or to an international court, Standing Order 68 applies from the time notice of that appeal is given until the appeal has been decided.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the House.

CIVIC FORUM ASSEMBLY DEBATE

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I refer to the debate last Tuesday on a motion making arrangements for consulting the Civic Forum. In the course of that debate, Mr Peter Robinson made a number of allegations with regard to comments I had made on the procedures whereby we consulted the Civic Forum with regard to the motion put forward. In those comments, Mr Robinson referred to documents that he had on the matter, and I believe that you, Mr Speaker, asked him to forward those documents to you. I would like to ask if you have received any such documents. I also want to draw your attention to two documents that I have relating to this matter. The first is on Civic Forum paper, copies of which were sent to all members of the Civic Forum prior to its discussion on 20 December. It sets out the motion for arrangements with the Civic Forum, proposed by the Deputy First Minister and myself. The document concludes:

“If issues need to be addressed they can be discussed at the meeting of the Forum on 20 December.”

The issues were discussed at the morning meeting of the Civic Forum on 20 December, which was attended by 20 members of the Forum. The issues were discussed further by the management committee of the Civic Forum on the afternoon of 20 December, and I have the minutes of that meeting. The relevant minute reads:

“The motion as it currently stands was discussed at a recent meeting...”

— that was the morning’s meeting —

“...and some changes were proposed ... It was agreed that the motion as developed at the previous meeting should go forward to the Assembly.”

The minutes set out the text of the motion, which is exactly the text considered by the Assembly last Tuesday. These documents show that I did not mislead the House and, furthermore, show that Mr Robinson was quite wrong in his allegations.

Mr Speaker: It would be helpful, and in order — although the two are not always the same — if the First Minister were to supply those papers to me. I have not been in a position to make any ruling in regard to the matter until now. I will study any papers provided and respond appropriately.

ASSEMBLY MATTERS SUB JUDICE

Mr Paisley Jnr: My comments relate to your earlier ruling relating to the overly cautious ruling made by Madam Deputy Speaker during the debate on the motion tabled by Mr Danny Kennedy. In my view, Madam Deputy Speaker’s ruling stymied part of that debate. If a similar motion were to be tabled by a Member, can we assume that it would be listed for an early hearing and debate so the matters which ought to have been heard during the course of the debate can be fully and properly explored and debated by the House.

Mr Speaker: At times, the tendency of the Members is to be less than cautious, and the tendency of the Speaker is to be a little more than cautious. These are understandable failings on both sides. Whether a motion would actually be taken is a matter for the Business Committee, but I shall look at the question as to whether a motion may be tabled, and I will correspond with the Member on that matter.

CIVIC FORUM ASSEMBLY DEBATE

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you confirm that a view expressed by an Assembly Committee could not be regarded as being the corporate view of the Assembly any more than a view expressed by a mere management committee of the Civic Forum could be considered as the view and decision of the whole Forum? This is what was alleged last Tuesday.

Mr Speaker: I have already undertaken to consider all the papers that are provided to me in relation to this question. I will subsequently make a ruling.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Peter Robinson is quite wrong. He did not listen to what was said, either on Tuesday or today. The allegations that he made are completely wrong. I will leave him to read the minutes and the papers to see that. He can then come and apologise —

Mr Speaker: Order. It would be quite wrong for this to become a matter of debate, rather than several points of order. There may also be a subsequent question which I shall wish to address, which is the availability to Members of the Assembly of relevant papers from the Civic Forum. That is a matter that I think would be proper for me to examine, aside from ruling on this particular point of order.

BSE TESTS

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has indicated that she wishes to make a statement in respect of results of BSE tests carried out by her Department.

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

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): Members will be aware that last Friday I released details of BSE tests that my Department recently carried out. My officials briefed the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on Friday. It is appropriate for me to provide the Assembly with the details, which I am happy to do.

Members will be aware that, with the full support of the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland, I and my officials have been attempting to have the present ban on the export of Northern Ireland cattle and beef products relaxed. It became very clear to us that the European Commission and other member states would expect us to be able to demonstrate that we knew, as far as is humanly possible, the full extent of the incidence of BSE in Northern Ireland. That required us to carry out active surveillance for BSE, rather than relying on the disease being diagnosed and reported. My Department has only recently been in a position to do this, with the availability of a rapid mass screening test for BSE.

We therefore embarked on a round of testing aimed at high-risk cattle entering the over-30-months casualty cull in Northern Ireland. There are some 20,000 such casualty animals a year. I want to stress that as over-30-months animals, they do not enter the food chain. These animals are put down humanely on the farm. They are rendered and eventually incinerated. We took samples from 2,500 of these casualty animals during 2000, and the samples were tested as soon as my Department was in position to do the work. That was in the last few weeks.

As Members will now be aware, 54 of those tests for BSE proved positive, and, moreover, one animal appears to have been born after 1 August 1996, when the feed ban became fully effective. My officials are presently investigating that case further, although it has always been expected that there would be a few such cases. There has been one in GB. That means that BSE is more prevalent in older cattle than we had previously believed. It also means that the same may be true in other member states.

I hope that Members will forgive me if I stress several important points again, because it is vital that people do not misinterpret this. First, the cattle that were tested were from the category most at risk of BSE — older, sick or injured cattle. Secondly, as they were aged over 30 months, there was no question of their entering

the food chain. All such cattle have been banned from the UK food chain since 1 August 1996. Thirdly, even though about one third of the animals tested were aged under four years at slaughter, none of them proved to be harbouring BSE. That vindicates the independent scientific advice from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) that the over-30-months scheme is an effective public health measure.

10.45 am

Where does this leave our bid to restore beef exports? Although it must still be our goal to get beef and cattle exports moving again, it must be recognised that until other member states report their cattle test results, we have no figures with which we can compare ours. It is such a comparison with the results of other member states that will form the basis for any case for the resumption of beef exports from Northern Ireland. However, other member states will not have reported all their results until later this year.

In conclusion, these figures are the result of a new mass screening test carried out on older, sick animals, which are in a very high-risk category and most likely to be harbouring BSE. There was absolutely no possibility of any of these animals getting into the food chain. No animal over two and a half years has gone into the food chain in Northern Ireland or Great Britain since 1996. We have the strictest controls in Europe. One third of those tested were under four years of age, and not one of those animals tested positive. This is further evidence to support the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee recommendations on the effectiveness of the over-30-months scheme as a measure to protect public health.

No comparison can be made with any other region or member state, as there are no comparable results of mass screening of this high-risk category. I hope that consumers and other member states will recognise that this exercise has given us a much better idea of the level of BSE in Northern Ireland cattle. It also demonstrates that it is present only in older cattle which are well beyond the 30-month age limit. Possession of this information can only help us to achieve our ultimate goal of eradicating BSE.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Savage): I welcome the Minister's important statement. It is vital that the public understand that those cattle which showed traces of BSE were four and a half years old: they were not in the food chain, and they could not have got into the food chain. The upper age limit for inclusion in the food chain is two and a half years. Therefore it was impossible for that beef to have entered the food chain.

I want the Minister to reinforce this message to the media, because over the last few days, the situation has been misinterpreted. I fear that, in many cases, the key point is being missed. It is important that there be no

scaremongering about BSE. We must approach this issue with a cool head and common sense. It remains the case that Northern Ireland beef is still the safest in Europe. The traceability scheme —

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is not the opportunity to make a statement, but to ask the Minister a question. Please come to a question soon.

Mr Savage: I hope that the Minister will emphasise as much as possible that the safety of our beef industry is at stake. Over the weekend, the wrong message was given out by the media through a report that claimed that the youngest of these cattle was four and a half years old, and the oldest was 18.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Savage, please come to your question.

Mr Savage: This is a very important point, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I ask the Minister to reinforce that message.

Ms Rodgers: I am somewhat surprised that the Member is saying that the correct message has not gone out. Having carefully monitored all the media coverage, I know that there was just one unfortunate exception, and we are dealing with it. It was a misrepresentation of animals which were non-BSE. Aside from that one unfortunate exception, all the media coverage has interpreted the position as it is. I took great care to inform the media of the position, and I am pleased to say that the message has gone out that we have been responsible and open and that the precautions we have been taking have been seen to be working.

I also have to place on record my appreciation of the responsible manner in which the industry has acted. It has accepted that these tests are in the industry's interests, as they will ensure that we eradicate this disease. With one unfortunate exception, media coverage of the issue has been extremely positive.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that while the figures cause worry, they do not constitute any threat to public health and that the campaign to achieve low incidence will continue to emphasise the advanced testing procedures which make us the safest region in the European Union?

Ms Rodgers: I totally agree that these figures have no implication whatsoever for public health. None of the animals which were found BSE positive in the rapid screening tests could have entered the food chain. Independent scientific advisers have assured us that animals under two and a half years of age are not a threat to public health once the specified risk material has been removed. That position has been reviewed and reiterated by the Food Standards Agency and by SEAC. Indeed, last week the European Commission repeated that animals under two and a half years of age are not a threat to public safety.

Mr Kane: Although it was important that the Minister fully informed the Assembly, it is nevertheless disappointing that the export of livestock has had a further setback. In response to widespread concerns, can the Minister confirm categorically that she made the appropriate representations to the Government of the Irish Republic? Has the Minister received assurances that no infected BSE livestock have been imported into Northern Ireland? If the Minister is not in a position to acquire low-incidence BSE, what is her alternative?

Ms Rodgers: The implication of the question about the Republic of Ireland is unclear. The UK Government and I have informed the Commission of the results of our survey. Indeed, as a matter of courtesy, I have also informed the Government of the Republic of Ireland of those results. I am not sure what point Mr Kane was making. However, I can assure him that it is illegal for meat from any animal over two and a half years of age to enter the food chain in Northern Ireland. That remains the case for beef coming from any other part of Europe as well as from within Northern Ireland.

The second part of his question related to what I am going to do now. I am not going to lose my head. I am not going to be rushed into making any foolhardy decisions. I will be speaking to the Commission, to other European Ministers responsible for agriculture and to Nick Brown. I await the results of the testing which will be carried out across Europe this year, and I will assess the situation to gauge the best time for me to resume my proposals for low-incidence status. I have no intention of abandoning my campaign for low-incidence status.

In the meantime, we will proceed with the many other things which need to be done. For instance, improving the quality of our beef is crucial so that when the markets open up again, we will be in a position to move immediately and capitalise on that.

Therefore the beef quality initiative that was announced in the Budget, and for which I obtained £2 million, is going ahead, and I will do everything possible to ensure that the quality of our beef is improved and can compete with the best.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Several Members have indicated that they wish to ask questions. I ask Members and the Minister to keep their comments as brief as possible.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am sure that the Minister will agree that the efforts to have the ban lifted were made on a voluntary basis. Other countries are not required to fulfil the same criteria for animals of over 30 months until the end of 2001, which means that Northern Ireland will stand alone for some 10 months. Does this extinguish our efforts to have the ban lifted?

The Minister's statement made reference to the incineration of animals, and the general public are concerned

about where they are to be incinerated. I would like to know the Minister's opinion on our hopes of having the ban lifted.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, I am sure there was a question in there somewhere.

Ms Rodgers: I think there were a few questions, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am not taking points of order at this stage, Mr Maskey.

Ms Rodgers: Mr McHugh made reference to voluntary efforts. He seems to misunderstand the procedures for the rest of Europe. In 2000 a decision was taken in Europe that sample testing of casualty animals would begin on 1 January 2001. We made immediate preparations to bring in the casualty animals. Given that this testing was compulsory from 1 January, it was highly unlikely that, had we proceeded with proposals for the relaxation of the ban, the European Commission would have come to any conclusion until the results of our initial testing were available. Therefore we decided to proceed in order to be in a position to supply the results.

In December 2000, because of the BSE situation in Europe, the Commission decided that testing would start in Great Britain on 1 April 2001 and on 1 July in the rest of Europe. It is not true to say that we went ahead too early. The Agriculture and Rural Development Committee agreed that we were right to proceed when we did. When the other results come in we will be in a better position to assess the true picture across Europe.

I ask Mr McHugh and Members of the Assembly to consider the position we would be in now if we had proceeded with proposals for the removal of the ban before the results came in. We will get only one shot at this, and I want to make sure that we get it right.

Mr Ford: I would like to thank the Minister and her administrative and professional officials for the way in which they have handled this issue since last week. Their openness contrasts well with the actions of the 1996 United Kingdom Government, which were so roundly criticised by the Phillips Report.

Can the Minister assure the Assembly that she will continue to emphasise the safety of Northern Ireland beef that is under 30 months and the fact that there is no danger whatsoever to public health? Last week's information did not give that sort of assurance — quite the opposite. Will she also ensure that the new tests are conducted properly by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and that the results are publicised in the same open way?

Will she also use her influence to ensure that other member states do the same? And will she ensure that her officials remain vigilant when checking further beef

imports, such as those discovered in Newry a couple of weeks ago?

11.00 am

Ms Rodgers: I will try to remember all of the questions that Mr Ford asked. If I omit some, perhaps he will remind me.

First, I thank the Member for his remarks, which I appreciate, about the manner in which this has been dealt with. He asked about the new tests to be carried out. In the coming year we will now have to test all casualty and fallen animals. Moreover, all animals born between 1 August 1996 and 1 August 1997, not just casualty and fallen animals, that are entering the over-30-months scheme will have to be tested. The purpose of those tests is to see how effective the introduction of the ban on the meat and bonemeal has been, because the ban was introduced from that date. If that year-long period is tested, that will indicate whether the ban has been effective. Those tests will all have to be carried out during this year.

I assure Mr Ford that I will be as open and as transparent when those results come through as I have been with the recent ones. I will continue to make a point of assuring the public that the results of those tests have no public health implication because — and I have repeated this, as have other Members — none of those animals would have entered the food chain.

Mr Taylor: All information is useful, and we thank the Minister for the information she has given and, especially, for her response to it. First, will the Minister confirm, once again, that meat from animals under 30 months old in Northern Ireland is among the safest in Europe? Secondly, can she tell us when she expects Scotland, England and the Republic of Ireland to carry out tests similar to those described to us today? Thirdly, how confident is she that other European Union countries will carry out similar tests, since BSE has been somewhat hidden from the public in those countries?

Ms Rodgers: In relation to Northern Ireland beef being the safest, I can only repeat the Food Standards Agency's view and that of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC), an independent scientific advisory commission. The SEAC states, and has recently repeated its view, that animals under two and a half years — the only ones going into the food chain in Northern Ireland — are not a threat to public health, and, moreover, that the specified risk material is removed. That has been the case in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK since 1996. Some of those controls are only now being introduced in other European countries. Therefore in that sense we have been ahead with our strict controls.

In relation to the tests being carried out throughout the rest of Europe, and whether the rest of Europe will comply, this is something that we wish to see happen.

That will be a matter for the Commission and for the food standards agencies. I would like to think that all other countries will be as open and transparent as we have been. In the end, the fact that we have been open and transparent will stand to us.

Mr Bradley: I too welcome the statement and the openness of its content. Last Friday at the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee meeting we heard from the Minister's officials that some very old animals had been tested. Can the Minister confirm the age of the oldest animals that tested positive, and can she give us the age profile of the remainder?

Ms Rodgers: The oldest animal to test positive in the recent survey was 14 years old, which is pretty old for a cow.

All the others, with one exception, were over four years of age. Many were in the five years to seven years of age category — far beyond the age when they would have entered the food chain. We are checking on one animal, born just after the introduction of the meat and bonemeal ban. None of the animals was under four years old.

Mr Paisley Jnr: To help us to make sense of the statement and be clear about its content, can the Minister inform the House how many of the beasts tested were from the beef sector, and how many were from the dairy sector? In the cold light of day, no matter what spin she cares to put on this statement, this is a blow to the policy of achieving a reduction in BSE status, or having low-incidence BSE status introduced and having the beef export ban lifted. Can she now, on the fourth time of asking, confirm that she has an alternative way forward, one in which the beef sector can place confidence, so that we can proceed in a united way to get the agriculture sector out of the mess it is in?

Ms Rodgers: As regards the profile of the animals tested, 70% were from the dairy sector, and the remainder were from the beef sector; I will write to the Member with the exact figure.

I do not like the use of the word "spin". I have not been spinning, and I am sorry that the Member has used that word. A dangerous message would be going out of the House if there were any attempt by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland to spin the figures. If I were spinning the figures, I would not have given out those that I did last week.

I understand that this is disappointing news for the industry — and for us all. I thank most of the Members for the responsible way in which they have spoken today. Nevertheless, it is only a temporary setback. I intend to continue with my efforts, and those of my Department, to improve the quality of beef to ensure that when the markets are reopened, we are in a strong position to exploit them. I will continue to talk to my counterparts in the rest of Europe, including Nick Brown. I will have discussions

with the European Commission and officials in Europe, and I will assess when the time is right for us to go forward with our attempt to get low-incidence status for Northern Ireland.

There may have been some implication in what Mr Paisley Jnr said that there has been an increase in BSE in Northern Ireland. There is no increase. We are now seeing the real picture as regards the older animals. We cannot compare this type of testing with that carried out before. This is a mass screening exercise. We do not now have more BSE than before. We have a clearer picture of the real incidence in the older animals. When the picture emerges across Europe, we will then be able to make the comparisons.

Mr Byrne: The farming community has had to endure many setbacks as regards BSE. How do the Minister and her officials think that our current BSE status relates to the other member states, given that we are the first to carry out a mass screening test?

Ms Rodgers: Last year 22 animals that were showing clinical signs of BSE were tested, and that compared very favourably with the rest of Europe.

In relation to the new mass screening test, it is not possible to make a comparison for the simple reason that the rest of Europe has not yet carried out — or certainly has not come forward with the results — of that type of new targeted mass screening.

Mr Hussey: First, I want to say that I totally support local beef products and welcome the endorsement and the assurances of the safety of the product. I concur with Mr Paisley Jnr when he talked about the relevancy of distinguishing between the beef herd and the dairy herd. Can the Minister outline how that will be progressed?

The Minister said that she would not be rushed into making any decision and I read from her statement

"until other member states report the results from their cattle test results, we have no figures with which we can compare ours ... other member states will not have reported all their results until later this year."

It was the way in which this announcement was made that produced the disappointing news for the industry. How much better it would have been if the results of our testing had come out together with those of the other member states. A true comparison could then have been given to the public, which would have been a good news story for our industry. Why was it not handled that way?

Ms Rodgers: As I have already explained, it was quite clear to me that given the fact that these tests had to be done, the Commission was not going to come to any conclusions on any proposals for low incidence in Northern Ireland until they had seen the results of the new mass screening test, and that is why we went ahead with the testing. Indeed, many Members would have advised me to go ahead even earlier. Having gone slightly

ahead of the rest of Europe and having discovered these figures — which we were not in a position to know — it was right to put them in the public domain immediately. It would have been totally wrong to withhold them. I could not have stood over that. It is important that all of these figures be made available to the public and to the Commission as soon as they become known.

I have explained the reason why we went ahead and why we went public with this, and it will now be a case of waiting until the other figures from Europe begin to emerge, which will be some time after 1 July this year.

Mr Poots: Given that this is a relatively new test, how confident can the Minister be of its accuracy? Can the Minister indicate how many cattle were slaughtered in Northern Ireland for human consumption in 2000? Perhaps we can take the positive elements from this matter. The Minister mentioned that 2,500 animals were tested, and of those, 54 were positive. None of those animals was under four years old. Given the fact that there is now evidence that cattle are not contracting BSE under the age of four, should the Minister not consider upping the age of slaughter of cattle for human consumption to at least 36 months, rather than 30 months as it is now?

Ms Rodgers: The number of cattle slaughtered in Northern Ireland for human consumption was 350,000. This new test has been approved by the European Commission. I understand that it is an accurate test, and we have to be guided by that.

11.15 am

With regard to the 30-month rule, the Food Standards Agency advises that it should stay. Therefore that will guide us. The priority is to ensure that we can stand over the safety of our beef. If the Food Standards Agency's view is that beef under 30 months is the standard for safety, we will continue with that policy; it is what Europe requires.

If there was another question I will reply to it in writing.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister agree that this is another example of Northern Ireland leading in health and safety and doing everything in its power to achieve that, as shown by the vision group's findings with regard to England which came out at the end of last year?

Does the Minister also agree that the information we have on dead animals is not recorded by any other state? Northern Ireland is leading the way again. There are no figures for comparison with other countries. Therefore will the Minister agree that we need to examine the export of animals from other states which do not meet the same standards? Indeed, some states are not even thinking about the same criteria that we have introduced. Everybody appears to be trailing behind Northern Ireland. The same thing happened with pigs on the matter of stalls and tethers, when we took action before anyone else. Our farmers paid the price —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, Mr Armstrong, I think that there is a question in there.

Ms Rodgers: At the risk of repeating myself, our controls are, and have been, the strictest in Europe since 1996. I think that the question was about animals and meat coming here from other European countries. We must follow European rules. I repeat that it is illegal for meat from animals over two and a half years of age to be sold anywhere in Northern Ireland. Our controls are very strict in that regard. The inspection of, and controls on, meat going to slaughter in Northern Ireland are strict. Indeed, the strictness of those controls has been demonstrated recently by the effectiveness of our inspections.

It is difficult for me to know what the questions were. However, I believe that most of them have already been dealt with. The rest of Europe now has to abide by the same strict controls that we have had since 1996. From now on, the other European states will have to apply the controls that we have on meat and bonemeal and all of those things in animals under 30 months. However, the Member is right to say that we were ahead of the posse.

Mr McMenamin: The Minister said that this is not the end of her campaign to achieve low incidence. How does she propose to proceed?

Ms Rodgers: First, I will wait until the full picture emerges in the rest of Europe. In the meantime, I will continue the dialogue with the Commission, Nick Brown and other EU Agriculture Ministers. I will also continue to improve the quality of beef in Northern Ireland through the beef quality initiative. Indeed, I will continue to take decisions on the same basis as I did with the beef national envelope funds, which will provide as much assistance as possible to the farming community, particularly targeting those most in need.

Mr Gibson: I am sure that the Minister will agree that the agriculture industry demands confidence, and that that is demanded equally by consumers. What programmes has the Minister considered to ensure that there is mass screening of all our livestock, or is she confident that BSE cannot be transferred at the incubation stage in animals under 30 months?

Is there scientific evidence to support the belief that incubation of BSE pre-30 months cannot be transferred into the human chain? If not, there will be doubts in the mind of every consumer.

Ms Rodgers: I have already answered the question in relation to the programmes with which we will be proceeding. I refer the Member to my previous answer about the tests that will be carried out during the rest of the year on fallen and casualty animals and, particularly, on over-30-months animals born between 1 August 1996 and 1 August 1997.

With regard to the incubation of BSE or the threat to public health of animals in the under-30-months scheme,

I understand that the reason for the Member's question is to reassure people who may have doubts in their minds. I want to make it very clear that all the independent scientific advice available to me from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, which is an independent scientific committee, the Food Standards Agency and the Commission indicates that animals under 30 months old with specified risk material, such as the brain and dorsal material, removed do not constitute a threat to public health. That has been reviewed and confirmed recently. I will continue to be guided by the scientists.

Maternal transmission is one way of transmitting disease, but that is covered by the offspring cull. However, I repeat that even in the case of maternal transmission, the fact remains that animals under 30 months old are considered by the independent scientific advisers not to be a threat to human health.

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Minister agree that the last thing that our hard-pressed farmers need is a lack of confidence in beef by the consumer, and will she indicate what action she will take to ensure that consumer confidence remains?

Ms Rodgers: Everything that I have done in the last week and, indeed, since the beginning of the year in relation to the tests that have been carried out should be a reassurance to the consumer that in Northern Ireland we are being open and transparent. We are taking all possible measures to eradicate the disease, and we are being guided strictly by our first priority — the protection of the public health. I will continue to be guided by the scientific advice and ensure that the strict controls that have always been present in Northern Ireland will continue to be in place. The first priority of my Department — and of the industry itself — is the protection of public health.

Mr Shannon: Why has the Minister's Department carried out the tests 10 months ahead of the rest of Europe? Does she agree that the announcement should have been made in tandem with the other European member states?

Secondly, can she give us a timescale as to when the statistics for the rest of Europe will be published? We want to see those. Thirdly, in the light of the announcement, will the Minister confirm what action her Department will take to be more proactive in promoting Northern Ireland beef as a top quality product that meets exceptional standards and is above that of all our competitors in the rest of Europe?

Ms Rodgers: I think that Mr Shannon is under a misapprehension; I have already explained that we are not 10 months ahead of the rest of Europe. I have explained why we went ahead, and I do not want to reiterate that. We started these tests a few weeks ago, and Great Britain has to start them on 1 April — which is not very far away. The rest of Europe has to start them on 1 July. Therefore we are not 10 months ahead.

Mr Shannon: Ten months will have lapsed when the results are announced.

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is not an opportunity to cross-examine the Minister.

Ms Rodgers: I am responding to the suggestion that we started 10 months ahead of the rest of Europe. We did not. The rest of Europe will start testing on 1 July. We started testing on 1 January and announced the results on 9 February. The results from the rest of Europe will emerge shortly after they begin testing.

I cannot speak for the rest of Europe; I can only speak for my Department, and I have already outlined the action that I will be taking. I am looking forward to the report of the vision group, which should be hoped, will be available in early March. I expect it will contain advice about proactive marketing and various initiatives that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development needs to take. The Department is already taking some of those initiatives with regard to beef quality to ensure that we are in a position to exploit the quality of our beef.

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am a wee bit reluctant to raise this matter, but I will do so, considering the issues I had to raise last week. I am concerned that the Deputy Speaker was unable to follow Gerry McHugh's contribution and had to ask if it contained a question. The Minister knew immediately that there were at least two questions. I am concerned that the Deputy Speaker was unable to follow the conduct of business.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I noted earlier that there was some difficulty in recognising questions. I said that Members should not make statements, which lead on to questions, when the Minister is making her statement. I have to listen very closely to what Members are saying to ensure that a question is being asked. There were two occasions from each side of the House when it was difficult to discern if there was a question. I hope that that resolves the problem.

PUBLIC EXPENDITURE: DECEMBER MONITORING

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):

I will confirm some further decisions by the Executive as a result of the December public expenditure monitoring round for the financial year 2000-01. I have emphasised in previous statements on the monitoring of public expenditure that its primary purpose is to address emerging issues as a result of improved information on the estimates of requirements for expenditure and receipts by Departments.

The Executive are determined to look carefully at such issues and adjust bands where necessary. We need to look at what is in the public interest and how we can best pursue the priorities set out in the Programme for Government in what is usually a context of limited options in each monitoring exercise.

It is important that the points I will announce be set in a routine context, because the Executive want to deal with, and agree, those issues as a matter of routine procedure. That the Executive can deal in that way with important economic and social issues is as clear a statement as we could make of the significance of having these institutions and of the fact that we have an Executive that take account of evolving local issues and the concerns and aspirations expressed in the Chamber and in the wider community.

When I announced the outcome of the December monitoring round on 22 January, I explained that the Executive were giving further consideration to the deficits that have emerged in the Health Service trusts. Although I must ensure that procedures for financial control are being observed, it is also important to recognise that the problem of deficits in the Health Service is a symptom of much deeper problems in relation to funding, which we need to address.

11.30 am

The Executive will wish to examine issues in the resourcing of the Health Service to ensure that money is being used as effectively as possible. We need to examine our priorities in the light of the Programme for Government. We also want to carefully examine the relative levels of provision for health funding and other key services between here and England, Scotland and Wales, as we increasingly feel that the Barnett formula has worked against the interests of health and other programmes here.

With the agreement of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Economic Policy Unit in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, I am today confirming that we are launching a joint review of the causes and consequences of the Health Service trust deficits. This will not be a punitive or hostile study. The Executive are determined to work

constructively with Health Service management in the interests of all those in need of care and the wider community. We want to find ways to ensure that the financial management arrangements and the roles and responsibilities help everyone in this purpose and give them the kind of management information that will be of real help in this vital service.

We need to ensure that the problem of trust deficits does not recur. We need to match funding to need as far as we possibly can, but we also have to match spending to funding in order to respect the authority of the funder, which is now the Assembly. The steps that we are taking aim to fulfil both these objectives. Under the resource budgeting arrangements, which are due to take effect from 1 April, trust deficits will no longer be at one remove from the Department's financial control totals as set by the Executive and the Assembly in the annual Budget exercises. The principle must remain that spending proposals are brought together by the Executive and presented to the Assembly but then reflected in Assembly votes of approval. This is a fundamental part of the democratic process, and we need to reinforce the arrangements in the Health Service in that important context.

The Executive have decided to inject £18 million of additional spending into the Health Service to address these deficits. At one stage the estimated requirement to address the deficits was £38 million. Since then the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have analysed the technical issues in more detail and reassessed the implications of aspects of the funding arrangements. Taking account of this work and the allocations agreed in the December monitoring round, it has been confirmed that the amount needed is now £18 million. By the nature of the issue this does not mean any new activity in that it is paying bills for activities and services that have already been carried out. However, it is important to avoid the constraints on services that would be necessary next year if the trusts had to deal with the deficits in the allocations provided in the Budget. We want the improvements planned in the Programme for Government to proceed, and this requires a resolution of the deficits.

However, the Executive are concerned to ensure that this injection of funding is distributed fairly and does not lead to any distortion in the distribution of resources or the way resources are planned and managed in the future. We welcome the full co-operation of the Health Service management in the forthcoming consultancy study. The results of the study and the action that we will take on foot of it will affect the view we take on future allocations to the Health Service as 2001-02 progresses and for the longer term.

The approach that we are taking represents a responsible and considered response to a difficult issue, but it is fundamentally one which will be of significant benefit, both in the short term and the long term, to the Health

Service and hence to our people. In any society appropriate spending on health has to be a considerable priority. These allocations demonstrate clearly the Executive's commitment in this context. The study that we are introducing will help management in the Health Service as well as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Economic Policy Unit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to work together to ensure that whatever future levels of funding are available are used to best effect to promote the best interests of the health of the region.

Allocating £18 million that remained unallocated in the December monitoring round still leaves a further balance of £10 million. The Executive have carefully considered how best to use the remaining resources, which allow us to address three important issues. It was not possible to come to these before now, given the considerable uncertainty over the Health Service deficit figure, which has only now been resolved through the analytical work that I mentioned earlier.

In the draft Programme for Government the Executive committed themselves to bringing forward proposals to introduce free travel on public transport for older people. In December I said that the indicative allocations for 2002-03 included substantial funding towards the cost of introducing a free travel scheme for older people from April 2002. We estimate that the total cost of the scheme will be about £10 million a year.

The plans announced in December included £4 million in 2001-02 and £8 million in each of the following two years. Since then, there have been helpful discussions in a working group of officials, which has been exploring options and considering the best way forward. I am pleased to be able to confirm today, on behalf of the Executive, that it has been decided that an additional £3 million will be allocated to this in 2001-02 by carrying forward part of our room-to-manoeuvre funds. An additional £2 million a year will be provided in the following years. That will allow full funding of a scheme for free travel for older people, taking effect from 1 October 2001.

There is no requirement for funding or assistance from district councils. That fulfils an important pledge in the Programme for Government and shows that the Executive can work together to find resources to implement key policy initiatives. That marks a distinct difference from the approach taken under direct rule. The Department of Finance and Personnel and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will be discussing the details of the scheme with Department for Regional Development officials as soon as possible to take that forward.

The question of the gap between the old and new rounds of EU structural funds has caused considerable concern to many people in the community. It has been put strongly

to us that the uncertainty over the timing of the new round of funding is leading to job losses and a break in the progress of the Peace programme that could have been avoided. As some resources remained unallocated, I put proposals to the Executive to address this issue. Those have been agreed. So far in this financial year, the Executive have provided £9 million of additional spending for gap funding, including £4.5 million for projects which were part of the Peace I programme. Those amounts have gone some way to dealing with the problem in the financial year ending on 31 March. However, we have recognised the problems that remain, given that it will be some time into 2001-02 before the allocations from Peace II and other programmes become fully available. Further action is needed.

At its meeting on 8 February, the Executive agreed a new approach to this that should allow for both continuity and change. It is important to recognise that the new round of funding includes some material differences from the first round. It would not be appropriate to simply roll forward every group and project that received assistance under the old round into the new round.

The Executive have agreed that Departments should be authorised to make advance payments to projects where they judge that there is a strong likelihood that the project will be eligible for funding and successful in an application under the new round. That would be subject to the procedures of the monitoring committees and funding mechanisms, when they are in place. It is important that this anticipated drawing down of the new round of funding is managed carefully. However, it should provide the continuity and certainty that everyone needs.

Much work has gone into developing clear criteria for the Peace programme, including detailed discussion with the European Commission. The criteria must be applied carefully. They are available to all Departments and can be used to help to secure the best use of available funding.

We also need to bear in mind that existing projects should not be funded without regard to the need to hold resources for new projects, which will meet the Peace II criteria. We need continuity and change as we adapt to the new programme.

This approach involves Departments making considered judgements about what applications will, and will not, succeed in the new round of funding. The criteria will help in this regard. Additionally, some new money is being set aside to insure, by providing a safety net, against the risk that a Department may assist a project, which may not, in the end, prove eligible for funding under the new peace programme. We propose to allocate £2 million of the room-to-manoeuvre fund — which is available now — and carry that into 2001-02 within the Executive's programme fund for social inclusion and community regeneration. The first call on this £2 million should happen when Departments make gap funding available in good

faith, and on criteria which are as close as possible to those adopted in the new programmes, and where, ultimately, the project aided does not succeed under the new Peace programme.

There remain substantial resources to be drawn under the Peace I programme. My Department will be actively working with relevant Departments and the Special EU Programmes Body to ensure the best use of these resources and to help with the problems of continuity from Peace I to the new programme. Meetings have been arranged with the main Departments concerned to reinforce the importance of this task and to help to take it forward. We need to maximise the benefit of Peace I money and ensure that it fulfils the key objectives set for the programme in order to pave the way for Peace II as well as possible.

This approach should serve to resolve the problem of gap funding, which has been a difficult issue for the voluntary and community sectors over the past months, and it should leave no remaining cause for uncertainty. The Departments concerned will be able to fund projects that are likely to succeed under Peace II. The Executive are also setting aside £2 million to provide a safety net so that if Departments need additional spending power, for the purposes of the new programmes, it will be available. This will be carried forward from 2000-01 to 2001-02 in the Executive's social inclusion fund.

In some cases, it will be necessary to adopt an exit strategy for funding because some projects are not likely to come forward under the Peace II programme. This is an important aspect of the shift of emphasis which the Executive have agreed with the European Commission and the two Governments in relation to the Peace II programme, and it is part of adopting what is a different context from that of the original Peace programme.

During questions on the draft Budget statement in October 2000 I made it clear that we would continue to keep the forecast level of rate revenue under review. As was the case for the current year, I undertook that I would make use of any emerging additional revenue to help to keep down the increases in the rate requirements as far as possible. I am pleased to announce that because of the strong continued growth in valuations of domestic property there is some scope to adjust the domestic regional rate increase. The latest revenue forecast is £2 million higher than we assumed in December. The Executive have, therefore, decided to accept my proposal to reduce the increase from 8% to 7%. Because of the growth in the revenue base it does not mean foregoing revenue, but it will be of some benefit to the ratepayers.

The Executive's approach to the domestic rate continues to take account of the realities that we have to face, namely that the levels of local revenue per household raised here are markedly below those raised in England, Scotland and Wales. Foregoing revenue would risk

foregoing some of our key arguments in the case that we must put to the Treasury on the Barnett formula.

11.45 am

Turning to the non-domestic regional rate, the position is somewhat different. Given the effects of the proposed uplift of 6.6% in the non-domestic regional rate for 2001-02, I asked for more detailed work to be done on comparisons with England on the non-domestic rate. This has confirmed that the non-domestic regional rate here is not out of line with that in England. This strongly suggests that if we had a lower uplift in the non-domestic regional rate than was planned in December, this would not undermine the case that we need to put to the Treasury regarding the Barnett issue.

Now that the figures for the Health Service have been confirmed, we have some additional spending power in 2000-01 which could be carried forward into 2001-02 to replace an element of regional rate revenue. This would make it possible to reduce the uplift in the non-domestic regional rate from 6.6% to 3.3%.

On the evidence available, it seems fair that for 2001-02, the non-domestic sector should face a rates uplift that is broadly in line with the rate of inflation, especially now that we have found a way to do this without detriment to our overall spending levels, which would have been the case had we rushed into this issue in either December or January. The amount required is £5 million.

This is good news for the business sector and will not undermine the case that we need to make to the Treasury on the Barnett issue. We must look carefully at the impact of the rating system system, on business as well as on individuals and households, as part of the review of rating policy, which I will be referring shortly to the Finance and Personnel Committee. The Executive are determined to find solutions through the review that can make the best use of whatever resources are available and which are in the widest possible interest.

The proposals for the now reduced uplifts in the domestic and non-domestic regional rates will be introduced to the Assembly in the form of the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2001, which is due for consideration in March.

The four measures that I have announced on behalf of the Executive represent clear and decisive action on the part of the Executive in key areas. This has been made possible through routine, straightforward financial management and by facing up to the difficult issues with proper regard for prudence, sensible planning and the needs and aspirations of the community.

We have acted to ensure that the health deficit issue is fully addressed through immediate funding and a study to ensure that the circumstances are properly understood and that the health trusts and boards can make changes

in management arrangements, which will ensure a better planning process and avoid deficits in the future.

We have acted to introduce free travel for older people more quickly and in a more straightforward way than was possible in the context of the December Budget.

We have found a way through the problem of gap funding, which means that eligible voluntary and community groups will be able to make appropriate plans to secure the way ahead, in conjunction with Departments, by making progress towards Peace II on a workable basis.

We have acted to contain the increase in the regional rates without compromising the key issues that we all face in seeking additional resources from the Treasury. We can reduce the domestic increase from 8% to 7% without a loss in revenue because valuations have increased slightly faster than we were expecting. For that reason we have acted to bring down the increase for the non-domestic sector from 6.6% to 3.3%, which will be of significant benefit to local businesses.

These measures show the Executive at work. They show our determination to work in the interests of all in our community and across the full range of functions for which we are responsible. I hope the Assembly will join with me in supporting these four proposals, particularly in the political context which has made them possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members, before we proceed may I remind you that several people have indicated that they want to ask questions. For that reason, I ask you, and the Minister, to be as brief as possible.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome this important statement from the Minister. It shows that changes can be brought about by negotiation and by shifting the people power in the street. The Minister's quick response is very welcome.

I welcome the idea of paying off the trusts' debts, but I want to voice my concern to the Minister that I hope that this is not an open-ended situation. The trusts should not feel that if there is a crisis in the future, someone will pay off the debts. Will the Minister state whether this will arise again with the extension of the one-year GP fundholding? Is that likely to lead to debts in the future?

It is good news for the older traveller that we now have a stand-alone measure and will not be depending on council funding. This is important, because it is more manageable.

In relation to gap funding, there are concerns in the community that the gap between Peace I and Peace II is extending. Some people believe that there is a policy to create a gap between the two funds, rather than to provide continuity. In that way valuable resources, personnel and experience could be lost. Can the Minister confirm when the Peace II programme will be on the ground?

The rates rise is an important measure. Although I welcome the reduction in the increase for the non-domestic rate in line with inflation, again I am concerned that the level of domestic rates will be maintained. Can the Minister confirm —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It is very difficult to hear.

Mr Molloy: Will the Minister confirm — particularly to Committee members — that domestic rates will still cost the ratepayer the same amount of money? The new money is being brought in by the rise in valuation. It will not, therefore, save people any money. Like for like, it is not possible to compare district councils here with those in England, Scotland and Wales, because the services provided locally are different to those across the water.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his questions. Under the stricture of brevity, I shall not be able to cover all of them.

With regard to deficits, it is not intended that action taken now to deal with the current serious deficit problem should, in any way, create a precedent or an incentive for further deficit spending in future. That is one reason for undertaking the joint consultancy study, together with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Economic Policy Unit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. This matter is not being taken lightly in relation to any concerns raised by the deficits — either issues of service pressures or the question of unmet need which must occur to people, not least in respect of those trusts which have not been showing deficits, and concerning questions of financial management. I am glad that the Committee Chairperson welcomes our starting the free travel scheme earlier, and on a fully funded basis, so that it is more straightforward. We did not have the resources available to allow us to commit to that previously, but we do now.

With regard to gap funding, I want to refute any suggestion that there is a policy to try to open up or to deepen any gap between Peace I and Peace II. There is certainly no such policy, and our announcement today goes beyond gap funding and moves us on to bringing forward Peace II. Again I emphasise to Members that in relation to the Peace I money, there are outstanding questions which must be addressed. We will be taking measures in that regard — again, proof that we are not treating the issue lightly.

I accept that the reduction in the domestic regional rate is not as much as people would have liked, but I refer Members to my point in relation to the case that we will have to make to the Treasury on the question of the Barnett formula. Comparing the functions of councils in England with those in Northern Ireland is not material to the issue of the regional rate. The previous rate increase of 8% would have seen an average household paying £16 a year extra. Now an average household will pay £14 a year extra.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Leslie): The Minister's statement contained several interesting points, but I shall confine myself to one.

Can the Minister confirm that as a result of his additional £3 million allocation, the free travel scheme will be introduced seven months earlier than would otherwise have been the case? Will he also comment on his statement that an additional £2 million a year will be provided in forward years? That seems to go beyond the scope of a monitoring announcement and into the realm of a matter pertaining to future budgets. Can the Minister explain how he manages to contain the allocation of £2 million in future years within his statement on monitoring?

Mr Durkan: The £3 million allocated to bringing forward the commencement of the free travel scheme for the elderly to 1 October 2001 rather than 1 April 2002 requires a consequent provision in future years. In making the decision to bring forward the scheme and to fully fund it, the Executive had necessarily to take a decision consciously in relation to provision for future years. The Executive have done that and have been fully open and transparent about it.

Mr Byrne: The Minister's statement was a good example of how the Executive are beginning to function in a meaningful way for the public, who will be appreciative of the forthcoming reduction in the regional rate, which has been one of the most contentious issues this year.

Can the Minister give details of the total amounts made available to date for gap funding? When will the money announced today be available to the community groups on the ground, who are anxious about the continuity of the Peace programme?

Mr Durkan: It is good to have a welcome for the direction in which we are moving in relation to the rates. We have only been able to do that on the basis of the money available to us, either through the improvement of the valuation base or because we do have this money available after dealing with other pressing spending items. I stress that we only have the money available after we have dealt with those other items, and it would have been wrong to make the money available before addressing our priorities.

In this financial year we made £9 million available for gap funding — £4.5 million of that went to the Peace programme. We now wish to see Departments making the sort of considered judgement that we think they are capable of, and that many community groups would like them to make, on whether or not people are eligible for the next round of funding, and making some advance allocations on that basis. We have provided the additional £2 million for the Executive's social inclusion programme fund as a safety net, so that if Departments, in good faith, make allocations to groups that turn out not to qualify for the next round, that is covered and it is not an

expense to the Department's other programmes or to the wider Peace programme.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): I welcome the Minister's finding the necessary finance for free travel for the elderly. In keeping with your request to be brief, Mr Deputy Speaker, I have a very concise question.

Last week, the Deputy First Minister said:

"At no stage, and I repeat this, at no stage was a bid made to the Department of Finance and Personnel for funding for this by Mr Campbell prior to today."

Will the Minister confirm that my predecessor, Peter Robinson, made a bid for full central funding in July 2000? I renewed the bid in bilateral meetings with the Minister in September 2000 and again in December 2000. Rather than my having to release the documents, which would demonstrate the extent to which the Deputy First Minister misled the public, perhaps the Minister would be good enough to confirm that the July, September and December bids were all made to him.

12.00

Mr Durkan: I acknowledge the question. There are several issues. There was a bid in July in the context of the Budget discussions. That bid was for full funding of this scheme and is a matter of record. It came prior to Mr Campbell's term in that Department. The point was referred to in one of the bilateral meetings that I had with all Ministers in September. However, it would be misleading to imply that those were the only terms on which free travel for the elderly, and questions on how to deliver it, were discussed. Although the point was referred to, I do not recollect the discussion as being about a straightforward bid for full funding with no other options.

Mr Campbell also said that a bid was made to me in December. In fact, Mr Campbell sent a memo to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on 7 December 2000, which was the day that the Executive were meeting to discuss my proposals for the revised Budget. Those proposals included one to have the scheme begin on 1 April 2002, with three quarters of the funding coming from us, and one quarter from councils. Mr Campbell's memo acknowledged that the proposals he had been pursuing with councils were for part-funding by them, and it reflected on some of the difficulties of that. His memo was to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the day of an Executive meeting and was in response to the recommendations from the Department of Finance and Personnel. I can confirm that communication in December, if that is what Mr Campbell was referring to.

I can also confirm that, subsequent to that, I had a further communication from Mr Campbell dated 23 January 2001 — the day after I made the statement on December monitoring. That communication put forward the proposal that he would like to be able to allow

councils that were willing to participate to go ahead and contribute to a part-funding scheme this year, beginning in April 2001.

The Deputy First Minister's point, I believe, was with reference to Mr Campbell's comments last Thursday morning on Radio Ulster. Clearly referring to the opportunity that he said existed — and it was obviously in terms of the December monitoring round — he said that he had instructed his officials to make a bid to the Department of Finance and Personnel. We did not receive that bid, and I pointed that out in a note to Mr Campbell.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the statement, and the four proposals contained therein. It is quite remarkable that the proposals are possible. It is not because of the political context within which we are working, but in spite of it. It is remarkable that the First Minister has announced yet another timetable to collapse the institutions.

In paragraph 26 of his statement, the Minister states that he asked for further comparisons between the rates here and those, for example, in England. This matter was well aired over two or three months, particularly when I and others raised the point about the regional rate being increased too much above the level of inflation. I find it difficult to understand what information the Department — I do not mean the Minister, of course — did not have available to it when the deliberations were going on.

Mr Durkan: Comparisons are neither entirely easy nor straightforward, and many technical issues must be examined. However, one can conclude that businesses here would be paying similar rates to their counterparts across the water. Another relevant point is that we have a higher proportion of smaller businesses here. We were only able to consider using money to offset the expected higher rate increase after other outstanding issues were dealt with. Many of those who question why we were not able to go for this lower rate increase earlier are the same people who say that there should be significant additional expenditure on certain programmes.

The comparison with English rates has never been expressed to me before, but several Members expressed particular concerns about the effect of the rate increases on the non-domestic sector. Given that much of the argument on the domestic regional rate included references to the situation in England and the Treasury's likely angle on that, I made a point of confirming that those same concerns did not apply. I feel that I have been quite open and fair about this — I was not aware of any of this earlier. Officials, working in the background, found the information. This, combined with the fact that we had money available at the end of the December monitoring round, allowed us to take this measure, which I hope people will welcome.

Mr Ford: I am sure that the Minister will be pleased to know that because of the illness of my Friend,

Mr Close, he only has me to put up with today. I will probably be slightly gentler on him on some topics than Mr Close would have been. I am glad that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is in her place. She has previously acknowledged the difficulties of funding different aspects of her work and the fact that the acute services sector has taken the lion's share of available money compared to children's services, community care and psychiatry.

Can the Minister indicate how he proposes to ensure that there will be a fair distribution of the additional resources allocated to Health Service trusts to ensure that the bigger acute hospitals do not, yet again, run off with the vast majority of the money?

I have no desire to interfere in the little spat between the DUP and the Minister on free travel. I welcome the extension of free-travel provision and, speaking on a constituency-level basis, I trust that this additional money will result in more resources for the Department for Regional Development to enable the Knockmore railway line to be preserved. I hope that the Minister will happily confirm this today.

Similarly, the proposals on gap funding must be welcomed. Can the Minister indicate more clearly how he is going to administer the inelegantly described "exit strategy" for those organisations which will no longer receive funding?

Finally, on the regional rate, the Minister will know that Members in this corner of the Chamber will welcome the reduction of the business rate. Will he assure us, on the basis of his statement, that any rises to this rate will be in keeping with rises in the rate of inflation and that it will not be increased as was originally planned? I agree that the Barnett formula is unjust and that it must be changed, but does he agree with me that to change it we must move to fair taxation as well as to a fair distribution of national funding — *[Interruption]*

Dr Birnie: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry. I am not taking a point of order.

Mr Ford: And that must refer to income tax and not the rates.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, I am sure that you may wish to answer one of those questions now. You may wish to respond to others in writing later.

Mr Durkan: In acknowledging several of the Member's points, I stress that I am not having a spat with the Minister for Regional Development. The emphasis in this important proposal should be on who gets the benefit, not on who gets the credit. We should work on that basis. Although we refer to joined-up government, perhaps grown-up government would be a better term — let us concentrate on that.

Although it does not matter who gets the credit, for the likes of rate increases, it is pretty clear who gets the blame — and I recognise the unfairness of that.

In response to the other question on gap funding, when the Peace I programme was undertaken, and before there was any mention of Peace II, there had to be provision for exit strategies. That may or may not have been made on a satisfactory basis. This is causing us further problems, but the issue must be addressed. We want Departments to work on that and to make best use of my announcement today by way of gap funding and by moving to make allocations from the next round of programmes. Further work also needs to be done to maximise the spending on Peace I.

Today's announcement bears no relation to the Knockmore railway line. That matter should be taken up with the Minister for Regional Development.

Ms McWilliams: I welcome today's announcement, particularly in relation to free travel and the reduction in the regional rates. It is clear from many who have lobbied the Assembly that this is the kind of message they want to hear.

Last week UNISON, the trade union representing those in the community and voluntary sector, lobbied the Assembly. In its report 'Communities in Crisis' the union expresses its concern about the transitional nature of this funding and predicts that £3 million, not £2 million, is needed. What is more important, the report recommends that the Executive now take a serious look at mainstreaming these projects, many of which are examples of good practice, rather than wait for Peace II and leave it to the Health Service to pick up the psychiatric or social service costs.

The second point I want to make concerns the £18 million deficits that we are now picking up. I am concerned that proceeding with the Programme for Government requires a resolution to the problem of the deficits. Will this allow next year's trusts to say that they cannot do what is in the Programme for Government and then have their deficits picked up? How does the Minister intend to address that problem?

Mr Durkan: I am aware of the UNISON paper to which Ms McWilliams has referred. It says that £3 million is needed for gap funding. I refer the Member to the statement I have made. We are authorising Departments to make considered judgements now and on the basis of those to make advance allocations to projects they believe to be eligible under the Peace II criteria. The £2 million that is going into the social inclusion fund now is there effectively to cover Departments against any risk of allocating moneys to projects that do not end up being eligible for Peace II. It is there to cover the Departments and protect the Peace programme. We hope that the allocations which can now be enabled by this approach will involve more than the total of £2 million.

I ask the Member to look again at the statement and at the nature of the proposal we are dealing with. We are making a gear change. This is not the way in which gap funding has previously been provided.

The Member referred also to mainstreaming. One of our reasons for changing the nature and scope of the Peace programme and for further embedding and developing the notion of partnerships so precisely is so that our arrangements will sustain themselves after the Peace II programme. That is the only way to mainstream these things seriously in the long term.

In answer to the trust deficit question, we made significant provision in the Budget, with some increases in Health Service spending. It would have been inappropriate and inconsistent with the goals we set out in the Programme for Government to have left some of that additional funding for paying off these deficits. In the statement I made the point that there will be a significant difference between this year and next year because of the change to resource accounting and budgeting. Trust spending will no longer be at one remove from departmental control.

We have agreed a joint consultancy exercise with the Economic Policy Unit, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and ourselves to look at both the causes and the consequences of trust deficits. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and I recognise that a number of questions arise in this regard, and we want to address those seriously.

12.15 pm

Mr McCartney: It would be churlish not to welcome the Minister's statement, particularly on such matters as free travel and the reduction in rates. Is the Minister aware that in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's coming Budget one of the incentives may be a substantial reduction in business rates? In Northern Ireland, however, while there is to be a reduction in the increase in business rates, there is nevertheless to be an increase. Is the Minister aware that the public at large are becoming a little concerned at the millions of pounds that can be found down the side of the sofa or at the back of the piano when it is necessary to address what is clearly an urgent problem?

I have taken up the issue of business rates with the Minister outside the Chamber. Increasing small business rates will put a substantial and significant number of hard-working, self-employed business people out of work, while simultaneously the Executive are pumping money into the IDB and LEDU in order to lay out huge capital sums to create new jobs. Is it not something of a paradox that on the one hand he is putting people out of business while on the other hand he is laying out large sums of money to encourage new jobs?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question and acknowledge that he has spoken to me about the

non-domestic rate increases. Quoting averages can be dangerous in this context, and I have already stated that the change in the domestic rate will be from £16 a year to £14 a year. With business rates the increase will be reduced from £299 a year to £150 a year. I am not sure that the rate increase was going to have quite the adverse effect on individual businesses that some people have suggested, but I do recognise that the margins are significant, particularly when people are working in marginal circumstances.

We will look at what is happening elsewhere with rates. Across the water non-domestic rates are increasing at the rate of inflation, and we have been able to achieve the same rate for the non-domestic sector here. I cannot promise that that will be the case next year, because we will have to look at next year's funding requirements in the light of many circumstances and pressures. It would be irresponsible of me to make a blanket commitment.

We are sensitive to the impact of rate levels and are aware that several issues need to be examined. This also applies to rates in the commercial sector, and some commercial areas are affected and others are not. These issues can be best addressed in the wider review of rating policy which is to be undertaken and on which I will soon refer papers to the Finance and Personnel Committee.

Mr McFarland: I welcome the Minister's announcement of an additional £18 million to clear the health deficits. I hope that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will ensure that there is equal distribution and that an unfair proportion does not go to the large hospitals. I wonder if the Minister has considered giving some money to those poor GP fundholders who through no fault of their own also have deficits.

The Executive's review of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is welcome; it should produce some clarity on health funding. Will the Minister encourage the review team to introduce a standardised system for tracking health funds so that we know where the allocations go and can be sure that the best value is being given to patients at the point of delivery?

Mr Durkan: We need to address the liability that the deficits represent, and not least the liability in service planning and management. Therefore, it is best that we resolve the historic or cumulative deficits as they stand. However, we need to go beyond that and look at many of the underlying questions raised, not least those referred to in relation to a management information system. That is important, not just for financial control but also because it would mean sound service planning geared to meeting need on an equitable basis. I recognise that the pattern and the nature of trust deficits raise serious equity questions about what is done to resolve them and to avoid them in the future. The consultancy study that has been undertaken on terms of reference agreed by the three Departments involved should be able to contribute positively to that.

Ms Lewsley: I also welcome the Minister's statement and commend him for his actions, particularly on the gap funding and the £2 million now available. Can the Minister tell us what additional actions, if any, he would propose to the Departments to assist the community and voluntary sector further?

Mr Durkan: Several issues need to be addressed, but not all together. We cannot make progress on any one point without attending to all the others. However, gap funding is not simply allocated in the same way as before. We are now asking Departments to judge who is eligible and, on that basis, to make advance allocations against the funding programmes. Furthermore, we are asking them to do that in relation to Peace I funding because a considerable amount of money is still available there. We have engaged with the Special EU Programmes Body on this.

As Members will recollect, in what was a new departure in the Budget, we have created Executive programme funds. Some of those programme funds will be of particular interest to the community and voluntary sector, not least the children's fund, an arm of which would need to be accessible to applications directly from that sector. The social inclusion/community regeneration fund, by its scope and terms of reference, should allow Departments to continue their good work with the community and voluntary sector.

Mr P Robinson: I would like to take the Minister back to the issue of the Department for Regional Development's proposal for free fares for the elderly. Is the Minister aware that a Department does not ultimately produce a scheme and deliver the goods? An operator does that, and the Minister and the Department for Regional Development have to negotiate with that operator. Can the Minister therefore inform the House why it was thought appropriate for the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and himself to announce details of the amount of funding available prior to entering into negotiations with the operator? By doing so, they prejudiced the added benefits that could have been obtained had negotiations taken place beforehand.

Will he further tell the House why documents and information, which would have allowed him to enter into negotiations that would have produced improved services in rural areas, were withheld from the Minister for Regional Development?

Mr Durkan: First, on the circulation or availability of papers, that is not my responsibility, so I cannot comment on that. In relation to the earlier part of the question, once the Executive had taken a decision, there was going to be a decision presented here today. I do not think that many people would have liked me to leave part of the statement blank because certain matters were subject to negotiation. If anybody is taking issue with what the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister

said on Thursday evening, I remind Members that the Minister for Regional Development referred on Thursday morning to a bid of between £5 million and £7 million that he said that his officials were making to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

On 'Good Morning Ulster' the Minister for Regional Development referred to a bid. He said:

"I have made a bid, and I have instructed my officials to make a bid to the Department of Finance and Personnel."

He referred to a sum of between £5 million and £7 million. Mr Robinson cannot make an argument against the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and not apply it equally to the Minister for Regional Development.

Once the Executive have taken decisions on these matters and have allocated figures, I have to present those decisions here so that they become public quickly. Members of the Finance and Personnel Committee would not like me to say to them that there are certain parts of this that we are keeping blank because of other negotiations. I would make the point that negotiations still have to be undertaken. An amount of money has been made available, but several details still have to be worked out, and they include negotiations with the transport providers. We are quite clear on that.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an ráiteas a rinne an tAire inniu. I welcome the Minister's statement. It is a good news statement in several regards, not least in the area of free travel for senior citizens, which brings us closer into line with the rest of Ireland.

My question is on the regional rate reductions, which is a step in the right direction. I draw attention to the commitment to look carefully at the wider impact of the rating system on business, individuals and households. I ask the Minister and his Department to embark on a comprehensive programme of public consultation. This should be aimed at listening to the views of the wider community, increasing public awareness on the procedure and methodology for arriving at the regional rate, and on the range and character of public services financed by the regional rate. This mirrors an approach taken by Omagh District Council, which held an open forum.

Mr Durkan: In my statement I referred to the wider review of rating policy, which will look at many of the business implications, including some of the points touched upon by Mr McCartney earlier and at the distribution of the domestic rate burden. I hope that the review will look at the whole question of rating in a root and branch way.

I do have to offer everyone a reality check. We do need to raise money from the rating system and we are not going to be able to come up with a rating system with such a menu of exemptions and reliefs that will exempt everyone from paying. People under that illusion

are simply not living in reality. I remind those Members, who normally are very articulate in telling me how much public expenditure we actually need, and how much we need into services, that the margin of additional expenditure afforded to us by the rating system is significant. If we were to try to cut the moneys represented by the rates, we would soon be hearing strong protests from the expenditure areas immediately affected by such cuts.

I will forward papers to the Finance and Personnel Committee soon. These papers will outline the main phases of the review as we see it unfolding, consistent with the Programme for Government. That will include a strong public consultation phase.

Mr Weir: Although I welcome aspects of this announcement, such as free travel for the elderly and the reduction in the increase of the non-domestic rate, I have to express concern at the somewhat meagre reduction of the increase in the domestic rate.

If the domestic rate were reduced from 7% to an inflation rate, what resources would be required to achieve that? As today's announcements have been funded from the £68 million resulting from the December monitoring round, will the Minister give the House a breakdown of where that money came from? How much of it came from departmental savings and easements? How much of it came from the money saved with the suspension of the Executive last year? How much has come from other sources?

12.30 pm

Mr Durkan: With regard to where the money came from, we covered those points in the December monitoring round itself. I made the point that, with regard to the £68 million available, some items were clearly sizeable and exceptional. One was the fact of the change to the treatment of domestic rate rebate. That gave us a further £23 million — essentially, a windfall. There was a further £7 million, for instance, from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which was money from returned shipbuilding loans that had been held against a possible claim from Harland & Wolff. There was also the £9 million which the Assembly, partly because of suspension and other phasing problems with plans, did not spend this year.

Those are three items accounting for £40 million that we had previously allocated. There were also the additional receipts, including those from housing and the Water Service, and other regular easements from Departments on a fairly routine basis.

It is a matter of providence that we had that room to manoeuvre in the December monitoring round. It is one of the reasons we should not confuse the providence that we now have with the need for prudence that we had up until that point. We could not have made provision for lower rate increases without knowing that we had the

resources to do so and without knowing that we could meet our expenditure commitments. That is why these matters have taken time.

I have made the move to rates after we had looked at the other pressing issues such as the health trust deficits. There was a stage, a few weeks ago, where it looked as if the figure for health trust deficits would be £38 million. When we held £28 million over, we thought we could still be facing difficulties there.

Fortunately, with good work between the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Finance and Personnel, we have been able to come up with a clearer and a more helpful picture. That has now enabled us to move in other key directions that I hope all Members will welcome.

Mr Hussey: Does the Minister agree that there is an implied rap on the knuckles to management in the Health Service in the statement? It appears that it is now going to have to be given some kind of “management information” — to quote from the statement.

There are technical issues amounting to £20 million of a difference. What are they doing as managers within the system? We are told that there is an effort

“to ensure that whatever future levels of funding are available are used to best effect to promote the best interests of the health of the region”.

Has this not been the case so far?

On the issue of free travel, I understood from Translink that the current system was costing in the region of £6 million a year on the 50% reduction. Can the Minister therefore confirm the figures in his statement? My understanding is that it should be in the region of £12 million.

On the issue of gap funding, the Minister referred to outstanding matters in Peace I. The Deputy First Minister has already agreed with me that the Protestant/Unionist community has yet to rise to comparable funding levels with the Nationalist community groupings. Will the funding ensure catch up through the proactive promotion of schemes in that part of the community where it is needed? Will the Minister assure the House that that will happen?

One final point — [*Interruption*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that the Member has overstretched.

Mr Hussey: This is the final point. In his statement, the Minister, instead of using the term “rates”, says

“levels of local revenue per household raised here are markedly below those in England”.

Will the Minister comment on the fact that households on the mainland also have to take water charges into account? Is it implied in the Minister’s statement that households in Northern Ireland may be faced with such charges to bring them up to comparative levels on the mainland?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister may wish to answer some of those questions in writing.

Mr Durkan: I will bear that helpful suggestion in mind.

First, it is wrong to characterise the consultancy study as a rap on the knuckles, just as it is wrong to characterise the money going into the deficits as a signal that people can accumulate deficits in the future. Both interpretations are wrong. We are trying to deal with, and recognise the measure and background of, the problem.

As for the December monitoring bid, which clearly reflected the problem in certain ways, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have been able to bring the estimated deficit down to £18 million after examining the problem. That has been achieved through technical re-categorisation and an assessment of the impact of the allocations that were announced a couple of weeks ago in the December monitoring round.

The real issue now is to ensure that the trusts know that they can proceed on a positive, purposeful and sound management basis to plan services based on next year’s Budget without worrying about the deficits. We also need to make a success of the consultancy exercise. The three Departments concerned, and Health Service management, need to make sure that we do not run into these problems in the future, not least by ensuring that the management information system — which is needed because of changes in budgetary arrangements — is put in place. Making that improvement and change for the future should not be viewed as a punitive or critical exercise.

With regard to the rates and examining what households pay here, the fact must be borne in mind that people across the water pay council tax and water charges. I make the point that we fund the Water Service here. There is no Barnett formula consequential for doing that. I remind Members that that is a relevant issue when one examines what resources we have. The Treasury provides no funding for the Water Service. Remember, therefore, that that is the only additional money that is raised to support the Budget, including funding for the Water Service. Money for the Water Service has to be found by stretching the Barnett allocation for other services or from the regional rate.

There are questions about how we fund services, and Barry McElduff touched upon this earlier. It was asked whether we should be hypothecating services that rates, or a portion of the rates, pay for. All these issues must be considered in the rating policy review. It would not be a comprehensive review if it were not open to such consideration.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister and Members of the time constraints.

Mrs Courtney: The statement shows the Minister of Finance and Personnel’s commitment to the Health Service,

the business sector, householders, the elderly and the community sector. These announcements will be widely welcomed across society. The statement shows that this Minister of Finance and Personnel stands at the centre of joined-up government.

Will the Minister provide details on when the findings of the Health Service consultancy will be ready for implementation?

Mr Durkan: We hope to get the joint consultancy study under way shortly. We do not intend it to be a prolonged exercise. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Economic Policy Unit and I recognise that this needs to happen sooner rather than later. We want to ensure that the results of that study give us good light under which to consider funding needs as they arise for the Health Service in the coming financial year and beyond. I hope that we will be able to work with the benefit of some conclusions and insights from this consultancy study within a few months.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome this act of repentance by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on behalf of the pro-agreement parties in the Executive. It is nice to see that the pro-agreement parties have seen the error of their ways on the issues of free transport and the regional rate. Is this really an act of repentance for past misdeeds, or a bribe in relation to future elections? To use the Minister's own words, is it the Executive at work or "at its work"?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am not clear that there was a question there.

Mr S Wilson: Can I come to my question?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I would prefer you to ask the question.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Minister accept that all the arguments that he put forward on 18 December in relation to his refusal to accept the amendment on the regional rate have been proved to be false? Will he tell the House when he found out that the valuation of domestic property gave him an extra £2 million?

When did he get the result of the more detailed work that showed that, contrary to what he said on 18 December, people in Northern Ireland do not pay more for non-domestic rates than is paid in England? Will he tell us when he was convinced that by not increasing the non-domestic rate by 8% he would not be putting in jeopardy any discussions on the Barnett formula?

Perhaps, having got his homework wrong last time, the Minister can now tell us, in answer to a previous question, how much it would cost to reduce the domestic rate to 3.3%. Will he now consider alleviating the burden on domestic householders by restricting the increase to 3.3%?

Mr Durkan: I did not mislead the House on 18 December. I never said that we were paying non-domestic rates at a proportion that was lagging well behind Great

Britain. I always made that point in relation to domestic rates. I subsequently have made a point of trying to check out the position of non-domestic rates — not an argument that had been made to me. That information became available to me at the end of January. It was at around the same time that confirmation of the buoyancy of around £2 million came through.

At the stage of the draft Budget, and at other times, including in December, I made the point that if the figures showed a buoyancy that allowed us to raise the same amount of money with a lower rate increase, we would consider that. That now has happened.

I have a point to make to Members, especially to those who tell me that there are all sorts of things that we should be doing on Barnett: that we should be taking on the Treasury, and so on. In relation to what we are raising as a contribution from households in the domestic regional rate, we will be in a very weak position in making any case to the Treasury. The Treasury will be able to say "Here you go again; you want English taxpayers to pay more for services yet you will not do anything to raise from your own households even a larger fraction of the amount that is being raised in England and Wales". Therefore, Members need to remember that when we quote and when we rightly argue parity on many grounds, that case can be used against us.

12.45 pm

It is only since the Executive have examined other spending issues and the money that was available in the December monitoring round — not all of which could have been reliably predicted in December — that they have been able to make these judgements. It is wrong for Members to suggest that the Executive should set a particular level of rate increase as a priority, ahead of public spending needs and the needs of certain services, and regardless of anything else. If that line had been taken I might have been unable to make some of today's welcome announcements. As was clear from my statement, if £2 million buoyancy means that the Executive can reduce the rate increase from 8% to 7%, each 1% will work out at £2 million.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister on his comprehensive and socially meaningful statement with regard to health, free travel and — with reservations — rates.

I particularly welcome the joint review of the causes and consequences of the Health Service's trust deficits. At a recent meeting of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee a Member suggested that the Executive had set up a hit squad to investigate deficits and monitoring procedures in the Health Service. I am glad to know that that will not be a punitive or hostile study. Does the Minister recognise that those deficits result from the historic years of underfunding? Will he assure the House that those deficits may not have accrued from

carelessness but may have come about because people were targeting social or health needs in those trusts?

No age limit has been set for those wishing to avail of free travel. Women are pensionable at the age of 60. Will the Minister and his officials keep that in mind? Does the Minister accept that, on Thursday morning, Gregory Campbell made a pre-emptive strike on the free travel issue and was making no contribution to the debate?

Rev Dr William McCrea: That is a speech.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCrea, please sit down.

Mr Durkan: I am glad that John Kelly has found much to welcome in what I have said.

The people who will carry out the consultancy report into the trust deficits are not a hit squad. It is about trying to get on top of the problem and make sure that we understand it fully. There are several issues involved. I accept what Mr Kelly said about the service pressures and needs that trusts face and how those have a bearing on some of their spending patterns. However, the study will also examine other issues to try to ensure that deficits will not rise to the level that they previously have without effective recovery action being taken. The Executive must be fully aware of the extent of the trust deficits, particularly as we move into a different regime under resource accounting and budgeting. The point of the consultancy study is to ensure that the Executive — and the Assembly, as the public expenditure management — are in the position that they need to be, as well as making sure that the trusts, as far as possible, have adequate funding.

We have already dealt with the sequence of the statements. We need to focus on making the scheme for free travel for the elderly work. Several details still need to be worked out. Some of them will be addressed in the interdepartmental working group that the Executive established some time ago, and the Department for Regional Development will have to pursue many of the issues directly with transport providers. We need to get on with that work and achieve the outcome that we want, rather than arguing about the provenance of it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. The House is suspended until 2.30 pm.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. First, you called two Members of the Ulster Unionist Party consecutively. When calling Members to speak, I understood that you had to do so on the basis of how they were aligned when they were elected to the House. You called Mr Weir and then Mr Hussey. That removed the opportunity for other parties to have their full allocation.

Secondly, perhaps you could facilitate Mr Taylor by giving him a copy of the rules of the House on the use of mobile phones. We know that he does not attend very often, so he may not understand them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not want to delay the House. As you know, we are going to a memorial service at 1.00 pm. Mr Taylor is quite aware of the rules on mobile phones. With regard to calling two Ulster Unionist Members in a row, I understood that Mr Weir did not fall into that category. I hope that that explains the situation.

The sitting was suspended at 12.52 pm.

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

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

School Performance Tables

2.30 pm

1. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education if he gave advance notice to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister of his announcement of 10 January 2001 that he was to end the publication of school performance tables. (AQO 780/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Responsibility for decisions on school performance tables rests entirely with me, as Minister, and the Department of Education. A paper outlining future options was the subject of widespread consultation, as well as consideration by the Assembly Education Committee. I considered the range and nature of the responses and, as the Minister responsible, took the final decision. It was not necessary to involve any other Minister on an administrative issue that was the exclusive responsibility of my Department.

Mr Armstrong: Why did the Minister not consult the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the Executive on those issues?

Mr M McGuinness: It is important to note that the decision on the tables was the exclusive responsibility of the Department of Education and, as such, was no different from other decisions that fall exclusively within the responsibility of other Ministers.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr S Wilson): Is the Minister telling the House that he ignored other members of the Executive when he made that important decision? On 19 December, the Education Committee sent him a unanimously agreed report that concluded as follows:

“The Department should regularly publish comparative information based on value-added performance indicators to enable a more accurate assessment of schools to take place. In the interim, while a suitable value-added method is being identified, the Department should consider making widely available the benchmarking data currently provided to schools, which enables them to compare their performance with schools of similar size.”

Is the Minister saying that he ignored not only the Executive but the Education Committee and the views of members of his own party who sit on that Committee? How does he intend to raise school standards if he refuses to have any comparative measures?

Mr M McGuinness: In response to the value-added contribution made by Sammy Wilson, I would point out — I believe that I have done so previously, but I am subject to correction on that — that research on the topic has been carried out for some years. No satisfactory means has been found of including such information in a way that would recognise progress in a broad range of qualifications and, at the same time, be readily understood by parents. There are no special factors relating to our schools that would justify the commissioning of further research. My Department will, of course, continue to monitor developments.

Benchmarking information is provided annually by my Department to schools and is available to anyone who would like a copy. Its purpose is to enable schools to see how they are performing in comparison with other schools of similar size or catchment, as defined by the number of pupils in receipt of free school meals. It is also sent to education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment and the teachers' unions. I would be happy to send a copy to the Member and the members of the Education Committee, if they so wish. However, the information is quite technical, and I do not believe that it would be helpful or meaningful to a wider audience.

School Guidance Counsellors

2. **Mr McNamee** asked the Minister of Education to (a) outline why school guidance counsellors in Northern Ireland do not require specific counselling qualifications and (b) enhance the status and profile of guidance and counselling as a means to support disadvantaged pupils. (AQO 793/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I recognise that there are times when pupils and, sometimes, parents need access to counselling. Increasingly, schools are identifying the need for such support, as staff become more alert to the signs that a young person is under stress.

I also accept the need for counselling staff who are appropriately trained and professionally supervised. In recognising this fact many schools refer pupils for external professional help when they judge it necessary. Several pilot counselling services are operating in schools, and my Department will consider the reports that are evaluating these. My departmental budget does not leave me with enough resources to provide the education service with professionally trained and supervised counsellors, but I intend to expand appropriate training and access to counselling, as resources permit.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat. Given that guidance counsellors in the South of Ireland require a postgraduate qualification, will the Minister consider establishing a similar level of qualification for those employed in this important service in the North?

Mr M McGuinness: A range of courses and qualifications is available to those who want to train as counsellors. At this point, I do not want to stipulate the best form of training of those working with young people, in or out of schools. I will, however, seek further advice on this.

Classroom 2000 Private Finance Initiative

3. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Education to clarify the current position on the Classroom 2000 private finance initiative (CPFI) (AQO 782/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Unfortunately, it was not possible to reach a mutually acceptable agreement on the PFI contract for Classroom 2000 that included commercial terms which also represented value for money in public expenditure. However, urgent steps are being taken to ensure that schools will have the same level of Classroom 2000 services, through the negotiating of several procurement contracts over the coming months.

Mr Kennedy: What action is the Minister taking to minimise the undue delays and inevitable disadvantages that this will impose on schools and pupils?

Mr M McGuinness: The Department is working hard to resolve the difficulties created by the failure to agree a way forward with Trilith. The Department believes that it can move forward and ensure that there is no change in the planned level of service provision — an average of one computer per 10 children. The Department is certain that it can resolve this issue.

The Classroom 2000 project board is positive that implementation will begin in schools from June 2001, with follow-up implementation to be completed in all schools no later than March 2003. Its director of services has written to all schools to inform them of the planned roll-out of services during this period.

Mr Gallagher: What are the alternative arrangements, in relation to Classroom 2000, that the Minister has said are coming into place? Is he in a position to tell us the number of contracts that it will involve and what the minimum period of those contracts will be?

Mr M McGuinness: It is the Department's view that it will probably not go down the PFI route, and several alternative options are being considered. At this stage, it is difficult to say how many contracts that will involve, but I feel that there will be more than just one.

Attacks on Rural Schools

4. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of Education to detail discussions he has had with the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary to discuss attacks on rural schools and to detail the security measures he has requested. (AQO 736/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I have had no discussions with the Chief Constable of the RUC, nor is there any need for me to have any. School security is the responsibility of individual school authorities, and any additional security measures which may be required after an attack on a school must be determined locally and in the light of the specific circumstances of that school. My Department has issued practical advice and guidance to all schools on security and personal safety.

I deplore all attacks on schools and call on all responsible members of the community to help to prevent them by highlighting the fact that such attacks are totally unacceptable. I also welcome the appeals made by representatives of all political parties for attacks on schools to end so that schools are safe havens for all our children.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Given the fact that the Minister is linked to an organisation that has attacked schools, school bus drivers and teachers, is his refusal to contact the RUC on this matter due to the fact that he does not have the brass neck to go to it because of his past? Or is he allowing his prejudice and hatred of the RUC to stand in the way of student safety in our country?

Mr M McGuinness: The supplementary question betrays the real reason for this question. The question was not asked out of any concern whatsoever for schools or for schoolchildren. The question was asked so that Mr Paisley Jnr could launch a political attack on me as Minister of Education.

As Minister of Education, it is my responsibility to ensure that schoolchildren, schools and teachers are protected. In recent times we have been involved in issuing important advice to schools as well as spending a considerable amount of money to ensure that schools can upgrade their security. Over the course of the last four years, this has amounted to about £4 million.

We must focus on the reality that the greatest contribution towards ending these attacks could come from politicians in the Assembly making politics work. Politicians must work with one another to ensure that we set a proper example to those people who think that this is the sensible way forward.

In recent weeks I was pleased to hear the courageous comments of DUP Assemblyman Roger Hutchinson and to see the leadership that he has given in the Larne area. He made it absolutely clear that under no circumstances will he support people who are involved in attacks on isolated Catholics — be it in Larne, Coleraine, Ballymena or anywhere else. That type of leadership shows the way forward.

Mr Paisley Jnr would learn an important lesson from Mr Hutchinson were he to accept that that is the right way to go. I also commend the comments of the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, who was courageous recently

in making it clear that it is time for Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters to stand together against those who try to destroy political progress.

Mr McClarty: Given his public comments of 30 November last year following an attack on a youth at Corpus Christi College in west Belfast, will the Minister encourage anyone who has information on attacks on schools to pass that information on to the RUC? Furthermore, as wanton vandalism caused by the lack of proper security measures at schools is a continual drain on school revenue resources, will the Minister confirm that his Department will financially support security measures where they are deemed necessary?

Mr M McGuinness: My Department is working proactively with the employing authorities and all education sectors to ensure that there is adequate provision for security measures at schools deemed to be at particular risk.

2.45 pm

From my own point of view, a large section of our community has a huge difficulty in relation to the RUC. The best way to resolve all these difficulties, which have been in existence for many decades, is to ensure that we have the new beginning for policing promised in the Good Friday Agreement. That is why it is particularly important that all elected representatives do everything in their power to ensure that that new beginning comes about.

Mr McHugh: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I am sure the Minister would agree that these attacks have largely taken place against Catholic schools, and that the situation was quiet in some areas until members of Mr Paisley Jnr's party became involved in whipping up tensions in such places as Dunloy. That is the real reason that there has been an environment for these attacks.

Mr Deputy Speaker: What is the Member's question?

Mr McHugh: The question is, does the Minister agree with me?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is the Minister clear as to the question?

Mr M McGuinness: I am.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could I suggest that, in order to prevent this fractiousness, it might be wise to keep the politics down.

Mr M McGuinness: I cannot see how we can possibly keep the politics down when this place is supposed to be about politics. The people on the other side of the House who are making fools of themselves are only too keen to use every possible issue in order to prevent political progress in this establishment.

I agree with Gerry McHugh that the vast majority of attacks that took place in the summer and autumn of 2000 were against Catholic schools. Fortunately, they

have been relatively rare in recent months. It is important that people —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: It is important that people in this establishment recognise the huge contribution they can make towards providing a good example to people on the ground. However, they need to go further. They need to recognise that the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement is the only way forward for all of us because those who are attempting to bring down the agreement know that the result will be an escalation of such attacks on our schools and on isolated Catholic families. That is why I think they have a particular responsibility. I hope and trust that some day in the future the DUP will wise up, catch themselves on, and recognise that it is time for all of us to work together.

Toberlane and Churchtown Primary Schools (Cookstown)

5. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Education to explain his decision to overturn the proposed closure of Toberlane and Churchtown Primary Schools in Cookstown.
(AQO 786/00)

Mr M McGuinness: There were two fundamental reasons for my decision. First, the significant level of opposition to the proposals reflected the strength of local opinion. Secondly, there was the view of the inspectorate acknowledging that teachers at both schools work particularly hard — and with success — to cope with a wide range of abilities and ages, and provide a broad curriculum in line with the statutory requirements.

My decision was also a practical demonstration of an approach which emphasises the importance of good schools as part of an infrastructure necessary to support rural communities by providing the best possible education for young people.

When I announced these decisions, I said that I would consider all development proposals on the merit of each case.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister confirm that he will apply the same criteria that he used in his decision on the proposed closure of Tobermore and Churchtown schools to all small rural schools facing closure?

Mr M McGuinness: When I made my announcement I made my approach crystal clear. I value the importance of small rural schools and the huge contribution that those schools make to the life of the rural community. There have been many cases in recent years where local communities have organised themselves effectively against what they perceive to be the Department's strategy of closing rural schools. It is important to listen to local people. There will, however, be occasions when a school will have to be closed because it is not fit for children to

be educated in and is not conducive to providing teachers and pupils with the proper educational environment. There will also be arguments for amalgamation and for federation, and we are prepared to look at those issues. In my original answer I stated that it is important that I, as Minister, examine and judge all these cases on their individual merits.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's commitment to the rural schools. What practical support can he give to enable rural schools to remain open? They are the linchpin of the rural community.

Mr M McGuinness: This is an issue that has struck a chord with many people, particularly those who live in rural areas —

Mr McCarthy: Ballygalget.

Mr M McGuinness: Absolutely. In moving forward to strengthen and enhance our education system it is necessary that we recognise the important contribution that rural schools make to the life of the local community. The assessment of relative needs exercise — which all the boards have to deal with — takes account of the incidence of small schools in each board area. The local management of schools schemes, through the application of the formula and the common criteria for the distribution of each board's curriculum reserve support fund, ensure that each small school receives a budget that reflects its relative need.

There has been much interest in the Assembly and among the parties about the decision in relation to the schools in the Cookstown area of County Tyrone. There will be occasions in the future when it will be sensible, for the purpose of ensuring proper education for the young people in certain areas, to close some rural schools. We may be involved in amalgamation and federation projects — we have to be flexible. From the way that the rural community has responded to the development proposals, it can be seen that people have strong views on schools that have been in existence for quite some time and that have made a huge contribution to their areas.

We want to move forward in partnership with the different education sectors and with local communities. We want to put in place an education system that people can recognise as being responsive to their needs and demands.

Ethnic-Minority Children: Educational Needs

6. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps he has taken to address the educational needs of traveller children and children of other ethnic minorities. (AQO 795/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The provision of education for ethnic-minority children is set within the framework of

the Race Relations Order 1997, which makes it unlawful for schools to treat a pupil from a particular racial group less favourably than other pupils, and requires education authorities to ensure that facilities for education are provided without racial discrimination. Section 75 of the 1998 Act places a duty on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity among persons of different racial groups. The provision made for the education of children from ethnic minorities attending primary or secondary schools usually takes the form of a more generous staffing ratio and/or the use of support teachers, including those specialising in teaching English as a second language, where the need for this is identified.

The education and library boards can, and do, mount specific initiatives within the overall block grant allocated to them by the Department. For example, some boards have appointed a traveller liaison officer to develop localised strategies for meeting the needs of traveller children. The cost of providing interpreters for parent/teacher meetings in situations where the parents are not fluent in English is met centrally by the boards.

As part of New TSN, the Department is engaged in reviewing its education strategies for travellers and other ethnic minorities in order to help further promote the social inclusion of these minority groups. In doing so, we will be giving careful consideration to the recommendations contained in the report —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Two more people want to speak.

Mr M McGuinness: I am almost finished. We will be giving careful consideration to the report of the promoting social inclusion working group on travellers and the research report 'Opportunities for All' produced by the Statistics and Research Agency.

Mr Deputy Speaker: One other person wants to speak after you, Ms Lewsley, so please be brief.

Ms Lewsley: Has the Minister's Department any type of outreach programme for these children, because many are lacking in self-esteem and confidence? There should be a pre-education programme run for them before we integrate them into the classroom.

Mr M McGuinness: That is something that we need to examine. The education and library boards and the different education sectors are looking at the particular difficulties and problems which the education of these children poses for the education system. We are open to examining that and seeing what more can be done.

Dr Adamson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister indicate how many Irish-medium schools he has visited since June last year, and how many formal meetings he has had with representatives of the ethnic minority and the Ulster-Scots communities?

Mr M McGuinness: I cannot say, off the top of my head, how many Irish-speaking schools I have visited, but I will provide the Member with that information.

In relation to the Ulster-Scots community, I have made it clear to everyone within the education system that my door is open to anyone who wishes to speak to me about issues of importance to them. Unfortunately, my door has not been rushed by people who are involved in that sector. I reiterate: if they wish to come and speak to me, I will meet with them and treat them with all the respect to which they are entitled.

Anti-Drugs Education

7. **Rev Dr Ian Paisley** asked the Minister of Education to detail discussions he has had with the Chief Constable or other senior Royal Ulster Constabulary officers to assess ways to improve anti-drugs education in schools.

(AQO 741/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I have had no discussions with the Chief Constable of the RUC or other members of the RUC on this subject, nor is this necessary in my view. I am a member of the ministerial group on drugs which deals with this issue in detail. The Minister for Social Development should also be attending those meetings, but he does not. He boycotts them. It would be worthwhile if Mr Paisley would advise him that the sensible thing to do would be to work with the rest of us to deal with these issues.

In my Department a high priority is attached to tackling the increasing problem of the availability and use of illegal drugs. It has always been recognised that schools have a major preventative role to play in addressing the problems of the misuse of drugs and other substances. For this reason, drugs education is a statutory requirement within the schools curriculum. It is one of the objectives of the health education cross-curricular theme, and it is recommended that it should be taught within the context of health education. Science, religious education, and personal and social education programmes are the most common areas through which the topic is covered.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The Minister did not mention that his Colleague in IRA/Sinn Féin set up a different committee in order to remove the police. That is why the DUP did not co-operate with that committee. Let us have a bit of truth.

3.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley, is that a question?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The Minister has admitted in the House today that he does not discuss this matter with the Chief Constable of the RUC.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your question, please.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: My question is whether this is part of his policy to put the RUC out of schools, despite the good work that it has done there. Is it not a fact that, at certain schools, the RUC, which has been doing good work on the drugs issue, has been put out of the schools?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I warned you that we had only two minutes left. Time is up.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This part of the Assembly's proceedings is billed as "Questions to the Minister". Can you rule on whether there is also an obligation on the Minister to answer those questions. In addition, was the Minister correct, or was he abusing the House, when he gave a three-minute answer to a question from a Member from one party, yet spent six minutes avoiding giving an answer to a question from a Member from this party?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister answered the questions to the extent to which he felt empowered and knowledgeable to do so. However, you had only two minutes to discuss this matter, and that time is up.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Further to the point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the debate Mr McHugh referred to an incident which took place in Dunloy, which is in my constituency. Why did he not tell the House that that attack was carried out by Republicans and that it was as a result of an internecine fight involving his own party?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley, that is not a point of order. Our time is up.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Royal Victoria Hospital: Neurosurgery

1. **Mr Kane** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she is aware that there is a waiting list for patients requiring surgery for brain tumours of up to 10 days at the Royal Victoria Hospital neurosurgery department, and to detail the steps she is taking to rectify the situation.

(AQO 757/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mar gheall ar nádúr agus práinn an reachta seo cuirtear othair a bhfuil obráid uathu faoi scian a luaithe is féidir. I rith na bliana 1999-2000 glacadh isteach othair a ndearnadh fáthmheas príomhúil nó tanáisteach i leith siada inchinne orthu taobh istigh de sheacht lá ar meán ón dáta ar cinneadh go raibh obráid riachtanach. Go hiondúil, rachaidh othair den chineál seo faoi scian ar an lá a glactar isteach iad nó ar an lá dár gcionn.

Is eol domh go raibh ócáidí ann ar na malllaibh nuair a cuireadh moill ar roinnt obráidí de bharr dianbhrúnna ar an aonad néarmháinliachta réigiúnach. Ach dearbhaítear domh anois nach bhfuil aon mhoill mhíchúí ann faoi láthair maidir le hobráidí d'othair a bhfuil siadaí inchinne orthu.

Because of the nature and urgency of this condition, patients requiring surgery are operated on as soon as

possible. During 1999-2000, patients with a primary or secondary diagnosis of a brain tumour were admitted for surgery within an average of seven days from the date on which an operation was deemed necessary. Operations on such patients normally take place on the date of admission or on the day after. Recently, there have been occasions when severe pressures on the regional neuro-surgical unit have led to delays in some operations. At present, however, I am assured that there is no undue delay in surgery for patients with brain tumours.

Mr Kane: How far will the Minister's proposed series of measures go towards shortening the waiting list for neurosurgery and redeeming what is in effect a meltdown of neurosurgery at the Royal Victoria Hospital? Recently, in attempting to represent a patient requiring spinal surgery, whose admission for treatment had been cancelled 10 minutes before he left home in Coleraine, I contacted the consultant at the RVH. The consultant informed me of his frustration and that of his colleagues at the RVH at the dramatic reduction in the number of days on which surgical procedures can be carried out by one full day a week. The lack of resources available for neurosurgery —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Kane, may I hear your question?

Mr Kane: Can the Minister give the House a constructive commitment? How does she intend to deal with this serious matter?

Ms de Brún: With regard to waiting lists, I am advised by the trust that the five people who are currently awaiting treatment were diagnosed last week and are scheduled to be admitted this week. I cannot comment on the specific case to which the Member refers, as I do not have the necessary details. I have frequently highlighted the need for additional resources for the entire range of health and social services, and I will continue to do so. It is clear that I am addressing this issue.

Ms Gildernew: The problem of waiting lists does not only apply to neurosurgery. There are an estimated 50,000 people on waiting lists. May I ask what the Minister is doing to try to address this matter?

Ms de Brún: Tackling of waiting lists is one of my key priorities. This long-standing problem is the result of years of underfunding. There is no quick fix. I have already issued a comprehensive framework for services which sets out a longer-term, more strategic approach to making real and sustainable reductions in waiting lists. This is backed by an additional investment of £5 million this year, and the Budget proposals for next year mean that there will be an extra £8 million available for further action.

Rev Robert Coulter: Will the Minister provide details of the numbers on waiting lists for major surgery at acute hospitals in Northern Ireland today and further indicate any percentage improvements from the previous year?

Ms de Brún: The Member will be aware that without advance notice such an answer detailing the range of hospitals and percentages cannot be available. However, if the Member wishes to write to me, I can pick up on that.

Department Literature (Languages)

2. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her policy on publishing literature by her Department in languages other than English; and to make a statement.

(AQO 760/00)

Ms de Brún: Tá rún daingean agam cumarsáid éifeachtach a dhéanamh le daoine i ngach foilseachán de chuid mo Roinne. Aithníom gur gá nó gur mian le roinnt earnálacha sa phobal teacht ar ábhar i dteangacha seachas Béarla; agus, i gcás daoine a bhfuil míchumas céadfach agus foghlama orthu gur gá teacht ar eolas i bhformáid eile seachas cló. Cuirfidh mo Roinnse doiciméid thábhachtacha ar fáil i gcló mór, in Braille, ar chlostéip, i nGaeilge agus i Sínis agus scrúdóidh sí éilimh maidir le haistriúcháin i dteangacha mionlach eitheach eile.

Tá sé beartaithe ag mo Roinn ina scéim chomhionannais na socruithe sin a mheasúnú roimh mhí an Mheithimh 2002 le fáil réidh le bacainní ar chumarsáid éifeachtach.

I am fully committed to effective communication with the public in all my Department's publications. I recognise the need or wish of some sections of the public to access material in a language other than English and, in the case of people with sensory and learning disabilities, to access information in a format other than print.

My Department will make key documents available in large print, Braille, audio cassette, Irish and Chinese and will consider requests for translations into other minority ethnic languages. In its equality scheme, my Department has also undertaken to assess these arrangements before June 2002 with a view to removing any barriers to effective communication.

Mr Neeson: Does the Minister agree that Northern Ireland is now home to a growing number of people from different ethnic backgrounds and that it is vital that they understand information distributed by her Department? Can she assure the House that the health boards are consistent in the provision of these facilities?

Ms de Brún: The concept of health and social services provision is not tied to one language and we must provide health and social services to a wide range of service users with regard to community background, social class and language. A modern health service must be able to cater for this, and we will endeavour to do so. We do not have consistency from one board to another because provision depends on who is likely to need whatever service in a particular area. If there is a predominance of one community in one board area, that should influence the provision of translated documents.

The boards take the subject matter into account and consider whether a document is likely to be of relevance to particular linguistic groups in their areas.

Dr Adamson: Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister assure us that she will approach this matter on the basis of need rather than ideology? Will she indicate how much her Department has spent since she took office on the translation and publication of literature in the Irish language and what the figures are for Ulster-Scots and ethnic minority languages?

Ms de Brún: My approach is based on the need to provide services to a diverse community. We are looking at the Good Friday Agreement and at what it says about the use of languages, and I will take that into account.

For the current financial year, from April 2000 to date, translation costs are as follows: Irish, £17,549; and Chinese, £4,289 — a total of £21,838.

The documents 'Investing for Health' and 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care' are currently being translated into Ulster-Scots. We have had 27 requests for 'Investing for Health' and 10 requests for 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care'. We have not yet been billed for these translations, but I will give the Member the figures as soon as they are available.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Minister accept that every month she is wasting vital resources by duplicating her material in the Irish language? She has made her puerile political point. Will she now stop wasting these resources, which could have been spent on at least five hip replacement operations? Will she now start to allocate her resources to ensure that patients come first and not the Republican agenda?

Ms de Brún: As for the perennial hip-replacement question, may I suggest that it is not I who is making puerile political points. I have already explained the need to provide services in a pluralist society to a wide range of service users. Once and for all, can I put to rest this issue that Ian Paisley Jnr raises again and again. Translations are paid for out of my Department's administration budget. That is quite distinct and separate from the general Health, Social Services and Public Safety budget, to which he constantly refers.

3.15 pm

Foster Parents

3. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the recruitment and retention of foster parents; and to make a statement. (AQO 769/00)

Ms de Brún: I mí Mheán Fómhair 1999 sheol mo Roinn cód cleachtais maidir le caighdeáin chúraim altrama agus maidir le cúramóirí altrama a earcú, a mheasúnú, a fhormheas, a oiliúint agus a bhainistiú agus

le tacaíocht a thabhairt dóibh. Is é an cuspóir a bhí leis ná dea-chleachtas agus seirbhísí ardchaighdeáin altrama a chur chun cinn. Déanfaidh gach iontaobhas sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta iniúchadh ar ball ar an tseirbhís chúraim altrama atá aige i gcoinne na gcaighdeán seo. Nuair a bhéas an t-iniúchadh seo críochnaithe beidh sé ar mo chumas gach gné den tseirbhís luachmhar seo a mheasúnú.

There have been some difficulties with the recruitment and retention of foster carers. The health and social services trusts are aware of those problems and are endeavouring to address them. In September 1999 my Department launched a code of practice on the recruitment, assessment, approval, training, management and support of foster carers and standards for foster care, both of which were designed to promote good practice and a high-quality fostering service. Each trust will shortly undertake an audit of its foster care service against those standards. When that has been completed I will be in a position to assess all aspects of this valuable service.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr David McClarty. Oh, Mr David Ford.

Mr Ford: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thought you had forgotten me.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Never.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her response, although I am slightly worried when she talks about "some difficulties" with the recruitment and retention of foster parents. If she were using the language that social workers use, she would not be using a euphemism such as "some difficulties". In view of the serious difficulties that exist in recruiting and retaining foster parents, is it acceptable that little seems to have been done since the 1999 report to which she referred? What is she going to do to ensure that trusts take serious action now, including looking at the different methods used in other jurisdictions, to ensure that we can increase the number of foster parents and improve the care service offered to our children?

Ms de Brún: I am aware that some 200 additional foster carers are needed. Last September the Foster Care Association organised a foster care awareness week, which was designed to encourage recruitment. The response to that initiative is now being assessed, and we will be interested in hearing its outcome. I assure the Member that my Department will give priority to the development of foster care services. Moreover, all the boards have indicated that the development of foster care services is among their priorities, as we have asked.

With the help of the national Foster Care Association and the necessary computer support, we can assist the trusts. We can ensure that the audit will address good practice that has been developed elsewhere, as well as the standard audit, which we will be able to track.

Mr McClarty: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I understand completely the difficulty you had in distinguishing between me and David Ford.

Last September, when 322 children were waiting for foster homes in Northern Ireland, the Minister encouraged more people to become foster parents. Can the Minister indicate to the House how many children are presently waiting for foster homes and how many of those are still on the waiting list from last September? Furthermore, can the Minister indicate by constituencies, areas of (a) poor recruitment and (b) retention difficulties?

Ms de Brún: Perhaps the Member would make that a written question rather than an oral one. Such detailed questions cannot possibly be answered without advance notice. The Members who are putting them as oral questions, rather than as written ones, know that they cannot possibly be answered. However, I will supply the necessary details for each constituency. If the Member writes to me, I will supply that information.

We are endeavouring to produce increased support for foster carers and to increase the number of foster carers. That has been addressed in the Programme for Government. We are also trying to ensure that there is increased support to overcome difficulties in the retention of foster carers.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, Madam Deputy Speaker. Does the Minister agree that funding is a test for the Executive, not only on the delivery of foster care but on children's services as a whole? Is there a different level of financial support —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Ramsey: Are there different levels of financial support for foster carers across trusts?

I thank Mr Paisley for his attention.

Ms de Brún: I have frequently and consistently highlighted the considerable need for greater resources across a wide range of health and social services, including children's services. In advance of the Budget allocations this year, I bid for what I considered to be necessary. I also made it clear that I did not think it possible for the Executive to address that this year because of competing priorities. We are now taking up that question and examining the need. The kind of examination that the Executive are now making of needs across the health and social services should help us to address the level of budgetary allocation to health, social services and public safety for the future.

On the question of variation between trusts, some concerns have been expressed about the payment of allowances and expenses associated with caring for foster children. One of the 25 foster care standards deals with that aspect of the service. The audit that is about to commence will track the performance of the trusts in that.

Children's Health Care: Finance Allocations

4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that the third report from the capitation formula review group is proposing that for every £100 allocated to children's health care in Northern Ireland, only £77 will be allocated per child in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area while £122 per child will be given to some other areas; and to make a statement. (AQO 785/00)

Ms de Brún: Ceapadh an fhoirmle le cinntiú go léiríonn leithroinnt na n-acmhainní na leibhéil dhifriúla riachtanais i gceantair éagsúla. Is amhlaidh, mar sin, gur mó na hacmhainní a leithroinnfear ar cheantair inár mó na leibhéil ganntanais agus riachtanais eile. Is mar seo a chinntíonn an fhoirmle go bhfaigheann bord a bhfuil níos mó páistí i ngátar faoina chúram go leor acmhainní leis an leibhéal céanna cúraim a sholáthar do pháiste i ngátar agus a thioctadh le bord ar bith eile a sholáthar. Ós rud é go bhfuil leibhéal an ghanntanais i bhfad níos lú, ar meán, i gceantar Bhord an Tuaiscirt, is lú an t-airgead atá de dhíth le tabhairt faoi leibhéal an ghanntanais ann.

The formula is designed to ensure that the allocation of resources reflects the different levels of need in different areas. Areas with higher levels of deprivation and other needs will be allocated correspondingly more resources. In this way, the formula ensures that a board with more needy children receives enough resources to provide the same level of care to a needy child as can be provided in any other board. As the level of deprivation is, on average, much lower in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area, it requires less money to address the level of need. It is for this reason that it has the lowest average allocation per child in the population for children's social services in the family and childcare programme.

Mr Beggs: Can the Minister confirm that the overall effect of the proposed formula changes will result in the Northern Board being short several million pounds compared to the funding it would have received if the current formula was simply updated using current demographic factors?

Does the Minister accept that the criteria create a huge disparity between different board areas in family and childcare funding? Does she also recognise that the formula does not take account of all homes in receipt of income support, those forced to live in private rented accommodation or parents in low-paid employment living in poor-quality private housing? Does the Minister accept that the weighting is out of character with all other factors in this proposed document? I contend that the disparity is huge and needs to be re-addressed.

Ms de Brún: The figures on the overall impact of the boards' shares and the proposed changes to the formula are not yet finalised. However, if the transitional relief

currently being given to the Southern Board to phase the last formula changes is excluded, the current assessment is that the Northern Board's share of resources will increase from 23.69% to 23.70%.

The Western Board's share will increase from 16.53% to 16.69%. The Southern Board's share will remain constant at 17.67%. The Eastern Board's share will reduce from 42.11% to 41.94%. There may still be some further adjustments, based on the outcome of consultation.

With regard to the matter of needs weighting, considerable research has been done into how needs and other weightings for gender and age should be worked out. Therefore I cannot accept that there are any negative aspects to the way in which this is carried out.

On the contrary, it would be wrong for us to continue with a dated formula which does not take account of the up-to-date information we now have on the effects of age, gender and deprivation on the need for resources. We now also know much more about the impact of rural consideration on the costs faced by boards.

Primary Care (Mid Ulster)

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of primary care provision in Mid Ulster; and to make a statement. (AQO 779/00)

Ms de Brún: Is é an cuspóir atá leis an soláthar cúraim phríomhúil i Lár Uladh go mbeidh teacht réidh ag an phobal ar réimse iomlán seirbhísí cúraim phríomhúil ar fud an cheantair.

The primary care provision in Mid Ulster is designed to offer good access and coverage for the population of the area to the full range of primary care services.

Mr Armstrong: Following the Minister's announcement this morning that she will continue to provide high levels of funding, can she advise us what criteria are used when assessing the viability of primary care sites? Can I be assured that the rural nature of my constituency, coupled with poor road infrastructure, will be given due weight in her thinking? Does the Minister accept that healthcare provision must be seen in the round and that, no matter how satisfactory primary care may be in Mid Ulster, this provision is undermined by the inadequacy of hospital services?

Ms de Brún: I have indeed said that I will endeavour to make improvements and to ensure the highest quality services. I now re-affirm that commitment to the Mid Ulster area.

In answer to the question about roads, interdepartmental consultation on the development of the Department for Regional Development's transportation strategy is ongoing. Work is also progressing on the health impact on that strategy. That will also take into account

the need to look at health matters when developing road structures.

We are endeavouring to improve primary care services in the Mid Ulster area. We recently funded two innovative pilot projects, which were put forward by the Homefirst Community Trust, across the entire Mid Ulster area.

One of these is aimed at improving access to dental care for housebound people; this has an effect on the Member's wider concern about the impact of the road infrastructure on health. We have also funded an initiative on out-of-hours community mental health. It is hoped that these will bring benefits that can be replicated in other areas.

3.30 pm

In addition, the Northern Health and Social Services Board has supported the development of a major new GP premises in Magherafelt and provided improvement grants for substantial extensions and renovations to the Coagh and Stewartstown surgeries. The Member will also be aware that the Department funds the Mid Ulster commissioning pilot scheme, which is undertaking a variety of initiatives, such as the local medical orthopaedic clinic, an elderly needs assessment project and work on prescribing and outpatient waiting times. I hope that that gives an indication of our absolute commitment to primary care services in the Mid Ulster area.

Acute Hospital Services (Tyrone and Fermanagh)

6. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the future provision of acute hospital services in the West Tyrone and Fermanagh and South Tyrone parliamentary constituencies. (AQO 750/00)

Ms de Brún: Tá mé ag dréim leis go mbeidh an grúpa aithbhreithnithe neamhspleách a bhunaigh mé sa samhradh seo caite ag cur tuarascála chugam ar fhorbairt seirbhísí ospidéal sa todhchaí. Ní bheadh sé cuí agam tuairim ar bith a nochtadh ar sholáthar seirbhísí géarmhíochaine ospidéal i gceantar ar bith go dtí go mbeidh tuarascáil an ghrúpa aithbhreithnithe neamhspleách curtha faoi mo bhráid.

I expect the acute hospitals review group, which I established last summer, to report on the future development of hospital services. It would be inappropriate for me to offer any comment on the future provision of acute hospital services in any area before the independent group has submitted its report. However, I assure the Assembly that I am committed to the development of our hospital services in a way that ensures access to high-quality care for all those who need it.

Mr Gibson: When does the Minister expect the acute hospitals review group to report? Will it be before or

after Easter? The Erne Hospital and the Tyrone County Hospital are in decline, and the South Tyrone Hospital has gone. We are totally dependent on hospitals that are 60 to 70 miles away.

Ms de Brún: Although I cannot anticipate what the group may say about the Erne Hospital, Tyrone County Hospital, or any other hospital, I am committed to the development of services in a way that ensures access to high-quality care for those who need it. I have clearly said that I wish to see present services maintained until the review group reports.

Until those longer-term decisions are taken, I expect every effort to be made to maintain services in existing hospitals. For example, I refer the Member to the contingency agreement that existed between the Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust and the Western Health and Social Services Council for gynaecology and female surgical services at the Erne Hospital. That temporary measure ended on 5 February, when the gynaecology ward reopened and elective surgery resumed.

I cannot say exactly when the acute hospitals review group will report to me, nor if it will be before or after Easter. First, it is an independent review group, and secondly —

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

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Madam Deputy Speaker:

Question 6.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Why are we jumping to question 6?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The first five Members on the list to ask questions were not in the Chamber.

Mr Dodds: Patricia Lewsley is present, and she is on the list at question 2.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I did not see Mr Dallat in the Chamber when I called, nor was I aware that Ms Lewsley was in the Chamber. I will go back.

Public Expenditure: Comptroller and Auditor General and Public Accounts Committee Scrutiny

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the steps he is taking to ensure that Government Departments address issues which are raised in reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General and scrutinised by the Public Accounts Committee.

(AQO 770/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): It is each Department's duty to consider the Committee's

reports that relate to it and to provide answers to any issues raised. That is done in the form of a memorandum of reply that is laid by the Department of Finance and Personnel before the Assembly. My officials ensure that the relevant Department addresses all issues raised in the Committee's reports in the memorandum. In addition, they contact the Departments annually to confirm that all commitments given in such memoranda have been addressed and implemented as appropriate.

Mr Dallat: Can the Minister assure the House that reports prepared by the office of the public auditor are agreed without unnecessary delay so that the issues they raise can be scrutinised by the Public Accounts Committee and acted upon? That would ensure that the Assembly can make real changes in the interests of value for money and improved services to the wider community.

Mr Durkan: It is important that reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General are dealt with quickly, as the Member suggests. However, it is worth taking some time to ensure that the relevant facts of the case are available and interpreted accurately, rather than have them be the subjects of likely dispute when it comes to later consideration. Taking time to make sure that relevant facts are properly established and understood should not be used to impede the process of scrutiny by the Comptroller and Auditor General or the Public Accounts Committee.

Executive Programme Fund (Children)

2. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how the Executive programme fund relating to children can be accessed. (AQO 801/00)

Mr Durkan: At its meeting on 25 January, the Executive agreed a process for making allocations from the five Executive programme funds. Departments have been provided with guidance on preparing bids for projects that might receive support from the funds, and they have been asked to submit proposals by mid-February. Following assessment of those, the Executive will announce their decision on allocations.

The Executive have agreed to put in place special measures for the children's fund to allow voluntary sector projects to benefit from it. An interdepartmental working group is being established to consider and implement the arrangements needed for that.

Ms Lewsley: Given that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister announced the appointment of the new commissioner for children, can the Minister outline the role that the commissioner will play, if any, in relation to this fund?

Mr Durkan: The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister recently announced the terms of reference for the proposed children's commissioner's remit, which will be informed by widespread consultation. The specific relationship between the proposed commissioner and

the children's fund will be developed in the light of that consultation.

Mr B Bell: Will the Minister advise Members of the mechanisms that will be put in place to make sure that funding goes where it is needed, and will he assure me that funding will not be held up by the bureaucracy of empire-building organisations acting as intermediators?

Mr Durkan: The arrangements being made will be brought forward as a result of the interdepartmental working group that I indicated would work particularly with the children's fund. The Executive have agreed some broad approaches to the question of their programme funds at large, and I hope that Departments will make meaningful bids.

In this first round, the bids will probably be more mono-departmental than multi-departmental, but the aim is to make sure that we move the funds forward in ways that target need. We are quite clear that the programme funds are there to make sure that there is a new strategic impetus to measures and that due regard is shown to targeting social need.

Rating Policy Review

3. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that the proposed review of rating policy will provide an opportunity for consultation outside government. (AQO 800/00)

13. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that the review of rating policy will examine the impact of the existing policy in terms of equality and targeting social need as well as the needs of small businesses. (AQO 798/00)

Mr Durkan: With permission, I will take questions 3 and 13 together.

The review of rating policy will involve consultation with the public so that views and proposals can be considered. The review will be comprehensive and will include consideration of the existing rating policy's impact on equality and targeting social need. I cannot pre-empt the outcome of the review, but I assure Members that rates issues such as the needs of small businesses will be considered in the review. The target date for the completion of the review is spring 2002.

Mr Fee: I thank the Minister for his reply and for confirming how quickly and expeditiously the review will be carried out. The speed at which he works has already caught out a number of Members in the last couple of minutes, but I commend him for his industry.

Will the Minister confirm that a principal function of the review is to ensure that the burden of debt will be shared across all sectors? That is particularly important in situations where relief is necessary to ensure that small businesses can operate, where employment and jobs are

protected and where people on low incomes cannot afford to pay the rates. Will the Minister confirm that those who are most vulnerable will be protected and that those in a position to pay will pay the lion's share.

Mr Durkan: The review will attempt to examine all the issues involved in rating policy. Additional money — above and beyond what the Treasury gives us — is required, and rates are the means to achieve that. Therefore we need to raise revenue by whatever revised or remodelled rating policy and system we have.

However, the review should be used to examine equity and effectiveness and to ensure that we levy rates in ways which do not place an undue burden on households that can ill afford such a burden or on any particular business sectors as distinct from others that might be better able to afford to make a contribution.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his announcement about the rates review. Does the Minister accept that it is important that due consideration be given to the character of business in Northern Ireland, particularly the small retail sector? In the last review, that sector felt that it was unduly dealt a severe blow and that the rating review seemed to cause less pain to the larger multiples.

Mr Durkan: I accept the Member's point. The last review was a revaluation of rating in the non-domestic sector, and that is different from the wider rating policy review that I have announced. There will be a revaluation in the non-domestic sector. That has already been announced, and work on that is in progress.

Given that many Members feel that there are outstanding discrepancies since the last revaluation or that there have been significant changes, particularly in the retail geography, since then, that is all the more reason that they should support the non-domestic revaluation that is under way. That is a separate exercise from the wider rating policy review, and it would not have been fair or proper to postpone the revaluation that needs to happen on a timely basis just because the rating policy is being reviewed.

Government Departments: Decentralisation

4. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail progress towards the decentralisation of Government Departments outside the Greater Belfast area. (AQO 768/00)

6. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline progress in the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs to South Down; and to make a statement. (AQO 748/00)

7. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that his review of Civil Service accommodation will be completed by June 2001. (AQO 753/00)

18. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on his review of Civil Service office locations throughout Northern Ireland. (AQO 773/00)

Mr Durkan: Madam Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will take questions 4, 6, 7 and 18 together.

With regard to the dispersal of Civil Service jobs, I do not wish to prejudice the outcome of the accommodation review or speculate about those areas that might feature in job relocation considerations. Following the recent baseline review of the Government office database and the Executive Committee's agreement to Next Steps, consultants will be engaged to take forward the next phase of the accommodation review process.

A completion date of June 2001 is no longer considered viable, and I anticipate that it will be October, possibly November, before final recommendations regarding accommodation and associated dispersal implications can be brought to the Assembly.

3.45 pm

Mr Ford: The Minister will be pleased to know that if he does not intend to discuss the merits of different locations, I will not mention Ballynure, Toomebridge, Crumlin or anywhere in between. The Assembly warmly welcomes the recently increased staffing in the Department of the Environment and, in particular, in the Planning Service and the Environment and Heritage Service. However, is the Minister aware that there is now serious overcrowding in many Government offices in central Belfast as a result of the increased staffing? If there is to be no outcome of the review before November, should temporary action, which would not undermine the long-term need to decentralise jobs away from the city, not be taken?

Mr Durkan: I assure the Member that the review will not be blind to any pressing needs. Some Departments have pressing needs, and some of these relate to staffing numbers and to the quality of locations. Issues are arising as matters proceed. Nevertheless, we want to make sure that we have a strategic framework that will guide our thinking, not just in meeting the ad hoc pressures and needs of Departments but in informing overall accommodation policy. I am aware of the needs of several Departments, and in many ways those needs add up to a strong justification for the sort of review that is being undertaken.

Mr McGrady: In view of the fact that the Department for Regional Development will shortly be publishing the regional planning strategy, which predicts enhanced growth for areas outside Greater Belfast, will the Minister assure the Assembly that all Departments will be required to examine areas where there is scope for their activities to be transferred outside the Greater Belfast area? In other words, what services can be decentralised to give some

meaning to the Executive's Programme for Government regarding rural proofing and the equality agenda?

Mr Durkan: Many Members will be aware that each time questions have been asked on this subject I have stressed that there are various matters that have to be considered and reflected upon in the review that is being undertaken. Regional planning strategy is one of those matters, and there are also the sorts of undertakings contained in 'Shaping our Future', as finally approved.

On the issue of examining departmental activities to see what services might be suitable for decentralisation, authority was given at the Executive Committee on 8 February for the Department of Finance and Personnel to proceed with the next stage of the accommodation review. It was explained to the Executive that, in parallel, we will write to Departments asking them to reassess their accommodation requirements with regard to business needs, including the need for a presence on the Stormont estate and, where appropriate, to prepare a business case for meeting those requirements. As part of that exercise Departments will be asked to consider the scope for New TSN-related relocation, subject to cost and value-for-money assessments, and to bring forward costed proposals where there are pressing requirements or where early decisions are needed.

Mr Hussey: I want to express my extreme disappointment at the four-to five-month delay in the review of accommodation. I wonder how much of that is due to resistance in the Civil Service to the proposals for the decentralisation of accommodation. The Minister will be well aware — as he supplied me with the figures himself — that in the constituency of West Tyrone 1.8% of the working population are civil servants.

Madam Deputy Speaker: What is the question?

Mr Hussey: The average percentage for Northern Ireland is 2.8%. West Tyrone clearly falls well below the average, and the figure represents a shortfall of 480 jobs. Can the Minister assure me that this will be taken into consideration when the review is published?

Mr Durkan: With regard to the delay, we need to conduct the review in a realistic manner. Earlier, I referred to work carried out on the baseline review. We have received an updated database of Government office accommodation from consultants only recently. It follows on from something that was originally prepared two years ago, but with devolution and the reorganisation of Departments there have been changes, which have had to be tracked. That is really an essential prerequisite to the main stage of the review.

I recently obtained the agreement of Colleagues on the Executive Committee to their Departments starting work on the review. I expect to finalise the terms of reference shortly so that we can proceed with appropriate consultants for that particular assignment. Given the

time factors involved in the appointment of consultants, which is not a straightforward matter, I am advising the Assembly of the likely slippage of the timescale. I do not believe that that in itself will affect the quality of the review.

I hear what the Member has said in relation to the proportions and the relative statistics, just as I hear a similar point coming from many other Members in other constituencies. All of the obvious concerns referred to will be reflected in the review.

Mr Beggs: The Minister talked about targeting social need being one of the criteria that will determine where he will allocate potential new sites for Government offices. Will the current low numbers of civil servant jobs in constituencies be a weighting factor in the consideration? Will areas of high unemployment be a factor? Does the Minister recognise that there are areas, for instance in my own constituency of East Antrim, where there are very few civil service jobs and high unemployment? Does he recognise that there is a need to create an equitable spread of civil service jobs across all constituencies?

Mr Durkan: I recognise the beneficial impact that public service and civil service jobs have in any given area, not least in those areas of high unemployment. Unemployment rates are one relevant indicator when it comes to measuring or reflecting social need. I have also indicated, in the past, that the levels of civil service jobs in locations relative to the overall population of working age would be a relevant consideration in identifying areas particularly ripe for hosting new civil service jobs.

Regional Rate

5. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to state what representations he has received regarding the proposed increase in the regional rate.

(AQO 743/00)

10. **Mr Dodds** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail discussions he has had with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the decision to increase the regional rate by 5% above the rate of inflation.

(AQO 787/00)

11. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any meetings he has had with district councils or chief executives of councils to discuss the decision to increase the regional rate by 8%.

(AQO 776/00)

Mr Durkan: I will take questions 5, 10 and 11 together. I have received written representations from three MLAs, six district councils, two private bodies and six members of the public regarding the proposed increase in the regional rates. The proposed rates increases were discussed at the Executive Committee each time the Budget was on the agenda.

Belfast City Council has requested an early meeting with me to discuss the regional rate increase, among other matters, and that meeting is currently being arranged.

Castlereagh Borough Council has also requested a meeting, which I am currently considering. Four other councils have written to me about the regional rate, but none of those requested a meeting. Appropriate written answers were either issued or are being issued in each case.

Mrs I Robinson: Can the Minister give us the estimated impact of the proposed 3.3% rates increase on businesses, jobs and on personal disposable income? Does he agree that even this rise is coming at a time when there is an expected downturn in the economy, which, if it does come, will be made worse by his rates increase?

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Durkan: I recognise that any rates increase will be significant to ratepayers. However, given that people said that the rate of inflation should be the target figure and that rate increases should be pegged to it, I find complaints that 3.3% is too much a little hard to take now.

Although averages can be misleading, we are looking at a situation in which the reduction in the non-domestic rate to 3.3% — which was the rate figure that the Member mentioned — will see businesses paying, on average, an extra £150 a year instead of £299 a year. I thought that that reduction would have been welcomed.

I must also make the point that the revenue from the rates is welcome in view of the many spending programmes whose pressing needs have been outlined to the Executive and to my Department.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been grouped with questions 10 and 11.

Mr Dodds: In view of the rapid volte-face on non-domestic rate increase levels which the Minister announced this morning, I wonder if he considers it fair to increase the regional rate by more than double the rate of inflation for householders and domestic ratepayers. He should take it from me, and from those who have opposed him on this issue, that many householders will not find much comfort from the cheering, waving and handclapping that went on this morning as he announced that that increase was staying.

Despite the late state of play, will the Minister not reconsider that proposal in view of the reversal of his decision on non-domestic rates? He has proved that when the pressure is on, he really can find extra money. Some Members have already suggested diverting money from the North/South political institutions.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his points, which are familiar to me. The fact is — and I made it very clear this morning — that the change in the domestic rate increase is funded by the buoyancy of the valuation base. I explained repeatedly that this would happen if the figures allowed. There is no U-turn or volte-face in that.

Allow me now to respond to the question on the non-domestic regional rate. It is not the case that someone put this to me or to the Department of Finance and Personnel. On the contrary, at my request the Department examined certain issues and provided details that showed the comparisons between ourselves — *[Interruption]*

I refer Members again to my earlier point about the number of representations that I received. They were not particularly overwhelming, nor were huge numbers made. I must also make clear to the House that if the Department had not had the available resources left over from the December monitoring — particularly after it had dealt with the Health Service deficits — I would not have been able to make these revisions. Regardless of pressure, there would have been no change; the means would not have been available to fund a lower rate increase next year. This reduction is being made purely as a result of these moneys having subsequently become available. I was not in a position to place any reliance on their availability at any of the earlier stages when Members were making representations.

Mr S Wilson: Is the Minister aware that in both Belfast and Londonderry there was all-party — and I include the SDLP in this — support for a meeting with him to express concern about the 8% increase in the regional rate? This is the third time today that he has been asked this question. We found out in the statement this morning that he has difficulty with sums, but will he tell us how much it would cost at this stage to reduce the domestic rate increase from 7% to 3.3%? In the light of representations from parties right across the board, including his own, will he accede to that request?

Mr Durkan: On the point about the arithmetic, I overestimated the Member's numeracy. I thought I had made it clear that 1% equals £2 million. Therefore, if you go down from 7% to 3.3%, some £7 million will be required. Various Members and various parties state that we need to make a strong case on the Barnett formula, but they have not always said this. Some people have counselled strongly that we should not even raise the Barnett question, that the sky would fall in if we went to the Treasury and raised issues about the Barnett formula, and that it would be a dangerous thing to do. If we are to make the case to the Treasury, we need to make it based on the Barnett formula and we need to be realistic, namely that it would be against us in relation to the regional rate. It may be unpopular, but it seems strange on the one hand to be told that the 7% increase is unpopular and will not wash and, on the other, that we

are making the decisions for reasons of populism or electoral gain. This is yet another inconsistency from the critics.

4.00 pm

Mrs Carson: Can the Minister indicate whether he has received any representations, either directly or at the Executive Committee, from the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Social Development on the regional rate?

Mr Durkan: I cannot confirm references that have been made in the past to representations or cases that people say were being made. As for information being made available in advance of Executive meetings, I can remember one occasion when I suggested possible consideration of a lower rate increase and received no particular backing from anyone —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Durkan: The record would show it differently. We are caught in a situation in which some people take advantage of the “Now you see it, now you don't” semi-detached game that they can play with the Executive. They can claim certain positions —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Durkan: For instance, in earlier considerations of the Budget, the Committee for Finance and Personnel did not recommend a lower rate increase. Obviously, Members of the party in the far corner were on —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister is finishing his reply. Please let him continue.

Mr Durkan: I am referring to the Committee for Finance and Personnel's report on the Budget. The report did not include a recommendation about the regional rate. That should be borne in mind, given the points that have been made about bodies on which all parties are represented — including Members of this House.

Socio-Economic Statistics

8. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has plans to further disseminate North/South comparative socio-economic statistics following the recent joint Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)/Central Statistics Office (CSO) Dublin publication ‘Ireland, North and South: A Statistical Profile’.

(AQO 796/00)

Mr Durkan: NISRA plans to publish the statistical profile on its Internet site in March (www.nisra.gov.uk). Copies of the statistical profile are also available from the Stationery Office and the Bookshop at Queen's.

Mr Speaker: Question Time for the Minister of Finance and Personnel started at 3.34 pm. It is now 4.04 pm, so the 30 minutes is up. Unfortunately, Mr McElduff will

not be able to ask his supplementary, and other Members will not be able to do so either.

Mr Molloy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When the Minister of Finance and Personnel spoke to the Committee, it made a clear recommendation that the rates should be kept in line with inflation, both the regional rate and —

Mr Speaker: Order. This may be a matter of politics, but it is not a matter of order. Therefore I must rule it out of order.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would you rule whether it was in order for the Minister to ask the Committee to deal with his Budget statement in an expedited way? As a result of that, the Committee did not have the opportunity to prepare the necessary proposals in relation to changes to the Budget, but every one of the parties present questioned the Minister on the issue and had asked for it to be held down to below inflation.

Mr Speaker: Order. As far as the order of things is concerned, we are in the process of changing the Standing Orders to ensure a new, smooth and transparent process where everyone will feel able not only to participate but also that the consultation has been appropriate. That, it seems to me, is the point of order here, and I look forward to its being followed with some assiduousness next time around.

GOVERNMENT RESOURCES AND ACCOUNTS BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: We do not have any amendments to the first six clauses. Before I seek leave of the House to put those clauses en bloc, may I remind Members that only one of amendments No 4 and No 5 may be made. If amendment No 4 is made, amendment No 5 will automatically fall. If amendment No 4 falls, amendment No 5 may be made. Similarly with amendments No 7 and No 8: if amendment No 7 is made, amendment No 8 will automatically fall. If amendment No 7 falls, amendment No 8 may be made.

Clauses 1 to 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 7 (Resource accounts: preparation)

Mr Leslie: I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 4, line 25, after “practice” insert

“as agreed with the Public Accounts Committee”.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

Amendment No 2: In page 5, line 3, leave out “Department” and insert “department”. — [Mr Molloy.]

Amendment No 4: After clause 17 insert the following new clause:

“Advisory group

*—(1) Before—

(a) issuing directions under section 7(2), or

(b) determining the form and content of accounts under section 12,

the Department shall consult the group of persons for the time being selected by the Treasury for the purposes of section 24(1) of the Government Accounts and Resources Act 2000 (c. 20).

(2) Where a group is consulted under subsection (1) in a particular year, the Department shall arrange for the group to prepare a report for that year—

(a) summarising the activities of the group for the purpose of the consultation, and

(b) dealing with such other matters as the group considers appropriate.

(3) Where a report is prepared under subsection (2), the Department shall arrange for it to be laid before the Assembly.” — [Mr Durkan.]

Amendment No 5: After clause 17 insert the following new clause:

“Advisory group

*—(1) Before—

(a) issuing directions under section 7(2), or

- (b) determining the form and content of accounts under section 12,

the Department shall take full account of all recommendations made by the group of persons for the time being selected by the Treasury for the purposes of section 24(1) of the Government Accounts and Resources Act 2000 (c. 20).

(2) Where a group is consulted under subsection (1) in a particular year, the Department shall arrange for the group to prepare a report for that year—

- (a) summarising the activities of the group for the purpose of the consultation, and
- (b) dealing with such other matters as the group considers appropriate.

(3) Where a report is prepared under subsection (2), the Department shall arrange for it to be laid before the Assembly.” — [Mr Leslie.]

Amendment No 6 (clause 18): In page 10, after line 14, insert

“() In determining whether and, if so, how to exercise its powers under subsection (6) or (8), the Department shall have regard to any views expressed by the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly.” — [Mr Durkan.]

I welcome the Minister to financial matters, round three, Monday 12 February. By the end of this debate there will be very few nooks and crannies of the Assembly’s finances that have not been turned over and looked under. That is really the substance of my amendment to clause 7. I raised these matters at the Second Stage and in the early Committee Stage. Unfortunately, I missed the later Committee Stages through illness, which is why two amendments are down in my name today.

Those amendments cover an exceedingly important matter: who oversees the overseer? The way the Bill is constructed, the Department reserves for itself all of the power to be the overseer, and clause 7 addresses that issue. Subsection 2 states:

“Resource accounts shall be prepared in accordance with directions issued by the Department.”

— that is, the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Subsection 3 states:

“The Department shall exercise the power to issue directions under subsection (2) with a view to ensuring that resource accounts —

- (a) present a true and fair view,”

— as you would expect, and —

- (b) “conform to generally accepted accounting practice”.

The Department also has the power to issue guidance on various matters.

There are two separate strains here. In my view, the Assembly should welcome the fact that the Department puts itself in charge of setting the same standard for all Departments. That is entirely appropriate, and anything else would be chaotic and would make it difficult to make comparisons.

Secondly, it is a good thing that clause 7(6) gives the Department the power to appoint an official in each Department as its accounting officer. I support the minor technical amendment — amendment No 2 — that relates to that matter. The provisions of the clause are welcome. The Assembly wants to be sure that a powerful Finance Department is able to ensure conformity between the other Departments.

The matter that exercises me is how the Department of Finance and Personnel will set the accounting standards, practices and conventions. The thrust of the Bill is in the move to resource accounting and the adoption of practices that are prevalent in the private sector. That is a sensible move, but I am vexed that the Department has given itself — and only itself — all of the power to place and, therefore, move the goalposts. It is in the interests of the Assembly to have an independent third party who would provide scrutiny and make recommendations that would be binding on the Department.

Who should set the accounting conventions? In the Assembly, we have two candidates: the Public Accounts Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee. Externally, there is the Financial Reporting Advisory Board, which is, in essence, appointed by the Treasury. Amendments No 4 and No 5 propose that the latter body would, in effect, be the independent body.

When the equivalent Bill was debated in Committee at Westminster, it was proposed that a national accounts commission be set up to be the independent body to set the standards and oversee the Treasury’s actions. That proposal was strongly supported by the Conservatives, by the Liberal Democrats and by the other parties, and it was also, I understand, supported quite widely on the Labour Back Benches. However, it was defeated by the Government. The debate at Westminster highlighted the issue, and I wish to bring the same issue to the attention of the House.

The compromise arrived at in Westminster was that a body selected by the Treasury would be consulted. The wording in the Westminster Bill was that:

“The Treasury shall consult a group of persons who appear to the Treasury to be appropriate to advise on financial reporting principles and standards.

(2) Before selecting a group for the purpose of subsection (1) the Treasury shall consult the Comptroller and Auditor General.”

The effect of those sections was to bring the body known as the Finance Reporting Advisory Board into position as the body to be consulted. The point was made in Committee that the nature and name of that body could change and that, therefore, it was not sensible for the legislation to prescribe the name of the body precisely. That is sensible, and I agreed with the Minister’s recommendation on that matter.

4.15 pm

The two amendments which move on from my amendment to clause 7 involve inserting separate clauses, but they refer back to clause 7 and its operation. Amendment No 4 has been put down by the Minister, further to discussions with the Committee. Amendment No 5, which I have tabled, is very similar to the Minister's amendment but goes a little further in terms of the power that it gives to the independent body.

The Minister's amendment precisely parallels section 24 of the Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000, as passed at Westminster. The fact that the Finance and Personnel Committee here persuaded the Minister to move this amendment is perhaps not as much the success that we thought it to be at the time, because it does no more than bring into our Bill a provision that was already in the Bill passed at Westminster.

The House should be concerned that our Bill, as originally tabled, made no provision whatsoever for this independent body to be involved, even in the consultative role that is proposed. That implies that the Department did not want any independent body to scrutinise its setting of accounting policies, and that is regrettable. In the interest of open government and transparency, it is exceedingly important that we have an effective form of independent scrutiny.

Consequently, having examined amendment No 4 moved by the Minister, I put down my amendment, which is amendment No 5 on the list. It takes the proposals that were made in his amendment further. Where he has used the words

"the Department shall consult the group of persons"

I have said:

"the Department shall take full account of all recommendations made by the group of persons".

While mulling over the matter at the weekend, I felt that I had perhaps not worded my amendment strongly enough and that the words "shall abide by the recommendations" might be more appropriate. Nonetheless, I believe that the tighter parameters set down by my amendment are preferable to those in amendment No 4. However, it has been drawn to my attention that the drafting of amendment No 5 is slightly incomplete and would be improved if under (b) it said:

"the Department shall consult with and take full account of all recommendations".

Therefore if my amendment is successful today, it is my intention at the Further Consideration Stage to move a minor tweaking amendment to insert those extra words, which would improve the sense and effect of my amendment.

The key point of principle here is to ensure that there is an independent body which has some teeth and which

would oversee the way in which the Department is carrying out its remit to set the parameters for accounts and pull them together. There are various possibilities: this power could be vested in the Public Accounts Committee; we could give further power to the Finance and Personnel Committee; a new independent body could be set up; or we could use the existing — more or less independent — body, although I raise the caveat that it is selected by the Treasury. In moving my amendments I am, in effect, airing the various possibilities.

Amendment No 5, which uses the existing body and puts it in a position where the Department must take full account of its recommendations, sets a reasonably good standard for independent scrutiny of the activities of the Department. I therefore urge the House to support my amendment in preference to amendment No 4, moved by the Minister. I also reiterate my support for amendments No 2, No 3, and No 6.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Before addressing amendment No 2, as proposed by the Finance and Personnel Committee, I want to convey my thanks to the other members of the Committee for the work carried out at the Committee Stage of the Bill. The Minister identified the time pressures surrounding the Bill and asked the Committee to end its statutory Committee Stage on 26 January instead of 2 March. The Committee had to meet 10 times before that date.

I also pay tribute to the Department's officials and to the Minister for the work they did to provide guidance and advice to the Committee. Finally, on behalf of my fellow Members, I thank the Chairpersons and members of the Public Accounts and Audit Committees for the invaluable service they gave in seeking to improve the Bill. Without their help it would have been impossible for the Committee to complete the Committee Stage of the Bill by 26 January.

Amendment No 2 relates to clause 7 and is tactical in nature. It is needed to ensure that this part of the clause relates to Departments in general and not just to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Amendment No 4 introduces a requirement for the independent advisory body to be selected to oversee the manner in which the Department produces guidance on resource accounting for use by other Departments. This matter was discussed during the Committee Stage with departmental officials and the Minister. The Committee agreed that it was appropriate for the Bill to incorporate a worthwhile safeguard. While the Committee did not consider the further refinement proposed by Mr Leslie in amendment No 5, it too seems to represent a worthwhile improvement to the proposed arrangement.

Finally, the Minister's amendment No 6 was discussed with the Committee, departmental officials and the Minister. The Committee agreed that it was appropriate for the

Department to consult with the Public Accounts Committee before making an order to direct the Comptroller and Auditor General to undertake examinations to obtain access to documents. The Committee recommends the adoption of this amendment.

The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee (Mr B Bell): The Public Accounts Committee broadly welcomes these amendments. However, as Chairperson of the Committee, I prefer amendment No 5 because we want to give the Comptroller and Auditor General as much power as possible. Amendment No 5 would strengthen his position.

We are concerned with the guidance that the Department of Finance and Personnel gets on accounting matters. We would prefer it to be overseen by the group selected for the same purpose in Great Britain. The Public Accounts Committee considers that there can be little scope for divergence, since we are part of the United Kingdom public expenditure framework and normally follow Treasury guidance on financial reporting, based on UK accounting standards. I am satisfied that the membership of the advisory body is representative of all the relevant interests, including audit in particular.

The requirement for the advisory group to report on its activities, and for the Department of Finance and Personnel to arrange for such a report to be laid before the Assembly, will ensure that we are made aware of any areas of difficulty. I believe that amendment No 5 would help us more than amendment No 4.

Mr Weir: I support the Bill and amendments No 1, No 2, No 5, and No 6.

In the explanatory and financial memorandum — if we are to believe everything we are told in it — we are being promised a new dawn in Government resource accounting. The benefits of the Bill which are listed are that there will be better information on the costs and benefits of capital assets, a lessening of current disincentives for capital investment, better focus of resources on priorities, better informed judgements and an extension of the accountability of the Executive.

All of those things are to be welcomed. However, in examining the Bill — and it has been examined extensively — we need to look at how we can best improve it. The amendments that have been put forward will improve the situation.

In particular, as has been indicated, within the Bill the bulk of control lies with the Department of Finance and Personnel. That is necessary and right. Nevertheless, there is a question mark over whether there is an opportunity for some independent input into that control. That has to be as strong as possible.

Consequently, left with the choice between amendments No 4 and No 5, amendment No 5 is clearly stronger. As

Mr Leslie said, there may be a need for some tweaking as regards amendment No 5 at Further Consideration Stage.

We are faced with the choice between a Government Department simply offering consultation with an independent body and, as in amendment No 5, the Department's having to take full account of all recommendations made by that group. Amendment No 5 imports a greater degree of independence by professionals into this subject, which is necessary.

I want to make a point that has not been made until now. According to the explanatory and financial memorandum, amendment No 5 is proposing something in keeping with the intention behind the Bill. Looking at clause 7(2) — which is one of the key clauses as referred to in amendment 5 — the memorandum indicates that the purpose is to

“provide that DFP shall direct the form of resource accounts subject to the requirements that they shall present a true and fair view and conform to generally accepted accounting practice (GAAP) amended as necessary in the context of departmental accounts. In doing so DFP will have regard for any guidance issued by the Accounting Standards Board (ASB) or any successor. In practice this means that resource accounts will follow the normal accounting standards and conventions used in the private sector and elsewhere in the public sector modified only where necessary to take account of the particular requirements of departmental accounts.”

The intention behind the Bill and such a clause is that the Department should have to take account and follow the example of the professional bodies indicated by the advisory board. Therefore it is more in keeping with the spirit of what is intended rather than simply having a duty of consultation with the advisory board.

Amendment No 5, with its more thorough regulations that compel the Department to take full account of all recommendations, is the preferable amendment. I urge Members to support amendment No 5 rather than amendment No 4.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): Several points have been addressed. Some amendments have been debated, and there are others in my name.

First, regarding amendment No 1, I want to make the point that under my proposed amendment — amendment No 4 — any directions issued by the Department would be required to be agreed by the Financial Reporting Advisory Board and therefore would be subject to an independent check.

4.30 pm

I want to emphasise that at all times we stressed the need for independent scrutiny and oversight, as happens at Whitehall. There is no resistance to that, and I refute any suggestion that there is. It was part of the initial proposals.

I also remind Members that I identified this question in my introductory remarks at the Second Stage of the Bill. The outstanding question then was how to achieve

that in the context of Northern Ireland. I said that I needed to introduce an amendment to achieve this. Essentially, that is what is now being done with the Financial Reporting Advisory Board clause. I hope that that allays some of the concern that Mr Leslie appeared to have, given his remarks about the initial Bill. I made that point myself at Second Stage.

In the UK, the Accounting Standards Board oversees generally accepted accountancy practice, as Mr Weir indicated, while the Financial Reporting Advisory Board oversees the application of generally accepted accounting practice in the UK to public sector resource accounts. The proposal that accounting guidance should be agreed with the Public Accounts Committee is inappropriate, because such an approach would be inconsistent with that adopted in Westminster and Scotland. Therefore I do not accept amendment No 1.

I accept amendment No 2, which was discussed by Mr Molloy as Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee. This is a relatively minor amendment to correct a typographical error, but it is essential in that it gives the clause its proper meaning.

I thank Mr Molloy and the Committee for the very thorough role that they played in scrutinising the Bill, for adhering to a very tight timescale and for presenting their report before the January deadline. I am also grateful to those other Committees which took a particular interest in the Bill. I am pleased that we were able to work together to progress the Bill thus far, despite the complex issues involved. The keen interest and co-operation of the Committee has been, and will be, vital if the Bill is to be passed during this financial year.

I believe that amendment No 4, which I moved, is preferable to amendment No 5. The legislative draftsman has noted that the clause is technically defective because subsection 2 refers to consultation under subsection 1. However, the amendment removes the reference to consultation.

Mr Leslie stated that, after further consideration, he might want to go even further with the amendment by requiring the Department of Finance and Personnel to obey the rulings of the Financial Reporting Advisory Board. That would leave the Finance and Personnel Committee, the Public Accounts Committee, the Executive and the Assembly without any discretion to take a different approach. An attempt to move in that direction may not be consistent with points about other aspects of the Bill, which stressed our need to retain some facility and judgement of our own, rather than be absolutely bound by practice, as happens elsewhere. Regarding amendments in my name, I have already indicated that I prefer amendment No 4 to some of the others tabled.

When the Assembly considered the Second Stage of the Bill, I signalled that I intended to introduce an additional clause to give effect to the way in which the

Department of Finance and Personnel's guidance on accounting matters to Departments would be overseen by an independent check. I intimated that I wished to discuss how best to go about that. That is something we pursued in discussion with the Committees — the Finance and Personnel Committee, the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee. Hence the nature and wording of the clause.

My proposal was that, in line with the position at Whitehall, the Department of Finance and Personnel should be required to consult an independent body on accounting policy and guidance to ensure an independent check. Also, an annual report will be required on those and other similar accounting matters.

The question was whether to appoint the same body of persons selected by the Treasury — the Financial Reporting Advisory Body — or find an alternative. Following discussions with the various Committees and other interested parties, it has been agreed that the role should be fulfilled by the Financial Reporting Advisory Body, and the amendment has been drafted accordingly.

I shall explain why amendment No 6 is in my name in more detail later. The Bill, as originally presented, contained a proposed power to enable the Department of Finance and Personnel to make an order to grant the Comptroller and Auditor General access. Although that was intended to facilitate accountability, some of the Committees interpreted it as placing the Comptroller and Auditor General's powers under the discretion of the Department of Finance and Personnel.

To emphasise that the powers should be used mainly to open doors for the Comptroller and Auditor General, I am proposing this further amendment to place an obligation on the Department of Finance and Personnel to have regard for any views expressed by the Public Accounts Committee on the issue.

Mr Leslie: I thank all Members who have contributed. This has been a useful airing of a very important issue. I note the comments made by the Minister, particularly the one he made at the beginning of his remarks when he said that the Department would have to agree with the Financial Reporting Advisory Body. That may be his intention, but it is not the thrust of his amendment, which says:

“the Department shall consult”.

We are all familiar with what the outcome of consultation can be. Sometimes it can be very effective, and sometimes one wonders why the consultation took place at all. Although the Minister may have worthy intentions, the House must be conscious that when we pass the Bill we are binding the way in which Government accounts will be done in the future by all future Ministers. Although Ministers, and the parties that they are drawn from, may come and go, the Department goes on.

When the Bill was first put before the House it did not contain that clause, even though a clause of that type was in the Bill at Westminster. That means that we must entertain some suspicions in that respect. Therefore, it is important that we increase the power beyond that of consultation. I urge the House to accept amendment No 5 in my name in preference to amendment No 4, as proposed by the Minister.

I acknowledge that the drafting of my amendment needs a further tweaking and, as I said earlier, I will put down an amendment for Further Consideration Stage to take account of that minor matter. It was for that reason, when we first wrote our Standing Orders, that we quickly decided to introduce two Consideration Stages rather than one. With the best will in the world, one can sometimes fail to spot the consequences of amendments.

I agree with the Minister that the thrust of amendments No 4 and No 5 is preferable to the thrust of amendment 1, and I support amendments No 2, No 3 and No 6. However, I urge the House to support amendment No 5, rather than amendment No 4, on what I regard to be the major issue.

Mr Speaker: Is the proposer begging leave to withdraw amendment No 1?

Mr Leslie: I do so beg.

Amendment No 1, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendment No 2 made: In clause 7, page 5, line 3 leave out “Department” and insert “department”.

Clause 7, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill

Clauses 8 and 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill

Clause 10 (Comptroller and Auditor General: access to information)

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): A Cheann Comhairle, I beg to move amendment No 3: In clause 10, page 6, line 36 leave out

“at all reasonable times”.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

Amendment No 7 (clause 18): In page 10, after line 19 insert

“() The accounts and all documents relating to 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 it appears to him that the body exercises functions of a public nature, has received significant public funds or is entirely or substantively funded from public money.” — [Mr Molloy.]

Amendment No 8: After clause 18 insert the following new clause:

“Inspections by Comptroller and Auditor General

*—(1) The Comptroller and Auditor General may at any reasonable time inspect—

- (a) the accounts of any body to which this section applies, and
- (b) any documents relating to those accounts which are held or controlled —
 - (i) by the body; or
 - (ii) in pursuance of arrangements made by the body for the compiling or handling of any of its financial records.

(2) The Comptroller and Auditor General shall not exercise his powers under subsection (1) in relation to a body unless it appears to him that—

- (a) it is appropriate to do so in view of public concern about any matter relating to the finances of the body or its financial transactions, or
- (b) it is otherwise appropriate to do so in the public interest.

(3) Subject to subsection (4), this section applies to a body if it appears to the Comptroller and Auditor General that—

- (a) the accounts of the body are not required to be examined by, and are not otherwise open to the inspection of, the Comptroller and Auditor General by virtue of—
 - (i) any statutory provision,
 - (ii) any agreement made between that body and a Northern Ireland department, or
 - (iii) any conditions imposed by a Northern Ireland department in pursuance of any statutory power, whether in connection with the provision of financial assistance or otherwise, and
- (b) the body exercises functions of a public nature or is entirely or substantially funded from public money.

(4) This section does not apply to a district council.

(5) Any person who holds or has control of any accounts or other documents mentioned in subsection (1) shall give the Comptroller and Auditor General any assistance, information or explanation which he requires in relation to any of those documents.

(6) The Comptroller and Auditor General may report to the Assembly the results of any inspection carried out by him under this section.” — [Mr Durkan.]

Amendment No 9: After clause 18 insert the following new clause:

“Economy, efficiency and effectiveness examinations by Comptroller and Auditor General

*—(1) Part III of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 (NI 5) (economy, efficiency and effectiveness examinations) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In Article 8(3) (public bodies subject to examination under that Article) —

- (a) after sub-paragraph (b) there shall be inserted—
- “(b) any body—

- (i) whose accounts are open to the inspection of the Comptroller and Auditor General by virtue of section (Inspections by Comptroller and Auditor General) of the Government Accounts and Resources Act (Northern Ireland) 2001; and

(ii) which is a public sector body within the meaning of paragraph (7).’;

(b) in paragraph (c) after ‘by virtue of any’ there shall be inserted ‘other’.

(3) At the end of Article 8 there shall be added the following paragraph—

‘(7) For the purposes of this Part an authority or body is a public sector authority or body if—

(a) in the case of a company, its directors (or a majority of them) are appointed by a Northern Ireland department or a Minister of such a department;

(b) in the case of any other body, its members (or a majority of them) are so appointed, and

(c) in the case of any authority, the authority is so appointed’

(4) In Article 9 (other bodies subject to examination) for paragraph (4) (bodies to which that Article applies) there shall be substituted—

‘(4) This Article applies to any public sector authority or body within the meaning of Article 8(7).’ ” — *[Mr Durkan.]*

That clause empowers the Comptroller and Auditor General to obtain the information he needs to carry out his investigations. As currently worded, the clause restricts the Comptroller and Auditor General’s access to times that are deemed reasonable. That could mean that the Comptroller and Auditor General might not be able to gain access to accounts during the weekend or on public holidays. There may be times when urgency is needed, and that test of reasonableness may be inappropriate.

In order to remove unnecessary barriers to the Comptroller and Auditor General’s ability to obtain documents, the Finance and Personnel Committee recommends the deletion of “at all reasonable times”.

A Cheann Comhairle, amendment No 7 is intended to invest the Comptroller and Auditor General with the additional power to investigate bodies that are in receipt of substantial public funds. The amendment is closely based on an earlier proposal by the Public Accounts Committee, which receives support from the Audit Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee. A further refinement to the Public Accounts Committee’s proposal was the introduction of additional wording to extend the scope of this power to encompass bodies that have “received significant public funds”. However, the Finance and Personnel Committee has noted the format of amendment No 8 proposed by the Minister, which sets out to achieve the same objectives.

A Cheann Comhairle, the Finance and Personnel Committee is satisfied that the Minister’s proposed amendment represents a form of words which is more legally competent than the version suggested by the Committee. Although it failed to address the inclusion of those bodies which are in receipt of a significant amount of public funds, the Finance and Personnel Committee is satisfied that the additional powers invested in the

Comptroller and Auditor General are now broad enough to establish a robust system of inspection.

I will not be moving amendment No 7. I urge the Assembly to support amendment No 8, as proposed by the Minister.

The Minister is to propose amendment No 9, which introduces a new clause that will further extend the powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General to undertake audits to measure economy, efficiency and effectiveness. At present, the Comptroller and Auditor General can undertake such audits in respect of Civil Service Departments. The new clause will extend that power in line with the inspection powers set out in the earlier amendments. The Finance and Personnel Committee urges the Assembly to support amendment No 9.

4.45 pm

The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee (Mr B Bell): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter on behalf of the Public Accounts Committee. The Public Accounts Committee originally drafted the amendment following discussions with the Minister. We were concerned that the Department of Finance and Personnel had not taken the opportunity presented by this legislation to widen the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General to allow him to examine the use of public money on behalf of the Assembly more fully.

The Public Accounts Committee’s amendment would have provided for the Comptroller and Auditor General to have inspection rights to all bodies carrying out functions of a public nature, or which are entirely, or substantially, funded by public money, where he did not already have such access. One of the key reasons behind the original amendment was a clear recognition by the Public Accounts Committee of the invaluable work that the Comptroller and Auditor General carries out on behalf of the Assembly.

As Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, I have first hand knowledge of the vital contribution that the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff in the Northern Ireland Audit Office make in ensuring that the Northern Ireland Departments and other public bodies are fully accountable to the Assembly. That is very important.

Over the past nine months the Public Accounts Committee has been able to examine some important issues based on the Comptroller and Auditor General’s reports. These included road safety, control of river pollution, expenditure on the rural development programme, the administration of income support benefit and suspected fraud in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

I recommend that Members take a keen interest in the Comptroller and Auditor General’s work and in the reports produced by the Public Accounts Committee, which have been based on his work up to now.

The amendment has been widened and strengthened since it was first produced by the Public Accounts Committee. That has been due to the hard work and commitment of the Finance and Personnel Committee, of which I am also a member. We have argued successfully that we should seek to get things right rather than settle for something less because of the unreasonable time constraints that always seem to be placed on the Finance and Personnel Committee. No doubt this will be taken into account.

At this stage I would like to acknowledge the Minister's co-operation in accepting the thrust of the Public Accounts Committee's proposals and extending it to provide for the Comptroller and Auditor General to carry out value-for-money examinations of all public bodies to which he has inspection rights. This would now include public corporations and a range of other bodies, such as housing associations. We have also had some positive assurances from the Minister. He has undertaken to review the Comptroller and Auditor General's role in the light of the impending report on the review of audit and accountability being carried out in Great Britain by Lord Sharman and to bring forward legislation in an early audit reorganisation Bill very soon.

I am also encouraged by the Minister's response to the question of the Comptroller and Auditor General's access to bodies that receive significant public funds but which are not covered by the Bill. He has agreed to consider the matter further and to bring forward proposals in the audit reorganisation Bill. We look forward to that. He also said that the Department would be prepared to use powers under clause 18(8) to make an order to give the Comptroller and Auditor General inspection rights to such bodies where necessary.

The Minister's amendment would require the Department of Finance and Personnel to have regard to the views of the Public Accounts Committee when determining whether and how to exercise those powers.

This Bill is a worthwhile first step in improving the Assembly's accountability arrangements. However, I must emphasise that our long-term aim should be to ensure that the Assembly has complete oversight of public expenditure and that the Assembly's auditor has the statutory authority to investigate every pound we vote to the Departments, whenever or wherever it is spent.

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Dallat): To avoid any confusion, I will explain that the Audit Committee is primarily responsible for the budget that the public auditor has to spend — currently it is about £5 million and going up.

I am pleased by the co-operation there has been between the Public Accounts Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee and by the willingness of the Minister to take on board our concerns, anxieties and plans. From the very beginning, the Audit Committee recognised

the need to update the powers of the public auditor in line with the modernisation of Government accounts that was being proposed. It was for that reason that we held joint meetings with the Public Accounts Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee. I think that that marks a very good demonstration of how the Assembly can work in a positive way in the interests of the people whom we represent.

It is critical that the Audit Committee works with the Public Accounts Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee, which it has done. The Minister's co-operation has to be noted and has already been recognised by Mr Billy Bell.

The Audit Committee is keen to see the Comptroller and Auditor General's inspection rights widened as far as possible to represent all public sector bodies and organisations that are substantially funded from public money. That is certainly something that we will pursue, although we may differ on timescales.

However, the Bill must not be the end of the story. It is important that the Minister has undertaken to bring forward an audit reorganisation Bill. That will have implications for the structure and resources of the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and my Committee will be taking a close interest. We will be particularly keen to ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General's audit and inspection powers are as comprehensive as possible and clearly defined in statute.

We need to be able to assure voters in Northern Ireland that under devolution the Assembly can exercise full overview of public expenditure and hold to account any Department, body or company which receives taxpayers' money. Earlier today the Minister assured us that there would be no unnecessary hold-ups in how that work is done. It is critically important to the performance of this Assembly.

Mr P Robinson: I am glad that other Members are today able to enjoy the excitement that we have had for several months in the Committee and to listen to the lively contributions on this subject.

The Bill provides a considerable improvement in the way our finances are managed. The movement to resource or accrual accounting is, perhaps, something we should have had before now. As it works its way through the system, it will produce several advantages in the way that Government operates.

Therefore there is a general welcome for the Bill, and even if none of the amendments are accepted I am sure Members can go away knowing that we have improved on the ways things are being run.

That is not to say that perhaps the Minister is not trying one on, but we caught him out with amendment No 2. The suggestion that there is a difference between a small "d" and a big "D" — and we are not talking about

the “d” word that we have been arguing about in the Assembly since it started — shows that the original wording was a clear attempt by the Department of Finance and Personnel to have complete control over the appointment of accounting officers in all Departments. The interpretation section of the Bill makes it clear that if it is a large “D”, we are talking about the Department of Finance and Personnel, and if it is a small “d”, it is all other Government Departments. The Minister did not even attempt to defend it, other than to say it was some poor wee typist who was responsible and that she has to take the blame. Nonetheless, it gives a taste of how the Department of Finance and Personnel is viewed.

When I was Minister for Regional Development I found that coherent, articulate, and even macho civil servants became a quivering mass when reference was made to the Department of Finance and Personnel. It is seen as the overlord within the Civil Service, and people consider it with some fear and reverence. I quickly found out that the response to suggestions that I might do something to get its back up was “Oh, it will get you eventually, Minister, if you do that”. I assume this was a suggestion that it does not always make decisions based on the merit of the case.

Nonetheless that gives us some idea why, when we look at legislation such as this, we need to look and see just what powers we are leaving within the Department. Therefore the reference in amendment 3 to “at all reasonable times” is no small matter — reasonable to whom? Well, “reasonable” to the Department of Finance and Personnel, of course, because all reason begins and ends with it in these matters. From the point of view of those of us who want to see proper inspections carried out, there should be no barrier to the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General. If the Comptroller and Auditor General wants to see the accounts in any office, Department or Government agency, he should be able to do that. He would not start the task if it were not reasonable in all circumstances that he should be doing it. To have this other layer of judgement added to it is unnecessary and perhaps dangerous.

It is possible to conceive of circumstances where the person who is going to make the judgement in a Department might be the person whom the Comptroller and Auditor General wants to investigate. Is it reasonable then for that person to have the power to stay the hand of the Comptroller and Auditor General? I note that although amendment No 3 is down as an amendment to clause 10, the Minister managed to get it in again in amendment No 8 — the new clause where he again inserts the reference “may at any reasonable time inspect”. If amendment No 3 is carried it would suggest that at the Further Consideration Stage it will be necessary, for the sake of consistency and of taking the power away from the Department to determine whether or not the Comptroller and Auditor General has the power to

inspect, that the reference in the amended new clause be taken out as well.

This brings me to the inspection rights of the Comptroller and Auditor General. I do not think there was any disagreement in the Committee or with the Public Accounts Committee or with the Audit Committee in relation to the matter. There was a general principle, accepted by all, that the Comptroller and Auditor General should have the ability to follow the money. If the Assembly is voting money, the Comptroller and Auditor General should be able to satisfy himself, or herself, on how it is spent.

5.00 pm

Has it gone in accordance with the wishes of the Assembly as regards how it will be managed? There are several additional opportunities open to the Comptroller and Auditor General if the Minister’s amendment is accepted, as I expect it will be.

However, I am not convinced that it is sufficiently global to include all the essentials. The Comptroller and Auditor General, who happily came along to give evidence to the Finance and Personnel Committee, was quite content with the Public Accounts Committee’s amendment when it was produced, although he had to admit that, during the course of the questioning, circumstances were put to him that he had not thought of before and which clearly could only be taken into account by an amendment of the scope of the amendment put down in the name of the Committee.

The Minister’s amendment falls short of what is necessary. However, as a reasonable man — which I am at all times — I am willing to listen to what the Minister has to say in moving his amendment and in his defence of it. I wish to see if it takes into account the various circumstances that concerned members of the Committee. One example is the famous football case. This is off the top of my head and is, perhaps, not the best analogy to use. However, if a substantial amount of money were to be given by the Minister for Fun to football clubs in Northern Ireland, and those football clubs set about spending that money, what power has the Comptroller and Auditor General to ensure that they do what they were supposed to do? If millions of pounds had been given to a football club, how could the Comptroller and Auditor General ensure that, for example, grounds were upgraded? Have they had the added value, as required by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, of putting in a certain amount of their own money as well? How does the Comptroller and Auditor General check that out if he does not have the power to inspect their accounts? Under the amendment as it stands, how could that be done? If it can be done, we have closed off one loophole.

Another example is the enormous amount of money that is going out to so-called community organisations. All sorts of community organisations have sprung up.

We hear reports day and daily about how such money is going into paramilitary organisations and that the IRA is running this organisation, the UDA is running that one and the UVF is running another. They are running around in cars of a better type than the Speaker of the House has. The truth is that there are allegations in the community that this is Government funding of these organisations. Would it not be worthwhile if the Comptroller and Auditor General had the power to go in to see if the money that is given to these organisations is being used properly? Will the Minister look at those issues to determine whether he is satisfied that the Comptroller and Auditor General would have the power to do so under his amendment?

We have the opportunity at Further Consideration Stage if we feel that we have to revive the amendment not moved by the Chairman of the Committee; it can be put down under the name of another Member at Further Consideration Stage. I am unconvinced, as a reason for not pursuing it at Further Consideration Stage, by the view expressed earlier that the Minister will come back to the issue on the foot of later legislation. My confidence in the longevity of the Assembly is such that I prefer to have my jam now. If that is the only reason that the Minister can provide for putting it off to a later stage, that will inform my decision as to whether I put down an amendment at Further Consideration Stage.

Mr Weir: I support amendment No 3. It is important that no restrictions be placed on the Comptroller and Auditor General, and the removal of the phrase “at all reasonable times” is to be welcomed. I also welcome the new clause put down in amendment No 9, made by the Minister himself. This is a welcome piece of progress. As regards amendment No 8, I am glad that the Minister has taken account of the concerns raised by the Public Accounts Committee and, indeed, of some of the concerns raised by the Finance and Personnel Committee.

Amendment No 8 is certainly a step in the right direction, and it is comprehensively drafted. However, I share certain concerns with Peter Robinson. Regarding the reference in the first sentence to “at any reasonable time”, there is a question mark over whether that should be in the legislation.

For the sake of clarity, I would also like the Minister at some stage to define “substantially funded from public money”. It is clear that a body which is entirely funded by public money has 100% funding from the public purse, but the definition of a body which is “substantially funded” from the public purse is more vague. It would be appropriate for the Minister to clarify that.

Bodies receiving significant public funds were covered in amendment No 7, which is not now being moved, and I would like to see that changed by way of an amendment for the Further Consideration Stage. That was the principal weakness of amendment No 8. Again, there

needs to be clarity about what that will entail. It is important that the Comptroller and Auditor General be given these inspection powers, which are of a lesser strength than audit powers. They should be much more comprehensive in the areas they cover.

For example, if there are two bodies — and reference has been made to community groups — there could be a situation in which one group, perhaps a relatively small one, receives funding from the public purse. It employs one or two people and perhaps has an annual budget of £30,000 or £40,000, all of which comes from the public purse. To ensure that there is no abuse of that funding, and to ensure that it is spent correctly, we rightly have powers of inspection. But another community group may have a budget of £200,000, of which perhaps £80,000 or £90,000 comes directly from the public purse. It may well be that that group falls outside the definition of being “substantially funded”, because less than 50% of its budget comes directly from public money. However, the amount it receives is in excess of what other groups receive.

To take another example, there may well be, by way of contracts, various private bodies which receive tens of millions of pounds, but this may not constitute substantial funding from public money because it may be less than 50% — if that is the definition — or it may well fall below the level which would constitute “substantially funded”. Yet no one could argue that that public body is not receiving significant public funds. That money needs to be traced to ensure that it is being spent properly. To close this loophole, when the Bill comes to Further Consideration Stage I would like to see an amendment that takes account of the proposals in amendment No 7 to bring on line my opinion that the power of inspection should also extend to bodies which receive significant public funds.

Mr Gibson: Most community groups receive a cocktail of funding from various sources, of which a small amount may come from rural or district councils to prime the pump. Most of those money providers have a different system of auditing, so community groups have great difficulty in presenting their accounts in such a way as to be understandable because often each provider demands its own system. It is imperative that those accounts are properly scrutinised. Recent reports have indicated that community groups have shown gross negligence in how their money has been spent. It is imperative that the Comptroller and Auditor General has a remit that allows him to inspect these bodies fully.

Mr Weir: I accept the Member’s point, but I only cited community groups as one example — there is a myriad of bodies that are outside direct departmental control, and it is important that any public money be spent in the right fashion. Events in recent years in Northern Ireland have shown that some groups are effectively fronts for paramilitary organisations, and we

must be particularly careful that we are not funding such organisations.

That is why I believe that the powers of inspection — as opposed to the audit powers — should be drawn as widely as possible. It is why, while I am happy to support amendment No 8, I would like further amendments to be made at Further Consideration Stage. I want to ensure that, as far as possible, we have a Government Resources and Accounts Bill which we can stand over and of which we can be proud.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):

I understand the arguments put forward in respect of amendment 3, but it is not desirable to remove any reasonableness test from this clause and, therefore, I oppose the amendment.

The provisions for the Comptroller and Auditor General to have rights of access to documents “at all reasonable times” is included simply to ensure that it could not be thought that the Comptroller and Auditor General was exercising his rights in an unreasonable manner. The intention is not to restrict the Comptroller and Auditor General’s rights, but rather to have a reasonableness test which is consistent with other legislation and which others have to pass. If the context were such that access was needed urgently, that would be reasonable.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister acknowledge that there is a duty upon any public official, in those circumstances, to behave reasonably and that this reasonableness test does not need to be explicitly spelled out in legislation? There is a general requirement for reasonableness that would be tested, for example, in a judicial review of any decision. There is no need for the words “at all reasonable times” to appear in the Bill.

Mr Durkan: I was going to comment on that matter. The explicit inclusion of the reasonableness test in the Bill would not jeopardise the effectiveness of the Comptroller and Auditor General’s work. Equally, if the Wednesbury test of reasonableness applies anyway, why should objection to its inclusion be so strong that an amendment is needed.

Contrary to Mr Peter Robinson’s suggestion, the Department of Finance and Personnel would not be seeking to define “reasonableness” case by case. It is a reasonableness test that would apply anyway in the approach taken by the Comptroller and Auditor General. Some Members seem to be suggesting that this is an attempt by the Department of Finance and Personnel to rig or restrict things. That is certainly not the case.

In the same way, when Mr Robinson referred back to amendment No 2, and to the question of whether one should include “Department” or “department”, it was made clear that this was the result of a typographical error. Do people really think that the Department of Finance and Personnel would wish to be in a position

where only its officials would be accounting officers for different Departments? As a Minister, would I want to be in that position? I assure Members that I would not want that, particularly given the experience we had earlier in the life of the Administration when dealing with conflicts of interest. Such a situation would put me in an impossible position. People should be more sensible about this.

5.15 pm

We have amendments No 7, No 8 and No 9. I need to address the issues that go to the heart of those amendments, notwithstanding the points that have already been made about amendment No 7 and the Committee’s willingness to withdraw that amendment — although that willingness has been qualified by the expression of particular continuing concerns.

Although the primary purpose of the Bill was to give effect to the introduction of resource accounting and budgeting, consequential changes to the auditing of Government accounting information presented to the Assembly were also necessary. This gave rise to a more extensive debate of accountability issues than was directly relevant to the Bill. As a result, the Finance and Personnel Committee, the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee each suggested possible amendments aimed at extending the powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The Finance and Personnel Committee report was completed before officials were able to produce the text of an amendment to put into effect the approach that I agreed with the Committee in January. Hence the Committee’s report indicated that the Committee would be prepared to consider withdrawing its amendment if it were satisfied with mine. The approach in amendments No 8 and No 9 is designed to fulfil my undertakings to the Committees, and amendment No 6 provides further assurance that the Department of Finance and Personnel will work with the Public Accounts Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee in implementing these provisions.

The issues are complex and sensitive because they relate not only to how the Government go about business but also to the ways in which Ministers and Departments are accountable to the Assembly and the public. There has been considerable debate about the respective roles and powers of the Executive, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the key Assembly Committees. I again want to place on record my gratitude to the three Committees for the detailed thought and attention that they have given to the Bill. I also recognise that they have served notice — including what has been said here today — that they will continue to underline these concerns as matters proceed, and particularly if matters do not proceed.

This is of major constitutional significance, and I want to put some points on the record. We can all agree that the institutions here are unique and distinctive. It follows, therefore, that any model for the relationship among the various branches of the Administration will also be distinctive. The approach that we adopt in the Bill does not need to be the final word on the subject, but it can and should lay some important foundations. Some principles are clear in both the agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and, indeed, in our practice so far, though that is still evolving.

First, expenditure is subject to the approval of the Assembly, following scrutiny of, and consultation on, the annual Budget. Secondly, there is clear accountability by Departments and other public bodies to the Assembly through the Public Accounts Committee. It is already evident that on both these points the scrutiny is deeper and more intense than was possible under direct rule, although I also recognise Members' frustrations — as we have heard again today — with the timetables. I agree, yet again, that these need to be improved.

I want to affirm that I and my Department are committed to working with the Finance and Personnel Committee and the Public Accounts Committee to develop these arrangements. We want and need to see better and stronger scrutiny of Departments' expenditure, with an increasing emphasis on the outputs and outcomes that are being achieved.

We need to ensure that the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Economic Policy Unit fulfil their roles to pursue jointly value for money and effectiveness. We need to have a strong and effective public audit function, working constructively with Departments to ensure that Departments and other public bodies are held to account — to learn lessons and share best practice.

The approach to the key amendments to the Bill should be seen in that context. Amendment No 7 would give the Northern Ireland Audit Office wide-ranging powers of access to the accounts of private sector companies, voluntary organisations and individuals on an almost unrestricted basis. It has been argued that the Comptroller and Auditor General should be able to follow public money without constraint. However, I am concerned that adopting such an approach without prior consultation could lead to criticism that we are imposing unwarranted and undue burdens on the private and voluntary sectors in an uncontrolled or summary fashion. It might lead some to hesitate over participating, not least in the voluntary sector.

I am not saying that I oppose comprehensive scrutiny, but we need to proceed carefully and with consultation. We need to keep the focus, as in recent Public Accounts Committee hearings, on how Departments protect public money. Similar issues arose when the corresponding Bill was being taken through Westminster. The Government

responded by commissioning the Sharman review to address them and report. That process is still ongoing, although the final report is expected later this month. I intend to examine the findings very carefully, as, undoubtedly, the Committees will.

Although I am concerned that we should not act without consultation, I have been supportive of the general principles underlying the approach sought by the Public Accounts Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee. Following lengthy consultation with the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Committees, I have brought forward this amendment, which further extends the powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General. In some respects, these go further than the corresponding powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General in Whitehall, and represent a significant advance on the original proposals. In my view, this is the furthest we could reasonably go without consultation with the other affected bodies. It has been argued that the public auditor has more extensive powers in some other jurisdictions. I am not aware of any case where such powers were rushed through in a context such as our present position.

For all bodies in the public sector — except district councils, which are the responsibility of the Department of the Environment's local government audit function — amendments No 8 and No 9 would, in essence, give the Comptroller and Auditor General powers to inspect relevant documents and to initiate value-for-money studies. For any other body undertaking functions of a public nature or substantially funded from public money, they would give the Comptroller and Auditor General powers to inspect relevant documents. For other bodies in receipt of significant funds, the effect of my proposals would be that the Department of Finance and Personnel would facilitate the Comptroller and Auditor General by using the new power to make an order giving him inspection rights where necessary. The Bill, as originally presented, contained a proposed power for the Department of Finance and Personnel to make an order granting the Comptroller and Auditor General access.

Although that was intended to facilitate accountability, some members of the Committee interpreted it as placing the Comptroller and Auditor General's powers under the discretion of the Department of Finance and Personnel. In order to emphasise that the power should be used mainly to open doors, I am proposing a further amendment — amendment No 6 — which will place an obligation on the Department of Finance and Personnel to have regard for any views expressed by the Public Accounts Committee in relation to the issue.

I have also proposed that the Comptroller and Auditor General should only exercise these powers if it appears to him to be appropriate to do so in view of public concern or interest about a matter. This condition

is there to provide reassurance that the powers will not be used without good reason.

As I have indicated to the Committee and others, the amendment represents only a first step in the process of developing improved local accountability arrangements. I am committed to revisiting this area in the forthcoming audit reorganisation Bill.

Going any further at this stage would have direct implications for other bodies. It would be helpful and necessary to consult, so that any factors that may emerge could be taken into account when we frame new powers. That should lead to better legislation than would be the case if we proceed on our present understanding of the issues.

It is my intention that, following consultation, we should seek to agree definitions that will clarify the extent of the Comptroller and Auditor General's locus for inclusion in the audit reorganisation Bill — which is also the obvious place to address any issues in respect of district councils. This will mean widening the scope of the audit reorganisation Bill, which is primarily designed to improve the organisation of the functions of the audit of local government and of the Health Service. However, as it was not possible to resolve all the issues of the Comptroller and Auditor General's locus in the very tight time scale for the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, it will be necessary to review those issues in time for the next Bill.

To take that forward, I propose that the Department of Finance and Personnel consult widely on the implications of providing access for the Comptroller and Auditor General to the types of bodies that would be affected. The views of all Departments regarding the scope, remit and nature of public sector audit will be sought as part of the preparatory process — particularly its remit for health boards and trusts, local government, limited companies and other entities.

Mr Speaker: I wish to draw to the attention of the House that the moment of interruption is 6.00 pm and we have a substantial amount of business still on the Order Paper.

Mr Durkan: Our thinking may also need to be developed in the context of the review of public administration, as appropriate mechanisms of accountability will need to be part of the overall proposals that emerge there.

Mr Molloy: A Cheann Comhairle, you will be glad to hear that my voice will not allow me to speak very long, so I will be brief. I too recognise that there has been good co-operation involving the three Committees and the Minister in dealing with the Bill. This augurs well for the future.

As regards amendment No 3, in relation to the issue of reasonableness, although we recognise that we have a reasonable Minister currently, we are looking at legislation which may be used by future Ministers who may not be

as reasonable or understanding. Therefore, it is important that we look at access for the Comptroller and Auditor General at reasonable times. It depends on interpretation. It is important that we actually open up doors to ensure that there are no barriers created to make it impossible for the Comptroller and Auditor General to carry out his functions at weekends, holiday periods and at other times when there may be unnecessary delays. It is important that that deletion be made.

5.30 pm

The Committee met this morning and gave me permission to withdraw amendment No 7. Members can, of course, put forward any amendments for the next session. I ask the Assembly to support amendments No 3, No 8 and No 9, as the Committee has recommended.

Amendment No 3 agreed to.

Clause 10, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 11 to 17 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 4 proposed: After clause 17 insert the following new clause:

“Advisory group

*—(1) Before—

(a) issuing directions under section 7(2), or

(b) determining the form and content of accounts under section 12,

the Department shall consult the group of persons for the time being selected by the Treasury for the purposes of section 24(1) of the Government Accounts and Resources Act 2000 (c. 20).

(2) Where a group is consulted under subsection (1) in a particular year, the Department shall arrange for the group to prepare a report for that year—

(a) summarising the activities of the group for the purpose of the consultation, and

(b) dealing with such other matters as the group considers appropriate.

(3) Where a report is prepared under subsection (2), the Department shall arrange for it to be laid before the Assembly.” —
[Mr Durkan.]

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that if amendment No 4 is made, amendment No 5 will fall.

Question put That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 25; Noes 40.

AYES

P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Joe Hendron, Alex Maskey, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Eddie McGrady, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Pat

McNamee, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Mary Nelis, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Sue Ramsey, John Tierney.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, David Ford, Sam Foster, Oliver Gibson, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, Derek Hussey, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, James Leslie, Kieran McCarthy, Robert McCartney, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Sean Neeson, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause

Amendment No 5 proposed: After clause 17 insert the following new clause:

“Advisory group

*—(1) Before—

(a) issuing directions under section 7(2), or

(b) determining the form and content of accounts under section 12,

the Department shall take full account of all recommendations made by the group of persons for the time being selected by the Treasury for the purposes of section 24(1) of the Government Accounts and Resources Act 2000 (c. 20).

(2) Where a group is consulted under subsection (1) in a particular year, the Department shall arrange for the group to prepare a report for that year—

(a) summarising the activities of the group for the purpose of the consultation, and

(b) dealing with such other matters as the group considers appropriate.

(3) Where a report is prepared under subsection (2), the Department shall arrange for it to be laid before the Assembly.” — [Mr Leslie.]

5.45 pm

Question put That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 41; Noes 25.

AYES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, David Ford, Sam Foster, Oliver Gibson, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, Derek Hussey, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, James Leslie, Kieran McCarthy, Robert McCartney, Alan McFarland, Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice,

Sean Neeson, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Bairbre de Brún, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Joe Hendron, Alex Maskey, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Eddie McGrady, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Mary Nelis, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Sue Ramsey, John Tierney.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendment No 5 agreed to.

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 18 (Examinations by Comptroller and Auditor General)

Amendment No 6 made: In page 10, after line 14, insert

“() In determining whether and, if so, how to exercise its powers under subsection (6) or (8), the Department shall have regard to any views expressed by the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly.” — [Mr Durkan.]

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 7 not moved.

Clause 18, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 8 made: After clause 18 insert the following new clause:

“Inspections by Comptroller and Auditor General

*—(1) The Comptroller and Auditor General may at any reasonable time inspect—

(a) the accounts of any body to which this section applies, and

(b) any documents relating to those accounts which are held or controlled —

(i) by the body ; or

(ii) in pursuance of arrangements made by the body for the compiling or handling of any of its financial records.

(2) The Comptroller and Auditor General shall not exercise his powers under subsection (1) in relation to a body unless it appears to him that—

(a) it is appropriate to do so in view of public concern about any matter relating to the finances of the body or its financial transactions, or

(b) it is otherwise appropriate to do so in the public interest.

(3) Subject to subsection (4), this section applies to a body if it appears to the Comptroller and Auditor General that—

- (a) the accounts of the body are not required to be examined by, and are not otherwise open to the inspection of, the Comptroller and Auditor General by virtue of—

- (i) any statutory provision,
- (ii) any agreement made between that body and a Northern Ireland department, or
- (iii) any conditions imposed by a Northern Ireland department in pursuance of any statutory power, whether in connection with the provision of financial assistance or otherwise, and

- (b) the body exercises functions of a public nature or is entirely or substantially funded from public money.

(4) This section does not apply to a district council.

(5) Any person who holds or has control of any accounts or other documents mentioned in subsection (1) shall give the Comptroller and Auditor General any assistance, information or explanation which he requires in relation to any of those documents.

(6) The Comptroller and Auditor General may report to the Assembly the results of any inspection carried out by him under this section.” — [Mr Durkan.]

New Clause ordered to stand part of the Bill

New Clause

Amendment No 9 made: After clause 18 insert the following new clause:

“Economy, efficiency and effectiveness examinations by Comptroller and Auditor General

*—(1) Part III of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 (NI 5) (economy, efficiency and effectiveness examinations) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In Article 8(3) (public bodies subject to examination under that Article) —

- (a) after sub-paragraph (b) there shall be inserted—

‘(b) any body—

(i) whose accounts are open to the inspection of the Comptroller and Auditor General by virtue of section (*Inspections by Comptroller and Auditor General*) of the Government Accounts and Resources Act (Northern Ireland) 2001; and

(ii) which is a public sector body within the meaning of paragraph (7).’;

- (b) in paragraph (c) after ‘by virtue of any’ there shall be inserted ‘other’.

(3) At the end of Article 8 there shall be added the following paragraph—

‘(7) For the purposes of this Part an authority or body is a public sector authority or body if—

- (a) in the case of a company, its directors (or a majority of them) are appointed by a Northern Ireland department or a Minister of such a department;
- (b) in the case of any other body, its members (or a majority of them) are so appointed, and
- (c) in the case of any authority, the authority is so appointed.’

(4) In Article 9 (other bodies subject to examination) for paragraph (4) (bodies to which that Article applies) there shall be substituted—

‘(4) This Article applies to any public sector authority or body within the meaning of Article 8(7).’ ” — [Mr Durkan.]

New Clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 19 to 24 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: We have a procedural dilemma. We still have two items on the Order Paper, but the time of interruption is 6.00 pm. There are two possibilities. If the business on the Order Paper is unopposed, I could put the questions forthwith. However, if we do not have the leave of Members to proceed in that fashion the Assembly will be adjourned, to resume at 10.30 am tomorrow morning for the rest of the business, after which there will be a break of five minutes. Then the business of the new day will begin.

Do Members agree to the former?

Members indicated assent.

HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES BILL

Final Stage

Resolved:

That the Health and Personal Social Services Bill [NIA 3/00] do now pass. — [*The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety*]

ASSEMBLY STANDING ORDERS

Resolved:

To Standing Order 40(1) add

“(1A) Where on or before the Second Stage of a Budget Bill the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (or another member of that Committee acting on his/her behalf) confirms to the Assembly that the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill, the Bill shall proceed under the accelerated passage procedure which shall exclude any Committee Stage.” — [*Mr C Murphy*.]

Resolved:

In Standing Order 40(1) delete

“that may require an accelerated passage”

and insert

“proceeding under the accelerated passage procedure in accordance with paragraph (1A) or (2).” — [*Mr C Murphy*.]

Resolved:

In Standing Order 40(2) line 1 after “Bill” insert

“(other than a Budget Bill).” — [*Mr C Murphy*.]

Adjourned at 6.00 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 13 February 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EUROPEAN MARKETING CAMPAIGN

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): From Tuesday 30 January to Friday 2 February 2001, Northern Ireland had more doors open to it in mainland Europe than at any time in the last decades of the twentieth century. We were warmly received, we broke new ground and our economic message reached a wide and influential audience.

Two simple themes dominated our four-day tour. The first was that Northern Ireland, through its new institutions, is steering a course to a new era of economic well-being and prosperity. The second was the straightforward and attractive business case for inward investment, strategic and trade opportunities, and what our academic institutions can contribute in the fields of research and cutting-edge technologies. Tourism also featured prominently in our presentations.

We embarked on the European marketing campaign to tell audiences in France and Germany that in this Assembly the potential exists to put conflict behind us and that together we are building a new and inclusive society for all our people. I have great pleasure in reporting to the Assembly that we achieved all three objectives. I will attempt to put some meat on the bones of each of those points.

In the first instance, the campaign was given a political focus through the active participation of our First and Deputy First Ministers. Without them, the venture would not have been as successful. History was made on the first leg of the tour in Paris when, for the first time, the leaders of the new Administration met with a European head of state, President Jacques Chirac.

They briefed President Chirac on devolution, told him how we are now managing our affairs and how our economy is performing and set out our many advantages as a business partner and business location. The First Minister described their meeting at the Elysée Palace as “a milestone”, an assessment wholeheartedly endorsed

by the Deputy First Minister. For his part, President Chirac was fulsome in his praise for what we are trying to achieve here. Mr Trimble and Mr Mallon found a willing ally, but without them this high-profile meeting would not have taken place.

Following the meeting with President Chirac, both the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister met the European Minister in the French Government, Mr Moscovici, to brief him on the position in Northern Ireland.

Before their courtesy call on President Chirac, an audience of over 200 business people heard at first hand what the Northern Ireland of today has to offer Europe. This lunchtime event was organised by the Mouvement des Entreprises de France (MEDEF), the French equivalent of the CBI, and took place in the ornate surroundings of Le Grand Hôtel.

Seven subsidiaries of French companies have a presence in Northern Ireland and, between them, employ more than 3,000 people. France is the leading European investor in the Province, and its approval and endorsement are significant. For example, the French Ambassador to the United Kingdom, M Daniel Bernard, made our task all the easier when he told the gathering that “Northern Ireland is a good bet. Northern Ireland is good for business”. M François Périgot, who is the Chairman of MEDEF, talked about the “remarkable economic dynamism in Northern Ireland”, adding later in his speech that the region is “a safe investment”.

Not too long ago, such glowing accolades would have been unthinkable. They are happening now in national capitals because we are coming out from under the cloud of violence and hopelessness — some would say more slowly than we should — into an era in which hope and confidence can flourish.

That event on its own was a resounding success. Executives from French industry and business were impressed with the presentations delivered by Mr Trimble and Mr Mallon, and many stayed behind to ask follow-up questions and establish contact with IDB personnel, who were on hand to maximise the opportunities. Later, Sir Michael Jay, the British Ambassador, and Mr Patrick O'Connor, the Irish Ambassador, hosted a dinner in the British residence.

From Paris, our European marketing campaign headed to Düsseldorf, the capital of North Rhine-Westphalia. Ongoing political discussions at home meant that this leg of the tour had to be conducted without the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. At this point, my ministerial Colleague, Dr Sean Farren, joined the party. Together we paid courtesy calls on civic leaders and had a very worthwhile and productive meeting with the region's Economy Minister, Herr Ernst Schwannhold. Our discussion was wide-ranging, taking in the desirability of establishing closer links between our academic institutions

and the scope that exists for strategic alliances in the areas of biotechnology, avionics, informatics and textiles.

It was clear from this wide-ranging discussion that considerable scope exists for meaningful and very practical co-operation. Our hosts heard of the ground-breaking research being conducted here, and it seemed to us to be logical to explore the feasibility of involving institutions from Düsseldorf in the work. Both Dr Farren's office and the IDB are undertaking follow-up work in that regard.

Our visit to Düsseldorf culminated in a very successful dinner, attended by business people and key influencers, at which a multi-media presentation was made on the Northern Ireland business opportunity. Furthermore, we were delighted to announce that the German company, M&M Software GmbH, is setting up a new software development operation in Northern Ireland. This announcement sent a strong message to other German companies that Northern Ireland is a cost-effective location with high-quality software engineers.

The dinner was followed by a musical finale, led by Belfast soprano Angela Feeney and her Laganside group of young musicians. I have to say that if Members had been present, they would have been very proud of Angela's performance and that of the young musicians from Northern Ireland who were with her. They were absolutely superb and had the audience captivated. IDB's Düsseldorf office is actively following up the business contacts generated by the event.

We arrived in Berlin the following day. As in Paris, there was considerable media and press interest. The First Minister and Dr Farren paid a courtesy call on the Federal Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, and briefed him on political and economic developments before returning to the British Embassy for a lunch that was jointly hosted by the British and Irish Ambassadors, Sir Paul Lever and Noel Fahey. The guest of honour was Dr Manfred Stolpe, Ministerpräsident of Brandenburg.

All of this would not have been possible without the organisational skills and contacts that have been carefully nurtured by IDB. The work done by IDB personnel and others paved the way for this historic visit, and I place on record my thanks and the thanks of my ministerial Colleagues, for the superb way IDB managed the tour.

Thanks are also due to the ambassadors and staff at the British embassies in Paris and Berlin, Sir Michael Jay and Sir Paul Lever, and to their Irish counterparts Mr Patrick O'Connor and Mr Noel Fahey. Thanks are due also to Her Majesty's Consul General in Düsseldorf, Northern Ireland-born diplomat Boyd McCleary. Their enthusiasm to assist was matched by our own eagerness to deliver our confident and up-beat economic messages to very receptive French and German audiences.

The four-day tour was not about going to Europe to ask for help. It was not about meeting senior politicians,

important although that is. It was about telling our story, our way, with honesty, conviction and some pride. It is a good story; one that gets better as each week goes by. We have the youngest and most highly talented workforce in the United Kingdom. Our manufacturing output is up 35% in the last decade. Overseas investment last year has more than doubled on that in the previous year. Eight out of every 10 new jobs promoted by IDB are with high-tech, knowledge-based companies. Tourism, which has long been in the doldrums, has bounced back with record levels of visitors. Our education system and comprehensive training programmes are the envy of many other regions.

In France, our sixth-largest export market, and in Germany, in fourth place, our mission was to explain that Northern Ireland is good for business, and has attractions few other regions can boast.

We want trade to grow, we want businesses to flourish, and collectively we will do all that we can to position Northern Ireland at the top of every political and business leader's agenda. The initiatives are invaluable and do bear fruit. There is no instant panacea, no magic formula, just careful contact-building and meticulous follow-up. That is the job we are now undertaking, but it is made easier by having the support and endorsement of the House and the Executive.

There is now greater awareness in France and Germany of what we are creating here. In those countries there is a willingness to support our efforts to build a vibrant and successful economy. In France and Germany, there are European partners who want to see us achieve the goal of long-term peace and stability.

The IDB will continue to pursue the many business leads resulting from this visit. I have no doubt that increased business will follow, and for those industrialists seeking to expand, they will find the right partner and the right business environment in Northern Ireland. When we open our representative office in Brussels later this year I hope we will have a firm platform upon which to build our message to mainland Europe.

I commend the statement to the House.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee (Mr Neeson): I thank the Minister for his comprehensive report and congratulate him and his Colleagues for taking this initiative. Are there any special areas of interest shown by people in France and Germany? What plans do he and his Department have as a follow-up? Looking further ahead, and bearing in mind the forthcoming enlargement of the European Union, what plans do he and his Department have to help Northern Ireland take advantage of the situation?

Sir Reg Empey: There were special areas of interest. When in North Rhine-Westphalia I was accompanied by Dr Farren at a meeting with the Economics Minister. To put the North Rhine-Westphalia area into context, the

gross domestic product of that state is equivalent to 25% of the gross domestic product of Germany.

10.45 am

We are therefore talking about a very significant area. There was clear evidence there of a willingness to co-operate on pursuing biotechnology issues, and Dr Farren is actively involved in trying to link our universities with the relevant counterparts in Düsseldorf. We have both issued a personal invitation to the Minister of Economics and Technology to visit Northern Ireland. We understand that he is coming to London later in the year, and we are trying to arrange a visit for him to Northern Ireland. We also met the mayor of Düsseldorf earlier in the day, and he is coming to Northern Ireland in June. Düsseldorf is a very vibrant city. The recent takeover by Vodafone Group plc of Mannesmann AG, which is one of the main employers in Düsseldorf, has put British industry very much in the centre of the scene there.

Members may be aware that we have a Düsseldorf office. That office did an enormous amount of work and is actively following up a number of very significant software companies, including some young software companies, in that area.

We also discussed air links, because one of the big problems that we have as a region is the absence of direct links to mainland Europe. We have only one or two at present, and I believe that there is significant potential, if we can follow that up.

The Member made a point about enlargement. As he probably knows, my Department has the NI-CO organisation, which specialises in offering services to other countries — particularly those in eastern Europe. That organisation is actively pursuing contracts and working with the Department for International Development in London so that we can inject expertise from Northern Ireland companies, and indeed public service contracts, into companies which are currently supported by the European Union through schemes — such as Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) — or potential enlargement countries. Activity is ongoing, and the test, of course, will be whether in the long run we are able to land some of these companies. The prospects seem to be encouraging.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Minister for his very comprehensive report. I am sure that he would wish to commend those companies that already export to the French and German markets. My question focuses on the commercial links between Northern Ireland and those two countries. Exports from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland grew by 81% between 1991 and 1999, by 34% to the rest of the European Union, and by 176% to the rest of the world, outside the EU. Does the Minister agree that such figures indicate that our companies have shown commendable flexibility in facing various values of the

pound sterling, and that there is a need for IDB and trade agency policy to focus on EU markets over and above the Republic of Ireland market?

Sir Reg Empey: The export performance of Northern Ireland in recent years has been commendable. We have had a mountain to climb. With the euro sometimes over 30% ahead of us, our exporters have had a huge problem with the sterling value. Although there has been significant improvement in our exports to the Republic, there is still a significant deficit in our trade with the Republic. I am hoping that through InterTradeIreland, and other efforts and initiatives, we will gradually overcome that. It is certainly our intention to grow that trade.

However, a lot of concentration in recent times has been on the north American market, because that is where the growth has been coming from. That is where the investment has, by and large, been coming from — generated and assisted by currency stability between sterling and the dollar. That has been a pattern in recent years, and clearly it has allowed this area to develop. Having said that, it is clear that in the past couple of months there has been a gradual erosion in the differential between sterling and the euro. I hope that that trend continues. I believe that it is now an opportune time to involve ourselves with our European partners to a greater extent than has been the case.

The reason for that is very simple — our economies, I believe, are gradually converging. The expansion of the European Union is in the pipeline, and it is going to become a market of well over 400 million people. It would be foolish for such a small region as ours to ignore that market. The European Union has given us very considerable support, financially and in other ways, over recent years. Very few regions in Europe would receive the great welcome that we have had. Our Ministers can go and see a head of state and other senior Government Ministers in two of the principal European capitals. The opportunity is clear, and the door is open.

Our European partners have a significant understanding of our situation here — they were very well informed, and the press was very interested. When our representation is opened in Brussels, I hope that there will be an economic dimension to it. I intend to see that our European partners are vigorously targeted from a trade and investment point of view.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to be reasonably concise because quite a number wish to ask questions.

Mrs Courtney: It is good to see that Ministers are going out and seeking inward investment — that is what we really need. What is the state of current German investment here? The Minister announced that M & M Software was going to set up another software company here. How successful is the current drive for German investment? I know that he is expecting the arrival in June of the

Mayor of Düsseldorf. However, what additional investment is he expecting as a result of his visit to Düsseldorf?

Sir Reg Empey: A number of German companies are based in Northern Ireland. The Member will know that Arntz has been operating in her constituency for many years and is well established. Another company of which the Member may be aware is Hüco Lightronic in Limavady. I presented an award there when the expansion of the company was announced a few weeks ago, and the company was represented at our function in Düsseldorf. It has achieved very significant training awards throughout the UK, and it is doing very well.

However, the scale of the German economy and the level of investment here are not matched. In other words, we are very significantly under-represented in terms of German investment. It is our fourth-largest export market, but it is well down the list of investors here, and that is why we have a small office in Düsseldorf. Most of the potential contacts that are there at the moment tend to be involved in the software and telecoms sector. Officials tell me that they are optimistic, and we believe that a number of significant companies are on the verge of committing themselves to Northern Ireland.

But, to be frank, one of the evident difficulties is that, although there is a willingness to consider Northern Ireland as a location, particularly because of our supply of software expertise, potential investors are still nervous about our situation. One of the purposes of being out in the marketplace is to make personal contacts and to make people feel more comfortable. But it is a fact of life that our job, both in tourism and in attracting inward investment, will remain at a disadvantage until things settle down here and people feel confident that the past is genuinely behind us. That is our single biggest obstacle. But, nevertheless and notwithstanding, we have been getting a small amount of investment from that area — it is far less than it should be, and that is why we are concentrating there.

Mr Wells: I am delighted that the Minister did not advertise Northern Ireland as a low-wage economy — we have been using that selling point for far too long, and we need to put it behind us.

This Minister is aware that many areas in Northern Ireland suffer from a skills shortage. Is it not a danger that he may stimulate a demand in some of the companies he has targeted which cannot be met, given that we do not have the trained young people available to take up the jobs on offer? Is he content and certain that if results accrue from his trade mission, we will be able to deliver the workforce that is required?

Sir Reg Empey: That is a very sensible question. We have a comparatively low-cost economy, and that is a perfectly legitimate point to market. I agree that we should not be marketing a low-wage economy; in fact that is entirely the wrong way to go. However, I have been in

contact with my Colleague Dr Farren very closely on this, and our Departments are very acutely aware of the skills position. Yes, it is true that bottlenecks are beginning to emerge in the labour market. However, because of the demographic profile of our population, we have a significant flow into the labour market every year, and we have to ensure sufficient job opportunities for those people.

It is a balancing act, particularly when unemployment is at historically low levels — we are not used to that. Nevertheless, to take our foot off the accelerator at this stage would be a mistake, because as the Member will know there are ebbs and flows and cycles in an economy, and we will have bad days as well as good. Dr Farren and his Department are working very closely with mine on this. We are doing our level best to ensure that the demands of industry are met through the training and education and also through our Track Back Programme, Back to the Future, which is endeavouring to bring experienced people back to Northern Ireland. We believe that this combination will ensure that potential investors find the labour they require.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's very positive statement and congratulate him on the success of the mission. The delegation seems to have done remarkable work in its four days away.

I refer the Minister to his words, "we are building a new inclusive society for all our people". How does he feel this objective will be achieved when the First Minister continues to enforce an unlawful ban on the legitimate attendance of Sinn Féin Ministers at North/South Ministerial meetings and has threatened to extend his unlawful activities?

When his Department embarks on trade missions and the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have to be replaced, why is it the norm that preference for replacement is given to Members from their own parties? How can this contribute to the principle of inclusiveness?

Sir Reg Empey: I suspect that one or two of those points are slightly at variance with the subject matter in front of us today. Our objective in the Programme for Government is to ensure that we provide the best possible economic circumstances in which people can have an expectation of and an opportunity to obtain fulfilling careers and work. As an economic objective, that is entirely consistent with inclusiveness. I do not want to get involved in an argument with the hon Lady over these other matters; however, I will reiterate that the best way to ensure inclusion in any society is to provide general access to good jobs. What can be more inclusive than conditions in which everyone can have a stake and a wage, something to protect and the ability to deliver a standard of living to his family? I am sure the Member will agree with that.

Let me turn to the substance of what the hon Lady was saying. We can have our political arguments, but if we go back to the source of these we face difficulties and meet concerns about whether we have settled our affairs.

11.00 am

It is perfectly clear that these things are not entirely settled, and that is the underlying reason. Dr Farren's appearance was entirely appropriate because his Department and my Department work closely together on training and employment matters, which are, of course, an integral part of our economic drive. If the hon Member refers to 'Strategy 2010', produced some two years ago, she will see that there is an inextricable link between training and employment and economic development. Our two Departments work closely together to ensure that our activities are co-ordinated and entirely consistent with economic development.

Ms Morrice: I would like to join with those Members who have congratulated the Minister on what seems to have been a remarkable visit. It is very valuable to start focusing on continental Europe.

Can the Minister go into more detail on the concrete business links that could be made and the subsequent follow-up, and can he put this in the context of the major problem we face with inward investment, namely our decision to stay outside the euro zone? Was the issue raised in meetings with the French and Germans? The Minister has said that our past is the single biggest obstacle to investment. Does he not agree that our future outside the euro zone is also a major obstacle and is he not be tempted to encourage our entry to the euro zone?

Sir Reg Empey: The logic of the euro zone is to follow consistent economic policies across those member countries that are included. Yesterday's meeting of Finance Ministers in Brussels saw Mr McCreevy of the Irish Republic put into quarantine because he was pursuing his own economic policies. So, the club is OK as long as you are allowed to do whatever you like.

I understand the difficulties the euro has caused in terms of some of Northern Ireland's exports, but it must be remembered that countries that can buy in the euro and sell in the dollar — and quite a number of Northern Ireland companies do that — have done quite well over the past few years. In fact, we have significantly developed our trade with North America and the rest of the world.

The problem is that the euro is undervalued, not that sterling is overvalued, and I hope the current convergence will continue. However, as we have seen with Mr McCreevy, the fact is that if you hand over control of interest rates to somebody else — which is what joining the euro means — there are consequences such as Germany's wanting lower interest rates and Ireland's needing higher ones. That is the current reality. This

absence is slowing down growth in Germany and creating inflation in the Republic.

Economies were not properly converged when member states joined. The principle of whether a nation can keep control over its economy must be considered. I think it would be madness for the United Kingdom to join the euro, particularly at the present levels of exchange, and I do not believe that there is consensus in the United Kingdom.

There has been vigorous follow-up because the IDB was involved in selecting and inviting companies, especially so in Germany, and the MEDEF was involved in the selection of people who attended the Paris function.

To have the French Ambassador stand up to market Northern Ireland to his fellow countrymen was remarkable. It was also remarkable, in one day, to see the representatives of a small nation meet the President of the French Republic, the French Minister of European Affairs and top industrialists and to be addressed by the French Ambassador and the head of the equivalent of the CBI and be told that this is a good place in which to invest. Those things were inconceivable a few years ago, and I hope people understand their significance for our future.

Mr Speaker: May I remind the House that questions should relate to the Minister's statement to his ministerial remit. Decisions on the euro go slightly higher up the tree than those that our devolved Assembly can take.

Mr McClarty: I congratulate and thank the Minister for his extremely positive statement. Will he confirm that an unprecedented number of contacts were made during the visit and that Northern Ireland plc received an unprecedented level of marketing? Does he also agree that much of the visit's success was due to the fact that our institutions are up and running and that those from here who attended presented a united front?

Sir Reg Empey: High quality contacts were made and, if I could relate to our German experience, it was a significant advantage that the Consul General in Düsseldorf, who is a very experienced diplomat, comes from Belfast. The Düsseldorf Consul General's office is responsible for all United Kingdom economic activity in Germany. Therefore, although it is a consulate, it is in charge of all the UK's inward investment activity. It is a powerful office, employing over 70 staff dedicated to economic development and co-operation.

There is no doubt that to mount that type of operation without the institutions in place would have been difficult. Yes, it has been done in the past, but a federal state like Germany, with its own Ministers and Government in each state, can now relate to us as a region. A similar situation exists in France. The message that our colleagues in Europe got from us, as well as information on what has been happening, was infinitely more positive than it would have been a few years ago when we were effectively

seen as a war zone. Europe correctly takes some degree of pride in the fact that it has made financial and unique contributions to here. The Member for North Down, Ms Morrice, will understand from her previous position that I mean “unique” in terms of peace and reconciliation. Those are things that have never happened before — no previous examples exist. Our European colleagues are paying close attention and are impressed by the progress that has been made. They understand that we have not yet reached a conclusion, but, nevertheless, valuable contacts have been made. But for our current situation, that would not have been possible.

Dr McDonnell: I want to congratulate the Minister, the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment for what has clearly been a success story. Having worked with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and observed his activities on the other side of the Atlantic, I expect very high standards from him. However, the greatest potential for immediate benefit from Germany and France lies in tourism. Can the Minister give us any good news on that front? Does the Tourist Board plan to market tourism more in France and Germany? I see the marketing of tourism as a continuation of the efforts that the Minister made during his visit. By selling Northern Ireland, the Tourist Board should add value to that visit.

Sir Reg Empey: That is a very interesting question. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has appointed an agent in Paris. Last year in tourism there was an increase of 44% in the number of visitors from France. The figures went up to over 18,000. That is not a huge number, but it has an advantage in that it represents high, added-value visitors.

The people being targeted for tourism are not those who go for two weeks in the sun in Ibiza — it is not that type of a market. There is great interest in our culture, heritage, gardens, hunting, shooting and fishing — this type of holiday is popular in France. Certain small companies specialise in such holidays, and our agent has good links with them. I did an interview with a leading French tourist journal. A marketing member from the Tourist Board accompanied me and went on to make further contacts.

There is a similar situation in Germany. Germans hire a significant number of the cruisers on Lough Erne, and they have stayed loyal throughout the difficult years. It is this type of specialist, natural-resource based tourism, with a high value added, that is the type of targeted market we must address. We have had a good success with France in the last year. We need to work hard on the German market, and our representation in Brussels, when we get it up and running, will provide us with a base.

It is about targeting these specialist, high value areas, which are not so subject to price fluctuation. We do have to bear in mind that we have been walking uphill against

the currency differential. However, the tourist potential in France is high and the performance last year was excellent, with a 44% increase.

Mr Clyde: I welcome the Minister's statement, in which he says tourism is bouncing back with record levels of visitors. If this continues, do we have enough bed places to facilitate the visitors? If not, has he any plans to grant-aid farmers who want to diversify into providing bed-and-breakfast accommodation?

Sir Reg Empey: That is a very useful contribution. If we get the level of tourists we should be getting, the answer is we would not have the capacity to cope with them. I have said before in the House that our tourism is operating at roughly one third of what it should be. If we compare ourselves with our nearest neighbours in Scotland and the Republic, tourism accounts for about 6% of their gross domestic product — here it is less than 2%.

We need to look closely at diversification by farmers. We have a scheme where if two or more units are being converted then the tourist board can contribute and help. Some people may be starting from scratch, and there are business start-up opportunities from LEDU that could be pursued. If the Member has any examples in his own constituency I would be very happy to look at them for him. We do need to refine that particular market more.

However, I have to say this — and it is not a new thing but it is something that we all need to be aware of. Because of our particular circumstances every summer we are creating a “black hole” for tourism in July and August. The best part of our season is turning into a disaster and this has been going on for years. Despite that we have been able to increase our numbers, which is miraculous. Until we get the matter resolved, we will not get tourism to a point where it should be.

It is a chicken-and-egg situation — people will not invest unless the tourists are here and tourists will not come here unless the situation settles. The major bus companies and tour operators are saying “We will come on the shoulder of the season, in April and October, but we are not bringing our people into a firefight in July”. Everybody in the House has to realise the implications of what we are doing. We understand the reasons, and I will not get involved in the arguments now, but the matter has to be resolved before we can really get tourism off the ground.

I appreciate the contribution from the Member.

11.15 am

Mr Roche: My question to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment comes from a desire that the perception of Northern Ireland should be based on political reality and not on political spin. How can he say to the French and the Germans that the potential exists to put conflict behind us, when, within the terms of the Belfast Agreement, there is no requirement for the terrorists to give up their weapons and when, in the process of this

current negotiation, the terrorists on both sides have not only refused to give up their weapons but have been replenishing their arsenals?

Mr Speaker: I have to say that that is thoroughly wide of the statement that the Minister has made — thoroughly wide. The Minister may respond, if he wishes, to the first few words of the question, which were relevant. It becomes rather pointless if every statement that every Minister makes on any subject ends up with the same chorus, even if the verses sometimes differ.

Mr Roche: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am not taking a point of order at this time.

Sir Reg Empey: Perhaps one of my mistakes was not to bring the hon Member on the tour. I understand the points he makes, and I understand only too well that things are not settled here.

However, if we go about with that type of attitude, this place will be economic scorched earth. Is that what the Member wants?

RETENTION OF HUMAN ORGANS

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Is mian liom tuairisc a thabhairt don Tionól faoin eolas atá faighte agam maidir leis an mhéid orgáin daoine atá á gcoinneáil in ospidéal i ndiaidh scrúduithe iarbháis. Beidh mé ag fógairt fosta réimse beart a bhéas mé a dhéanamh le tuilleadh imscrúdaithe a dhéanamh ar an chleachtas a bhí ann san am a chuaigh thart, le tacaíocht a thabhairt do na teaghlaigh a mbaineann an t-ábhar seo leo agus lena chinntiú go mbeidh an cleachtas sa todhchaí bunaithe go daingean ar an phrionsabal gur gá toiliú eolasach a bheith ann.

Nuair a tháinig an t-ábhar seo chun solais a chéaduaire an mhí seo caite, d'éiligh mé go ndéanfaí imscrúdú láithreach le scála na faidhbe agus líon na n-orgán a coinníodh a aimsiú. Mar chuid de seo, scríobh mo Phríomh-Oifigeach Míochaine chuig gach iontaobhas SSS le heolas a fháil faoi na cleachtais atá acu maidir le scrúduithe iarbháis agus orgán a choinneáil.

Thig liom a thuairisciú anois go ndearnadh 50,000 scrúdú iarbháis in ospidéal ón bhliain 1970. Rinne paiteolaithe stáit formhór acu siúd faoin Coroners Act.

Tuairiscíodh gur coinníodh 376 orgán páistí san iomlán sular tugadh na treoirlínte reatha isteach, agus go bhfuil siad á gcoinneáil gan toiliú eolasach tuismitheoirí: go bhfuil 361 díobh in Ospidéal Ríoga Victoria agus 15 eile díobh in Ospidéal Alt na nGealbhan. Tá orgán eile páiste amháin á choinneáil, le toiliú iomlán tuismitheoirí, in Ospidéal Cheantar Craigavon.

Bhain an t-imscrúdú fosta le horgáin aosach a coinníodh i ndiaidh scrúduithe iarbháis. Taobh amuigh d'Ospidéal Ríoga Victoria, coinníodh 60 orgán aosach san iomlán, gan toiliú eolasach i mbunús na gcásanna: coinníodh 45 cinn díobh in Ospidéal Alt na nGealbhan; trí cinn in Ospidéal Uladh; agus 12 cheann (haoi gcinn díobh le toiliú iomlán gaolta) in Ospidéal Cheantar Craigavon.

Coinníodh 677 n-inchinn mar aon le cordaí dromlaigh sa Ghrúpa Ríoga Ospidéal. Tá fardal mionchruinn á dhéanamh ar gach sampla d'fhíochán aosaigh san ospidéal le seiceáil an bhfuil orgáin eile ina mheasc. Tá an scrúdú fisciúil sin á dhéanamh faoi dhúdhéifre agus táthar ag dréim le freagra cinntitheach i dtaca le líon agus le cineál orgán ar bith a coinníodh faoi dheireadh mhí Feabhra.

Tuigim go ndearnadh gach ceann de na horgáin a aimsíodh a choinneáil i ndiaidh scrúdú iarbháis ospidéil nó scrúdú iarbháis cróinéara.

Is léir fosta, i gcuid mhór cásanna, gur coinníodh orgáin ar feadh tamaill mar chuid d'imscrúdú iarbháis agus gur créamadh ina dhiaidh sin iad. Go dtí le deireannas, ba ghnáthchleachtas é sin ar fud na n-oileán

seo. Ach is léir nach bhfuil sé inghlactha go dtarlódh a leithéid gan toiliú eolasach.

Dearbhaíodh san imscrúdú nach ar an scála chéanna a bhí orgáin á gcoinneáil anseo agus i Sasana. Níor thángthas ar fhianaise ar bith gur coinníodh orgáin go córasach coitianta, mar a tharla in Ospidéal Alder Hey.

Ach ba mhaith liom a rá go soiléir nár cheart, ar chor ar bith, go gcoinneodh an Seirbhís Sláinte aon orgán gan toiliú eolasach sainráite ó theaghlach an té a fuair bás. Tá sin fíor-riachtanach.

I wish to report to the Assembly my findings on the scale of human organ retention in hospitals following post mortem examinations. I will also announce a package of measures that I am taking to further investigate past practice, to support the families affected and to ensure that future practice is built on the principle of informed consent — *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: Order. If Members wish to have conversations, which is perfectly reasonable, I ask that they do so in the Lobby.

Ms de Brún: When this matter first came to light last month, I asked for an investigation to be undertaken immediately to establish the scale of the problem here and the number of organs being retained. As part of this investigation, the chief medical officer wrote to all health and social services trusts seeking information on their practices relating to post mortems and organ retention.

I can now report that nearly 50,000 post mortems have been undertaken in hospitals since 1970, and the vast majority of these were carried out by state pathologists under the Coroners Act 1988. It is reported that 376 children's organs have been retained prior to the introduction of the current guidelines. They are held without informed parental consent. There are three hundred and sixty one in the Royal Victoria Hospital and 15 in Altnagelvin Hospital. One additional child's organ has been retained with full parental consent at Craigavon Area Hospital.

The investigation also covered the retention of adult organs following post mortem examinations. Apart from the Royal Victoria Hospital, 60 adult organs have been retained, mostly without informed consent: 45 in Altnagelvin Hospital; three in the Ulster Hospital; and 12 in Craigavon Area Hospital — nine of which are with relatives' full consent.

In the Royal Group of Hospitals, 677 brains and spinal cords have been retained. A detailed inventory of all adult tissue samples in the hospital is underway to check if they include other organs. This physical inspection is proceeding with all haste, and a definitive answer on the number and type of organs retained is expected by the end of February.

I understand that all the retained organs identified have been held following a hospital post mortem or a

coroner's post mortem. It is also apparent that in many cases, organs have been held for a time as part of a post mortem investigation and subsequently cremated. Until recently, this was a common practice throughout these isles, but it is clearly not acceptable for that to happen without informed consent.

The investigation has confirmed that the number of organs retained here has not been on the same scale as in England. It has found no evidence of any systematic wholesale retention of organs, as was the case in Alder Hey Hospital. However, I am clear that no organs should be retained by the Health Service without the explicit and informed consent of the family of the deceased. This is absolutely essential.

I have listened carefully to the voice of parents and to the many helpful points raised by Members in the course of the recent debate on this subject. My conclusion is that there are still too many questions unanswered. Decisive action is needed to answer the questions put by many of the families affected, and to restore faith in our service and in future post mortem practice.

To achieve this, I am announcing a major initiative to investigate past actions, support those affected, and ensure that such practices can never recur. The initiative will include the following measures. First, there will be an inquiry established under article 54 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 to review past and current practice in post mortem and organ removal, retention and disposal. The inquiry will report on past practice and make recommendations for future arrangements, and it will report to me within twelve months.

Secondly, a relatives' support group will be set up quickly to work with parents and hospitals in order to ensure that the families affected receive full and timely information and support. The group will bring together parents, health and social services councils, bereavement counsellors and other interests, to ensure that parents and relatives are given appropriate advice, information and effective support.

Thirdly, there will be a review of the Human Tissue Act (Northern Ireland) 1962, with the aim of strengthening its provisions in regard to consent and making it a criminal offence to retain organs without informed consent. The review will take appropriate account of parallel developments in Great Britain. I also wish to ensure that proposed amendments are broadly compatible with the views of the inquiry on what is required.

Fourthly, recognising that the new legislation will take time to be put on the statute book, I will prepare good practice guidelines for the health services. These will provide interim guidance to the service on acceptable practice, pending new legislation.

The inquiry will have the power to summon witnesses and require the presentation of information, should that prove necessary. I will be furnishing the inquiry with the information gathered in the course of my own investigation, which it will supersede. I hope to announce shortly further details of the inquiry and membership of the support group.

The Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee (Dr Hendron): I welcome the Minister's statement on behalf of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee.

I would have preferred a full public inquiry into the matter. However, I am aware of the very great sensitivities of the families who have been bereaved over the years and where organs of their loved ones have been retained. The Minister mentioned that the Human Tissue Act (Northern Ireland) 1962 legislation would be looked at. I wonder if the Coroners Act 1959 should be looked at as well, because I understand that people in England are looking closely at the Coroners Act there.

Looking at the statement, I was aware that 376 children's organs had been retained but was not aware that 677 adult's brains and spinal cords had been retained at the Royal Group of Hospitals. Obviously, a lot of people will be asking questions about that and about the other organs that were subsequently cremated. However, that will be the purpose of the inquiry.

While I would prefer a full public inquiry into this matter, the Minister seems to be proceeding along these lines. My question concerns her last comment that she hopes to announce shortly further details of the inquiry and membership of the support group. Will she present the terms of reference concerning that inquiry and the support group membership to the Assembly?

Ms de Brún: First, it will become very clear that this will be a full statutory inquiry, not only because of the statute under which it is being set up but also from its terms of reference. As such, it will have the power to engage with the public, to call for evidence from whomsoever it feels can best contribute to the inquiry and hold its meetings in public if it feels that that is necessary or desirable.

11.30 am

The inquiry's terms of reference will require it to take account of the views and reasonable expectations of parents and relatives. It will report to me, and its findings will be made public.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee (Mr Gallagher): I also welcome the Minister's announcement about the inquiry and the setting up of a support group. People who have been affected by the organ retention scandal are asking what happened and why they were not told

about it sooner. It is hoped that the inquiry and the support group will address and answer those questions.

Like other Members, I have been approached by members of the public who have been affected by organ retention. The Minister's statement contains an assumption that, in many cases, organs were held and subsequently cremated. Will the inquiry be able to give Members information on cremation records? Was cremation the only means of disposal used? If not, what other means were used?

Will the Minister also tell the House if the support group will have links with every trust group? The families affected by the organ scandal live in every part of Northern Ireland.

Ms de Brún: Cremation and organ disposal will be part and parcel of the inquiry. The inquiry will be able to find out the relevant information on those issues and present its findings to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Dr Hendron previously asked a question about the review of the Coroners Act. As Dr Hendron said, that review is taking place in England, and the spin-off from that might well input in to legislation here, but that will not be within my power. However, I will be bringing forward legislation that will cover all aspects of ensuring that practice here is carried out to the highest possible standard in the future.

Mr Gallagher also asked if the support group will have links with trusts in every area. It is essential that the support group liaises with families and their representatives throughout the inquiry and that their needs and concerns are established. It is also essential that the support group works directly with the hospitals to ensure that the arrangements address the needs of families effectively and sensitively. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has already issued guidance to trusts about the required support for families, particularly those who live a long distance from the hospital at which their relatives' organs are being retained.

The Department needs to ensure that any subsequent support builds on that and that the highest standards and fullest efforts are made to meet the concerns and needs of parents. It is also important that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety receive the best possible advice with regard to setting standards for the future and bringing forward new legislation.

Rev Robert Coulter: I also welcome the Minister's statement and commend the speed with which her inquiry has been commenced. According to a rough calculation from the information in the report, there are 1,113 organs retained in hospitals. How many organs have been returned to relatives? Will the new guidelines be announced to the Assembly? Can the Minister give any indication when legislation will be laid before the House?

Ms de Brún: First, the process of discussions with parents as to what they wish to be done with the organs, how they wish this to be treated and where they are to be returned is ongoing. I cannot give you an exact figure for the number of organs returned to relatives. However, it is small compared to the number of organs that have been retained. The support committee is so important, because the relative social services, councils and others can give advice and work alongside those who can find their way through the system and ensure that parents have access to the absolute, total information and support that they require.

I will make the guidelines and the terms of reference known to the Assembly. I will also make the membership of the group and of the inquiry team known to the Assembly. We want the fullest possible information to be available to ensure that the way forward is built upon the experiences to date and the knowledge of what is needed for the future.

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Minister accept that her initial inquiry was insufficient and that she ought to have had a full and proper inquiry from the start? Does she accept that the drip-feed process which we have all witnessed has further eroded public confidence and that it will be fully and properly restored only by a public inquiry? Finally, does the Minister accept that this whole matter has seriously damaged public confidence in the entire donor system and that that will be restored only after a full public inquiry with lay people's involvement?

Ms de Brún: As soon as this issue arose I set out very clearly the steps that I would take. Those steps involved an immediate telephone enquiry to hospitals, followed by an investigation carried out by officials, who then sent for written information. At the time I made it clear that that information was necessary for me to establish the facts of what it was we were dealing with and what steps were necessary. I made it clear from the outset that nothing would be ruled out. People will see that the clear, precise and professional way of dealing with this led from the outset to where we are today — having a full picture of what we need.

Today I announced a package of measures to deal not only with the long-term changes — it will take time to put legislation in place — but also with an inquiry to establish the facts, which could take up to 12 months. In the interim, guidance has been issued so that practices here are informed of the best way forward, and a support group has been set up to ensure that relatives do not have to wait until the outcome of an inquiry, or for legislation, to see change. They can have their concerns addressed and have the availability of information and services immediately.

I hope that Members will not say that I have handled this in anything other than a very careful, precise and professional manner, dealing with the importance of the issue, recognising the trauma that parents have been

through and recognising the need to ensure the highest possible standards.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat A Cheann Comhairle. I too welcome the Minister's timely statement. She could not have brought it any more speedily to the Assembly. It would be compounding an injustice and compounding pain if one were to make this into some sort of political football.

At the time, I congratulated Jim Shannon on bringing this motion to the Chamber. I also said that it would be tragic if this dreadful situation were allowed to influence the very worthy organ donation scheme.

This has already happened in England. I hope the Minister's statement will at least assuage and assure people who are waiting for organ donations that this fear can be put to one side. I believe that the terms of the inquiry will satisfy the publicly-stated requirements of the parents, and, to that extent, I hope that it will lessen the pain and not increase it. That ought to be its overriding thrust.

What exactly is being done to ensure that advice, information and appropriate support is available for parents? How long will legislation take, and, importantly, what will happen in the interim? Can the Minister give an assurance that parents will have a key role in dealing with this issue during the course of the inquiry, a Cheann Comhairle?

Ms de Brún: I reiterate that the inquiry will be set up under statute with the necessary powers to establish the full facts. It will be full and exhaustive. Its terms of reference will require that the views and reasonable expectations of parents and relatives be taken into account. It will have the powers of any statutory inquiry — to engage with the public, to hold meetings in public, if it feels that that is necessary or desirable, and call whomsoever it feels can best contribute to give evidence.

I have answered some of Mr Kelly's questions in my answers to previous questions. For example, trusts have been asked to ensure that in cases where hospitals are retaining organs, or if they have information, that information is supplied to the relatives and that they look at their practices to ensure that this is being done in a manner which the relatives require. Trusts in every trust area have been told that they need to ensure that support, advice, help and counselling, if necessary, are available to parents. They specifically need to look at this where relatives are living at a distance from the hospital where organs are being retained. The establishment of a support group, which I announced today, will make very specific provision for liaising with parents, families and hospitals to ensure that the support available is there for the parents, that practice is as parents would wish and that advice is given to my Department in the drawing up of interim guidance and legislation.

I am committed to taking this matter forward as quickly as is practicable, given the legislative timetable of the Assembly. However, recognising that the legislation will take some time to bring on to the statute book, I hope, if we can find a window, that it will not take too long. In the interim I am taking steps to provide guidance to trusts to ensure that they adopt the spirit of proposed legislation prior to its coming into force.

Mr McCarthy: We have all been dismayed and disgusted at what has happened, and we offer our sympathy to all that have suffered and are suffering. We welcome all the measures outlined by the Minister this morning. Can the Minister assure the House that her Department will encourage the continuation of the voluntary donation of organs? In order to save further lives, will her Department do what is necessary to restore confidence in this very important field? Will she assure the House that under no circumstances will she ever permit the sale, or disposal by any other means, of organs to cosmetic companies or research agencies? Financial reward should have no part to play in organ donations.

11.45 am

Ms de Brún: I have said before that organ retention and disposal — and that covers disposal of any sort — will be part and parcel of the inquiry. This will be made clear in the way we move forward in the future. I certainly hope that the measures I announced today will restore public confidence in this area by setting standards; by making sure that the public is fully informed about what is happening; and finally, but most importantly, by ensuring that future practice is based firmly on the principal of explicit informed consent of the families.

The Department will be encouraging the voluntary donation of organs as part of its ongoing work. It is vital that people are still willing to donate their organs to save the lives of others. I understand that that is the case and that people are making a distinction. In fact, it has been said repeatedly by some of the families involved that if they had known that the organs of their loved ones could have helped others, they might well have been willing to donate them if they had been asked. The problem was that they were not.

Ms McWilliams: I have not had the opportunity to check article 54 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, but can the Minister confirm the composition of the inquiry team? Will she consider parents or relatives' representatives, if not in an advisory capacity then as members of the inquiry team? Would that be possible under the statute?

If not, would it be possible to have a relatives' advisory group? That would be separate from a relatives' support group, because counselling and support are very different from advice that relatives who have been through this process could offer. It would also be different from acting as a witness to the inquiry. Parents have told

me that they have asked for direct input into any ongoing inquiry that may be established. They feel that they should have a role.

When can we expect to have the interim guidance? I support Mr McCarthy's point, not just as regards advice to parents, but for the sake of those engaged in transplants. This is an enormous concern at the moment, and representations have been made to me. Is there any protocol as regards the questions that are asked when requesting voluntary donations?

I am also concerned that the inquiry will not report for 12 months. Has the Minister given any consideration to the inquiry's reporting sooner than that? Why was one year specified? It seems rather a lengthy inquiry, given that legislation will follow thereafter.

Ms de Brún: In looking at how the inquiry would be set up as regards its terms of reference and the length of time it would take, I investigated what has happened in England, Scotland and the South of Ireland. I had thought of setting up an inquiry that would report to me in six months, but I understand that where that had happened elsewhere, that time frame was not sufficient. I was worried about setting up an inquiry and raising expectations and then being seen to dash those expectations by lengthening it. That is why I decided on 12 months.

The inquiry will be set up under statute. It will be an independent inquiry, but its terms of reference will require it to take account of the views and of the reasonable expectations of parents and relatives. Therefore it will be up to the team to ensure that that is done. We will make sure that there are proper ways in which the inquiry will carry out that part of its terms of reference.

I referred to a parents' support group. Perhaps when we come to consider the terms of reference of that group, I should call the group something that will clearly show that it has more than a supportive role. It will liaise with families and hospitals to ensure that arrangements address the needs of families effectively and sensitively, but it will also be directly involved in influencing the ways in which parents and families are advised and supported at this difficult time. It will also act as a resource in advising myself, and it will assist the Department in developing the necessary guidance and the new legislation. It will have a direct role and an integral role.

Mr Shannon: The thrust of the Minister's statement has been about the principle of informed consent. That is where we should be coming from. Unfortunately, there are some issues that are still outstanding and which need to be answered. The statement says

"this physical inspection is proceeding with all haste, and a definitive answer on the number and type of any organs retained is expected by the end of February."

Will the families be consulted about this? Will the findings be made known to them?

Counselling is a very important issue. Measure 2 refers to “bereavement counsellors”. Perhaps the Department should be more proactive in relation to counselling. It is an important issue for all those families that have been bereaved and, even yet, are still trying coming to terms with what has happened to them. Will all the families be directly contacted? Will it be left up to the families to contact the relatives’ support group or the other organisation that was mentioned by a Member earlier? The Department should be proactive in this.

Can the Minister say how many phone calls or letters her Department has received in relation to this issue? It probably runs into thousands. I know that many people from my constituency have contacted the Department about the matter. We have had phone calls and letters. That correspondence has also been sent to the Minister. Also, will the Minister inform us of the people who contacted the Health Department and had to wait in long phone-call queues when news of the scandal first broke? Have all those people been contacted directly? Have they been made aware of whether any of the organs of their loved ones have been retained? If so, what steps have been taken to address that?

My Colleague Mrs Iris Robinson raised the issue of organ donation. That issue has perhaps been lost in the middle of this scandal. Can the Minister tell us what steps she will be taking to promote organ donation? Many of us carry the wee donor cards relating to our kidneys in case we are the unfortunate victims of an accident. Many people across the Province, and in this Chamber, do that. What we —

Mr Speaker: Order. I urge the Member to come to his question.

Mr Shannon: Those were all questions. What is the Minister doing about organ donation? Can the Minister assure us that the report will be transparent and readily available to all concerned? For instance, will there be lay people on the inquiry committee, not just doctors and consultants? Finally, the last time that the Minister spoke on this matter I think that she referred to the organs that are retained by the universities. That has not been mentioned in her statement today. Can she give us some indication of what has happened to organs retained in universities for research or other purposes?

Ms de Brún: I thank the Member for his various questions. I never stated — to my recollection — that organs are retained in universities. It does not come within my remit, and therefore I would not be able to make such a definitive statement. As is the practice elsewhere, there are protocols between universities and hospitals. That is something that we need to look at. My officials will check the Hansard records, but I do not believe that I was ever in a position to say such a thing.

Concerning organ donation, I would refer the Member to the answer I gave Kieran McCarthy this morning.

As regards the number of people who contacted the Department, very few, to my knowledge, contacted the Department directly. To date, the Department has received three or four letters and very few calls. The Royal Group of Hospitals has had more than 1,000 calls, and Altnagelvin has had a couple of hundred. People went directly to the trusts involved rather than to the hospitals themselves.

With regard to counselling, the Member referred to the point I made about having a counsellor on the relatives’ support group. That person would give advice and be able to make a contribution to the group in terms of overseeing what needs to be done. That is quite separate from the immediate action that my Department has already taken — which I outlined earlier — to ensure that trusts have been instructed to oversee that they put in place measures to take care of the needs of those relatives within their trust area, specifically the needs of those who live at any distance from the hospitals where the organs are retained.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her very detailed statement. I welcome the statutory inquiry and the Minister’s intention to put in place interim guidance on acceptable practice. I think I speak for all Members when I say that our sympathy and concern goes out to all those who have been notified that their relatives’ organs have been retained. I can think of nothing more distressing than for relatives to be told that parts of their loved ones’ bodies have been retained by hospitals.

Given the Minister’s statement that no organs should be retained without explicit and informed consent, does the legislation under which pathologists carried out their duties — the Coroners Act 1959 — need immediate updating, prior to the inquiry? Will the inquiry also address the Human Tissue Act 1962? How was that legislated for in the first place, and by whom?

Ms de Brún: I agree that our sympathy for those parents left in a position in which they should never have been is uppermost in our minds. Underlying all of our actions is our utmost desire to do the best we can for them at this point, to ensure that the practice — which previously was standard and which we now say was unacceptable and must change — does change, and that future practice is based firmly on the principle of explicit and informed consent.

I have said that I wish to bring forward a review of legislation, with a view to amending the Human Tissue Act 1962. That comes within the remit of health and social services, and I wish to do that. Earlier, I spoke about that and the fact that it depends on the legislative will of the Assembly. The Coroner’s Act is a different matter, as it does not lie directly within my remit.

Mrs Courtney: I also welcome the Minister’s statement. The debate was most emotive, because we were talking principally about the organs of young children.

The Minister has indicated that there will be a full statutory inquiry under article 54 of the Health and Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. The report is not due for 12 months, but in the interim, while the new legislation is being put on the statute book, there will be prepared new practice guidelines for the Health Service.

12.00

I would like to ask the Minister if there will be ongoing monitoring of trusts while this is happening and if someone will be appointed to ensure that the good practice guidelines are put into place?

We have considered the situation of the parents involved in these cases — and quite rightly so — but these circumstances have also had a devastating effect on hospital staff, and they have in some ways been ignored. Those working with young children and in the pathology departments have felt the effects. We cannot ignore their difficulties, and there has to be some reassurance for those caught up in the situation through no fault of their own.

I ask the Minister to ensure that her Department does all it can to bring trust back to the hospitals. The lack of confidence in organ transplants has already been referred to. There should be a separate programme, ongoing with the investigation, to reassure people, so that confidence in the Health Service is not completely destroyed. It should assure them that organ donation is entirely different and separate from what has happened in the past.

Ms de Brún: In relation to the question about guidance, I previously said to the House that a copy of the new guidance drawn up last year was placed in the Assembly Library. I will ensure that the interim guidance is also placed in the Library so that Members will have access to it.

There is not only ongoing monitoring of trusts, with trust management monitoring its own performance in relation to the current guidance; there will also be interim guidance. I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of the review of the legislation, but in the spirit of the proposed legislation we will be bringing forward, we will ensure that the interim guidance covers hospital practice. That will clearly signal to the public our intention to ensure that present hospital practice — and not just after the inquiry — will be of the highest possible standard.

I am mindful of the current position of staff who are performing a difficult job in trusts and who are trying to cope with a difficult situation. The inquiry will be open so that everyone can put their views forward, and that will include hospital staff. I will expect trusts to demonstrate that they are dealing with this matter fully and openly.

Mr Davis: As regards the 376 people the Minister mentioned earlier, will she be in a position to indicate to the House, at some stage, the age groups of those people? Were they children, or were they stillborn? Can she give us a figure?

Ms de Brún: I cannot give such a figure this morning. I will make information available as it comes to me, although I am not sure when such details will be established. Once the inquiry is set up, it will consider what information should be put into its report.

Mr Hay: The matter we are discussing has been a tragedy for Northern Ireland. I agree with the Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee in that the only thing that would satisfy families would be a full, independent public inquiry into this situation. In my own area of Altnagelvin the situation became clear only following complaints from parents.

What role does the Minister see for the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee in the inquiry? Secondly, can she assure the House that it will not be the case of the medical profession investigating itself?

Ms de Brún: I reiterate that this is a full statutory inquiry with the powers that any such inquiry has to call for evidence, to hold its meetings in public if it feels that this is necessary, and to engage with the public. It will be full, exhaustive and set up under statute. While I do not want to go into the details, I see its being overseen by a lay person rather than by someone from the medical profession. Once you set up an independent inquiry under statute, it is for the person who is named as the head of the inquiry to work on the terms of reference. It will therefore be for the inquiry to establish how it deals with various groups and representatives and how it fulfils its terms of reference, which I will be announcing shortly.

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

INLAND WATERWAYS

North/South Ministerial Council Sectoral Meeting

Mr Deputy 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 waterways meeting held on 29 January 2001 in Scariff.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The second meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in inland waterways sectoral format took place in Scariff, County Clare, on Monday, 29 January 2001. Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Mr Denis Haughey and I represented the Northern Ireland Administration. The Irish Government were represented by Síle de Valera TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands. I am making this report on behalf of myself and Mr Haughey who has approved the report.

The meeting opened with a progress report from the interim chief executive of Waterways Ireland, Mr John Mahony. The council noted that significant progress has been made both in terms of the development of the organisation and in progressing works on the ground. On Lough Erne a number of public moorings have been completely refurbished. A new floating jetty has been placed at Toome on the Lower Bann river, and new navigation signs are being erected along the river to improve public safety. In the Republic of Ireland the Limerick navigation scheme, which is an extension to the Shannon navigation, is nearing completion, and this will allow mooring in the heart of the city for the first time. The council gave its consent to plans from Waterways Ireland for compulsory purchase of certain lands necessary for improvement of the Shannon navigation. Work is also proceeding on restoration of the remaining 34 kilometres of the Royal Canal.

The council noted that Waterways Ireland had received the draft final report on the feasibility of re-opening the Ulster Canal prepared by ESB International and Ferguson & McIlveen Consultants, and this will be forwarded to the sponsoring Departments shortly. The council also noted that Waterways Ireland has had useful consultations with Bord Fáilte and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and that boating/cruising on inland navigations is to be promoted as a separate niche market. Waterways Ireland will develop a promotional strategy to complement this initiative. Waterways Ireland has also had meetings with various user groups, including the Lough Erne and Lower Bann

advisory committees, and it facilitated the Erne boat rally and the Youth Cruise 2000 from Killaloe to Enniskillen.

On the organisational front, good progress has been made in getting the headquarters at Enniskillen and the regional offices at Dublin, Carrick-on-Shannon and Scariff up and running. There are now 22 non-industrial staff based at Enniskillen, while Rivers Agency continues to undertake the operational work in Northern Ireland under a service level agreement. Two premises at Darling Street and Belmore Street in Enniskillen town centre have been leased to meet the body's interim accommodation requirements. The council agreed that Waterways Ireland should pursue negotiations on five possible site options for the permanent headquarters, which will be a waterfront development of around 25,000 square feet. The council also approved the options for permanent premises for the three regional offices.

An open competition for the post of permanent chief executive was completed, and the council confirmed the appointment of Mr John Martin as the new chief executive of Waterways Ireland. The council also approved proposed sterling pay scales for Waterways Ireland, which will enable direct recruitment of staff to proceed.

The council noted that the provisional expenditure out-turn for the 2000 calendar year was estimated at approximately £8.5 million, compared to the original budget of £10.5 million. This difference is largely due to the impact of the suspension of the devolved arrangements, which caused a delay in the recruitment of staff to the body. The council also considered and agreed Waterways Ireland's draft action plan for 2001, which included the programme of work and budgetary requirements. The proposed budget for 2001 is £18.8 million, and Northern Ireland's contribution will be approximately £2.6 million.

Waterways Ireland's main objectives for the coming year are the effective management and operation of the inland navigations for which it is responsible, the development of the organisation, the implementation of a capital development programme and meeting equality objectives and new targeting social need (TSN) goals.

Waterways Ireland plans to have 75% of all posts within the body filled by December 2001, and it will introduce new financial management and human resource systems to support the development of an effective corporate organisation. The council was pleased to note that Waterways Ireland will be involved in hosting the World Canals Conference in May 2001, with venues in Dublin, Belfast and Lisburn. This will provide an excellent opportunity to promote Ireland's inland waterways to overseas visitors. The council also approved Waterways Ireland's plans to undertake a review of health and safety standards on all navigations and to complete a preliminary assessment of the by-laws for all navigations.

The North/South Ministerial Council approved Waterways Ireland's draft equality scheme, which includes a

five-year programme for screening all policies and procedures, conducting and consulting on equality impact assessments and monitoring. The scheme will now be submitted to the Equality Commission. The council also gave its approval for Waterways Ireland to proceed to public consultation on its new draft TSN action plan.

The council agreed to meet again in sectoral format before summer 2001.

The Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee (Mr O'Neill): I welcome the Minister's statement. There has been considerable progress on practical matters, not least on consultation between the two tourist boards. I am, however, interested in the Minister's comments on the report by Ferguson & McIlveen on the Ulster Canal. Can he forecast the commitment that he and his Department will make to the Ulster Canal project? I am aware that that might be difficult for him at this stage, but we will soon be in a position in which, if we are to move forward with this project, he can discuss commitment.

I congratulate Mr John Martin on his appointment as chief executive of Waterways Ireland. Can the Minister give us a date by which the whole project will be fully operational, with staffing and permanent sites in place, both in the regions and at headquarters? He has indicated the date by which 75% of operational staff will be in place.

Mr McGimpsey: As I said in my report, the updated feasibility study report by ESB International and Ferguson & McIlveen has been completed in draft form. I have not yet received it in the Department, but I expect that to happen within the next week or two. We will then assess what the report says and look at the implications. I have previously said in the House that the Ulster Canal is one of the key capital projects of the future for Waterways Ireland. Half of the canal lies in the Irish Republic, and half lies in Northern Ireland; so, when it is completed, it will connect Lough Neagh to the Erne/Shannon waterways, which will link with the Royal Canal, when it is finally completed, and, thus, right through to Dublin. The Lagan navigation will be the last remaining scheme to be completed before a complete system, running right through the island, is created.

The canal is a huge resource in terms of its tourist potential. That is now properly recognised by the tourist board.

12.15 pm

So the Member is right: I cannot give a commitment. The original costs specified in 1998 were around £70 million, and I suspect that if we were to go forward with this, we would probably be talking about roughly £100 million. There is a major problem with how we address resources, so Members should not expect me to give a commitment now. I will say that the Department, Waterways Ireland and I have a commitment to proceed with

the Ulster Canal project as best we can; it is a key capital project.

I have already said that the operation of the body was delayed because of suspension. We anticipate that it will be up to full staff — a total of 381 — by 2002. It is building rapidly now, and we are progressing very well, although this involves moving staff in from other Departments, which takes time.

Sites have been identified for the offices outside headquarters. The headquarters office will take slightly longer. The developer's brief is out at the minute, and a number of sites have been identified. The decision will be made by way of a bidding process, but that is being handled by the property services branch of the Department of the Environment, and that is out of my control. It will come forward with its preferred options in due course, and then we will proceed. However, I suspect that it would not be unreasonable to expect to see headquarters fully up and functional within two to three years.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Culture Arts and Leisure Committee (Mrs Nelis): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to welcome the Minister's very progressive statement. It seems that he has been making good headway on the ship on Waterways Ireland. While I have a number of questions for the Minister, I particularly want to welcome the hosting of the World Canals Conference in Dublin, Belfast and Lisburn this year. Can the Minister tell us how these venues were selected?

I also want to welcome the development of the tourist niche of boating and cruising and the co-operation between Bord Fáilte and the Tourist Board.

I welcome too Mr John Martin, the new chief executive.

Will the Minister tell the Assembly if the Sinn Féin Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is still a suitable person to attend future North/South Ministerial meetings on Waterways, or has that changed? David Trimble told his party executive that UUP Ministers will no longer participate in North/South Ministerial meetings. Can the Minister confirm if this change in position was discussed at the North/South meeting?

Mr McGimpsey: The World Canals Conference is a very prestigious one, and we all rightly welcome the fact that it is coming and that Waterways Ireland will host it.

I am not aware of how the venues were selected, but I do know, for example, that Lisburn Borough Council spent large sums of money on its section of the Lagan navigation. Presumably Dublin and Belfast were chosen because they are the two main cities. However, I do not know exactly why those venues were selected for the conference.

I agree with the Member's comments about tourist co-operation. One of the main reasons is the huge tourist potential that exists for this type of resource when it is

properly in place. Experience in other parts of Europe, not least in the Irish Republic, demonstrates that genuine tourist jobs are available when this type of resource is put in place properly.

The question of a Sinn Féin representative is a matter for the First Minister, and I believe that he has responded to it within the last few days. It is not my responsibility to nominate Ministers.

Mr J Wilson: I welcome the Minister's report, which is informative and interesting. Considering the disaster of the two major fish kills at the trout hatchery at Florencecourt on the Erne in recent days, perhaps the Minister, like me, will think that a question about a North/South meeting of Waterways Ireland is relatively unimportant. However, my question is important to the future use of Lough Erne as a fishery and as recreational water. I hope that the Minister is in a position to elaborate on the nature and extent of progress on the refurbishment of Lough Erne's moorings.

I would like to tease out Mr O'Neill's earlier question. A recent newspaper report suggested that as early as October 2001, the Minister, along with his counterpart in the Republic and Waterways Ireland, may be in a position to make optimistic sounds about the future of the Ulster Canal. How optimistic is the Minister about having positive news about the reopening of the Ulster Canal as early as October?

Mr McGimpsey: I will take the three elements of the question and answer them in reverse order.

I do not have a great deal to add about the Ulster Canal other than to say that, as indicated to Mr O'Neill, the draft report will be with the Department shortly, and we will assess it. I am not aware of any newspaper report. However, we will deal with the report and issue it as quickly as possible. I give an undertaking to Mr O'Neill and to Mr J Wilson that as soon as I am able to, I will share the report with the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr J Wilson is right when he says that there has been another major disaster on the Erne at the Melvin Enhancement Company's hatchery. Although this falls outside the remit of Waterways Ireland, it would be wrong not to mention the incident, since Waterways Ireland, the Erne and the Melvin Enhancement Company complement each other in that they seek tourist revenue and jobs. An earlier pollution incident killed large numbers of fish, and, more recently, an act of wanton vandalism poisoned thousands. That is a tragedy for a non-profit-making facility that promotes Lough Erne's genetically pure brown trout, a natural strain of fish which is a major selling point for the future of our fisheries. It is an absolute disgrace that not only have thousands of fish been killed, but jobs have also been lost.

Capital works in the Irish Republic are the responsibility of the Government in Dublin. Capital works in Northern Ireland are the responsibility of the Government here. Work is ongoing through the Rivers Agency and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on public jetties on Lough Erne at Muckross, Ballinaleck, Magho and Inish Davar, and on a new floating jetty on the Lower Bann at Toome. Work will continue on the refurbishment of jetties and on the maintenance of navigation markers, et cetera, and we are also looking at plans to review existing navigations.

So if there is not a programme in place, one is certainly being built up. We are aware that our canal system is embryonic compared to the Irish Republic's, on which large sums of money have recently been spent. We have much work to do. As I have already said, there is a resource implication, yet it remains an exciting project and possibility, not just because of the recreational value to people living here, but also because of its potential for earning revenue from tourists.

Mr Gallagher: The report indicates that significant progress has been made with the inland waterways body. The headquarters is located in County Fermanagh, and I would like to ask the Minister how many people are employed there, and whether his Department has employment targets for the headquarters for the next year?

I join with the Minister in condemning what appears to have been a deliberate act of putting chemicals into the water system at the hatchery. As he said, we are all concerned about possible job losses, and I have no doubt that some will result from that. We have to keep in mind that many people have worked over the years in a voluntary capacity to bring this into being. It is deplorable that so much effort has been wasted. Is the Minister in a position to say if he is satisfied, given that a poison was put into the system, that adequate measures are in place to contain it, as the system feeds into larger and wider systems important for fishing and other considerations?

Mr McGimpsey: As I said on a previous occasion, it is anticipated that 70 people will be employed at headquarters. Mr Gallagher is quite right. Look at the size of Enniskillen and compare the number of jobs there with the number that would be created pro rata in Belfast: hundreds or thousands of jobs. Enniskillen is a small town, and 70 jobs will have a real economic impact.

I am not aware of the precise size of the workforce. I think it is currently about 18, but building rapidly. It might be more than that now. I previously reported 18, so it probably is more than that now. We expect headquarters to reach its proper complement within the year, as recruitment is ongoing.

As far as the hatchery is concerned, I agree with the Member that that has an important implication for tourist jobs on down the line. I am satisfied that the issue is being properly addressed. The RUC and the company

have been active in investigating the incident, and the company is not doing anything other than what it is supposed to. I have visited the facility, and I am quite sure that it takes environmental issues very seriously. While I cannot be absolutely specific about the volume of poison released into the watercourses, I am sure that if that is what happened, it was not due to any negligence on the part of the management but rather to an act of wanton vandalism.

Mr Shannon: The Minister has already recognised the great benefits of water-based tourism, to which the inland waterways report that he has brought to the Chamber testifies. Many in the Province, even those without canals in their area, recognise the tourism spin-off. The Minister spoke about the Ulster Canal as just one of the projects. That is one that the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee has looked at and supports. We would like to see how it would work. Has the Minister received any indications about funding? Will it come from private sources, or will some of it come from the Government? We would also like to see the economic benefit and spin-offs that will come to all the areas — bed-and-breakfast accommodation, restaurants and cafés in all the small villages and areas along the edge of canals.

12.30 pm

Lough Erne is not the only place with attractive areas for boating and water-based activities. Will other parts of the Province also benefit? What role does the Northern Ireland Tourist Board have in promoting the waterways? I hope that they make a much better job of promoting the waterways than they have with angling.

I want to take up two other issues mentioned by the Minister. First, he said that Waterways Ireland underspent its budget for the calendar year 2000 by some £2 million. Expenditure was £8.5 million, and the original budget was £10.5 million. Will that £2 million be carried over into the second year, or is it lost?

Secondly, he said that the Rivers Agency continues to undertake operational work in Northern Ireland under a service level agreement. Does the Rivers Agency have the necessary finance to carry out the work sufficiently and to the benefit of tourism? Tourism is a big thing in all of our constituencies, and I hope that we will all see the benefits. As the Minister lives in my constituency — or at least in the same district council area — I am sure that, like myself, he will want to see tourism promoted in Strangford.

Mr McGimpsey: I am very keen to see tourism enhanced in Strangford — indeed, in all parts of Northern Ireland. I have to remind the House that Waterways Ireland is purely a navigation body, dealing with navigable waterways. Currently, there are no navigable waterways under the control of Waterways Ireland in Strangford. There is the Ulster Canal, the Lagan navigation and the Newry/Portadown Canal, although it has its own

challenges. There is also a canal at Coalisland and the Lower Bann navigation. Once those are navigable, Waterways Ireland will take them over.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) takes promotion seriously, working in co-operation with Bord Fáilte on this initiative and in promoting this resource worldwide. I cannot comment, as the NITB is not answerable to my Department — it is answerable to Sir Reg Empey and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment — but I have no doubt that it takes its responsibilities seriously. I cannot comment on how it has performed in the past, but everybody has room for improvement, including ourselves.

There is an underspend of £2 million in the budget, which will be carried over and not lost. I am not clear on the exact mechanism, but it will be carried over to the next financial year. Normally within Government here, unspent money goes back to the centre for redistribution. I assume that that is the principle. I will write to the Member on that, giving the precise mechanism for ensuring that the money is not lost.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh ráiteas an Aire, agus is maith go dtáinig an Chomhairle i gceann a chéile coicís ó shin. Ba mhaith liom an tAire a insint domh cá bhfuil na háiteanna atá faoi chaibidil ag an Chomhairle agus í ag cinneadh ar cá háit a bhfuil an phríomhoifig bhuan le lonnú.

I welcome the Minister's statement. The meeting that he described was very welcome. What possible sites for the permanent headquarters are under discussion?

In point 7 of the statement there is a reference to the very negative impact of the last suspension of political institutions on the progress of the body and that it was particularly detrimental in the area of staff recruitment.

Will the Minister agree that the collapse of political institutions, wilfully being planned for by his own party leadership, ahead of the May election, will similarly have a disastrous impact on the progress of Waterways Ireland? Did the Minister inform the inland waterways sectoral meeting of the council of his party leader's intention to continue the illegal ban on nominating Sinn Féin Ministers to the council?

Mr McGimpsey: Five sites are currently being considered for the permanent headquarters in Enniskillen. Two are adjacent on the Sligo road; one is on the water's edge, close to the Ardhowen theatre; one is at Derrychara, opposite the Erneside shopping centre, and the other, known as the Brooke, is in the centre of the town.

I strongly believe that there should be a waterfront development. It will be of around 25,000 square feet. In other words, it will be for customers, users and tourists and not simply an office accommodation for staff.

With regard to the other part of the question, about the collapse of political institutions — institutions that we are all striving to retain — the Member talked about the collapses “being planned for”. Well, he probably knows more about that than I do. I know of nobody in my party who is planning for the collapse of the political institutions.

Regarding discussions of the “ban”, as the Member put it, at the meeting in Scarriff in County Clare two weeks ago, we stuck to the agenda of Waterways Ireland. This was the North/South Ministerial Council in sectoral format; we were there to discuss Waterways Ireland and its business, and that is exactly what we did discuss.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the Minister’s statement and the fact that at long last, the potential of inland waterways in Northern Ireland has been recognised. At the end of his statement the Minister stated that Waterways Ireland had the powers for compulsory purchase on the river Shannon. Would such powers also be applied to Northern Ireland?

Secondly, what plans do he and his Department have for the development or promotion of the heritage, particularly the industrial heritage of Northern Ireland’s inland waterways?

Mr McGimpsey: As regards the development of waterways and, as Mr Shannon mentioned, funding for this, funding will obviously have to be in the form of some cocktail of public, private and European money, and that mix of funding will be able to be determined only as things are developed.

The Member is right to say that there are powers of compulsory purchase in the Republic. There will also be powers of compulsory purchase in Northern Ireland if we find it necessary, for example, to further advance the re-creation of the Ulster Canal, since large parts of it have been abandoned. It is anticipated that there is a possibility that compulsory purchase may be necessary. I hope that it is not; that is something which should be done only as a last resort.

The industrial heritage of Northern Ireland is an important issue and one that is very much in our minds as we develop the waterways. As we go forward, things like environmental assessments will have to be done — indeed, environmental proofing has already been done in respect of the Ulster Canal, and that will become more concentrated and focused as we move forward with different parts of the canal.

The environmental heritage aspects of our canals need to be safeguarded. It is important to reach a balance between preserving the heritage features of former canals, protecting natural environment and providing for modern cruising needs.

We will have the formal environmental impact assessment, but we need to see waterways developed as living

assets which cater for modern usage with appropriate environmental safeguards. It cannot simply be the preservation of historic features for historic purposes.

When they were originally constructed, canals were used by narrow-gauge barges dragged by horses. I do not think that anyone is suggesting that there should be a horse-drawn canal resource in Northern Ireland — that would be the wrong way to approach the matter. As I said, we must try to safeguard them all, but we need a balance. For example, modern boats are wider than the original narrow-gauge barges. If the canal is made solely for narrow-gauge barges, it will effectively preclude, for example, all the boats currently available for hire on Lough Erne.

A balance must be struck and found. We will attempt to do that. Another feature of a modern canal system is the use of card technology to operate the lock, rather than a lock-keeper with a wheel and a handle to turn. Therefore although it will be a modern system catering for modern usage, it will preserve and be informed by historic features. However, they will not be preserved purely for historic purposes, but also as living assets catering for modern usage.

Ms Morrice: I too want to comment on the exciting potential of this initiative and body. My question has been partially clarified already. It relates to the tourism potential of Waterways Ireland. Will it focus simply on tourism for its revenue, or is there scope, for example, for freight and passenger transport to be used on these waterways? Is that possibility being examined?

Mr McGimpsey: I am not aware that freight carriage has been examined. I am not sure that that would be viable, but I have no doubt that if the canals were operating, it would happen if the operators decided that it was viable. Market forces would determine that type of matter.

It is not just about tourism, of course. There is a strong element of economic regeneration, particularly in the countryside. Members may recollect that by and large, canals go through areas of countryside that are often deprived and far from urban areas. The issue of new targeting social need (TSN) is also strongly addressed through the regeneration of the canals and the economic regeneration of rural communities. When we make the case for resources, one of our arguments will be that this type of investment addresses TSN.

The issue is much wider than simply tourism, but, as I said, we focused on tourism. Obviously, this is worth doing. There are recreational aspects for the local community too, but economic regeneration can act as a generator in the countryside, and that has been the experience in the Irish Republic. I have no doubt that that will be our experience too.

Mrs Carson: I welcome the Minister's report on the second sectoral meeting of Waterways Ireland and several points in particular which concern the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The feasibility study on the canal is especially welcome, because it would open up tourism in that area. I also welcome the creation of some jobs in the Fermanagh and Enniskillen areas, and, in particular, the refurbishment of public moorings on the Lough Erne system. Any improvement to the moorings will help the local boating, angling and, especially, tourism communities.

I ask the Minister to seek the development of more moorings and jetties for the Lough Erne system at the next sectoral meeting. The matter should be high on the agenda. We need more moorings and jetties. A large number of boats are coming into the Erne system, and there are not always sufficient places for tourists to tie up. That is particularly important, and I encourage him to put that on the agenda.

12.45 pm

I notice that boating and cruising on the system is to be promoted as a separate niche market and I welcome that. However, cruise firms on the Lough Erne system have had a particularly hard time in recent years because of the disparity between the punt and the pound and many bookings are going to the South of Ireland. The Minister said that that has nothing to do with him, but something should be done to help and encourage the hire firms in the Fermanagh area.

Mr McGimpsey: It is not that the disparity between the punt and the pound has nothing to do with me, it is something that is out of my control and out of the control of the Assembly. However, it is a matter that focuses minds, not just in this situation, but in others also. There has been some coming together in the currencies, but there is still a very large disparity. I am not entirely clear how that matter should be addressed other than by providing a product in Fermanagh that is second to none.

With regard to Waterways Ireland, some of the ongoing work will carry through the capital programme for 2001. For example, they are refurbishing jetties on the Erne, and there is ongoing maintenance of navigation markers. There is also a review of the Bann, with a new pair of lock gates going in on the Lower Bann. There is the construction and completion of works on the Shannon navigation at Limerick City. So, the ongoing work is enhancing the entire system, and it includes the construction of the first of six road bridges on the Royal Canal to allow the canal to enter the system.

Once the system gets into operation, all parts of it will benefit. I have no doubt that Lough Erne and Fermanagh will benefit as well — as they have done to an extent already with the location of headquarters and staff in Enniskillen.

Mr Hilditch: The agency has held meetings with various user groups, and the Minister has named two as examples. Will he further expand on this information, particularly from the Northern Ireland context, including the ports? Will he also indicate how much of the £18.8 million action plan budget for 2001 will be of direct benefit to Northern Ireland?

Mr McGimpsey: I reported on the user groups and gave those examples because I understand that Waterways Ireland has been dealing with a number of user groups. I cannot give an exhaustive list here, because I do not have the information with me. If the Member wishes, I can provide him with that information.

Of the £8.5 million capital expenditure for this year, Northern Ireland's contribution is £750,000. The £8.5 million will provide, for example, for the organisation as a whole, £3.45 million for capital, £4 million for maintenance and £1 million for administration, professional and technical staff. I cannot be precise as to staff numbers, but they are increasing rapidly this year from 18 to 250 as people come in from various Government bodies and agencies, both in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. Next year those numbers will increase again.

We are responsible for capital projects within Northern Ireland. So, for example, the funding for the Lagan navigation and our half of the Ulster Canal will have to be found within Northern Ireland. Mr Shannon made a point about funding. I anticipate a cocktail of public and private finance, with, perhaps, money also coming from Europe or other sources.

I cannot say how capital will be drawn down or how capital resources will be addressed in the future. At the moment, the main project is the new headquarters in Enniskillen. I am not sure how many millions that will cost, but it will be a substantial building on the waterfront, comprising 25,000 square feet.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is also considering the Ulster Canal and other capital projects that I mentioned, such as the refurbishment of jetties and the construction of new floating jetties. That work programme will continue to develop. I shall keep the House and the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee informed as appropriate.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement; it shows that progress has been made. It is important that Waterways Ireland make progress. It is unfortunate, however, that Fermanagh will not be a venue for the World Canals Conference. Fermanagh has been the home of Waterways Ireland for some time and has a strong connection with the subject, through the Ballyconnell Canal, one of the better recent developments. However, I am sure that that link will be developed.

A statement from the Minister's Colleague, Denis Haughey, about the Coalisland Canal has already appeared in the press. What progress has been made on linking the Coalisland Canal to the Ulster Canal, assuming that that project progresses as the Minister envisages? The reopening of the Ulster Canal is an important step in the opening of the waterways. As the Minister says, it is important that we have a working canal, not just one of historical interest.

The problems with attracting tourists could be eased by the introduction of a single currency. As one solution, the Minister could endorse an all-Ireland strategy and policy that would ensure that there was one currency throughout the island of Ireland. As an interim solution, we could use the euro. In the long term, we must focus on the all-Ireland dimension if Waterways Ireland is to attract visitors to the island of Ireland.

Mr McGimpsey: The Member mentioned the disparity between the punt and the pound. He has a particular political view on that, and it is one that I do not share. It is also a view — if I must make a political point — that most people in Northern Ireland do not share. That is what the agreement and the projects and processes that we are working on are about. That kind of financial issue is important, but not so overwhelmingly important as to justify changing our entire political philosophy, however much the Member might desire that.

I have nothing to add about the World Canals Conference, but as I receive information I shall share it with the Committee and with Mr Molloy. The Department recognises Fermanagh's importance, which is why the headquarters is in Enniskillen. The conference will consider experience and best practice in other parts of the world and will try to benefit from those.

I have received a number of inquiries about the Coalisland Canal. It is the responsibility of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, not Waterways Ireland. There are no plans for it at present, because resources are not available. However, there is no question of allowing that property — some 4 kilometres long — to disappear from the Department's control. The Department has custodial responsibility and will maintain that. I share the aspiration that the Coalisland Canal can again become the navigation that it once was.

The sitting was suspended at 12.54 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

STREET TRADING BILL

Further Consideration Stage

2.00 pm

Mr Speaker: Members will note that there is only one amendment on the Marshalled List. Clauses 1 to 8 have had no amendments proposed to them. I therefore propose, by leave of the House, to take those clauses en bloc at this time, and similarly for the other clauses to which there is no amendment.

Clauses 1 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 9 (Discretionary grounds for refusing an application)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): I beg to move amendment 1: In page 7, line 1, leave out subparagraph (v) and insert

“(v) the nature of the articles, things or services in which the applicant wishes to trade is such that their sale or supply, or their preparation for sale or supply, would adversely affect the general amenity of the area in which the applicant wishes to trade;”.

Members will be aware that at the Consideration Stage I accepted an amendment that would allow a district council to refuse an application for a street trading licence where the sale or preparation of the goods would have an adverse effect on the amenity of the area. At that time I said that I had some concerns about the precise wording of the amendment and advised Members that I might wish to tidy it up at the Further Consideration Stage. The amendment I have tabled introduces minor revisions of the wording to maintain consistency with the other provisions in the Bill, but does not alter the effect of the sub-paragraph.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 9, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 10 to 30 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Street Trading Bill, which now stands referred to the Speaker.

SHEEP BAN (SILENT VALLEY)

Mr O'Neill: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on those Ministers responsible to make compensation available for farmers who are suffering financially as a result of the Silent Valley sheep ban in the Mournes.

Perhaps before I begin, Mr Speaker, I could raise a point of order. As you can see from the wording of the motion I am clearly asking that Ministers — plural — be in attendance and the wording of the motion was designed to achieve that. I understand that the Minister for Regional Development is going to respond to the motion, and I thank him for that. However, both Ministers who have a direct responsibility, the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, indicated that they wanted to participate in the debate, and I phrased the motion in such a way that they could.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member may choose to phrase the motion whatever way he likes, but that does not make it in order for more than one Minister to respond to it. It is not in order to do so, save in the exceptional circumstances of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister who have a different constitutional position.

It is only in order for one Minister to respond on behalf of the Executive. It may be one Minister or another, but it can only be one Minister. If it were to be more than one Minister, it could be two, and there are other circumstances in which it could be three or more. The House could be in a dilemma if each Minister did not say precisely the same thing and the question for the House in those circumstances would be, “Which Minister spoke for the Executive?” That is not a dilemma which I wish to place before the House.

Indeed, as the Member himself will be aware, in this particular matter, and with respect to the two Ministers he is speaking of, he had the problem of two Ministers appearing to say different things and laid it upon my shoulders to seek some resolution of the matter. Not wanting to voluntarily put myself in that position again, nor place the Assembly in such a position on this or any other matter, I have made the ruling that one Minister shall be responsible for responding. On this occasion, the Minister who has come forward — and I assume it has been agreed that he will respond — is the Minister for Regional Development, who is in his place.

Mr O'Neill: Undoubtedly I will get an opportunity to include a few comments in response as I go through what I have to say on the issue.

First, I welcome the opportunity to bring this issue to the attention of the Assembly. It is one that has been affecting sheep farmers in the particular catchment area of the Silent Valley for some time now. The matter should have been before us a bit earlier because of its inherent

urgency. The particular farmers involved have been faced with huge difficulties regarding the grazing of their sheep and this has led to immense financial problems. It is time someone took responsibility for compensating those farmers.

Another matter causing me huge concern — and I mentioned it under a point of order but will include it now as part of my speech — is the fact that, although my motion calls on all Ministers responsible, there is only one Minister here to respond to the motion. If my motion was accepted as genuine for tabling before Members today then it should have included a response from all Ministers responsible. That is not a ruling I can make, but it is my view nevertheless.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is commonplace to refer to more than one Minister in motions. In questions and in motions in other places the reference is most commonly to, in that situation, Her Majesty's Government, which consists of many Ministers.

However, only one Minister will reply on behalf of the Executive. The fact that more than one Minister is referred to in the Member's motion is entirely competent and proper. He may refer to the responsibilities of a number of Ministers, and to their actions. That is also entirely proper and in order, but it is nevertheless the case that only one Minister will respond. I trust that I have made that clear.

Mr O'Neill: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I now realise why we put such burdens on such strong shoulders.

Before I continue with the substantive part of the motion, there is another issue that has caused me serious concern outside this Chamber. There was a news report this morning about sheep grazing in the catchment area. It caused me considerable concern because, according to the report, this has been going on for some time. Why did they choose to issue that report today? It creates a big question mark in my mind. Is it an attempt to deflect attention from the real issue? Who encouraged the media to look at that issue yesterday? What was the reason behind it?

The real issue here is the 115 farmers suffering, in some cases, an estimated loss of £4,320 — that has been worked out by an agricultural expert. There are two issues that I must explain for the benefit of Members. First of all, by not having their sheep on the mountain, the farmers lose out on grants that they would otherwise be entitled to. Secondly, because the farmers have had to take their sheep off the mountain, they have had to use their lowland pastures to graze the sheep. Consequently they have not been able to obtain their winter fodder stock, and they have had to buy in food to keep their sheep going. That is where most of the farmers have incurred their biggest loss.

I have said, on the record, that I appreciate the Water Service's attempt to prevent cryptosporidium from reaching

the drinking water of my constituents and those of my Colleagues. However, in an effort to distance itself from the obvious evidence that the Silent Valley was not adequately protected against such infection, and that the conduit running from the reservoir for some 35 miles was leaking, the Department has ensured that the sheep farmers have shouldered all the blame.

Why was this reservoir not adequately protected against infection, when every other reservoir in the area is? Why was the conduit allowed to fall into such disrepair? And why, when officials have admitted that there is no evidence to link these animals to the infection, are farmers now paying the price for the inadequacies of others?

All the evidence strongly suggests that the conduit was to blame for the infection. I would like to explain. The old conduit from the Silent Valley, which brings the mains supply into areas of South Belfast, Lisburn and north Down, is gravity-fed. That means that if a crack or a break occurs in the line, it will suck in material from outside as it passes. The new conduit, which is currently being installed, has a pressurised component that ensures that if a crack occurs, it will force the water out, thus not allowing outside contamination to enter.

2.15 pm

On page one of the Eastern Health and Social Services report published in November 2000, it states clearly

"The highest notification rates among children were in the area from Saintfield northwards which is suggestive that the cause of outbreak was ingress in the middle section of the conduit."

This was far away from the Silent Valley. Indeed, the middle, older section of the pipe was the first to be replaced, indicating an urgency to get rid of the damaged section. If it were all the fault of the sheep, why would the Water Service go to such lengths? The report confirms that

"outbreaks of water-related cryptosporidiosis do not just happen. There appears to be a strong correlation between outbreaks and situations where an inadequacy was identified in the treatment provided, or in the operation of the treatment process."

The difficulty for the public in all of this is to fully realise that, even today, the actual source of that original outbreak is not traceable and remains presently untraceable, which must be a cause for major public concern. I have a letter from the Water Service dated 13 September 2000, which states

"The link between the grazing of sheep and the risk of cryptosporidium in the water supplies is well established."

There is no further explanation. This infers that the link was firmly established, although this report says that it was not. In a meeting with Health and Social Services officials in November to discuss the report published by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, Dr Liz Mitchell informed me that, in the Silent Valley case, there was absolutely no evidence to link the faeces of the sheep with the cryptosporidium outbreak.

Surprisingly, not one of the sheep that traditionally graze on the mountains was ever tested. One would have thought that to find out whether these animals were the cause, the simple and honest thing to do would be to test them. Not one of them has been tested. Why? Surely the Department wants to pinpoint the culprit. Perhaps the reason for this — and this is an interesting sign that all of the things that go on in Departments are not necessarily the Ministers' responsibility — is to be seen in Mr Campbell's admission that the Department was under pressure from the media and had to come up with an answer immediately. Mr Campbell stated in a letter to you, Mr Speaker, in response to the very issues that you were raising to me with those broad shoulders earlier, on 12 January 2001 that

"the decision to extend the ban had, in fact, emerged more quickly than intended, due to questioning of officials in the media on 4 September."

Who is running the Department of Regional Development? Is it the Minister or the 'Belfast Telegraph'? Mr Campbell made this statement in an attempt to explain what appeared to me to be his misleading the House. Now you have decided, Mr Speaker, that he did not deliberately mislead the House. Mr Campbell admits that he did not consult with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development before he made the decision to extend the ban. He maintains that both he and his officials did liaise with that Department's officials. He stated in this Chamber on 11 September 2000 that they had liaised and were continuing to liaise with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I do not know what kind of liaisons he referred to, but they are certainly not to the benefit of our farmers. To liaise means to communicate and co-operate. To consult means to seek advice. I do not think there is a huge difference. Mr Campbell and his officials did not consult the Department of Agriculture. Had they done so —

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The motion before us calls on the Ministers to provide financial compensation to the farmers affected. I have prepared my contribution on that basis. The Member for South Down has had some time, but it all seems to be an attack on the Minister for Regional Development and his handling of this case. As far as I can see, the Member has not as yet dealt with the motion. How much more time will he be given before he comes to the subject of the debate?

Mr Speaker: The Chair frequently has to be patient if it is to see things coming to their point and conclusion. I am sure that the proposer of the motion has heard what the Member has said.

Mr O'Neill: Before the point of order, I was trying to make a very important point. I will make it again. Had there been proper consultation between the two Departments, Regional Development would have been aware that had it waited until earlier this year before making its decision,

the Department of Agriculture could this year have introduced the *force majeure* regulations that last year secured the grant aid, thereby preventing its loss. Members, therefore — like Mr Wells, who made the point of order — would not have to go around using sleight of hand methods to find some other way round the regulations to restore the situation. They could have been dealing with it frankly, honestly and openly.

As I said, the loss of that grant could have been avoided. There was a lack of consultation. Those who did not embark on consultation are therefore directly responsible for that loss of income. That is where the buck should finally stop.

The loss of subsidies is not the only concern. One of the most serious implications in all of this is that the tradition of sheep farming in the Mourne is likely to become extinct as a result of this ban. The Water Service has decided that the sheep will not be allowed back onto the mountain until the barrier is complete. The estimated date is 2003-04 and this, as we all know from our experience of forward planning, is probably a very optimistic target. Lambs born in that period will not have the chance to learn from their mothers where or how to graze a particular piece of land.

Members should be aware that the grazing tradition in the Mourne is very old indeed. It is probably early, or even pre-Christian, in origin. The practice was known as “booleying”, where farmers, their families and their flocks moved entirely from the lowlands in the spring or early summer to graze the higher Mourne. They have done that for generations untold. Evidence can still be seen in the higher Mourne, where there are little round patches. Those were the sites of the booley huts. That has come down to us from that period. If the sheep do not know which area to graze in, and if they are simply put up on the mountain, they will wander all over the place.

They could turn up in Rostrevor, Kilkeel, or anywhere. It is important each year that the lambs go up with their mothers, and graze the same areas that their mothers grazed in the past, so that they know where the grazing is. The circle will be broken if that does not happen, and the old tradition will be lost forever.

If and when the filter-bed is put in place and sheep are allowed to return to the Mourne it will just not be possible to operate that system. In those circumstances, a meagre request might be for the Department to relent on its decision during those months that everyone has established as representing the least hazard — August, September and early October. That might be sufficient to allow the pasturage tradition to continue. The Minister might consider relenting somewhat on that.

I come back to the overall issue of compensation. The farmers themselves are now seeing their livelihoods disappearing before their very eyes. Of the 115-odd farmers involved in farming in the Mourne, not everyone is as

dependent on the grazing as others are. However, a large number of those farmers are facing financial ruin because of the sheep grazing being removed. As a direct result of the ban, for example, farmers have to use extra fertiliser —

Mr Speaker: Order. I draw the proposer’s attention to the fact that this is a time-limited debate. There are a number of other Members who wish to contribute, and there is also the Minister’s winding-up speech. We are now 20 minutes into the 90-minute debate, so I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr O'Neill: I am glad of the instruction. As a direct result of the ban, farmers are having to use extra fertiliser and are losing out on silage as animals have eaten up their winter feed. To pay for these factors the farmers are selling lambs and cattle at a much reduced rate and will not be able to afford to replace them. One farmer in my constituency can no longer afford to pay for childcare or afford to drive the children to school. These are genuine hardship cases. He has had to take on extra work, and he has even enrolled in an IT course because he is considering giving up farming entirely. That is after a farming tradition of 300 years in his family. That is the reality.

I ask the Minister for Regional Development — who I believe is directly responsible because he issued the ban — to come up with a package of compensation, in consultation with his Colleagues, to redress the situation and help these farmers. They need to be helped through the four or five years before they are able to graze their flocks again on the Mourne. It is also necessary for that pasturage tradition to remain unbroken so that the flocks will know where to go when the filter-bed provision is made.

Mr Speaker: Given the limited time available, and the number of Members that have put their names down to speak, I shall not permit Members to go on longer than 10 minutes. The Minister responding will have a maximum of 15 minutes, which is the normal rule of thumb for a debate lasting an hour and a half. Whatever time remains can then be returned to the tender mercies of the proposer for his winding-up speech.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee (Mr McFarland): Cryptosporidium poses a very serious threat to humans, especially the elderly, children and the infirm. As many will know, there were two attacks last year. The first, in April and May, laid low a number of people in Lisburn, Belfast and my own constituency of North Down. The second was the famous attack in Lisburn — in the Lagmore conduit.

2.30 pm

The first attack was quite clearly tracked back to the water supply from the Silent Valley. It was tracked back, as I understand it, to animal causes. Members will recall that the scientists were able to identify human causes for the Lagmore conduit attack. It is possible to identify where

the cryptosporidium has come from. It is clear that the initial attack in April was from animal sources, and it seems to have come from the Silent Valley water supply.

There is clearly a need to devise whatever protection measures we can to stop this happening. As we discovered in the second attack, it is extremely unpleasant and very dangerous. It is understandable that the sheep — one possible source — were removed from the catchment area. I understand the Member for South Down's concern about losing sheep from the Mourne. I was brought up in the Sperrins, and the joy of seeing sheep on the mountains is something that should be experienced by those who have not done so. However, we have to be practical about this. If there is a possibility — indeed a strong possibility — that the cryptosporidium came from that source, then that source should be removed.

It is my understanding that farmers have been permitted to graze their sheep in the Mourne catchment area, although the land belongs to the Department for Regional Development — the Water Service. It is a custom and practice — a tradition that has grown up — that farmers are allowed, between April and October, to graze their sheep on this land. Presumably the farmers have land upon which they keep their sheep between October and the end of March. It is not as if it is the only place where the sheep can be kept. We have a concern, a removal of the possible source of cryptosporidium and somewhere else that the farmers can keep their sheep.

Compensation, however, is a different matter. We have heard an enormous amount, as Mr Wells has already said, about where this all went wrong and who is at fault. However, the compensation issue is a different one. If we all accept that there is a danger and that steps have been taken to nullify that, where possible, for a set period until the new measures to make sure that the water is absolutely pure are put in place, then compensation is a different issue.

We are all concerned. We hear weekly about the plight of the farmers. No one can be left untouched by their problems at the moment. However, the compensation issue is not directly connected to cryptosporidium. There may be a case for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to look at some form of compensation. As anyone who attends this Chamber at all regularly will know, the Department for Regional Development's work has been underfunded over many years. It is a potential disaster area in terms of cryptosporidium outbreaks. The water piping and water treatment plants need to be renewed. There is an enormous infrastructure cost. I would rather see any spare money that the Minister for Regional Development has going towards fixing these pipes against the possible ingress of cryptosporidium to make sure that this does not happen again. He might encourage the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to see whether she has a few shekels left to help the farmers out.

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

Mr Wells: I will be speaking to the motion, unlike others who, perhaps, will use it as a vehicle to launch attacks on various Departments. One cannot underestimate the devastating effect of this ban on sheep farming in the Mourne. One hundred and fifteen farmers have been affected and, crucially, 9,000 acres of grazing land have been taken out of circulation. It must be emphasised that there is simply no other available land in south Down to which farmers can move.

Mr McFarland asked where farmers keep their sheep in winter. In many cases, they are kept under cover or in enclosures in which they are fed hay, et cetera. This fodder has to be brought in, and farmers simply cannot afford to have their sheep enclosed and fed in this expensive way during the summer. That simply cannot happen.

Landowners have grazed their animals on this area for generations, going as far back as the nineteenth century when the land was owned by current farmers' great-grandfathers. Many farmers still have the original title deeds of this land which state their right to graze animals in the Silent Valley catchment area, but when the Belfast Water Commissioners decided to build the Silent Valley reservoir, those rights were bought out. Nonetheless, a tradition has continued whereby the same farmers rent or lease the land for grazing on an annual basis. They pay a relatively modest amount to a Castletwellan-based estate agent, and at Kilkeel a register is kept of the names of those who have grazed the land and for how long.

Therefore no absolute legal right obliges the Department to allow these farmers to graze. I accept this, but I believe that a very strong, moral right, based on previous practice, still exists. The ban could not have come at a worse time for the farming community of south Down. According to estimates, the income of farmers in the peripheral areas of Northern Ireland is as low as £22 a week. I can confirm Mr O'Neill's statement that farmers are in a desperate situation at the moment because of this, and because of the very low price for sheep meat and wool. I know of one farmer who has been forced to get a job delivering 'Yellow Pages' to try to supplement his income, while others are taking jobs in the electoral offices. They are doing anything they can to get round this problem. This terrible blow came at a time when farmers were already suffering tremendous financial stress.

One point that Mr O'Neill did not highlight is the conservation implications of this ban. A certain pattern of grazing is required to sustain the high quality environment which exists within the Mourne wall. Too much grazing leads to a loss of vegetation, but no grazing at all leads to the growth of rank vegetation, which destroys the very interesting flora of the area. If there is no grazing over the next three or four years, the conservation value of the Mourne will be irreparably damaged. It must be

emphasised that farmers have never been in any way to blame for this crisis — they are the innocent victims of the situation. But, like Mr O'Neill and others, I have been leading various delegations to meet with the relevant Ministers. We had a very constructive meeting with the Minister of Agriculture and, only last week, we had a very useful meeting with the Minister for Regional Development.

Mr Kelly from the Water Service explained in very clear terms the precise dilemma faced by the Minister. The law is very clear: it is a criminal offence to allow more than one cryptosporidium oocyst per 10 litres of water. If that were allowed to happen, the Department would be liable in law. Once the scientists tested the water and found the existence of one oocyst per 10 litres, the Department's hands were tied, and it simply had to take action. The Water Service informed us last Wednesday that cryptosporidium can be clearly traced back to the Silent Valley reservoir and to sheep.

I fully accept Mr O'Neill's assertion that doubt still exists, but clearly the doubt is such that, in the light of this information, it would have been irresponsible of the Minister to fail to take action — and he would not have been able to deny knowledge of it. Cryptosporidium is so harmful that, as result of a recent outbreak in America, 30 people died and over 100,000 people were infected. Therefore, the effects can be more serious than a mild stomach complaint. This bug, if it takes effect, particularly in the elderly and the infirm, can lead to death.

The Minister found himself in a very difficult dilemma, and I can fully understand why he took the decision that he did. Mr O'Neill makes the point that if he had held on a few months, the *force majeure* regulations would have been invoked allowing the sheep to continue to graze. That is true, but that would have only been for one more year. We would still have been in the same position the following year and would have had to ban sheep from grazing. If the Minister had knowingly sat on this information for four or five months to allow the grazing to continue, and someone had become seriously ill or even died as a result, Mr O'Neill would have been the first to hang the Minister out to dry. We have to look at this in a balanced way.

I accept that farmers need to have compensation for this. One of the important points that emerged from a meeting with the Minister is that no matter how high a priority the new treatment plant is given, the very earliest date on which it can physically be opened is March 2004, so farmers are going to be denied the right to graze for another three seasons. That is going to cause enormous hardship. There must be some compromise that can be reached which will at least enable the farmers to claim their subsidies through their Integrated Administration and Control System (IACS) forms or provide some form of alternative compensation that will give them restitution for a situation for which they are not to blame.

During our meeting last week we suggested various forms of words that could be used to enable the payments to be made. Something has to be done soon. As Mr O'Neill has said, the farmers are not only losing their grazing rights; they are also losing a tradition, and they are going to be put to enormous expense to restore that grazing tradition to the Mournes.

This is not a situation in which the money is not available. The money is there; the budget already provides for subsidy payments for the sheep farmers. Some way has to be found of coming up with a form of words which will allow that money to be transferred to another budget within the Department of Agriculture for payment to farmers. If we do not do that, we will face a tragedy in the Mournes.

I do not believe it useful this afternoon to try to apportion blame. The fundamental reason for the problem is that a deadly bug was found in our water supply, necessitating action and the sooner we find some way of getting money into the hands of farmers, the better. There is no doubt that if we do not find some way of compensating farmers, individual farmers in the Mournes will go to the wall because of this. That is how serious the situation is. The best solution is some form of subsidy adequate to enable the farmers to tick over until grazing is restored in 2004.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is a pity that the proposer should have trivialised the motion so much. The Department for Regional Development is endangering the hill-side farmers of the Silent Valley and the Mourne Mountains, and those near to Belfast. The timescale for putting in place the safe scheme needed for the Silent Valley reservoir is totally inadequate. If the current situation continues for another three years it will put at risk the health of the people in Belfast and present a considerable burden to the hill farmers in the area.

Gregory Campbell must move immediately and allocate farmers priority funding so that work on the filtering scheme can be brought forward. In view of present financial pressures, it is not enough to ask farmers to keep sheep off the grazing land. Farmers must be compensated for the alternative feed. The onus rests entirely on the Department for Regional Development and the Minister, Gregory Campbell, to end the risk to the people of Belfast and to alleviate the burden shouldered by farmers.

What level of communication has been maintained between the Minister for Regional Development, who imposed the ban, the Minister of Agriculture, who is responsible for the farming industry, and the Minister of Health and Social Services, who is responsible for public safety? This is a key question. Or as many people suspect, is this an example of DUP sectarian antics putting people's health and farmers' livelihoods at risk? It is time to stop playing party politics with people's lives.

2.45 pm

The Agriculture Committee has also heard that there has been little discussion or negotiation between officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the North and their counterparts in the South. In Donegal, where there are similar problems, the Southern Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development has already said it will compensate the farmers for the duration of the problem. I have repeatedly called for a closer look to be taken at the ban affecting farmers in the Silent Valley, and for the scientific facts to be established on whether the cryptosporidium bug is linked to sheep specifically or to all grazing in general. Is the ban more appropriate on sheep grazing or is there flexibility to allow limited use of cattle for grazing in the Silent Valley to safeguard future area aid payments? The loss of income to farmers of area aid payments could be substantial because of a loss in acreage of the land available for grazing.

It would also seem to be short-sighted of the Department to allow the area to become overgrown with a subsequent deterioration in the physical beauty of an area which has been sustained by sheep grazing. The Environmental Heritage Service is also in the process of designating the area as an area of special scientific interest. Indeed, farmers are suspicious of the real agenda of those placing a lengthy ban on grazing in the area, given the future consequences for local farmers.

I accompanied a Sinn Féin delegation from south Down to meet Brid Rodgers, and we put a strong case to her for the need to compensate farmers in the Silent Valley who are suffering directly from the ban on grazing. Since May farmers have been contacting Sinn Féin on a regular basis to express their anger at the lack of compensation. One hundred and fourteen farmers have been directly affected by the ban, and it is estimated that the farming community in the area will lose some £1 million this year alone. While the Minister acknowledges that the Silent Valley farmers have been treated unfairly, she has also said that her hands are tied by Europe and by the Executive. It is now time for the Minister to act. Brid Rodgers should go to the EU and the Executive and make a case for compensating the Silent Valley farmers. The lack of action by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister is threatening the continuing viability of sheep farming in the Mourne. No plan seems to be in place, and there is no will for decisive action. There is no guarantee of compensation and no end in sight for the grazing ban for the next three to four years. Farmers are asking: what is the alternative; how will we graze our sheep? Farmers are facing an increase in the price of land for grazing and no great profit in sheep because of poor prices at the farm gate. The farmers and the community are not getting the support they need from the Minister.

As Mr O'Neill stated, an important aspect of this ban is that offspring of the sheep are losing the right to the

grazing ground where they were reared. In other words, flocks of sheep are separated from their grazing ground year after year, and the offspring are being deprived of the plot of ground that belonged to them. Because of the ban, the offspring are deprived of that, and that causes a major problem for the farmers. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Bradley: I support the motion in the name of my Colleague Mr O'Neill. He and the other Members have covered most of the problems that farmers are experiencing, through no fault of their own, at the Silent Valley.

When the closure came about, both the farmers concerned and representatives from all political parties gave ample warnings on present and future problems. The difficult days ahead were spoken about last summer and in September. In just eight or 10 weeks the sheep and newborn lambs are due to return again to the Silent Valley slopes. The new lambs bring some continuity to the mountain's grazing cycle. They familiarise themselves with the pastures grazed by earlier generations of the flock. If that cycle is allowed to be interrupted, it will present a problem that will never be resolved. To return sheep to former grazing pastures after a break of three or four years is not achievable and would only create bedlam as far as shepherding was concerned.

Last week I asked the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to put in place, through the Executive's programme funds, a support mechanism to alleviate the short- and long-term problems imposed upon Mourne sheep farmers as a result of the Silent Valley grazing ban. We have heard different people blaming others, but the ban came about as a result of a demand from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That was done for health reasons, and nobody can challenge that. The Minister for Regional Development, being the landlord, had to implement it. Subsequently, everybody came knocking on Brid Rodgers's door as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Many other doors could have been knocked on. The Executive's programme funds might have been the appropriate place to look for funding.

In their answers, the Ministers stated that they understood that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development had met with a number of deputations on the issue and had obtained additional information for the affected farmers. The Minister stated that she is considering the position in the light of those contacts, with a view to reaching a decision on the way forward and

"including the appropriateness of offering assistance."

Regardless of which Department foots the bill, this is something that those of us who campaign on the farmers' behalf are waiting to hear about.

Our anxiety is minor compared to the concerns of farmers who await the lifeline that could save their flocks, which for many would protect a major percentage

of their income. I missed the earlier part of the debate, but I would have liked all Ministers to be available to respond. I know there is a ruling on that, but with so many different Departments having responsibility it would only have been right for each Minister to be able to be here. In the future we will have to look at similar situations for which three Departments must carry the can.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I congratulate Mr O'Neill for putting the motion on the Order Paper. At that point my congratulations run out, when I consider his contribution to the debate. That was unfortunate, given the excellent speeches made by Mr Bradley and Mr Wells, who between them brought an element of reason and sanity to a difficult issue — one that concerns farmers, the community and the livelihoods of many individuals in the Mournes area.

Mr O'Neill did nothing to convince my party to support the motion, which is unfortunate. His speech tended to borrow from that little verse in the Bible

“All we like sheep have gone astray”.

He seemed to stray everywhere with his statements. He strayed with the sheep on their traditional route, and he strayed with the sheep off their traditional route. That is unfortunate because he failed to make a number of key points and address a number of key issues.

He came to the Assembly armed with an allegation — an allegation made previously — that the Minister for Regional Development had misled the House. He had to temper that allegation with an admission during the course of this debate that the Minister for Regional Development had not misled the House. The only thing missing from his speech was an apology to the Minister. He should have retracted his allegation and accepted the ruling by the Speaker a little more graciously than he did.

The spurious point of order at the start of the debate and the ruling by the Speaker betrayed the fact that, if Mr O'Neill himself does not know who is responsible — and if the Speaker cannot make a ruling on who is responsible — it ill behoves him to come to this House to try to pour blame on the Minister for Regional Development on a matter that Mr O'Neill cannot even say that the Minister is fully responsible for. I hope that after the contribution by the Minister — who has had the decency to be here today — Mr O'Neill will be prepared to thank him for his contribution and comments, which I hope will be constructive.

This motion derives from a faux pas — an attempt by Mr O'Neill to settle some old scores with the Department for Regional Development. That Department took a quick and necessary decision to protect human and public health. Those are not my words. They are the words of Mr P J Bradley in this debate, and he is absolutely right. The decision was taken on advice received from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Minister, and his predecessor, could do nothing else in that regard.

Unfortunately, through this motion, and during the course of this saga, the SDLP has attempted to ignore the public health issues by claiming that consultation between the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was not as extensive as it might have been. The facts on consultation are very clear. The permanent secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has agreed in writing — in a letter to myself that has been published — that there was consultation. We might not like the decision or the outcome, but the reality is that there was consultation. The SDLP once bitten was not twice shy when it should have been. It then attempted to squeeze compensation from the Minister for Regional Development, who clearly does not bear sole responsibility for the issue of compensation. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development should recognise that she should try to find a mechanism in her own Department to help her pick up the tab on this particular issue — and it will be an expensive issue.

We could continue in this way, playing silly games. My party could blame the SDLP Minister, as, unfortunately, the SDLP, through Mr O'Neill in this debate, has tried quite deliberately to blame a DUP Minister. That would be unfortunate, not because of the cheap political point scoring, but for the farmers in the Mournes trying to graze their sheep and maintain a livelihood for themselves and their families. I do not, and will not, go down that road. It is important for people to keep their heads in relation to this issue. They must realise that they cannot come into the Chamber, blame the Minister and think that resolves the issue. They have to go one step further and try to find a process or mechanism to resolve the problem and get agriculture in that part of the Member's constituency out of the doldrums it is in.

We have had a number of suggestions in the House today. Mr Wells made an eminently sensible suggestion about the application forms for farming grants. The integrated administration control system (IACS) forms could be brought forward and additions made to them. That is a reasonable measure. The Agriculture Committee, which I sit on, has made that suggestion to the Department.

3.00 pm

Mr M Murphy, with his Victor Meldrew impersonation, made the suggestion, which was not that bright, that we should look to Donegal for the answer. Frankly, “I don't believe it.” I do not believe that that is where the answer lies.

Mr Bradley actually came up with quite a good idea; that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development should ask for the Executive's programme funds to be used. I would go one step further and suggest that there should be a joint approach by the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development for Executive programme funding on this issue, because that is where the issue rests.

The Minister, or Ministers, responsible have to find a mechanism with which to trigger compensation. I trust that officials — certainly those in the Department for Regional Development — will soon find a legal method that will go some way towards allowing them to trigger that mechanism for compensation. Ultimately, when we get away from all the politics involved, that is really the solution — to achieve compensation.

There is another issue for the House to consider. With all the shouting, berating and hectoring of Ministers for their different political allegiances, it is important that, when we come to consider the Budget in a few weeks' time, the Minister for Regional Development is allocated the resources necessary to upgrade the water treatment works. I hope the SDLP and all parties argue equally strongly for that. That will ensure that any issue to do with sheep grazing on the Mourne can be resolved more speedily.

I hope that the public health issues, which have brought this matter on to the agenda, will also be resolved.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): I thank Mr O'Neill for the opportunity to participate in the debate.

First, I recognise the importance of the issue for the farming community in south Down. However, it is one that has even greater importance for the public health of the wider community. Therefore, I welcome the opportunity to place the issues in their proper and wider context.

Information about cryptosporidium and its effects are in the public domain. I made Members aware of that in my statement of 11 September 2000 on the outbreak of cryptosporidiosis in the Lisburn and south-west Belfast areas. However, given the importance of the subject, I would like to reiterate briefly the nature of cryptosporidium, the cryptosporidium risk assessment at Silent Valley, the reason for the exclusion of sheep from catchment lands, and how I see the compensation issue.

Cryptosporidium is a parasitic organism, which can be water-borne, and which is resistant to normal disinfection processes. It can cause acute diarrhoeal illness, lasting two to three weeks. For those whose immune systems are weakened or compromised, it can be much more serious. Some Members have spoken about how serious it can be. In some instances, it can be fatal, as Mr Wells indicated. The organism can be removed by treatment incorporating fine infiltration, but once detected in the water distribution system, it can only be destroyed by boiling the water. There is a proven risk of cryptosporidium contamination of the public water supply from livestock grazing in reservoir catchment areas.

I will now move on to the risk assessment at the Silent Valley. Following outbreaks of cryptosporidiosis

in Great Britain, the Government appointed an expert group, under the chairmanship of Prof Ian Bouchier, to advise on measures to protect the public against cryptosporidium in drinking water. The group reported in 1998 and made over 50 recommendations, all of which were adopted by Water Service. One of the recommendations was that water utilities should carry out risk assessments on all their water catchment areas. Early in 1999, the Water Service assessed the risk of cryptosporidium contamination at all 59 of its sources. The assessment used was based on models used in England, Wales and Scotland, and developed in consultation with the Northern Ireland Drinking Water Inspector. The assessment showed that the Silent Valley was particularly at risk due to the lack of a satisfactory level of treatment.

The Silent Valley's water supply serves a substantial part of County Down and south and east Belfast, amounting to approximately 250,000 people in total. Water treatment at the Silent Valley is confined to coarse filtration, pH adjustment and disinfecting. These are not effective in the removal or destruction of cryptosporidium oocysts. The catchment lands at the Silent Valley comprise 9,000 acres owned by the Department for Regional Development in the upper reaches of the Mourne Mountains. Against this background, sheep were excluded on a temporary basis from March of last year. A further review of the management of the Silent Valley catchment area confirmed the need to continue to exclude sheep. I announced that on 6 September.

The ban has the support of the Chief Medical Officer and the Northern Ireland Drinking Water Inspector. I will review the position when the two new water treatment works for the Silent Valley and other reservoirs are provided. The new works, which will provide a barrier to prevent cryptosporidium from entering the distribution system, are programmed for completion in 2004 at a combined cost of £48m. The Mourne conduit, which carries water from the Silent Valley to Belfast, is currently being replaced at a cost of £32m.

There is a time lag between the approval of the replacement of the Mourne conduit and its completion. It is not physically possible for the works to be completed and operational before 2004. If it were possible, I would ensure that it was done. It is physically impossible. In addition, my Department has spent £250,000 on repairs to the Mourne wall to ensure that sheep cannot gain access to the catchment area. Contractors employed by the Mourne Heritage Trust carried out the work. Those significant investments demonstrate my Department's commitment to ensuring that customers receive drinking water of the highest quality.

I regret that I had to take the decision to exclude sheep from the catchment lands, but in the interests of public health it was, and is, unavoidable. To repeat the comments that I made in a previous debate, what if there had been a risk to the drinking water supply of a quarter

of a million of people and I had done nothing, or had delayed by a month, a week, or a day? Public representatives inside and outside this House would demand to know why did I not act to put the health of a quarter of a million people above every other consideration relating to the public drinking water supply. I repeat that I regret that I had to take the decision to exclude the sheep, but in the interests of public health, it was, and is, unavoidable. Protecting the public water supply must be my paramount consideration.

I met some of the farmers just over a week ago and heard their concerns at first hand, a fact mentioned by Mr Wells and Mr O'Neill. I appreciate the difficulties that the ban has caused for local farmers, and I sympathise with their position. I am minded to give whatever assistance my Department can. However, I cannot go outside the legal constraints on my Department's actions. By tradition, the right to use grazing land in Silent Valley has been renewed annually. The contract confers access to the facility of grazing, not possession of the grazing land itself. The legal advice is that as the practice of making grazing land available was on an annual basis, it can be discontinued.

I recognise the local farmers' concerns, but, regrettably, it will not be possible for my Department to pay compensation. I know that that will be a disappointment to the farmers, but I must have regard to the legal position. I will, however, give careful consideration to any of the suggestions made today that I can discuss with my Colleague the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. I am also willing to consider any scientific evidence that demonstrates conclusively that the presence of sheep would not present any risk to the public water supply. However, current advice from leading experts such as Prof Bouchier's committee on cryptosporidium is that livestock grazing on catchment land is a risk to public health.

My officials have maintained close contact with officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to establish what measures could be taken to assist the farmers. Discussions are continuing on whether any of the suggestions — written and verbal — that have been made to my Department could provide a way forward.

Mr Wells: During last week's meeting between the Minister, his officials and a delegation of sheep farmers, several suggestions were put to him about a form of words that could crack the problem. Is the Minister's Department considering those suggestions to see whether any of them offer a solution?

Mr Campbell: I can confirm, as I had just said before Mr Well's intervention, that we are considering several representations, including some of those that were made by the delegation that the Member led to see me last week. We are also examining other options. I am conscious of what can happen as a result of comments made in the House and how misleading impressions can be created,

but I should say that none of the suggestions made so far provides an automatic response to the difficulties that we face. They all present difficulties, and none of them provides the categorical and definitive response that the farmers would like.

I have spoken to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development today, and I want to clarify a point that Mr O'Neill raised at the outset. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has asked that I make it clear that she wanted to respond to the motion jointly with me but was prevented from doing so by the Assembly's procedures. She asked me to convey her concern about the plight of the farmers affected by the ban. She has also had meetings with deputations from different parties about the situation and has obtained additional information directly from the farmers themselves. Both of us assure the Assembly that we are keen to work together, through and with our Departments, to examine if there is any practical way of reducing the impact on the local farmers. To progress the issue we have agreed to meet soon, and a mutually convenient time will be arranged by our private offices.

3.15 pm

The Silent Valley catchment lands can not be made available for grazing because of the proven risk to public health. That action has the support of the medical authorities and the Drinking Water Inspector. As I said earlier, no one in the House would expect me to do otherwise. My first responsibility is the protection of the public water supply to the 250,000 customers who use the water from the Silent Valley. That does not mean that I am unsympathetic to the plight of farmers. I have demonstrated that I am sympathetic, and I am working with my Colleague in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to try to arrive at a conclusion to their plight. However, it would be irresponsible to allow grazing until the new treatment works are built. They will provide an effective barrier to cryptosporidium entering the water distribution system.

I am sympathetic to the difficulties of the local farmers, but, on legal advice, I cannot justify payment of compensation. However, officials from the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will continue to explore what other steps can be taken to assist those farmers affected. I will be meeting with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development soon to discuss those issues.

I wish to refute — and I hope that I have done so in my remarks — any suggestions of partisanship or sectarianism in the manner in which my Department and I have dealt with this issue. Some of the comments by a few Members mean that I am determined to try to reach a resolution of the problem despite their comments rather than because of them, and I will endeavour to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion.

Mr O'Neill: I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. Alan McFarland emphasised the threat of cryptosporidium and stated that the outbreak in April and May 2000, contrary to the other outbreak, was traced to an animal source. There are two traceable sources for the bug. One is human, and the other can be animal or human. This one was indeterminate.

I am basing that on the report of the investigation that was carried out by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety into the outbreak during April and May 2000. I pressed for the publication of that report, and the Health Minister promised that it would be published in the middle of August. However, it was almost December before we received it. I was greatly concerned that the publication of the report took so long, but the Health Minister did facilitate a meeting with myself and the medical team that was preparing the report, and I went through it in some depth with them. There is no evidence to suggest that the outbreak of cryptosporidium in April and May 2000 originated from the Silent Valley sheep.

People try to construct things about the issue, and that is why I feel aggrieved. Not surprisingly, I feel angry when I hear from my constituents that things that could have been done to help them were not done due to various circumstances. It makes it even more pointed when the source of the infection did not come from where it was supposed to have come from. I would like to divest people of the argument about health slightly in order to take a look at the point about the source of infection. Of course, everyone's first concern is for the public health of our community. However, some sort of understanding should be expressed when it is shown that a particular source is not the cause of infection. That evidence is available in this case.

Jim Wells made several comments and, of course he used the occasion to attack me for attacking the Minister. It is a good old ruse, and I can well understand why he did not want to indulge in apportioning blame because he wants to protect his Colleague and Friend. That is fine. We all understand that, and we will not get excited about it. However, he quoted a statistic about the levels of infection and the number of oocysts per quantity. The public health report stated

"Although there was a period of turbidity between 26th and 28th of April and cryptosporidium was detected in the water supply between 26th April and 1st May, the maximum level detected of 0.1 oocysts per 10L was below the recommended level for action of 1.0 oocysts per 10L".

In other words, the number was considerably below the action level, yet action was taken. That is a correction to a point that he made.

Mr Wells: If I believed that that was true for one minute, I can assure the hon Member that I would be 100% behind him. However, we met the deputy chief executive of the Water Service last week and we put that

point to him. He assured us that the level had been breached and when that happened the Department was criminally liable. I will be going back to check that. However, I was given an assurance that at least one oocyst per ten litres had been detected in the water supply.

Mr O'Neill: I quoted from page 18, section 4.9.3 of the public health report. That will enable the Member to research it more fully.

Mick Murphy drew attention to the fact that there were three Ministers involved. I did not fully understand his point. However, when I dealt with the three Ministers in person I found that they co-operated fully, and I do not want to minimise that in any way. On a person to person basis, that co-operation was there. However, I am concerned that Ministers may defend their Departments to the extent of not listening to what goes on there.

At the outset, I said that I was quite upset to hear a report on the radio this morning about the suggestion that sheep had been allowed into the area. It struck me as particularly interesting that someone should focus on this story after all this time. I detected that they wanted to divert attention away from the argument. On several occasions I have detected as much when I tried to investigate parts of the issue. It makes one feel that there is something of a plot afoot to disturb the public interest and to deflect public interest away from the issue. I may just be feeling a bit sore and persecuted but I have had that suspicion on several occasions. I wonder if it has anything to do with certain officials in a certain Department being conscious of the fact that they should have carried out tests on the safety, efficiency and protection of the water supply.

It is in the public interest for Members to bear this in mind. We are all aware of the extent to which we were dominated, in the past, by the Civil Service — there was no proper accountability. I definitely get the impression that this case was treated in such a way. Public health was constantly used to divert my attention away from protecting farmers. They were made the scapegoats at all times, even though the evidence indicates that the opposite is the case. This is what emerged from my dealings with the three Ministers.

Mr Paisley Jnr claimed that I failed to make a number of key points. I waited patiently for these points to be made, but I did not hear them. He was inclined to try to direct some form of calumny at me and to trivialise my comments, without realising that I am trying to reflect the very serious and sincere anger of the people I represent. I may perhaps be forgiven for my actions. I hope that I am forgiven, because I have seen the effects of this situation, and I get cross and upset when I can see ways around bureaucratic decisions that are not being taken.

I welcome the Minister's expressed willingness to try to solve the problem. I still maintain that his Department has a key role to play in this matter, and I hope that that

will encourage him and his officials to do everything possible, in conjunction with his Colleagues. Interestingly, this debate might just result in greater co-operation between our ministerial Colleagues in the Chamber — there have been some examples of this today, and I am glad to see that happening.

Finally, I appeal to the Minister to consider seriously my request that the pasturage link be maintained. Experts say that the risk of a cryptosporidium outbreak is least hazardous in August, September and October, and there is no evidence that anything happens at those times. Even if the rest of my argument falls on deaf ears, I urge the Minister to consider allowing those months to be used to establish and maintain that pasturage link, which would allow the tradition to continue after the Department carries out the intended work.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on those Ministers responsible to make compensation available for farmers who are suffering financially as a result of the Silent Valley sheep ban in the Mourne.

SCHOOLS PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

3.30 pm

Mr S Wilson: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to publish information which enables the performance of schools in Northern Ireland to be adequately measured and compared.

I will outline why I felt this issue should be debated by the Assembly.

First, we have a decision that has caused widespread concern, and I am going to mention some of the people who have expressed concern in a moment. Secondly, we have an issue that once again illustrates the cavalier manner with which the Minister of Education handles his portfolio. It does no credit to the Assembly, to its Committees, or to the general education debate for such an important issue, which is central to the whole delivery of education in Northern Ireland, to have been delivered in this particular way.

This is an important issue. The Department of Education receives the second-highest amount of money from the Budget for Northern Ireland, and a high proportion of that goes directly to schools. Therefore, it is important to have some measure on how effectively that money is being spent. One way of doing that is to measure the output of schools. The Minister, in his wisdom, has decided to do away with the only measure of performance that is made available to the public so that they can judge whether or not schools are delivering. It is a decision that has drawn criticism from academics, including Prof Tony Gallagher; from industrialists, including the Institute of Directors; and from parents and some school principals. It is a decision that ironically — or perhaps not ironically, but predictably — has been welcomed by teachers' unions. Some may well say that the Minister, having failed to make friends anywhere else in education, has decided to zone in on the teachers' unions: better some friends than no friends. But if he is doing that at the expense of the accountability of the education budget and what goes on in schools, then the Assembly ought to be concerned.

The second reason for my bringing the matter to the Assembly is that the Minister has handled this issue in an unacceptable manner. This is a major policy change, and it makes Northern Ireland different from all other parts of the United Kingdom, but, as we found out yesterday, the matter was not brought before the Executive. Other Executive Members were not consulted about it. So much for what we have been told about the Executive's ability to rein in rogue Ministers. The decision is contrary to the views expressed by the Education Committee. I know that some people will find it rather odd that another member of the Education Committee has

put down an amendment welcoming the decision. But let me remind the Assembly what the Education Committee said to the Minister on this issue:

“The Committee believes that it is important that performance information on schools is made widely available to assist openness, transparency and...”

— this is important —

“for the benefit of making comparisons.”

That was endorsed unanimously by the Education Committee, including the member who is going to move an amendment to the motion in a moment or two.

The Committee went on:

“The Committee accepts that the provision of comparative information can assist schools to monitor and evaluate their performance and set targets to improve.”

It concluded that:

“The Department should regularly publish comparative information...”

The first preference was that the comparison should be based on value-added information. But in the interim, until the Department decided what information to include, the Committee said that the Department should continue to publish the information as at present, but make it a bit more meaningful by benchmarking. In other words, rather than having one league table in which all schools were treated the same, divide it into divisions, similar to the football league, which would make it a bit fairer. Premier league schools should not be compared with fourth division schools. That may be an inadequate analogy, but it nevertheless demonstrates that schools divide into different sections, either because of their intake, their area, or the nature of the youngsters who go there.

The Minister ignored the views of the Committee. He ignored the views of many professionals, and he ignored the Executive. That is why it is important for the Assembly to debate this issue. The Minister now seems to be making decisions on the basis of some kind of inadequate and partial referendum. He sought to justify his decision by stating that 75% of the responses he received were in support of doing away with tables published by the Department. What he failed to say was that of the three options, two involved the publication of the kind of information that is currently available. One option was for it to be produced by boards, the other for it to be published by the Department. The division between those preferring that it be done purely by schools and those wanting some other central body to do it was almost fifty-fifty.

It was never indicated that the decision would be made on a headcount. Is the Minister going to handle these important issues simply by getting the responses and totalling them all up? Regardless of the nature, quality, standing and source of the responses, will he take 51% and say that if those people are in favour, then that is the

route to take? For a party that has railed against majority rule, that is a very odd way to behave.

Is that how he is going to deal with the review of post-primary education? If it is, the message is that every Tom, Dick and Harry across the country should write in. That is how the Minister is going to decide — by some form of postal referendum. In light of Sinn Féin’s reputation on postal votes, one has to query the wisdom of allowing things to be decided in that way. That is why this issue needed to be debated. It is significant that the majority of responses from parents said that they wished to have information reported by either the Department or the boards. Even though there has been a concerted campaign by teaching unions, 44% of teachers said that they did not mind such information being published by either the Department or the boards. There is no great resistance to performance information, presented in a comparative way, being published, however much the Minister likes to suggest that his decision was backed up by popular demand.

Let us look at some of the arguments. First of all, the Department’s own consultation document recognises the value of these tables. Here are some examples:

“The Tables encourage competition among schools, and the effect of competition is often to drive up standards. Many schools have worked hard in recent years to develop strategies that will improve their ‘ranking’ in the Tables ... the Tables can provide a basis for discussion about comparative performance, standards and quality of teaching between staff and Governors.”

The document points out that the information is popular. Over the past seven years, more than 250,000 copies of the school league tables have been distributed. No complaint has ever been received from a parent about receiving unwanted material. I could go on. The Department’s document indicates that there is value in the tables. The Minister, under section 4.2 of the Programme for Government, indicates that one of the prime reasons for demanding more money for education is to improve the standard of education. We have a situation where we have the Department admitting that a particular way of improving standards in schools is to publish information, the Minister saying he wants to do that, and yet he no longer publishes the figures.

The Department is now setting out targets for GCSE and Key Stage 2 attainment. If the Department is happy to set those targets nationally, why should we not look at the component parts of how those national targets are achieved? If some schools are underachieving, let it be known, so that, as the Committee said, they can be monitored and helped. Despite the compelling evidence from the Department, and the fact that the Department is now saying that targets will be set for GCSE and A level passes, Key Stage 2 attainment and everything else, those tables are not going to be published.

One reason might be that the Minister is seeking to bring Northern Ireland into line with the Irish Republic,

which is one of the few countries in the world that has bowed to the pressure of professionals within the education establishment. Not only does it refuse to publish the information, it bans publication by anybody else. What is the result? We hear a lot about the Celtic tiger, and how education has driven that, but the results are far from that.

The third International Maths and Science Survey reported that, when it tested nine year-olds and thirteen year-olds in maths and science, the Republic of Ireland ranked in the lower half of the countries surveyed. Only Cyprus, Iran and Portugal were lower. An international adult literacy survey looked at prose document and numeric literacy. Of the six English-speaking countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the standard in the Irish Republic was the lowest. It was also lowest in computer literacy in OECD English-speaking countries — just below half-way in the ranking of Western Europe. A whole range of statistical information shows that if standards are not measured publicly, it does not matter how much money is spent on education. There will be a lack of value for money.

3.45 pm

Many arguments have been put forward against publishing the league tables — some of them fairly spurious. The first is that it affects the morale of teachers. I would have thought that one way of improving teacher morale would be to show that what they were doing was valued and measured, and that when improvements took place there was something to praise them for. The attitude of some of the teachers' unions contrasts greatly with that of teachers in other countries. The American Federation of Teachers actually called for the publication of standards. It said that it believed that it was important for students to know what they should be able to do at each grade level and to have examinations administered by the state, and that that in turn would create confidence in the schools.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wilson, I ask you to draw your comments to a close.

Mr S Wilson: I will finish now.

The second argument is that the publication of league tables distorts the activity of schools. I would have thought that the main reason why parents send their youngsters to school was to gain qualifications. Therefore, one needs to measure whether schools have achieved that.

I am sure that Ms Lewsley will deal with the third argument, which is that schools do more than just pump out examination candidates. That is quite true. However, parents, when they are choosing schools, do not look solely at league tables or performance tables. They will go to open nights and listen to what their children and other children say, what people who have gone through

the school say, and what they read in the newspapers about a school. All that information is factored in anyway. That does not do away with the need to have some measure of school performance.

Finally, here is a quote from a letter sent to a local newspaper by a parent, referring to how some west Belfast schools had underperformed:

"The public has a right to know if schools have underperformed, and pupils have a right to have it redressed."

The only way one can know if schools have underperformed is if one has comparative information published. The only way one can have it redressed is to have schools monitored. For those schools which are underachieving, that information should be used as a means of devoting help, attention and resources so that children get what parents expect for them when it comes to the school system.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Owing to the substantial number of Members wishing to speak, I am going to have to limit each Member's time to eight minutes. The Minister will have 15 minutes in which to respond.

Ms Lewsley: I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after "Assembly" and add

"welcomes the decision of the Minister not to continue the current publication of school performance tables and calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that information supplied to parents about schools is wide-ranging and detailed and includes social and economic background data, extra-curricular and non-academic classes offered and other 'value-added' information."

It is schools that should deliver performance tables, not the Department. As Mr Wilson said, we are not asking for performance measures to be taken away, but we are asking that the schools deliver them and not the Department.

As many of us know, last October the Department initiated a consultation on the future of school performance tables and invited responses from schools, parents and other interested groups on the issue. At that time, I was concerned that the consultation period was too short. Responses had to be returned to the Department by 8 December. I was also concerned that the options were too limited. Mr Wilson has already mentioned the three options. In response to that consultation, many people who responded at that time, including my own party, chose option two. The proviso was that it should be implemented with appropriate monitoring by the Department, particularly given the additional resources saved through ceasing to publish the tables. Under option two we believed that schools would be required to provide parents with a copy of their prospectus, with the details of their examination performance set in the context of other information about that school.

I believe that it is in the interests of equality of opportunity and social inclusion for all children that adequate information on schools is presented to parents to ensure informed choice. Education is a vital element in society, coming close in importance to food and shelter.

Not only that, it is a human right. To provide parents with full and accurate information on schools, we need to recognise the need for a more holistic approach to the achievement of schools. I believe that there should be a duty on schools to present examination data, with vocational qualifications alongside academic qualifications. It is important that information on the achievements and extra-curricular and non-academic activities of the schools, including what I would term the value added by the socio-economic background of the students and areas, be given.

I do not accept that it is impossible to devise a system for presenting the information on the value added by a school, given its particular circumstances and approach. All too often, emphasis is placed on the school's academic performance alone, and this can increase the burden on the school to meet targets and to satisfy league tables, with the result that it becomes league-driven and geared too much towards academia. We have to move away from perpetual testing to perpetual teaching. This type of limited information can also be misleading for parents when choosing a suitable school for their child's needs. What we should have, as I have said before, is equality of opportunity. We must tackle the issues of underachievement, rural schools, nursery education and, in particular, special needs education. We must ensure that we target social need and take into account a child's abilities and reflect a child's needs and parental choice.

We need to develop a second level education that gives equal weight to a vocational stream operating alongside an academic stream to develop a real and meaningful curriculum that meets the needs of pupils and society. In my opinion, although we have a high level of excellence, we also have a high level of underachievement that needs to be tackled.

As a parent of a child who got her results on Saturday morning, I can assure Members that only about 30% of parents will be worried about league tables. The others, of whom I am one, are only worried at this stage about what school their children will actually get into. For me the issue is not about league tables. It is about finding a school that can give my child encouragement and the equality of opportunity to fulfil her potential, whether by a vocational or an academic route. Given the right environment, I believe that she will have the chance to regain some of the self-esteem and motivation that she lost on Saturday at the tender age of 10. I also believe that our aim should be to encourage all our children to develop their full potential in relation to academic, sporting, vocational, musical, artistic or other abilities, and to cope with whatever limitations or difficulties they may have or encounter. I ask the Assembly to support this amendment.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important debate. I am speaking as the Ulster Unionist Party's spokesperson on education, but I will

also be saying a little in my role as the Chairman of the Education Committee.

The whole issue of school performance tables has, from time to time, been shrouded in controversy. It is clear that there are conflicting views in the education sector as to their value. I am unable to give my support to the amendment tabled by the Member for Lagan Valley, Mrs Lewsley. In the submissions that were made to the Minister — and particularly those of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Education Committee — and the Minister's subsequent decision, there are gaps that I, as spokesperson on education and Chairperson of the Education Committee, am concerned about. The gaps relate, for the large part, to the main text outlined in Ms Lewsley's amendment. I am unwilling to commit myself to that amendment, in the light of the absence of a ministerial commitment to take action and support the proposals contained in the second part of the amendment.

The Ulster Unionist Party expressed its view to the Minister, as part of the consultation process, that there is a clear need for this type of information to be made available to those involved in education, including pupils, parents, teachers, library boards and the Department of Education. This would provide these groups with access to data, which would enable them to make better-informed decisions, albeit from a statistical perspective. School performance tables did not take account of everything that schools provide. For that reason, we were convinced that value-added information should be made available alongside the pure statistical data. Every effort should, therefore, be made to chart a school's complete performance on both an academic and a personal level.

The Ulster Unionist Party, in its submission on school performance tables to the Minister, also emphasised the need for his Department to consider the assistance and input of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), which has undertaken a wide range of useful work in this area. At the time of the ministerial announcement, that element was absent. I will be interested to hear his views on this value-added information and on the role that the CCEA might play in that respect.

The Education Committee's response was that it is very important that performance information on schools be made widely available and readily accessible to all stakeholders to promote openness and transparency and to enable comparisons to be made. That information must be accurate, consistent and easy to understand. In consideration of these issues, the Committee recognised that one of the benefits of the publication of school performance tables was the provision of accurate and consistent information that enables comparisons to be made. This comparative information could assist schools to monitor and evaluate their performances and to set their targets for improvement. However, the Education Committee also recognised that the old format of

performance tables provided information on a limited range of examination results. It was felt that the tables might reinforce the view that academic attainment alone is of value and that the comparison of schools on the basis of examination results is misleading in the absence of a reliable method of assessing and reporting value-added information.

For these reasons, I believe, the Education Committee made two recommendations regarding the review of the school performance tables. The first recommendation was that each school be provided with a simple standardised package of information on how to enhance the range of non-examinable subject options and other aspects of school life which are on offer, with a view to their publication in its prospectus. In essence, that is now being implemented. This is my understanding of the response, but the Minister will want to confirm that.

4.00 pm

The second recommendation of the Education Committee was that the Department should regularly publish meaningful and comparative information based on value-added performance indicators. This information would measure the progress achieved by students during a phase of education relative to their different starting points or the value-added education that a school offers. This would allow a more accurate assessment and comparison of schools. While the Committee is aware that as yet there is no easily understandable way in which to measure this, the Department of Education and the Minister should pursue this as a matter of urgency. A central provision of information would emphasise and heighten awareness of the importance of raising and maintaining standards. However, the information provided must be transparent, simple to understand and interpret and allow a comparison of like with like. That is why I am happy to give my support to the proposal outlined by Mr S Wilson. While I have great sympathy with and can identify very much with much of the text of the amendment proposed by Ms Lewsley, I am unable to give my full support to that this afternoon.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I congratulate my Colleague Mr S Wilson for getting this motion on the Order Paper, and indeed I support it. I want to contribute to the debate by reading an extract from an editorial in the 'News Letter' on Monday, January 15 — I think that was the day after the Minister took the decision to scrap the existing league tables. It said

"Surely the answer is to provide more information, not less. The tables have fulfilled an important function by putting previously unreleased information into the public domain, in an easily accessible way."

That "easily accessible" information, which was heretofore not available, has now been removed. That is censorship. The Minister has made a quite deliberate attempt to deny parents access to information.

No one ever argued that this information was the be-all and the end-all; neither was it ever argued that this was the basis upon which to make a decision about a child's future education — but was it? It was information to guide a parent and, indeed, to guide schools on the decisions that they had to make. It is unfortunate that less information is now available to parents when they come to make a crucial choice about the future of their child's education. That was the most regrettable thing about the Minister's decision, and it is that that has prompted this debate — we want to get a system of comparison in place. As the motion quite rightly states, information is published that allows for schools to be compared and allows us to make judgements against performance targets. In this day and age we are told to encourage the setting of targets and we are urged to reach and achieve them, so it seems very strange that the Minister of Education wants to deny us information which will let us know if schools are achieving the targets that have been set.

In the 'News Letter' on January 15, the Minister outlined his reason — or his excuse — for deciding to scrap the publication of these important tables. He said

"When I asked people what they would like me to do to improve the education system, one answer kept coming back. 'Do something about the league tables'."

This was second only to 'Do something about the 11-plus'."

That prompts the question: does the Minister do everything he is asked? Does he respond so favourably to every request that is made to him? Would he respond so favourably to similar requests to increase teachers' pay? A quare lot of people across Northern Ireland clearly think that he has not responded to that one. Teachers' pay has not been increased in the way in which they would like it to have been increased. No, the fact of the matter is that the Minister has fallen foul of the politically correct lobby on this issue. Instead of permitting parents to have access to all of the information they require, he has engaged in a form of censorship, and that is wrong.

The motion before the House will allow us to lift that censorship. Given the Minister's party and his protest in the past about censorship, one would have hoped that he would be able to understand parental concerns about censorship. However, it was a forlorn hope for many in the House and across Northern Ireland that he would be prepared to listen and respond positively to requests by parents and people in the teaching profession who want to see this information's being published. There is a truism that information is power. When you are denied information, you are denied the power to make appropriate decisions based on all the facts.

When the unfortunately named "school league tables" were first published, they gave parents a valuable measure by which to test schools. They blew apart the myth that grammar schools were miles ahead of other schools, and

they put into perspective the criteria that academics placed on the exam achievement status of several schools. Indeed, the 'News Letter' editorial that I quoted from earlier made this very point. It said

"In 1993, the 'News Letter' highlighted the fact that in some areas, an extraordinarily high percentage of young males were leaving school to go on to Government training programmes, and a follow-up investigation revealed that in many cases, the programmes fulfilled no useful function. The result of this was that the Training and Employment Agency improved their schemes and their monitoring systems to the benefit of young school leavers."

This was achieved because of those school league tables. Under current departmental circumstances that could not be achieved. The Minister has denied people the information they need.

School league tables were not, and were never intended to be, the be-all and end-all or the only measure of school achievement, but they were a useful source of information. The Minister has decided to throw the baby out with the bath water. A small number of teachers must be laughing up their sleeves at the Minister of Education today, because he has been putty in their hands and has done exactly as he was told. "Get rid of the league tables; get rid of the guides; get rid of the measurements that, perhaps, point the finger of blame at some teachers, and tell them that they have to do their jobs in a better way."

The tables also encourage schools to improve their activities and raise their standards to help young people achieve the examination results they are capable of achieving. Instead of destroying an existing process, the Minister ought to have improved on the league system. However, this Minister's psyche does not allow him to build; it only allows him to destroy. This is a classic example of the destruction of information that should be made available to parents, teachers and the public so that people can make reasoned and rational decisions about the future of their children's education and about where children should go for their secondary or grammar school education.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I should not really be welcoming the opportunity to have this debate, because it is quite unnecessary. League tables were discussed at length in the Education Committee, and the issue should have been sorted out there. We made decisions, and while some people say that we came to a different decision, I do not think we did. Some of us pointed out the problems with the system. I do not agree with Members who say that we should keep the league tables.

I now speak in support of the amendment. I always worry when something positive such as education is raised in the "No" politics of the DUP. I always worry that it is not for the benefit of everyone concerned. The tables themselves are a blunt instrument for measuring performance, and I am totally opposed to their publication.

Making information available is one thing, but publicising it so that the media and everyone else can have a field day supporting a particular agenda is unfair to the parents and, especially, to the teachers, who are trying to educate children in very different conditions. The decision made was probably the right one. Teachers and parents seem to support it, and I am sure that children in schools higher up the tables do. It is all very well if you are at the top of the heap, able to look down on the rest and make assertions about how you are doing, but it is a totally unfair system for measuring children's, teachers' or schools' performance.

I would try to put something in place that is fair to everyone. I would not choose, at any time of the year, to compare schools with each other on an unfair basis. That only serves to show that certain schools, certain teachers and certain children are not performing at all, while others are doing exceedingly well. That has to be wrong, and it was on that basis that we made our decision. Whether decisions were made by individuals at the Committee or otherwise, that is how I made mine.

League tables do not show the full picture. There they bear a likeness to the 11-plus examination. They measure only a few of schools' many educational outcomes, such as the students with five or more A to C grades. In particular, they do not take into account personal growth, social skills and the creativity of children, or the wide variations in the socio-economic and educational needs of pupils. They do not compare different context and ability ranges — even in the secondary sector — a school's extra-curricular activities, or its contribution to placing young people in jobs and supporting them in stressful circumstances.

Particular areas suffer social disadvantage. As many areas are deprived, children have to go to their local schools, and often they do not have a choice. League tables do not take into consideration the fact that there may not always be family support or money available to provide the support necessary to enable pupils to achieve the grades and standards that pupils at schools placed higher up the tables can. Social disadvantage, therefore, does come into the equation.

Education should not be a race to the very top, as the press says. Every school has special needs, and there is also the matter of pastoral development. For Mr S Wilson to say that the Minister ignored our views is wrong. There is to be a review of the situation, which we have talked about, and I am sure that that will be ongoing. We also intend to consult now and in the future on the issue.

Media sensationalism is one of the areas from which the DUP motion is coming. Is Sammy Wilson trying to highlight the performance of elitist schools against the performance of the many who want to deliver education in an unequal educational environment, rather than for any great educational reasons? The press's obsession with

academic results does not necessarily help us obtain an educational system in which we can educate our young people for a modern world. My difficulty with league tables is that the media control — or try to control — agendas and come out with headlines that try to drive a particular agenda, and that is wrong.

I am all for the sharing of information and for the sharing of a wider range of information. That is what is wrong with the present system. A limited amount of information was available to parents — information which they were able to read in the press the morning after the league tables were published. We need wider information. We need to inform parents so that they can make a choice. I am in favour of sharing information with parents who are interested in all the information. In the past, parents were not always interested in the detail and, in some cases, even in the headlines. Education is about more than parents comparing the top schools with those that their children must attend because there is no choice. There is a disparity in the abilities of children, and many schools need to be upgraded — for which they must wait for many years — before they can be compared with a nearby school. Many such things need to be taken into account.

4.15 pm

The Minister has made the right decision. It is popular with teachers and pupils, and they know best. Perhaps, the only people who think it better to keep the tables are those in the schools at the very top — the high-achieving academic schools. It is OK for them; they can turn in a great performance every year. They achieve such a high level of performance, because they get the cream of the crop. That is unfair to everyone else. The Minister's decision was a good one, and the issue can be considered again in the future. I support the amendment.

Mrs E Bell: It is said that schooldays are the happiest days of one's life. I never believed that, even in my relatively trouble-free school life. I certainly do not subscribe to it today, given the many assessments and examinations that today's pupils have to endure in the three stages of their educational life. I welcome the Minister's statement that school performance tables will not be published again.

The Alliance Party feels that the tables, introduced in 1983, have a narrow focus on examination attainment only. They do not include information for parents and potential pupils about other vital factors — citizenship education, development of interactive living skills or facilities for children with special needs, for example. Full information on the overall situation in a school should be made available, and only the schools can do that. They are best placed to give details of academic achievements, pupil development and the range of projects that aid such development.

Prior knowledge of the total picture would have a helpful effect on how parents view such schools. The annual league tables do not convey that information. They simply show examination performance: they are not called "performance tables" for nothing. Such information places additional pressure on pupils and teachers to achieve the optimum number of passes in each examination. The Alliance Party is concerned by an increasing body of anecdotal evidence that suggests that some schools, in an increasing attempt to secure the best possible profile in the league tables, are suggesting that pupils who are experiencing difficulties and have been judged by their teachers to be underperforming in examinations should move to other schools before entering for examinations. That should not be allowed.

Good performance should not be the priority in education. Education should be centred on meeting the needs of all children, whatever their ability. The current mechanical approach is rarely to the advantage of the children concerned. In its submission, the Alliance Party said

"People assume that what is measured is an indication of what is deemed to be valuable by the system. The league tables, which focus solely on academic attainment in examination, reinforce the idea that academic attainment alone is of any value."

A more diverse range of criteria must be introduced if equity of value and esteem is to be given to all aspects of educational achievement and endeavour. The publication of the academic achievement of schools must also be placed in context. This would be best achieved through the publication of results as one aspect of a school prospectus, which includes the full range of educational and extra-curricular experiences, opportunities and initiatives offered by each school, and which reflects all the facets of a school's achievements.

The publication of such documents should be compulsory for all schools and could form the basis of the transfer booklet currently distributed to parents. The results of this recent consultation process on league tables showed clearly that parents do not want the tables, whatever Mr S Wilson may have said. They speak of performance alone, and parents do not want that. Parents also wish to see included the ethos of the school establishment, added-value measurements such as the ability range of pupils, a range of criteria wide enough to reflect achievement across the various aspects of educational experience offered throughout the system, and the different emphasis placed by individual schools on meeting the needs of all their pupils.

I hope that the review of the information that a school is required to include in its prospectus will include all types of schools in different areas, and that its findings will go a long way toward assisting schools in drawing up their individual information packages. Obviously, this is where the Department of Education could come in with advice. The Minister of Education has made

such a commitment, and a full review has been taking place. I hope that that is done expeditiously. Performance tables have been shown to be problematic in encouraging pupils to have unrealistic ambitions and parents to assume unrealistic ideas of the abilities of their children by sending them to schools with the best record of achievement but where less gifted pupils may feel unable to match up.

In conclusion, I say that we should always have as our priority the establishment of a system that encourages and enables all children to achieve their own highest potential. The Alliance Party believes that the performance tables do not do this, and that the interests of parents, students and schools will be best served by the information's being made available within individual school publications, where the school provides the information as part of the school prospectus. The motion suggests that the Minister of Education should publish the information for comparison and measurement. That would put us back to square one, where the wrong values of superiority, et cetera, would pertain. Therefore I cannot support it. I support the amendment, as it outlines a good basis for the elements necessary for the future of our children's education.

Mr Speaker: This is the first occasion that this Assembly will hear from Mr Hamilton when he will be making what can be described as a maiden speech. As Members know, it is the convention in another place that such a speech is made without interruption.

Mr Hamilton: As this is my maiden speech, I promise to keep it short and to the point.

Mr S Wilson referred at the beginning of his speech to the need to evaluate how effectively money is spent on education. I do not believe that anyone in this House would disagree with that. Certainly Mr Wilson and I, who have both served in the teaching profession, would not disagree on that matter. I have no problem with the idea of schools publishing examination results. However, the information currently used and the format in which it is presented do not go far enough, because it in no way gives parents full or precise information as to exactly how a school performs. The tables, as used, were great if you taught in one of those schools that the top 30% of our pupils attend. The tables, as used, suited you as a teacher, because they reflected the high results that those types of pupils produced in examinations.

It is all very well for Mr S Wilson to refer to the damage that he claims is being done to teacher morale by not producing the league tables. I take issue with him on that point. He does not seem to have considered the undervaluation many teachers felt when they took a pupil, possibly with severe learning difficulties — as I did on several occasions — and managed to improve him or her sufficiently to achieve a GCSE grade F. The amount of work and effort that the teacher and the pupil put in — for what was a major achievement by the pupil — was not reflected at all in the published league tables.

Parents do not always just look at a school's academic performance. They do not always look at how many grade As or Bs were achieved. The reason is that in the real world many parents have children with learning difficulties, and they do not look at the number of grade As and Bs when trying to find a school. They want to know what special classes and teaching methods will be used to help their children. They know that their children will probably never be able to aspire to grade As and Bs so when they look for schools to send their children to the published league tables provide them with no help and no guidance — nothing in that respect.

Ms Lewsley's amendment has much to recommend it, but for the reasons outlined by my Colleague Mr Kennedy we are unable to support it. I do not have to reiterate those reasons, because Mr Kennedy outlined them adequately. In conclusion, my only regret is that Ms Lewsley did not approach us with the idea of devising a joint amendment, because she would have found much common ground for her proposals with many in the House.

Mr Gibson: This motion is timely and essential. I am reacting to an outburst made by the Deputy First Minister, Mr Mallon, when he spoke at a formal occasion — the opening of a commercial event in east Belfast. On that occasion, he indicated that the education system was somehow failing the people of Northern Ireland.

My private reaction was, first, that he might be correct. Secondly, I noted that the second-largest budget had been devoted to education — and quite rightly so — because the most prized asset that any community can have is its own educated people. That is the basic building block of society and all human activity. Therefore that is why it was essential that the so-called league tables were published. First, they did raise standards, and that is acknowledged in all the publications. The long tail of underperformance has been virtually eliminated by some of those schools, and children who did not feel that they should strive and struggle to achieve.

4.30 pm

There was encouragement; there was praise, and there was success. That removed the greater part of the long tail of underachievement. Therefore raising school standards embodies much more than the statement of facts. It is something that must be supported. Further evidence of this was put to us strongly just before the Minister made his statement. The Confederation of British Industry, the Chamber of Commerce and other industry interests told us "League tables are not complete in themselves." Everyone in this Chamber would agree that league tables never provided an adequate amount of information. I think that we would all be agreed on that.

There is currently a pilot scheme running in England that is devising a method for adding on the value-added element. We are told that that will not be available until

the 2003-04 academic year. Rather than stopping the publication of the league tables, we should have kept on with them. We should have used our best endeavours to ensure that value-added measures will be appended to any future tables. When we met the Minister I made it very clear to him that we in Northern Ireland, at the periphery of Europe, cannot, in any way be seen to be an underperforming group of people. In a comparison between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on educational attainments it was said

“Attainments in Northern Ireland are better by most measures. The area with the biggest difference is lifelong learning. The proportion of Northern Ireland adults who are taking Higher Education courses on a part-time basis is a remarkable five times greater than the proportion in the Republic of Ireland.”

That proves the point that I made in my opening remarks that personal achievement and betterment through education that is freely available to all is a prized asset. Why should we not praise success? What have we against praising that which is praiseworthy? Sometimes we take a negative view and adopt a negative attitude. In a clamour about transparency, equality of opportunity and justice we say that it is just that we should point out where good performance is taking place. However, it is equally just to point out where underperformance is taking place. We are unfair if we do not indicate places of underachievement and publicly encourage achievement. We should enhance our systems to achieve proper standards.

As a people, we cannot survive in the European or global economy, or economically perform in the field of information technology, unless we raise our standards. The method for doing that is to have openness, to publish, and to ensure that we are proud of what we do publish. We have enjoyed good standards, but there was an outburst when the Deputy First Minister — quite rightly — reacted on one occasion to tell us that he feared that our educational standards were dropping. Today we in the Education Committee are aware of that. Already we are putting in place the benchmarks and agreed targets to be achieved. We have discovered that at various key stages, instead of performance levels having risen, they have dropped from 85% to 77%. In another case they have fallen from 80% to 75%. People do not put in more money to move backwards.

As a society, we have a great belief in education. The fact that this debate is taking place is proof that we want to raise our standards and be proud of our educated society. I support the motion, and I thank Mr S Wilson for tabling it. I urge the Assembly to strive for success: the old expression was “Publish and be damned”; today I say “Publish and be proud of it”.

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

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I have some sympathy with the wording of Mr S Wilson’s motion,

but Members will not be surprised to hear that I have a greater sympathy with the amendment that was put down by Ms Lewsley.

With regard to Sammy Wilson’s motion, it would be great if information could be published that would enable the good work that goes on in schools to be adequately measured and compared. The key word in the motion is “adequately”, because that is where the school performance tables fall down — they do not do all schools justice. Over the last year, head teachers and teachers have often told me how unfairly the tables portrayed their schools. They said that no account had been taken of the ability of their pupils on entry, or of the circumstances in which they worked. All of the teachers’ hard work was portrayed instead as poor performance, because their schools were ranked against more affluent schools. The feedback from the teaching profession was that the tables were divisive and demoralising. Therefore I decided to launch a review and a consultation process to see if the objectives for the performance tables could be met in other ways. I was also conscious that the value of the tables had decreased because of the significant developments that have been taking place in education since they were first published in 1993.

Last October, the Department of Education issued a consultation paper containing three options to post-primary schools and to a wide range of other educational organisations. Option one was to keep the tables but do everything possible to improve them; option two was to ask schools to publish their results in their prospectuses; and option three was to ask the five education and library boards to publish the information in their annual transfer booklets. I was particularly interested in the views of parents, and for this purpose a leaflet was sent to all parents of year-eight pupils, the most recent group to have received a copy of the tables when choosing schools for their children. I also consulted with the Education Committee from an early stage, and it made a valuable contribution to the consultation process.

The consultation carried out by the Department of Education was comprehensive. There were over 1,000 responses, mostly from parents and schools. Of those, 75% were opposed to the continued publication of tables. That applied not only to the responses from teachers, it also applied to those from parents and others. Many who responded condemned the tables for being divisive and unfair. They said that they failed to offer schools the opportunity to give parents a rounded picture of the school.

Those who favoured the retention of the tables were unable to suggest how the criticisms of them could be addressed. A number of those who responded proposed the inclusion of value-added data, but no satisfactory way of doing this has been found, despite a continuing programme of research. I could not therefore see how such a proposal provided the basis for a realistic way forward.

Some commented that the tables challenged schools to drive up standards. I am not persuaded by that argument — all schools want to do their best for the pupils in their care, and they are continually striving to improve their performance. Schools are legally required to set targets for improving their performance, and that is supported by the supply of benchmarking data which enables them to compare their performances with those of schools of similar size and with similar circumstances. In addition, the Department of Education is funding a range of initiatives that has a direct impact on improving standards.

I decided to introduce option two, with immediate effect, after careful consideration of all of the responses to the consultation and the views expressed by the Education Committee. I did so for three main reasons: first, this option was favoured by the majority of respondents; secondly, it will provide up-to-date information on examination performance, and thirdly, it will give parents the most complete set of information about any school from a single source.

Schools are already required to publish information about examination performance in their prospectuses. I am concerned, however, that the information provided is consistent and accurate. With this in mind the Department of Education has started a review of the information required to ensure a standard approach. It is my intention that schools and parents will be fully consulted in this review and that all the points made in Patricia Lewsley's amendment will be considered in its course. A consultation paper will be issued to allow those with an interest in this matter, especially parents, to make their views known.

I want to give the Education Committee every opportunity to contribute to the process. The Committee has already made some suggestions on what information should be in the prospectuses, and these will form part of the review. I will look carefully at the responses I receive before coming to a decision on the way forward. Schools' requirements on the content of their prospectuses are contained in the education regulations. Those regulations will have to be amended to give effect to any proposed changes. I will take this opportunity to update the regulations in areas that are not directly related to the issue we are discussing today. These regulations will be placed before the Assembly for approval in the normal way.

Let me make it quite clear that there should still be means whereby schools can compare their performances with those of other schools and set targets for improvement. The Department of Education will continue to issue annual benchmarking information to schools, boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). This will allow schools and other bodies to compare performances in the key stage assessments for post-primary schools in public examinations and attendance rates with other schools of similar size or with similar catchments, as expressed in terms of the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals. As a basis for schools to set

proper targets, this benchmarking information is just as effective as the performance tables, if not more so. If any Member would like to see a copy of the benchmarking information, I would be happy to have it sent to him or her.

My decision to end the publication of school performance tables is the right one for schools and parents. I have been heartened by the very positive response in recent weeks right across the spectrum. The decision has been welcomed by both grammar and non-grammar sectors and by parents and teachers. We have also shown the way for others to follow. Wales is currently conducting a review of its performance tables. It is a progressive move that will send the signal to parents that we want them to have the correct information when they come to choose a school for their children and to teachers that we value their hard work and dedication on behalf of our young people.

I want to reiterate the point that the decision has been widely welcomed. I am open to correction, but I know that the Member who tabled this motion, Sammy Wilson, was, and possibly still is, a member of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT). The union wholeheartedly supported my decision. Sammy Wilson also made the point that I ignored the Executive. I did not ignore anybody. I consulted fully with the Education Committee, and as a Minister in my own right, I took a decision that was within my area of authority.

It is a bit rich and very hypocritical of Mr Wilson to launch that accusation against me, particularly as the DUP Ministers have boycotted all meetings of the Executive since it was established. That does not hold water at all. It is also important that we refute the suggestion that the only way to resolve the situation in schools that are not performing well is to publish these tables. That is nonsense, because information on the programmes which the Department of Education is involved in is available to the CCMS, the education and library boards and the Department through the work of our inspectors. Many measures are in place to ensure that there is support and encouragement for schools to help them to continue to do better.

4.45 pm

Patricia Lewsley and Danny Kennedy raised a number of important points on value-added information. It is pertinent to state that research on this topic has been carried out for some years. No satisfactory means has yet been found of including such information in a way that would recognise progression made through a broad range of qualifications and be readily understood by parents. I do not think that there are any special factors relating to our schools which would justify the commissioning of further research, but my Department is prepared to continue monitoring developments.

People may know that the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) has been examining the scope for introducing value-added measures. Late last year, DfEE published the results of a pilot project aimed at measuring added value based on the comparison between students' achievements at GCSE and GCE A Level. That pilot is continuing this year. DfEE are due to publish a consultation document in March to take views on the methodology to be used for introducing value-added measures in a series of further pilot studies, which I am told are being proposed. The consultation will cover how value-added measures might be shown between key stages 2 and 3, between key stage 2 and public examinations at age 16, and between public examinations at age 16 and age 18. It is likely to be several years before a serviceable system is introduced; however, we will continue to monitor developments closely.

I congratulate Mr Tom Hamilton on his fine maiden speech. He effectively hit the nail on the head, and it amplified adequately a point I made when, prior to Christmas, I went to a concert in the Holy Trinity Secondary School in Cookstown performed by the teachers and pupils. It was one of the most amazing concerts I have attended in my life. During the evening, someone tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I was enjoying the concert. I said that I was, and then he said "How do you put that in a performance table?" He is absolutely right.

Ian Paisley Jnr made a number of points about denying people information and made allegations of censorship. I am all for giving people the fullest possible information, and we will be able to do that adequately with the information that schools will provide about the holistic work they are involved in. As regards the review, we will have a very important role in ensuring that accurate and complete information is available to all parents. I deny absolutely the allegations of censorship that have been made.

I appreciate the supportive and realistic comments of Mr McHugh and Mrs E Bell.

Mr S Wilson: May I say at the very outset that — *[Interruption]*

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not the case that the mover of the amendment should have an opportunity for a winding-up speech?

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are absolutely right, Mr Kennedy. I call Ms Lewsley.

Ms Lewsley: I will be very brief. I was not surprised at some of the words used this afternoon, words such as "denied power", "competition", "the best", "elite" and all those things that are automatically assumed when you talk about a league table. Mr Gibson mentioned the word "praiseworthy", and I would like to know what his definition of that is, because to me he was only praising those that were the best. What about the praiseworthiness

of those who do not feature in the league tables? Mr Sammy Wilson talked about value for money and about how that needs to be output-related. How can we put a price on the value of learning?

Mr Tom Hamilton asked how one measures the fact that it has taken two or three years to stimulate and improve the ability of a child who has severe learning difficulties. Can this be quantified in monetary terms and compared to the money spent on somebody who got five As in GCSEs? Both Mr Sammy Wilson and Mr Tom Hamilton mentioned the morale of teachers who are in the league and feel that they are the elite. But what about teachers who have worked twice as hard, who deserve more praise but have been totally demoralised because of the league tables?

I ask Members to support the amendment.

Mr S Wilson: May I make it quite clear from the outset that this motion is about ensuring that whatever information is provided gives an adequate means of measuring and comparing schools. The submission by the Education Committee suggested — and a number of people supporting the motion have said this — that performance tables are not the be-all and end-all, but a guide for comparing and measuring what a school does. Many of us have considered what other information might be required to make the information adequate to enable measurement and comparison to take place. So let me make this clear from the start: this is not a defence of the performance tables as published by the Department. Nevertheless, I believe that they provided some useful information.

Ms Patricia Lewsley and the parents she spoke to believe that it is for schools to deliver the information. If she had read the Education Committee's document which she supported, it would have been clear to her that the Committee had concerns about schools doing this, first, on grounds of consistency and, secondly, with regard to gathering information for comparison. It appears that a number of Committee members do not read what goes out in their name or they would not have made some of the comments they have made today.

Ms Lewsley went on to say that schools ought to be about perpetual teaching rather than perpetual testing. That is a great line, but I must say that for a teacher it is a nonsense. Every teacher in every lesson seeks to test what he has done, whether by asking questions or giving homework by setting tests at the end of the week or examinations at the end of the year. Teaching is about testing. You must test what you have done; otherwise you do not know if you have achieved anything. There are various means of doing that testing, but it is absolute nonsense to talk about teaching outside the context of testing.

Indeed, Ms Lewsley sat through a Committee meeting today in which the Department told us that one of the ways in which it was going to measure —

Ms Lewsley: On a point of information, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was not at the Education Committee meeting today.

Mr S Wilson: I am sorry; I made a mistake. I hope that the Member does not take this the wrong way, but I was mixing her up with Eileen Bell. She can take that as a compliment. I will come to that point in a moment.

Mr Kennedy: For the benefit of the Assembly, to my recollection the only Member wearing a dress at the Education Committee earlier this afternoon was Eileen Bell.

Mr S Wilson: I am sorry; I apologise for that confusion. I will come to that point later. Stay and listen to it, Eileen.

I will move on to Mr McHugh's speech — made in his usual muddled way — in which he said that this decision should have been made by the Committee. The Committee made a three-page response, which, as far as I know, was endorsed by Sinn Féin. I will not read the response for the record again, but it indicated that information for comparison ought to be published. It proposed that information supplied by schools alone was inadequate and would cause difficulties with comparison and consistency.

Mr McHugh told of his difficulty, which he later denied, in having this information publicised because the media could follow their own agenda. He later said that he did not object to this information's being made available to everybody, so I am not sure whether he wants it publicised or not. If individual schools publish the information in their brochures, the papers will pick up on the information. On the one hand, he wants schools to supply the information, but he does not want it published. Once the information appears in a school brochure and is available to parents, it is in the public domain. This is typical of the position of Sinn Féin members with the press. On one hand they love it, and on the other they want to censor it if it does not suit them.

Mr McHugh also spoke about how information did not take things such as social disadvantage into consideration. The motion that I have moved seeks to have included information that will give an adequate means of measuring and comparing. The Education Committee's submission, which I am supporting, says exactly that. The Minister ought to make available benchmarking information as well as information on school performance, that will show all the matters that Mr McHugh spoke about. Perhaps that is why he supported it when it came from the Committee. However, now that it is on the Floor of the Assembly, he does not want to support it. It was a fairly muddled performance. Mr McHugh went on to say that he thought the abolishment of league tables was popular with parents, teachers and pupils. Option 2 was supported by only 40% of parents and pupils. A 54% majority of parents and pupils actually opposed option 2, the option that the Minister has gone for. The other figures were fairly evenly balanced: 44% to 55%, or 48% to 51%. There is no clear figure.

Eileen Bell — whom I mistook for Patricia Lewsley earlier on — said that we should get a total picture of what goes on in schools. This is odd coming from a party that recently published its own performance tables on this Assembly, and did it look —

Mrs E Bell: They were not performance tables, but attendance tables, which are completely different. We did not say anything about performance, but may I take the opportunity —

5.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is this a point of order?

Mrs E Bell: Yes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Perhaps you could —

Mrs E Bell: The Minister — I keep calling him the Minister — (*Laughter*)

Mr Deputy Speaker: Let us have some order. Mrs Bell, I am standing so would you be kind enough to sit down.

Mrs E Bell: The Minister — (*Laughter*)

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you please all settle down. This has all the air of a Gilbert and Sullivan comedy. We are dealing with a rather serious matter here. I do not think the public, the teachers — or the Minister — can be too elevated by the activities and hilarity with which this matter is being dealt. As to the question of what clothes people are wearing, we will draw a veil over that too. I ask you, Mr Wilson, to finish your winding-up speech.

Mr S Wilson: I assure Mrs Bell that, whether she seeks to elevate me artificially or not, I will not go easy on her. I will still make the points that I wish to make.

The first point is that it does seem a bit odd that this party should talk about taking into account the whole picture of what goes on in a school, when it has published inadequate information about the performance of Members here — with no value-added information, nothing about the contribution they made in Committee and nothing about the length of time they stayed on a Committee. I will leave that matter aside for the moment.

Secondly, she said that the publication of information about school performance and test results puts pressure on pupils and teachers. That was where I made a mistake earlier — we sat through an Education Committee meeting this afternoon, in which the Department outlined how it intends to measure targets. Those targets were all about the percentage of people who got GCSEs —

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are coming to the last minute of your allocated time.

Mr S Wilson: I am coming to it. The targets were also about the percentage of people who got Key Stage 2 examinations. I think — although, again, I could be wrong — that not one bleat of opposition was raised. Does

testing put pressure on schools? If so, should we not have these standards? Should the Minister be condemned for it?

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have about five seconds.

Mr S Wilson: I will not do justice to Mr Hamilton's maiden speech in just five seconds. In deference to the fact that this was the Member's maiden speech, you ought to give me a minute or two more. Mr Hamilton did make a number of very important points. He said that parents' choice of a school is not based on academic results alone, and that is quite right. I am not saying that school performance tables are meant to be the sole basis of choice for parents, because there is a plethora of other information.

Mr Hamilton also talked about the morale of teachers. I agree. I have taught people —

Mr Deputy Speaker: You must bring your remarks to a close.

Mr S Wilson: I am doing that now.

In closing, I believe that this motion ought to be supported by the House, because it seeks to ensure that the measurement of schools is presented more effectively than in the past and it deals with the deficit of information which we would have if we go ahead with the Minister's plan.

Question put That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 25; Noes 36.

AYES

Eileen Bell, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Bairbre de Brún, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Joe Hendron, Patricia Lewsley, Kieran McCarthy, Alasdair McDonnell, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Pat McNamee, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dara O'Hagan, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Fraser Agnew, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Joan Carson, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, Alan McFarland, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Jim Shannon, David Trimble, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to publish information which enables the performance of schools in Northern Ireland to be adequately measured and compared.

ASYLUM SEEKERS

5.15 pm

Mr C Murphy: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the report by the Law Centre, 'Sanctuary in a Cell', on the detention of asylum seekers and calls upon the Government to develop an alternative to detaining asylum seekers and to devise methods of expediting the application process.

I commend the Law Centre for publishing its report 'Sanctuary in a Cell'. Many of us are aware of the issue surrounding asylum seekers and the treatment they are receiving from the authorities here, in the South and in Britain. The report does an excellent job of documenting that — it highlights some of the terrible abuses those people have had to put up with and the lack of welcome that many have experienced on this island. It makes some key and sound recommendations for improvements to the system.

Central to the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement is the vindication and protection of the human rights of all. That must include the rights of asylum seekers, and not just the rights of the people native to this island. The detention in prison of asylum seekers waiting for their applications to be processed — along with convicted criminals in many cases — for up to eight months without charge is nothing less than internment. Many people in the House, not just on these Benches but on some of the other Benches, know only too well the impact that has on individuals and their families. Such detention only serves to increase the uncertainty and hardship that asylum seekers face. It does nothing to alleviate their difficulties.

People left this country, and this island, in their millions as a result of political persecution and economic deprivation — be it Presbyterians from this part of the island a couple of centuries ago, people in general as a result of the famine or those persecuted for their Republican politics in the early part of the last century. It is common for anybody born on this island to have relatives, or people they know, who have left for other countries as a result of political persecution or economic necessity. The Irish diaspora is testament to that. Only in recent years has immigration from Ireland to Britain and the United States, particularly for economic reasons, ended.

Such experiences give people on this island a special insight into the plight of immigrants and exiles. We need that insight more than ever as we see, for the first time, a reversal of emigration and people coming to this island, and this country, and creating a more diverse Irish society. I call on the Assembly to back the recommendations of the Law Centre in its report 'Sanctuary in a Cell', which include the ending of the unnecessary detention of asylum seekers, the creation of non-custodial alternatives, the designation of the British Home Office a public body

under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and full access to free legal advice and welfare and community services for asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers are entitled to have their application for asylum processed and to be accommodated while they await adjudication. They are not to blame for the current housing crisis — successive Governments are. They are also not responsible for the low levels of social welfare — successive Governments are. Finally, they are not responsible for the long delay in the processing of their applications; again successive Governments are.

In the first page of the executive summary of the report ‘Sanctuary in a Cell’, one can read that the British Government, in its 1999 White Paper on immigration and asylum, began its statement of policy principles by saying

“Any strategy for immigration control must, as well as reflecting operational requirements, satisfy fundamental policy principles. Chief among these are respect for human rights and for race equality.”

This has clearly not been the case considering the experience of asylum seekers in this part of Ireland, the rest of Ireland and in Britain generally.

Here is one of the primary recommendations of the report:

“asylum seekers should be detained in cases of necessity, in accordance with the guidelines issued by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. These permit detention in four narrow sets of circumstances only.”

A LeasCheann Comhairle, I will struggle on against the background noise. You might not be able to hear it. The report also concludes that

“in no circumstances should asylum seekers be held with convicted prisoners.”

However, that has been the case in Magilligan and in Maghaberry, where women asylum seekers have been held. No one who heard the report this morning on the radio could fail to be moved by the Algerian who was detained in Magilligan prison for almost a year. He ended up being seriously assaulted.

Mr M Murphy: On a point of order. I cannot hear the Member because of disruption from the other side of the Chamber. Will you do something about it?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Would you repeat that please?

Mr M Murphy: I cannot hear the Member because of the noise coming from across the Chamber. I would appreciate if you did something about it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I understand your problem. Will Members please keep quiet while people are speaking?

Mr C Murphy: A LeasCheann Comhairle, bad manners coming from that corner of the Chamber are nothing new. They are something that the rest of us have learned to live with over the last while.

No one could have failed to be moved by the experience related by the Algerian asylum seeker this morning. He

was detained for almost a year in Magilligan prison. He was seriously assaulted there and was severely traumatised. This was a man who had left very dangerous and difficult political circumstances to try and find some comfort in this part of the world.

One of the key recommendations is that this use of detention — which, it appears, the Government here, and certainly in other areas, has used almost as a first measure — is clearly meant to be used as the very last resort. In many cases, it is the very first measure that authorities resort to. Another key recommendation from the report is that “a dedicated accommodation facility” should be developed in Belfast. Some concern has been expressed to me recently that the Government may be considering providing a dedicated accommodation facility in Britain. Many Republicans and Nationalists — in many cases very innocent Nationalists — know the difficulty one has in trying to sustain any sort of relationship while someone is detained across the water. Visiting is difficult, as is trying to maintain family relations in such circumstances. Given the number of asylum seekers who have landed in this part of Ireland, there is merit and justification in creating a dedicated accommodation facility in Belfast — not simply removing the problem by shipping people over to Britain, therefore creating an even worse problem for those seeking asylum here. There are many other key recommendations in the report, but I will not go into them, because the Law Centre has sent a summary to most Members. I urge the Assembly to fully endorse very publicly the recommendations made in the report.

The British and Irish Governments have adopted an antagonistic approach to the issue. It is the responsibility of those in this Chamber to give leadership on the issue of asylum seekers and on the racism, which is quite often involved. The situation in the South is not good either and asylum seekers are being stigmatised there also. We need to see the development of legislation with regard to asylum seekers — preferably by the Irish and British Governments, so that we have the highest international standards in the protection and vindication of the human rights of asylum seekers across the island of Ireland.

In many instances, those who come here from other countries are not aware of the difficulties, the differences and the different jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. Indeed, a case was reported to me of an eastern European who was living in the Dundalk area with his young son. He was selling the ‘Big Issue’ magazine in order to raise some money for his son and himself, and when he moved to Newry to sell the publication, he was unaware that he had crossed a border. He was arrested and detained for a couple of months. If other immigrants in the Dundalk area had not cared for his son, he would have been taken into state care. It was hugely traumatising for both the father and the son.

There must be a common approach to asylum seekers on this island, from both the Irish and the British Governments, to ensure that there are no additional difficulties for asylum seekers if they stray from North to South or vice versa. We have found that Governments, particularly the British Government, are more anxious to deport asylum seekers rather than proceed with a proper system of assessment. A fair hearing and fair living and working conditions for those seeking asylum should be quickly put in place.

A Cheann Comhairle, a huge richness can be gained from multiculturalism. Through information, education and political leadership, fear and misunderstanding can be replaced by the embracing of the growing diversity in Irish society, North and South. I hope that the motion will secure support from across the House. As Members know, this is not a devolved responsibility. As has been the case when other reserved matters have been brought before the Assembly, this is an opportunity for us to speak on the issue with one clear voice and say that the system of dealing with asylum seekers is wrong and in need of change. It is an opportunity to urge the British Government and, indeed, the Dublin Government — who, I hope, are listening to the debate — to take note of our concerns on this issue and act accordingly. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs I Robinson: If anyone else had brought this issue before the Assembly, it would have been treated with more seriousness. However, it is either a joke or the height of hypocrisy for an organisation like Sinn Féin/IRA to move such a motion. This is an organisation with a Fascist attitude towards its fellow citizens, yet it is complaining about the way in which asylum seekers are treated in Northern Ireland.

While one may have sympathy for the plight of asylum seekers, serious questions must be asked about those who want to jump on this particular bandwagon. According to the Law Society, 400 asylum cases arise in Northern Ireland each year. However, the number of people who have become asylum seekers as a result of thuggish organisations like Sinn Féin/IRA is vast in comparison to that figure. Organisations like Sinn Féin/IRA have created at least 800 exiles or refugees. Did they raise any concerns about that? Here is an organisation that has been responsible for making hundreds of people exiled, forcing them to seek asylum across the world. Have there been any apologies for that? No. Has Sinn Féin/IRA ever admitted that it was wrong to exile its co-religionists? No. Has it issued a statement that not only condemns such behaviour, but tells those whom they have exiled and made into refugees that they can come home to their families? No.

There is no use in Sinn Féin/IRA's coming to the Assembly to complain about the plight of asylum seekers, and bleating that more should be done for them, while it has created the very same circumstances for

others itself. What about all the people whom it has turned out of their homes, forcing them to become refugees? These people are forgotten victims of our troubles. Here is an organisation that was quick to get its prisoners out of jail, yet it has said nothing about the refugees it helped create.

I might add that those who signed the Belfast Agreement said nothing about it either. According to evidence given last year, in the past, one person was being forced into exile from Northern Ireland every week. Of course, Sinn Féin/IRA denied that this was the case, but it would, would it not? Until this country is no longer a paramilitary haven, or a Mafia-run Province from which people are exiled on a whim, it will be difficult to get it right for those seeking asylum from other countries.

To engage in an exercise such as this is an attempt to create an illusion of order when there is chaos. It is an illusion created by those who want to turn attention away from themselves and their human rights abuses while claiming that asylum seekers are being denied proper treatment here in Northern Ireland. What a catalogue of human rights abuses there has been at the hands of Sinn Féin/IRA.

5.30 pm

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that something is seriously wrong given that young people have had to seek sanctuary and asylum in churches across the Province because they have been living in fear of their lives from IRA/Sinn Féin? Does she also agree that the proposal before us, from a party representing IRA/Sinn Féin, is the height of hypocrisy?

Mrs I Robinson: I thank my Colleague for his intervention. I totally concur with his views.

The hypocrisy is evident here given the way in which Northern exiles have been treated, and the treatment that asylum seekers receive, is a matter that needs urgent attention. I take this opportunity to ask that the Law Society compile a report on that issue of exiles. It was very quick to furnish us with briefing papers for today's debate.

I would usually support humane conditions for asylum seekers. However, given that that party moved this motion not out of genuine concern for those people but simply to trot out ad nauseam the usual anti-British propaganda, I cannot support it.

Mr Ford: Mrs Robinson referred on a number of occasions to hypocrisy. However, judging from her final couple of sentences, for her to suggest that she may agree with the motion but cannot support it because of who proposed it comes close to hypocrisy itself in my book.

I share some of the concerns raised about the past activities of some of those people associated with the party that has moved the motion.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: Give me a chance to start.

It is time we accepted at least that if there is a motion before the House we should consider what it says and not use it as an opportunity to slag off other people. I hope that when Mr C Murphy winds up he will give us some view of his concerns about asylum seekers who have left this island in more recent years than the Presbyterian victims of establishment oppression over two centuries ago or the famine victims of a century and a half ago.

I applaud much of what Mr C Murphy said on the report — and I do not intend to repeat it — because it tackles a wide issue concerning the entire way in which asylum seekers are treated in this society, throughout the UK and on the rest of this island. There is no doubt that we have huge problems, such as the backlog of applications, created in large part by Government policy. People know that it will take so long to get adjudication that they are keener to come to the UK than they might otherwise be. It is certainly a pull factor in some respects because of the inadequacies of Government policy.

Language, culture and past historical links mean that Britain, and to a lesser extent Ireland, has become a haven for some asylum seekers. Despite all that, we know from statistics in the last year that the UK was only tenth in the league of EU countries accepting asylum seekers. That is a small number compared with other countries.

The motion concentrates rightly on the Law Centre report 'Sanctuary in a Cell'. I also add my congratulations to the Law Centre and, in particular, to Victoria Tennant for producing an excellent report which highlights both the legal aspects and the human suffering of the way in which asylum seekers are treated. We should remember that it is not just in prison that asylum seekers have problems. In many cases, asylum seekers outside prison live in deplorable conditions. Most of them live in houses of multiple occupation (HMOs). The last statistic that I saw showed that 17% of the houses were unfit and 80% of them were fire risks.

Asylum seekers do not receive the same social security payments as any other person. They have to contend with the demeaning voucher system. Last week, J Sainsbury — a firm not unconnected with the Government — felt it necessary to object to the administration of the voucher system because of its inadequacies and the unfair way in which it treated people. Perhaps the Government believes that these difficult, awkward, tough measures will deter asylum seekers from entering the United Kingdom. However, even the conditions that people might endure in Maghaberry and Magilligan will not deter those who have come from worse conditions in such countries as Afghanistan or many of the central and east African countries. The problems and inadequacies in the treatment of asylum seekers will persist while the Government makes it almost impossible for them to legally enter the United Kingdom. However, after a period of detention, those who do manage to reach the United Kingdom will remain.

It is a back-to-front policy, which leads to intolerable conditions for people in many circumstances. Those people awaiting adjudication have multiple problems: lack of interpreters; lack of schooling for children; lack of proper healthcare; lack of an adequate diet. Those problems are largely exacerbated when one member of the family is detained in prison. It is a symptom of the institutional racism that exists in Northern Ireland and throughout these islands and it results in the demeaning treatment that many asylum seekers receive. Undoubtedly, the sort of institutional racism that is being perpetrated at Dover every day is also perpetrated on people with black skins who get off a train at Connolly Station. It is time that the Assembly stated that it finds that treatment unacceptable, whether or not it has direct control over it. That racism is manifested in unrealistic demands placed upon those seeking entry to Britain.

Over the weekend, when I was thinking about this debate, I was given a leaflet produced by one of the charities that works with refugees. The front cover reads

"In just a few minutes soldiers will break down your door. They've already killed your father and raped your daughter. Now they are coming for you. What should you take? Quick. Think. Money? Your passport? A family photo?"

They will also need warm clothes. That is the sort of decision that some people who arrive in this country face. They arrive with those difficulties. The Assembly should be objecting to those situations and making its views very clear. The Assembly should be working with other bodies across these islands to promote a diverse and pluralist society in Northern Ireland. This island already has a degree of cultural diversity with communities of first- and second-generation migration. Those people came from a wide range of backgrounds from across the world.

When it has suited the Government, economic migrants have been welcomed. Look at the Health Service. Even primary care and rural areas of Northern Ireland depend to a considerable extent on those who have come from overseas. Asylum seekers — whatever their reason for seeking asylum in these islands — should be treated with the same dignity and given the same rights as those who have come and been welcomed by the Government. I applaud the motion as it has been presented.

Mr Fee: The SDLP supports the motion. It is a timely motion, because this is the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the convention relating to the status of refugees. That convention sets the standards in this area and forms a central part of a growing body of international human rights law.

The focus and central thesis of that body of legislation — that there is an inherent dignity in every human person — must be highlighted. Europe receives a large number of refugees, but only a minority of those in the world as a whole. There are many other regions of the

world that shoulder a disproportionate responsibility. However, in a global context the Assembly's response will be carefully monitored. History will judge us harshly if we fail to respond humanely to contemporary refugee flows. The SDLP is fully committed to protecting the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers, and we recognise the special plight of those who flee persecution and make it to Northern Ireland. We welcome the Law Centre's report and commend it for its work, not only in the report, but in the whole area of human rights. We are convinced that Governments should adopt alternative mechanisms for dealing with asylum seekers and refugees.

Detention should only be used in the most exceptional circumstances. This issue has been neglected for too long. Detention in prison is a profoundly unacceptable way of addressing the needs of those fleeing persecution. Its extended use in Britain and parts of Northern Ireland breaches international standards. We must never forget that those who seek asylum are often fleeing from the most harsh treatment elsewhere. We call on the Government to rethink their current restrictive approach and to develop policy in line with the recommendations contained in the report.

We welcome the idea of an advisory body on immigration and asylum. We agree that the Home Office should be designated a public body and should be responsible for the purposes of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. We also believe that the Prison Service, like other public bodies, should have a comprehensive race-relations policy in place. We have stressed the importance of developing an anti-racism policy in all of Ireland, North and South.

The SDLP, therefore, supports the main thrust of the report and we ask the Government to respond swiftly to its recommendations. I cannot stress enough that asylum seekers are not criminals. They are exercising a universally recognised right which is contained in article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 which allows them to seek asylum and refuge in Northern Ireland. The act of seeking asylum in itself cannot be considered a crime.

In this the fiftieth anniversary year of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, we emphasise the enduring importance of that legislation and, particularly, the valuable work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). At present, the UNHCR is undertaking a process of global consultations. We hope that that will result in a far better system of international refugee protection which will afford priority to the human rights of all refugees and asylum seekers. However, any system which might be put in place must adhere to the numerous international standards which currently apply. The 1951 convention defines a refugee as someone with a well founded fear of persecution.

Members on all sides of the Assembly have seen people from our community, our neighbours and, in many cases,

family members fleeing from persecution, from fear and from threat of violence. We are the very people who should know, better than anybody else, that to be received with compassion and humanity is an absolute expectation that any refugee who comes to Northern Ireland must have. We must respond to that. There are many other international standards. The UN Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons Under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment (1988) states that all persons under any form of detention or imprisonment shall be treated in a humane manner and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.

Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights (1950) deals with the right of everyone to liberty and security of the person. Liberty is a fundamental human right which is recognised in all major human rights instruments. The detaining of asylum seekers and refugees in Britain and Northern Ireland is an absolute affront to those international standards and rights.

We must take this opportunity to encourage everyone in our society to take a responsible attitude towards this issue. In every part of civic society, in public life and in the media we are collectively responsible for the climate we create on this island. We must all work towards creating a society tolerant of others, which has no time and no place for racism and xenophobia — either outside or inside this Chamber. Under the Good Friday Agreement we are committed to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all. The new beginning so many of us want to see in Northern Ireland must include human rights and equality for all of us, including those people who come to seek refuge with us. The human rights values, which we, on all sides, are committed to, must have an impact also on the lives of refugees and asylum seekers.

5.45 pm

In the SDLP we firmly agree that the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is correct when he states that detention should normally be avoided. Detention involves extreme hardship for any individual fleeing persecution. It is therefore profoundly disturbing that any person who is fleeing persecution in another state should come to Northern Ireland only to find himself detained. Detention has been criticised, not only by the UNHCR, but by the UN Committee Against Torture and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture.

Mr Wells: Is the hon Member trying to suggest that those who come here seeking asylum should not be detained anywhere? Everyone would accept that if someone has to be detained he should be detained in humane conditions, but it seems that the Member is suggesting that all asylum seekers should simply be allowed out into the community without any form of restriction.

Mr Fee: I am suggesting that a whole range of alternative support mechanisms to ensure that these

people are treated properly and equitably needs to be put in place in this country and within this jurisdiction. Detention should be considered only as a last resort and in those circumstances. That is not my view or the SDLP's view; that is the conclusion of almost every international body dealing with human rights.

We could recommend this report simply because it highlights an issue often neglected in Northern Ireland. However, we must also recognise that it proposes a range of practical measures. It clearly addresses the problem and contains concrete solutions. It is therefore a very timely and useful contribution to this debate. The SDLP firmly believes that detention should only be used in very exceptional circumstances. Asylum seekers have the right to seek refuge in Northern Ireland and should never be treated like criminals for doing so.

Ultimately, however, I recognise that we all have to work towards eradicating the root causes of flight from persecution, fear and deprivation. Because of the way we treat each other and treat issues like this in this Chamber and around these desks, I would have thought that we might be able to establish a model for others to deal with this problem elsewhere.

Mr Hilditch: The issue before the House is a reserved matter. Nonetheless, it gives our community many concerns — not least because the motion has its origins in the Sinn Féin/IRA quarter. The issue of asylum seekers is quite emotive. We have noted, in recent times, the concerns of residents in areas of southern England, and a number of horrific tragedies which have led to many deaths. An asylum seeker is currently easy prey for those who set out deliberately to exploit the vulnerable. We can readily identify the likes of unscrupulous hauliers who, if they so desire, can charge enormous amounts of money to smuggle human beings in horrendous conditions across frontiers. Evil drug barons will seduce them into becoming couriers with the incentive of a new life. One could continue this with a catalogue of horrendous stories but, on many occasions, considering their ordeals, a prison cell with support services can be very acceptable.

The asylum seeker has become a black market commodity, something to be bought or sold, used or disregarded in the same way that we have seen so many of our young people in Northern Ireland used and abused by Sinn Féin/IRA. Indeed, the Member who brings this motion before the House knows no bounds of hypocrisy. On one hand he appears to be championing the cause of the individual who struggles against oppression, but on the other hand he belongs to an organisation that is inextricably linked to a fully armed terrorist organisation committed to imprisoning people against their will and dishing out punishment beatings, not to mention driving people out of the community to seek refuge in other countries. The mover of the motion is, unfortunately, part of a system of asylum makers.

The motion can be broken down into two issues. First, the use of Magilligan and Maghaberry as detention centres. The Northern Ireland Prison Service has acknowledged that prison facilities are not appropriate for the accommodation of asylum seekers — we can see that in the Law Centre (NI) report — and that it is unable to effectively and comprehensively meet their needs. However, we should also note that, where possible, the prison service has genuinely attempted to adapt facilities and services to the needs of those detained. I believe, looking at the present figures and circumstances, that that is the best we can expect, particularly as the current Home Office review may recommend transferring detainees to facilities in Scotland. That would further separate families and stop them from joining the communities they wish to join.

Members should be aware that, for most of the time, the asylum seeker is an unknown quantity. Let us not forget that in some cases one country's asylum seeker is another country's terrorist. We know nothing of their backgrounds or activities, or what they may have been involved with in their country of origin. It is only right that all precautionary measures and methods are adopted until such time as a satisfactory conclusion is reached in each case. Although we have an unsatisfactory situation at the moment, it is probably best kept in place in lieu of anticipated Home Office directives.

The plight of the asylum seeker is one with which I have much sympathy. All that any decent human being could wish for is to be able to live and raise a family without fear or prejudice; to be able to work and prosper and be in control of their own destiny. However, the second part of the motion calls on Government to devise and develop methods of expediting the application process. It must be acknowledged that the main cause of this problem can lie with the asylum seeker. I am surprised that the average period of detention until information is cleared is only 54 days. It has already been established that background information about most asylum seekers is lacking.

Most of them arrive in this country without official papers or identification. Even though those documents may have been in their possession when they left their country of origin, their papers somehow disappear once they are detained. Officials are then faced with the frustrating process of establishing an accurate picture, as in many cases false information is given. It may be that at a series of interviews conflicting answers are given, which makes the officers' jobs particularly awkward and the application process virtually impossible.

Members should remember that there are two sides to this difficult and sensitive issue. It is best left to the expertise of the Home Office, rather than the party/paramilitary organisation that brought forward this motion.

Mr Beggs: I have sympathy with the views expressed in the motion and by other Members. I believe that the

origin of the motion is relevant. It is hypocritical for Sinn Féin to attempt to appear concerned about human rights, while not demonstrating that on the ground.

Genuine asylum seekers must be dealt with sympathetically and looked after. There are many people trying to bring normal democratic rights to their society who are being abused by dictators or by communist or extreme right-wing regimes. Society has a responsibility to assist those people whose lives have been put in jeopardy while trying to uphold democratic principles.

On the other hand, many who claim to be asylum seekers are moving for economic reasons. Such cases must be dealt with speedily, and economic migrants should be repatriated as soon as possible, so that assistance can be concentrated on the genuine asylum seekers. Both groups must be looked after sympathetically until such times as the authorities can establish which group an individual belongs to.

It is important to note that the motion has been tabled by Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin/IRA and the loyalist paramilitaries continue to abuse human rights in Northern Ireland. Such groups cannot simply say that that is something from their past that they have left behind. Sinn Féin has yet to prove that it has left its past behind.

The abuse of human rights continues. So-called punishment beatings are an abuse of an individual's body and can wreck someone's life forever. Both sets of paramilitaries continue to impose exclusions; people are forced to leave Northern Ireland and become asylum seekers elsewhere. Such people stay away; they are afraid to go back home. Sinn Féin has yet to address that problem, although it is still happening today. That is hypocrisy.

I can speak from the experience of my town; the actions of Republicans there should be carefully examined. Republicans have imposed exclusions on Nationalists and Unionists from Larne. Republicans should examine what has happened, and I would be interested to learn whether such actions, carried out in the name of Republicanism, take place with the blessing of Sinn Féin, or are carried out by individuals outside the Sinn Féin family. Whatever the case, Republicans in Larne have forced Nationalists to move out of Northern Ireland. A few days ago, there was a shotgun attack in Larne. My information is that that attack — on a Nationalist family — was carried out by Republicans from that estate. Republicans must decide whether they have left their past behind them, ceased the exclusion of citizens from Northern Ireland and adopted purely democratic principles.

The origin of the motion is important. I am sorry to say that, on this occasion, although I have sympathy with the motion, I cannot support it.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. English rule in Ireland gave us the penal laws and the famine. Millions of people were forced to

leave the country to seek asylum. Many of those Irishmen and Irishwomen — Presbyterian and Catholic — made a new life in their new country. They also made a great contribution to the growth of those countries. Presbyterians who were forced to leave Ireland because of the penal laws became the founding fathers of the United States. People of the Irish diaspora — what the former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, called the “fifth province” — are a major influence in the political, social and economic life of many nations. Many of those arriving here now are no different; they are seeking refuge from persecution and intolerance.

6.00 pm

Iris Robinson and many others on the Unionist Benches seek to make this motion a political points-scoring exercise. We could all do that. For example, I could talk about the thousands of Catholics who were forced to move south in 1969 as a result of pogroms by the RUC and the B-Specials. Some of them, for all we know, may be sitting in this Chamber. However, we do know that the founder of the DUP, Dr Paisley, was a prime mover in the lead-up to the pogroms in 1969 and certainly all pogroms since.

This motion, a LeasCheann Chomhairle, is about justice, tolerance and human rights. Asylum seekers are fleeing from persecution in countries where the arms trade flourishes. Any refugee who tries to come to Britain or to the South of Ireland on his initiative will find humanitarianism in short supply when he arrives. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 has effectively torn up the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Convention enabled people who had a fear of persecution on the grounds of political affiliation, race, religion, nationality or membership of a social group to seek refuge in foreign countries. Today those countries do not want refugees from Third World civil wars. Certainly, New Labour in England does not want them turning up there, no matter how much torture or persecution they have experienced.

The Act is intended to deter people from seeking asylum in Britain. Since the 1971 Immigration Act, the British authorities have used the imposition of visa requirements to prevent certain people from coming to Britain, and that legislation extends here. What is more important, if, under the new powers, an asylum seeker has already been refused leave to enter, he or she will automatically become an illegal immigrant on applying for asylum in Britain. The United Nations Convention on Human Rights has complained that the trend towards visa control may be in breach of the 1951 Convention.

The policy of deterrence continues when asylum seekers arrive here. The 1971 Immigration Act brought in the power to detain illegal immigrants, and that is happening here. Our prisons are full of innocent, persecuted people who are thrown into prison by virtue of this

legislation as well as those under examination and those about to be deported.

In practice today, the Government are allowed to lock up hundreds of asylum seekers — often for many months at a time — who have committed no crime in this country. If they request bail, there is no presumption of liberty, and the Home Office requests sureties that they cannot afford. Many of these refugees do not understand why they are in prison or detention centres, and there is no limit to their detention.

The Government plan to extend their detention facilities. New legislation introduced a new procedure for those in prison. Detainees lose the right to go to court for a bail hearing. Instead, they are given a video link to a magistrate. There is no legal aid for representation, which means that detainees, who often speak no English, or a very poor level of the language, have to defend themselves.

The Human Rights Act 1998, a *LeasCheann Chomhairle*, which is supposed to prevent the deprivation of liberty, does not cover asylum seekers who have sought unauthorised entry, in other words, those without leave to enter without a passport.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the course of the rant we have just heard, the Member made a number of illegal allegations about another Member, whom she named. If she were to repeat those claims outside the House, she would find herself in court. I hope that the normal rule will apply and that the Member who was attacked will be able to make a personal statement when he is next in the Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, my view is that the Member must not do that. It is not parliamentary, right or proper and I hope that she will not do so again.

Mrs Nelis: A *LeasCheann Chomhairle*, the trend for making allegations in the House has been set by the Member who has just spoken.

There is no mechanism to verify what an asylum seeker has said to a immigration officer, and there is little provision in the current procedures to account for trauma; for the long and difficult journeys; or for simple errors in recounting how asylum seekers enter this country. The current legislation is racist. Asylum seekers are the persecuted diaspora victims of the 21st century arms race. They are entitled to be treated as human beings in need of our care and protection. They do not deserve to be treated as criminals. If allowed, they can make a valuable contribution to the pluralist and diverse society that we seek to put in place.

Dr Birnie: The Member represents Sinn Féin, which claims to be an all-Ireland party. Will she not agree that many of the criticisms made of the United Kingdom law with respect to asylum seekers, which may or may not be valid, have been made equally forcibly about the situation south of the border in the Irish Republic?

Mrs Nelis: If Dr Birnie had been listening, he would know that I said that at the beginning of my speech and that the proponent of the motion also said the same thing. Yes, we deplore the legislation in the South of Ireland every bit as much as we deplore it in Great Britain.

Mr Wells: Writ large over this motion is the word “hypocrisy”. The spokesman for the IRA who moved the motion no doubt has in his office a list of the thousands of innocent people in this Province, both Catholic and Protestant, who have been banished to Britain, to Europe and to north America by his organisation. If he had stood up and said that his organisation was going to issue an amnesty to those people, he could start to lecture us about human rights. How many thousands of people are there whose only way to hear of this debate is through the World Service on the radio or the Internet, because they can never return to Northern Ireland? Why can they never return to Northern Ireland? The reason is that his thugs will ensure that either their features are rearranged or they are murdered for returning.

What about the situation in Londonderry where one of his friends lured three of these people back who were promptly taken out to flats in the Bogside and had bullets put in their heads. That is how this organisation deals with asylum seekers. They are invited back and then murdered.

Frankly this motion cannot receive any support because of its proponent. It is hypocrisy, it is wrong and it is a disgrace.

Let us now look at the terms of the motion. Even if someone reasonable proposed the motion, like my Friend Mr Hay here, I still could not support it. We must ask why Home Office authorities have to detain immigrants and asylum seekers in the first place. Many decent people are genuinely seeking asylum from persecution. We have heard the sad tales from places like Kosovo and we have heard of the disgraceful persecution of Christians in Sudan and of ethnic minorities in places like India. We accept that that goes on. Those people are deserving cases who should receive asylum in western Europe. That we accept.

Unfortunately they are swamped by thousands if not millions of economic migrants who are moving from one part of the world to the other in order to get a better lifestyle. Statistics show that when the Home Office gets to the bottom of the various cases and checks their papers, they find that the main reason for the move is economic.

Two recent examples have emerged. There is a huge increase in the number of Chinese citizens applying to do degrees at universities, particularly in southern England, and especially in London. It has been discovered that in almost every case, the Chinese student obtains the necessary qualifications by falsehood in China, applies to a university in England, and then promptly drops out and disappears into the community, never to be seen

again. In a recent BBC documentary it has been shown that many so-called immigrants seeking asylum use false addresses in Bosnia or other former Yugoslavian countries in order to get—[*Interruption*]. Mr Deputy Speaker, someone seems to be interrupting.

They use false addresses in the former Yugoslavian republics in order to try and hoodwink the British authorities into believing that they come from a country where there is genuine persecution, when they did not live there in the first place. They then get into the United Kingdom and disappear.

If every immigrant who came into this country agreed to stay in a certain place, where his movements could be traced and where the Home Office authorities could contact him, there would be no need for detention. However, the reality is that a huge proportion of those who are not checked up on simply disappear into immigrant communities throughout the United Kingdom. It is estimated that there are over 1 million illegal immigrants in the United Kingdom. That has led to a traffic in humanity, which is disgraceful and which we should not be encouraging.

The flow of immigrants to Northern Ireland is thankfully smaller than to any other part of the United Kingdom—I believe we dealt with 71 cases last year. It is unfortunately an essential element of the process that those people are detained in secure accommodation until their cases are dealt with. I accept that Magilligan, Maghaberry or some other prison, are not the best places to keep someone seeking asylum. We need an alternative, which has to be secure and humane. The crucial point is that the person must remain there until his case is assessed, or until a stage is reached when the Home Office can decide that that person will not simply drift away.

I have several more questions. If all of these people are genuine migrants, why do they pass through eight, nine or 10 democratic countries before they come to the United Kingdom? Why, for instance, does a Romanian leaving his country, not emigrate to Austria, Germany, Holland or France? There are any number of democratic countries, which are alternatives to Northern Ireland, or the United Kingdom in general. I have to suggest that one of the reasons why they pass through all those countries and come to the United Kingdom is that it is perceived that the range of social security benefits is better in the United Kingdom than elsewhere.

It indicates to me that a lot of this is simply about people wanting to better themselves economically. There is nothing wrong with wanting to do that, but I do not believe that we, as United Kingdom taxpayers, should pick up the bill for it.

The United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, is an overcrowded country. We have 56 million inhabitants. Frankly, we have enough difficulties trying to look after the socially deprived, the unemployed and the handicapped

in our own community without a wave of economic immigrants coming from other parts of the world.

I wish to reiterate that I am not against the genuine, persecuted individual getting into Northern Ireland. Remember the contribution that the Huguenots have made to this society. We still see their contribution throughout areas like the Lagan Valley. They have made an important contribution. The Jewish community, which unfortunately is now dwindling in Northern Ireland, made a very significant contribution to the financial well-being of the Province. However, they were genuine, persecuted minorities. What we are facing at the moment, I am afraid, is not the same. Genuine people are welcome in the Province, but Northern Ireland simply cannot cope with a wave of economic migrants.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am disappointed, but not surprised, at the response to the motion from some of the people on the opposite Benches. I had anticipated that, but I had hoped against hope, as I said in my own address. I chose not to make any political points against political parties. I see them running out now before we answer them—scurrying away from the truth and their racist rants, which were an embarrassment.

Thank God the Public Galleries were empty, especially when Mr Wells was speaking. Some of his xenophobic comments were an embarrassment to the House. Then these Members scurry out rather than listen to what we have to say.

6.15 pm

I am sorry that that was the tone of the debate. The merits or demerits of the report published by the Law Centre, that has no political axe to grind, should have been debated. The fact that Sinn Féin proposed it rather than anyone else is merely an accident. Any Member of the House could have proposed it, and I dare say every Member would have supported it as well.

I will go through some of the responses. We had much of the same from Members from the DUP, which is sadly predictable. Mrs Nelis responded well to their points about hypocrisy. This is the party of Ulster Resistance, the party of Harryville intimidation, the party of Drumcree intimidation. It is also a homophobic party, which not only discriminates against Catholics and people of other ethnic origins but also against people on the grounds of their sexual orientation. To take a lecture in human rights from people like that is a bit rich.

As David Ford and Roy Beggs said, if the DUP wants a debate on how communities deal with criminals in the absence of an acceptable policing service, it should put down a motion and we will gladly debate it. In essence, that is not what we are dealing with here. Another amusing thing is that we sit on Committees with these people—everyone knows this, the media know it and I

dare say the electorate knows it, particularly the Unionist electorate. We sit on Assembly Committees, we make proposals and suggestions and we have no problem having them accepted by most parties. Suddenly the cameras appear, and people put on their super-Unionist outfits and cannot support anything that comes from Sinn Féin. That hypocrisy stands up and is seen and the Unionist electorate is not fooled by some of the stances taken here today.

Mrs Robinson did not care to listen when I was speaking earlier, and she does not care to listen now either. So what is new? She accused me of an anti-British rant. Mrs Nelis responded quite clearly to Dr Birnie. We are as critical of the Irish Government in their response to this issue as we are of the British Government. It is certainly not a rant against the British Government.

I welcome Mr Ford's support for the motion. I agree with his concerns about the plight of asylum seekers who are not in detention and the difficulties they face. He made the point about people being exiled from this part of the world. My party and I have said that exiling people is not a satisfactory response to criminal behaviour. Other party members and I have encouraged people to adopt non-violent, community-based responses to crime through restorative justice projects. We have spent months upon months, as other parties in the House have done, trying to ensure the establishment of a proper policing service that we can all support. That would remove the need for communities to deal with criminals in their midst.

I also thank John Fee for his support for the motion. I share the concerns he expressed on behalf of his party about the global response to refugees. I welcome his own and his party's support for recommendations in the report. I appreciate the point he made about people being forced into exile. As he spoke, I was reminded of a document that hangs in my office, signed by Dawson Bates, one of the first Ministers here. It is a document that excluded my grandfather from the Six Counties of Northern Ireland, including Belfast. He was a resident of County Armagh, but was forced into exile in the Twenty-six Counties. He was jailed on his return to the Six Counties, as he tried to come home to his family. I know all about exile, as do plenty of people in my party. I hang the document in my office to remind me of the humanitarian nature of previous Administrations here.

I also appreciate Mr Fee's point about the creation of a responsible attitude, and I make the point again about Mr Wells's contribution and some media contributions on the issue of asylum seekers. That sort of racist rant stirs up a feeling of "We cannot afford these people; they do not belong to the island". That is interesting coming from the people it does. If people had adopted that attitude, a few generations back this island would be a more sparsely inhabited place than it is now, especially this part of it. We welcome the benefits that economic refugees brought centuries ago, but suddenly the ports

are sealed, the airports are closed and the border is sealed, and nobody is coming in to benefit from the lifestyle we have here.

Mr Hilditch appears to adopt a confused attitude in that he describes asylum seekers as an unknown quantity; they could well be terrorists and could be masquerading here deliberately misleading those trying to deal with their applications for asylum. On the other hand, he professes to have great sympathy with asylum seekers. It is a somewhat confused response.

Mr Beggs made the point about economic immigrants. People who live on this island have an extremely short memory as far as economic immigrants are concerned. He calls for them to be "sympathetically repatriated", in his humanitarian way. If all the economic immigrants who left this island had been sympathetically repatriated — and I am sure they included people from his constituency — there would probably not be any room left on the island for himself.

I should not have been surprised about it, but I was astounded that he chose the debate to launch attacks on Republicans and on organised Republican activity in the Larne area. I have yet to hear him speak on television about the nightly attacks on Catholics in the Larne constituency. Perhaps I have missed it. The people of that area may well not hear his contribution.

Ms de Brún: Will the Member agree that when Mr Beggs took the chance to talk about Larne today he did not take the opportunity to talk about those nightly attacks; to acknowledge that it is Catholics and Nationalists who are bearing the brunt of those attacks? He did not chose to take the opportunity he had today — speaking as the Member of that constituency — to appeal to all constituents in the area, Protestants, Catholics, Unionists and Nationalists to work together. He did not ask people from his own constituency and from his own party to come out and publicly support and defend their Catholic neighbours.

Mr C Murphy: I agree totally.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Are you winding up now?

Mr C Murphy: I am — you will be pleased to hear.

I agree with what the Member has said.

Mr Davis: It would be fair to say that Mr Beggs referred to the Loyalist paramilitaries in his speech. I assumed he was condemning those paramilitaries for attacks on Catholics.

Mr C Murphy: I give the Member's assumption the benefit of the doubt.

Referring to his constituency, Mr Beggs appeared to grasp one incident, which he imagined had some relevance to Republicanism, and completely ignore the huge issue that has been keeping Larne to the forefront of the media

in the last months — attacks on Catholics. Nevertheless, I am sure Mr Beggs can answer for himself at some stage.

I am disappointed. The opposition, particularly from the DUP, masks their declared opposition to the fact that the motion was proposed by me. Some of their contributions mask the fact that they are actually opposed to the Law Centre report and its recommendations. Some of the racist and xenophobic stuff that came from them was an embarrassment to the Chamber, but probably not to themselves — but again, they are quite hard to embarrass.

Some Unionist Members may unite to vote against the motion. If they do, they may feel they have scored another success over Sinn Féin and the Republican movement. However, the Assembly needs to send a clear message to the British and Irish Governments that asylum seekers here and in Great Britain are being handled very badly. It is a disgrace, given the fact that we are a nation that has sought asylum in so many other countries. It should be changed.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr C Murphy: I was trying to conclude, but I will give way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You can give way if you want.

Mr C Murphy: If the Member had not left the Chamber when I started to speak and only returned when his name was mentioned, he might have had an opportunity earlier.

If the motion is not adopted, the real losers will not be Sinn Féin or anyone who supported the motion. The real losers will be the asylum seekers themselves.

Question put and agreed.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the report by the Law Centre, 'Sanctuary in a Cell', on the detention of asylum seekers and calls upon the Government to develop an alternative to detaining asylum seekers and to devise methods of expediting the application process.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Jane Morrice] in the Chair)

Motion made:

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

ACUTE HOSPITAL SERVICES (STRABANE AND OMAGH)

Mr Byrne: Of all the devolved Administration's Departments, it is arguable that decisions taken by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have the most important effect upon the daily lives of people in Northern Ireland. Among other factors, the quality of health care provision has a direct impact on life expectancy.

According to the draft Programme for Government, our life expectancy is lower than in other developed countries. We have higher numbers of patients on waiting lists for 12 months or longer. In the North, ill health is closely linked to social disadvantage, and long-term sickness rates are three times greater in some areas than in others. Therefore decisions taken by the Executive Committee in relation to health care will have far reaching implications for everyone in this region.

The recommendations of the independent review group, which is chaired by Dr Maurice Hayes, on the provision of acute hospital services is keenly awaited by everyone in the North. In particular, the publication of the review group's report is awaited with much anticipation in my constituency of West Tyrone due to the gradual but consistent reduction in the level of acute services over a number of years. This has heightened the real sense of social exclusion and marginalisation felt by the population in this region.

The region is served by the Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust which encompasses three district council areas — Omagh, Fermanagh and approximately one third of Strabane. Overall, the trust delivers health and social care to around 115,000 people spread across 1,000 sq miles of some of the most remote and marginal areas of Northern Ireland.

As I am a Member for West Tyrone, I will concentrate primarily on the West Tyrone area of the trust's responsibilities. That includes all of Omagh District Council and the Plumbridge, Newtownstewart and Castlederg areas of Strabane District Council. Of course, it is impossible to discuss this part of the region in isolation because the outcome of the acute services review will have consequences for the entire south-west.

Over the past 20 years, the people of West Tyrone have witnessed a gradual deterioration in the provision of acute services. This can be traced back to 1979 when the Department of Health and Social Services and the Western Health and Social Services Board recommended that acute services should be concentrated in Altnagelvin Hospital and Enniskillen. However, Omagh District Council successfully made a case which justified a need for three acute hospitals in the area, including the Tyrone County Hospital.

Since 1979, there has been some modest investment in the Tyrone County Hospital — for example, in 1987 a satellite renal dialysis unit was located in Omagh because of its central location. However, the maternity unit at the Tyrone County Hospital was closed down in 1994, and that was followed by the centralisation of neo-natal and paediatric services in the Erne Hospital.

Since then, there has been an ongoing leakage of services from the south-west, and from Tyrone County Hospital in particular. Overall, if one examines both inpatient and outpatient data between 1995 and 2000, there has been a continuous decline in the level of acute services' provision. In 1995-96, Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust had an average of 257 acute beds, yet the number of beds had decreased by 24 to 233 from 1999 to 2000. It is worth noting that in the same period, the number of acute inpatient day cases increased from almost 3,500 to almost 5,000 — a rise of over 500.

Statistics also show a similar decline in outpatient services. The number of clinic sessions held in Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust hospitals has decreased from around 4,000 in 1995-96, to under 2,500 in 1999-2000. There has also been a noticeable decline in GP written referrals to Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust hospitals from 18,445 in 1995/96, to 14,057.

If one examines similar statistics in relation to Altnagelvin Hospitals, Health and Social Services Trust, there is a significant rise in outpatient activity.

6.30 pm

This debate is not a case of the Tyrone County Hospital verses the Erne Hospital, or Sperrin Lakeland Trust verses Altnagelvin. The people I represent do not want to see one hospital close down or one trust receive preferential treatment to the detriment of patients in another trust or constituency. Rather, this is an issue that goes to the core of the Health Minister's commitment to social inclusion in the provision of acute services in the entire south-west region on a fair and equitable basis that matches the needs of patients, as opposed to discriminating against patients because of where they live.

Several models of acute service delivery for the region have been put forward in recent years. A report funded by Sperrin Lakeland Trust and Omagh, Fermanagh and Strabane District Councils, and published in 1997, proposed that the Tyrone County Hospital and the Erne Hospital could be developed as one hospital on two sites. However, that scenario received little support and the rapid deterioration of acute services in the west generally, and in the Tyrone County Hospital specifically, have made that option unworkable. A new area category hospital to serve the entire south-west region is now the best possible option.

The Government's 1997 report 'Putting it Right' identified the need for patients to receive hospital treatment from a local hospital and recommended that hospital services be organised so as to ensure that all patients, no matter where they live, receive an equally high quality of health care. The report identified the need for a number of local hospitals that would provide general acute services to the local population. These hospitals would be located in Coleraine, the Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry and in the southern part of the Western Health and Social Services Board area.

Two years ago the Western Health and Social Services Board brought the new hospital scenario one stage further and conducted a review of acute services that examined six models of delivery. The aim of the review was to find, through extensive public consultation, the model that would best meet the public's aspiration for accessibility to services, including an emergency hospital in the south-west of Northern Ireland. The Western Health and Social Services Board concluded in the subsequent report, 'The Way Forward', that acute services in the western area should be provided through a pattern of services based at Altnagelvin Hospital and a new hospital located in the south-west. Omagh District Council's response to the review also endorsed the need for a new area hospital, but in the meantime there should be strong interim arrangements to maintain the existing level of services.

Since the publication of the Western Health and Social Services Board's report, there has been a crisis of confidence among the population in the south-west because the Minister of Health and her Department appear to be avoiding the need to make a decision. The Minister and her Department have increased the level of anxiety and uncertainty around this issue. Many people in west Tyrone believe that the Department was dithering and delaying taking any decisions by commissioning, in July last year, a further review of acute services.

However, now that the independent review group will soon be publishing its report, it is important that we do our utmost to ensure that the people of the south-west receive the best possible standard of acute services provision. It is imperative that the review group should endorse the Western Health and Social Services Board's proposal for a new hospital in the south-west and that the Minister support its recommendations.

The people of West Tyrone must have access to the key acute services and rapid access to high-level specialist care. Any proposal for a new hospital must make the best available use of clinical practice and resources and should be located in an area that has the necessary infrastructure and public services.

As regards the need for joined-up Government, the Minister's decision must also be made with reference to other Government policies and the requirements of the

equality legislation, which states that the Department must ensure that effective health and social care services are available to everyone in Northern Ireland. The Minister must also refer to the requirements laid down by New TSN, which requires that resources be targeted to the areas most in need.

The Omagh and Strabane district council areas have been designated as suffering from high levels of social deprivation and long-term unemployment. The Robson index highlights Strabane as the most deprived district in Northern Ireland.

When making her decisions on other Government policies, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must address the issues of spatial equity and sustainable development. The Regional Development Department's strategic framework document, 'Shaping our Future', designates Omagh as a major service centre. It identifies Omagh as a town with strong potential for growth, and well equipped to develop as the major service centre for the west of the region.

Omagh has a population of 25,000, and outside of Derry it is the largest urban centre in the north-west of Ireland. The population of the entire district, which is now almost 48,000, has grown by 20% in the last 30 years and the population in the rural hinterland is approaching 150,000. Therefore any recommendation made by the review and any decision taken by the Minister should capitalise on the existing infrastructure, must be accessible and should make best use of the existing logistical, administrative and business support services in the region.

The people of the south-west need certainty on this crucial issue from the Health Minister and her Department. They want the Minister to have the courage to make a speedy decision and end the endless series of reviews. She should pay a visit to the Tyrone County Hospital and the Erne Hospital and show her solidarity and commitment to patients and medical staff in the south-west region.

The Minister, with the rest of the Executive Committee, signed up to the draft Programme for Government. It included a commitment to make a difference for the better to the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. When the independent review group publishes its report at the end of the month, the Minister's final decision will be a key test of her own and her Department's resolve to fulfil the terms of her pledge of office, the requirements of the equality legislation and the commitments given in the draft Programme for Government to reduce health inequalities in the marginal and rural parts of Northern Ireland.

Mr Gibson: I support the motion. Mr Byrne dealt historically with the majority of the background relating to the local hospitals. He rightly said that Tyrone County Hospital lost its maternity services in 1994. Unfortunately

for Erne Hospital, the predictions that were made on the numbers that would use its maternity services did not develop as anticipated. As a result, Erne Hospital is limping along — and I used that expression yesterday when asking a question of the Minister.

Tyrone County Hospital is limping along. Services are leaking away on a casual ad hoc basis. That is despite the Minister's assurances yesterday — which I was delighted to hear — that she wanted to ensure that services were maintained in the interim. However, that has not been the case.

On the last occasion that I visited my GP, he was in a temper because he had referred one of his patients to a medical facility without knowing that it had been taken from the hospital. The patient had arrived at the Tyrone County Hospital only to discover that a decision had been made to take the facility from it. Nobody knew whether the facility would be available at Erne Hospital, Altnagelvin Hospital or Craigavon Area Hospital. The patient was left in limbo until, after a series of telephone calls, somebody discovered where the service was available.

In the east of the county, South Tyrone Hospital has been virtually closed down.

At present Counties Tyrone and Fermanagh have a population of 200,000, who are more or less dependent upon the Tyrone County Hospital and the Erne Hospital. However, the vast majority of the services are dripping away from those hospitals. The staff feel demoralised, people have held street rallies, but they feel as though no one is listening. We made a presentation to Dr Hayes and his review group, and we were not just talking locally or parochially. We were making a point about good, genuine acute services for the whole south-west of the Province. It would take that amount of people to make one sustainable and viable unit. We are quite reasonable about that because we had a similar arrangement whereby the psychiatric facilities for both counties were based in one hospital. Therefore there is a historical precedent for the two counties to join and operate in unison.

Representatives from both counties made a presentation to the Department of the Environment for the 'Shaping Our Future' document. It is not new for co-operation and determination to come from both counties.

People made their case to George Howarth just before the Assembly recommenced last May. We thought then that he was ready to issue a determination, and we were rather surprised when the new Minister announced another review. However, we are quite content to wait because we hope that it will only be another year. We also hope that there will be a favourable consideration at last that will give encouragement and heart to the 200,000 people who now expect, in the age of equality, not only transparency and justice but also equality of opportunity and availability of a good Health Service.

People are prepared to make the 140-mile return journey from Omagh to Belfast to receive very specialist care. However, we do not see why a new provision in the south-west of the Province should not equally have a number of specialities. Not only do we have the facilities for a good acute service, but we also have the location and the population to support it.

This is an opportunity to make a hospital available in the south-west of the Province, which is attractive because it can provide quality and attract consultants of calibre. Tyrone County Hospital has a number of specialities. Its ENT section is known nationally and internationally. Specialities in kidney dialysis — chosen because of the need to centralise that service in the west of the Province — are reckoned to be equal to anything in the rest of the world.

Therefore we are talking about people who have already acquired a high level of expertise. We can bring those people together with other experts in the various fields of medicine. The south-west has every good reason to expect a favourable outcome. After Easter I hope that the Minister will be able to encourage us with a favourable announcement.

6.45 pm

Mr P Doherty: A LeasCheann Comhairle, there should be a co-ordinated strategic approach to the planning and delivery of acute services in West Tyrone. That would allow for the development of structural health care plans, accessible services and centres of excellence. Greater co-operation would also make better use of resources, build clinical expertise and deliver accessible services for patients and families.

Another issue is that many of the inequalities in the provision of acute care are a direct result of the fragmentation of planning and the parochial nature of boards. With the four area boards limited to overseeing the planning and delivery of acute services for their respective areas, there can be no overall strategic approach. Responsibility for planning and funding must be removed from the present board structures and given to a regional acute planning service established within the Department. The service would then have the widest possible remit to develop, in co-operation with other bodies, centres of excellence and co-ordinated regional services.

The Department must also develop regional patterns in the siting of acute care. Such an approach could be expected to provide major benefits that would obviate duplication of services and produce savings through the sharing of resources. That would also enable cross-border co-operation on high technology, leading to the distribution of complex and expensive procedures to designated centres of excellence throughout the island, as well as a greater responsiveness to the more isolated communities, such as West Tyrone.

Levels of planning should be clear, transparent and inclusive, and must uphold both the letter and ethos of equality legislation. I believe that in the planning, funding and siting of acute care in West Tyrone, the Department should establish a body comprising service users or their representatives, trade unions and the full range of health care professionals. The cross-border approach could be developed under the aegis of North/South co-operation, reporting to and accountable to the North/South Ministerial Council. Alternatively, the body could report to the respective Ministers.

The concept of accountability should not be solely applied to the central planning, funding and siting of acute care facilities. There should be greater accountability in the management of local hospitals and greater openness and transparency in hospital management. Trade unions and service users should be included in the management of hospital care. Unelected and unaccountable bodies are not the way forward. The Assembly and its associated Committees could provide oversight and help to assure the accountability of the Department. The structure of all aspects of acute care must be less bureaucratic and more cost-effective.

It must be accepted that an inaccessible service is not a quality service. Just as targets for waiting lists for in-patients and waiting times at accident and emergency units are used to evaluate the quality of service, it is incumbent to develop and implement such a target for accessibility. The Health Department must take account of the realities facing people in rural areas who need access to acute services. Their difficulties are of a cross-cutting nature, relating to time and distance — poor road infrastructure, lack of car ownership and, thus, dependency on public transport, which does not always exist or operate at the most appropriate time.

There are difficulties in achieving a balance between the accessibility of services and the provision of modern, high quality standards of care. However, the quality of care one receives cannot depend on where one lives, so Omagh must have acute hospital services.

The increase in waiting lists and the decrease in quality care stem from the reduction of the number of beds, the closure of hospitals and increased seasonal pressures. The current configuration of services within the hospital settings must be questioned. If care can be delivered locally, it should be. I accept the need to concentrate some services so that specialist teams have access to a wide range of clinical and technical backup. However, I see no reason for the majority of regional services being sited in Greater Belfast. Such a high concentration inside this limited area does not reflect an equitable and accessible hospital service.

In siting acute service care, one needs to take cognisance of the interface between the acute-care sector and community-based services. Some of the consequences of the

proliferation of trusts and the preserved incentives of the internal market are particularly evident in this area.

The abolition of both the internal market and unaccountable, unrepresentative quangos is a prerequisite to the establishment of an accessible and equal health service. There should be an effective integration of service and a smooth transition between health sectors reflecting patients' needs and the effective use of resources.

The review group must address the endemic underfunding of the Health Service and the piecemeal planning which wastes resources and duplicates management. A LeasCheann Chomhairle, recent cases have shown that quotas are not a true measure of quality. They promote the attitude that the attainment of specific targets is more important than the treatment of patients. They have been the driving factors behind acute-service reviews and the withdrawal of acute services from some areas. Some services have been removed from hospitals, not because there is no need for them, but because there was not the requisite number of patients to meet arbitrary quotas set by the Royal Colleges.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have received no notice that any other Members wish to speak.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Caithfidh mé Joe Byrne a thréaslú as an tsaincheist thábhachtach seo a thógáil le díospóireacht inniu.

Is maith a thuigim tábhacht ospidéal áitiúil leis na comhphobail a bhfreastalaíonn siad orthu. Ar na mórdhúshláin a bhéas fúinn sna blianta seo chugainn beidh le tógáil ar a dtraidisiún de sheirbhís áitiúil le linn dúinn a chinntiú go dtig le hothair teacht a bheith acu ar thogha na míochaine nua-aimseartha.

Aithníonn an Teachta cé chomh tábhachtach agus atá mo shainchúram aireachta agus tábhacht obair na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta. Aithníonn sé chomh maith go bhfuil tionchar an-tábhachtach ag cinntí de chuid an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, agus fáiltíim roimhe sin.

Tá eolas agam ar threolaíocht an cheantair agus tuigim an ról lárnach atá ag na hospidéal san Ómaigh agus in Inis Ceithleann i saol agus i leas a gcomhphobal féin. Ní sainiúil iad na deacrachtaí atá ag ospidéal bheaga atá ag iarraidh réimse leathan géarsheirbhísí a choinneáil. Leoga, tá deacrachtaí ag ár n-ospidéal bheaga foireann a earcú agus a choinneáil, agus ag an am chéanna riar ar éilimh a bheith ag síorfheabhsú chaighdeán seirbhísí. Tá dúshlán fúinn teacht ar réiteach idir an feabhas a thóraíocht agus ionrochtaineacht ár seirbhísí a choinneáil, go háirithe dár ndaonraí tuaithe.

Caithfidh ár seirbhísí tógáil ar fhorbairtí sa mhíochaine, i dteicneolaíocht nua agus i ndrugáí nua má tá siad le riar ar riachtanais sláinte ár ndaonra sa todhchaí. Is minic a thig brú ar sheirbhísí a lárú in éineacht leis na forbairtí seo, mar shampla i gcóireáil ailse.

Mar sin féin, caithfimid na deiseanna a aithint atá ag teacht as na teicneolaíochtaí nua agus as an chleachtas chliniciúil nua-aimseartha le cúram agus le cóireáil a dhílárú agus a locáil trí úsáid teilemhíochaine agus tríd an líonrú chliniciúil nua-aimseartha. Féadann siad seo brí úr a chur faoi sheirbhísí sna hospidéal bheaga a bheadh scoite ina n-easpa. Tuigim a láidreacht atá an tacaíocht do na hospidéal áitiúla seo agus d'ospidéal eile; tacaíocht a chuir Teachtaí i bhfriotail go solabhartha le linn na díospóireachta. Is cúram domh bhur gcúraim faoi bhrúnna ar ospidéal áitiúla agus tuigim bhur n-eagla go bhfuil siad faoi chrann smola ag easpa treorach soiléire faoi sholáthar seirbhísí sa todhchaí.

Ba é seo an fáth ar chuir mé an t-aithbhreithniú ar sheirbhísí géarospidéal ar bun faoi chathaoirleacht an Dr Maurice Hayes. Tá a fhios agam gur thionóil sé agus a fhoireann cruinnithe sna comhphobail a dtacaíonn ár n-ospidéal bheaga leo.

I congratulate Mr Byrne on raising this important issue. I appreciate the importance of local hospitals to the communities that they serve. One of the real challenges facing us in the coming years is to build on the tradition of local service, while ensuring that patients have access to the best that modern medicine has to offer. I welcome the Member's acknowledgement of the vital importance of my portfolio and of health and social services. As he acknowledged, it is not merely a question for myself, but of the importance that the Executive places on the Health Service in its decisions. I know the local geography and appreciate the central roles that the hospitals in Omagh and Enniskillen play in the life and well-being of their respective communities. I share many of the concerns that have been expressed and agree that local communities must play a part in the development of services in their area.

The difficulties that small hospitals face in seeking to maintain a broad band of acute services are not unique to these hospitals, and Members have recognised that. All our smaller hospitals are confronted by the dilemma of how to recruit and retain staff and how to meet the demand for continuous improvement of standards. The challenge is to balance the necessary pursuit of excellence with accessibility, especially for rural communities. Our services must build on developments in medicine, technology and drugs if they are to meet the needs of our population. Such developments frequently exert pressure for the centralisation of services, as in the case of cancer treatment. However, we must also be conscious of the opportunities to decentralise and localise care offered by new technologies, such as tele-medicine, and modern clinical networking. Such developments breathe fresh vigour into otherwise isolated services at smaller hospitals.

I appreciate the strength of support for these and other local hospitals; it has been eloquently expressed by Members today. I share the concerns about pressures on local hospitals and the fears that they have been

blighted by a lack of clear direction in respect of future service provision. That is why I set up the review of acute hospital services under the chairmanship of Dr Maurice Hayes. Dr Hayes and his team have held meetings in the communities served by our smaller hospitals and have had fruitful discussions with many community groups and individuals about the future of acute services and how they might develop.

I await the report with great anticipation. Its publication will furnish us with an opportunity to debate afresh how our services must develop, but, while the review is ongoing, it would be inappropriate for me to make advance comment on the way forward. I expect to receive the report in the spring and intend to consult fully on it, before coming to any conclusions. In the meantime, I expect trusts to maintain their current acute services in our smaller hospitals, unless that would seriously compromise patient care and treatment.

7.00 pm

At any point where services are not to be maintained, any transfer of services must be temporary. I am not clear about the reference made by Oliver Gibson to a specific case, but if he wishes to write to me I will be very happy to take the matter up with him.

On the other points raised by Members, I share their desire to ensure the availability of a good acute Health Service. That is what I expect to come out of the acute hospital review. I believe that it is important to build on the strengths of our current services and staff. I am absolutely committed to developing open and transparent Health Service arrangements that actively involve, and listen to, local communities.

Mr Byrne in his opening comments referred to 'Putting it Right'. That paper reflected the views of Ministers at that time in relation to the pattern of services. It does not necessarily reflect my views, and I have said before that I want to take a completely fresh look at these issues. Had it not been for the four-month suspension, I would now have been in post for a year. In that period I have taken on board the questions that need to be tackled. I have very proactively taken forward some of the concerns mentioned by Mr Byrne in his opening speech. These include the question of the health of our population and the need for a public health strategy that goes wider than the Health Service, the question of the future pattern and development of primary care services, and the very critical question of acute hospital services.

Reference was made to North/South linkages, and Pat Doherty referred to the need for an overall strategic approach. I agree totally that we need to develop a regional view of acute services. There are no boundaries in my thinking, and no boundaries have been set in the terms of reference of the acute hospitals review. We need to look at ourselves in this broader context and to build arrangements in the interest of all our people.

On North/South development, I am committed to building up effective linkages, and that is included in the terms of reference of the acute hospitals review. I am consequently open to any suggestions that Members may wish to put to me regarding the construction of cross-border partnerships that can work in the interests of patients.

With regard to the review of administration that is being taken forward, and any consequent changes and structures, my first priority, after the years of uncertainty, must be to set an appropriate direction for our hospital service. The form of administration required to operate such a service should be influenced by its functions, as determined in the light of the acute hospitals review. I would stress again that there is no question of my avoiding a decision. I have acted decisively to address this and other issues in the short — and somewhat difficult — period of suspension.

The points raised by the Member regarding waiting lists and winter pressures are matters that I have vigorously tackled. I can confirm to Joe Byrne that any decisions taken as a result of the independent review will be in line with the principles of TSN, and they must be assessed and equality proofed in line with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

On the question of rurality, I absolutely recognise the specific problems facing rural communities. I am prepared to take those into account in developing the required acute hospital strategy for the future, and, therefore, the issue is referred to in the remit of the acute hospitals review group. Reference was made to other Departments, and I trust that my Colleagues in the Executive are taking similar steps to ensure that their strategic planning takes account of the interests of rural communities. That point was certainly taken forward in our discussions on the Programme for Government.

Looking to the future, I am committed to creating a new and better hospital service. I will build on the report of the acute hospitals review group to stimulate an open and informed debate on the way forward.

At this stage I cannot say any more about the outcome of this process. I can say that I am committed to creating a modern and effective hospital service which will meet the needs of our population in this new century; a service which will provide a standard and quality of care comparable with the best in Europe; a service that will use technology in the interest of its users. We need a service that takes account of the overall needs of our population, which must, and will, include those people who live in rural areas.

Adjourned at 7.05 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 19 February 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My Colleague Joan Carson and I tabled private notice questions in relation to job closure announcements in Newry and Enniskillen last week. Why have they not been included in today's order of business?

Mr Speaker: The Member is entirely out of order, and he knows it. It is not in order to question such decisions. He is making assumptions that he and his Colleague were the only Members who put down such private notice questions.

CIVIC FORUM: ASSEMBLY DEBATE

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. A week ago the First Minister rose on a point of order on a matter relating to the Civic Forum. You stated that you would be prepared to consider the issue and that papers should be furnished to you. I know that I have done so. Can you confirm that the First Minister has done so? In assessing the status of the meeting of the Civic Forum on 20 December, I ask you to pay special attention to an e-mail sent from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister at 15.20 on that day, which referred to the meeting that was taking place at Balmoral. It said

"This is NOT the working group, but a group" —

I repeat: a group —

"to discuss the implications for the Programme for Government."

Mr Speaker: As the Member will be aware, I received some papers from him in the later part of last week. I have been studying those papers. I hope to receive the balance of the papers that were requested very soon and to be in a position to respond. I put it in that way at this stage — I do not want to say anything further. It may be that I will be in a position to respond tomorrow morning,

but I cannot say that with finality. However, I hope to respond as soon as possible.

Mr P Robinson: Is the Speaker saying that the First Minister, who was only two yards away from him last Monday, and who was waving papers that purported to be proof that there was a meeting of the Civic Forum, did not step forward to hand over the papers?

Mr Speaker: The Member will be very familiar with the practice of waving papers. I have not received all the papers that were referred to, but as soon as I do, or in any case, I will respond to the requests for rulings.

BUDGET BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 10/00] to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31 March 2001 and 2002; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes and amend certain appropriations in aid for the year ending 31 March 2001; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; and to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the year ending 31 March 2002.

Mr Speaker: The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel has confirmed in writing that the requirements of Standing Order 40 have been fully met. Therefore, the Bill will proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. The Second Stage is on the Order Paper for tomorrow, 20 February.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

FISHERIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Final Stage

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I beg to move

That the Fisheries (Amendment) Bill [NIA 9/99] do now pass.

For the benefit of Members, I will summarise the reasons for introducing the Bill and its main provisions.

The collection of wild shellfish from the shores of Strangford Lough for commercial purposes has been increasing in recent years. Conservationists have raised concerns about the likely impact of that on the foreshore's wildlife. Powers to regulate fishing activity on the foreshore are not currently available in Northern Ireland, and changes to existing fisheries legislation were therefore deemed necessary to permit the use of fisheries regulatory powers to control the collection of wild shellfish from the foreshore.

It was also considered necessary to amend existing fisheries legislation to provide fisheries regulators with powers to conserve and enhance the environment and to permit the trade and farming of salmon roe. Additionally, several measures in the existing legislation, relating to the issue of angling permits and licences had proved to be restrictive. The Bill amends the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 to provide the Department with powers to regulate fishing activity in the areas defined as Northern Ireland inshore waters, including the foreshore, by prohibiting fishing from, or by means of, vehicles or equipment of a specified description.

It also provides the Department with the power to regulate fishing activity for environmental purposes in line with its obligations under the EC Habitats Directive. These amendments will enable the Department to prohibit the use of mechanical harvesting equipment for collecting wild shellfish from the shores of Strangford Lough. They will, therefore, prevent damage to the wildlife that inhabits the foreshore in that area.

The Bill also amends several other provisions in the Act that relate to inland fisheries functions, which are the responsibility of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Those amendments include the removal of the prohibition on the trade and farming of salmon roe while retaining the protection of wild stocks. That will result in the removal of the restriction on trade in a very viable product.

The Bill also strengthens the Fisheries Conservancy Board's authority to conserve the environment by providing it with powers to regulate salmon fishing for environmental purposes. Those powers control the removal of material from rivers and reinstate in-river habitats that have been adversely affected as a result of pollution. It also provides the board with powers to make by-laws for the

management and protection of fisheries and to issue angling licences at concessionary rates to certain categories of applicants, such as those with a disability.

Finally, I thank Members for their contribution to the debate on the Bill and, in particular, the Chairman and members of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee who carried out detailed scrutiny of the Bill and afforded my officials the opportunity to give evidence on the amendments. On behalf of my Colleague Mr McGimpsey, I thank the Chairman and members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee for their work on those provisions in the Bill that deal with inland fisheries functions.

Mr Wells: The Bill is very welcome, and it has benefited from the scrutiny of the two relevant Committees. The grilling that the Agriculture Committee gave the officials impressed me, and the Bill has improved as a result. As Members are aware, the Bill will prevent the use of mechanical means of harvesting shellfish. That is a particular problem on Strangford Lough. I am confident of great support for the radical improvement in the sanctions available to the Department for those who deliberately pollute our waterways.

However, it must be emphasised that the Bill will enable the Department only to make regulations to control those activities. Will the Minister tell us when those regulations will be published, for without them the Bill is toothless?

Will the regulations be subject to the negative or affirmative resolution of the House? That is also very important, because one procedure would enable the House to make amendments to the regulations, while the other would mean they would simply be rubber-stamped.

The Bill is to be welcomed, once those questions are answered. Many people are involved in the conservation of the marine habitat of Strangford Lough and other coastal waters in Northern Ireland and in maintaining high-quality fishing facilities in our inland waterways. I am sure that they will all breathe a lot easier once the Bill receives Royal Assent.

Ms Rodgers: The regulations will be published as soon as possible following consultation, which will, of course, be very important. Consultation will involve all the interested parties. The regulations will be subject to negative resolution of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Fisheries (Amendment) Bill [NIA 9/99] do now pass.

GROUND RENTS BILL

Final Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):
I beg to move

That the Ground Rents Bill [NIA 6/99] do now pass.

I reiterate my thanks to the Finance and Personnel Committee for its scrutiny of the Bill.

In view of the short time allocated to the Final Stage of the Bill, I will keep my remarks brief. However, I confirm to Members who are not in the Finance and Personnel Committee that the 17 amendments agreed between it and me, and endorsed by the Assembly, in no way affect the underlying policy of the Bill. They do, however, improve the Bill's operational effectiveness by clarifying measures such as the position of mortgage lenders and covenants used by the Housing Executive.

The central aim of the Bill is to simplify the conveyancing process by facilitating the move from leasehold to freehold ownership of residential property. Ultimately that will simplify the conveyancing process by getting rid of complex pyramid titles, which blight so much residential property in urban areas. Associated policy developments are the computerisation of the conveyancing process and the extension of compulsory first registration of title to all residential property. These changes cannot be achieved overnight and will take some time. I hope that Members will be patient in that regard.

In due course, I will bring before the Assembly the necessary associated Land Registry rules and the draft Order that will set the multiplier.

10.45 am

The Deputy Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee (Mr Leslie): The Minister is aware that I raised some issues at Consideration Stage about schedule 1 and his proposals for calculating the multiplier. Owing to a slight misunderstanding between the Minister and me, we were unable to address those issues at Further Consideration Stage. The Minister has just said that a draft Order will be brought forward to deal with the setting of the multiplier. Would the Minister care to comment on any of the remarks that I made two weeks ago? Essentially, I did not feel that his proposal to set a multiplier of nine represented fair replacement investment value for the loss of a ground rent. I proffered different mathematical formulae that I felt would address that and which would raise the multiplier by two or three notches. Will the Minister address those issues before we finish with the Bill?

Mr Speaker: As there are no further requests to speak, I call the Minister to wind up.

Mr Durkan: Mr Leslie has raised some points that have been aired previously, including during Consideration Stage. The Bill will require and allow the Minister of Finance and Personnel to keep the multiplier under consideration. However, notwithstanding Mr Leslie's insights, I am not minded at this stage to opt for a multiplier other than nine. The advice that I have suggests that that is fair and reasonable and it would be wrong for me to tell either Mr Leslie or the House otherwise. That will be determined beyond the Bill when the necessary Order comes forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Ground Rents Bill [NIA 6/99] do now pass.

SUPPLY

Spring Supplementary Estimates (2000-01) and Vote on Account (2001-02)

Mr Speaker: I would like to explain how I propose to conduct the debate on the two motions on the Order Paper. I shall ask the Minister to move the first motion, after which we will debate both. In other words, there will be a single debate. It has been referred to by one Member as the “Dan to Beersheba” debate because of the range of matters that may be raised. At the end of the debate, the House will vote on the first motion. The Minister will then move the second motion formally, and the House will vote on it. Members will be aware that that business must be completed by five o’clock, when we will have the Adjournment debate.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I beg to move

That the Assembly approves that a further sum not exceeding £195,599,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges which will come in course of payment during the year ending on 31 March 2001 for expenditure by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That the Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £3,806,414,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002 and that resources not exceeding £4,305,870,000 be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002. — [Mr Durkan]

Mr Durkan: Before embarking on the main debate, I wish to acknowledge the Finance and Personnel Committee’s confirmation that it has been consulted on the spending plans reflected in these motions. The Committee has shown keen and proper interest in finance issues, and I look forward to its further constructive and incisive involvement.

The resolutions moved have two purposes. The first seeks the approval of the Assembly to the issue of a further sum of £196 million from the Consolidated Fund for the 2000-01 financial year — as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates booklet. The second seeks the approval of the Assembly to the issue of a cash sum of £3,806 million on account for the 2001-02 financial year. It also seeks the authority of the Assembly

for the use of resources amounting to £4,306 million on account in the 2001-02 financial year.

I will remind the Assembly about the significance of the resolutions for which I am seeking its support. These resolutions are the basis upon which the legislature — in the form of this Assembly — authorises the spending of Departments, the Assembly itself, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and other bodies for the carrying out of their various functions. One of our fundamental responsibilities is to authorise expenditure and to hold Departments to account for how the money is used. This is one of the main means that we have to ensure that we deliver on our agreed plans and, in due course, deliver the Programme for Government when it has been approved.

The scope of the debate covers expenditure in both 2000-01 and 2001-02. The first of the two resolutions is the means by which Supplementary Estimates can be examined by the Assembly. This is the main means of implementing and confirming the decisions made by the Executive on the allocation of resources brought forward from 1999-2000 under the end-year flexibility arrangements, on the reallocation of resources through the in-year monitoring rounds in June, October and December, and on the Agenda for Government, as announced in the summer.

The second resolution is the usual means by which, at this point in the financial cycle, the ongoing commitments of Departments are authorised during the period between the beginning of the 2001-02 financial year and the presentation to the Assembly of the Main Estimates for that year. In general, the cash and resource amounts required on account have been calculated as 45% of the forecast 2001-02 Main Estimate requirement, based on the Budget that was agreed by the Executive and approved by the Assembly last December.

As its name suggests, the Vote on Account is not intended to seek the Assembly’s final approval of the allocations for 2001-02, since less than half the total proposed budget is being sought in the Budget Bill. It seeks sufficient resources and cash to allow services to proceed until the detailed work on the Main Estimates has been completed in the late spring. At that stage, there will be a full opportunity to deal with the details of the spending plans for 2001-02, and, given the switch to Resource Estimates, I propose that there should be prior discussion between my Department and the Finance and Personnel Committee on the Main Estimates over the next few months. Therefore for today’s purposes, I propose to focus on the issues relating to 2000-01, as this is the last major opportunity for discussion on this matter before the end of the financial year. It is important that I draw out for the Assembly some aspects of the Estimates that differ from the position on the Budget and the monitoring rounds.

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

First, the Estimates include all aspects of departmental expenditure that are subject to appropriation under the

cash regime and which will be subject to the authorisation of resources in the resource accounting regime. That means that they include annually managed expenditure (AME), as well as expenditure that falls within the departmental expenditure limit (DEL). Because we receive automatic adjustment of estimated requirements for annually managed expenditure from the Treasury — and must return any unrequired resources to the Treasury — these items are not included in the scope of the public expenditure monitoring rounds that we conduct and which I have announced on several occasions to the Assembly.

The main items that fall into that category are social security benefits, some of which are subject to annual appropriation or authorisation. Others are charged under legislation to the National Insurance fund, and hence do not feature in the voting process. Expenditure under the Common Agricultural Policy falls into the same category because it is fully funded by the European Agriculture Guarantee and Guidance Fund.

As well as those AME items, there are some aspects of expenditure that are nominally attached to the departmental expenditure limit, but that are ring-fenced by the Treasury. As we have no discretion in the use of those resources, they have also not been included in the context of our monitoring rounds. They include expenditure under the Peace I programme, and the special addition that was provided some years ago to cover the cost of the Moyle electricity interconnector.

I have already mentioned that some social security expenditure is handled outside the voting system because there are standing authorisations, in the form of specific legislation, that allow money to be drawn from the Consolidated Fund, or another fund, to provide a service. A further example arises when a Department makes a loan under some statutory power. Very often, under the cash regime, the issue of the loan will count towards the DEL, but in some cases it will not need to come through the Estimates and voting system, because there is some standing authorisation for the making of loans outside the vote.

Some of the important sources of room to manoeuvre are outside the appropriation system. In particular, receipts from house sales are outside the Department for Social Development votes. The total that determines what we can do is the DEL, which is set by the Treasury. The house sales release some of that spending power, which makes it possible to afford an increase in the cash spending, and hence helps us to afford these Supplementary Estimates.

The convention is that the Estimates are not reduced as the year progresses, even if the Department concerned is clear that not all spending will be required. By their nature, the figures are estimates, and the sense of the resolution is that the Executive and the Departments are seeking spending authorisation up to the figure quoted in the Estimates.

Alongside the Estimates control regime, which operates on behalf of the Assembly, there are administrative controls. Decisions made by the Executive on the distribution of the Budget through monitoring rounds are reflected in clearly stated departmental expenditure limit figures for each Department. Those are issued following each monitoring round and become the cash ceiling that the Executive authorise. The system depends on those two controls working together, and it is a major function of my Department to ensure that those controls are brought together and that the detailed figure work is reconciled.

The final complication that I need to mention is that there can be agreed transfers of resources between Departments, or between Departments of the Executive and the Northern Ireland Office, or between Departments here and Departments in Whitehall. By convention, if responsibility for a function is transferred, the DEL spending provision transfers with it. In other areas, such as student support, there can be a need to allow resources to follow the pattern of demand on an agreed basis.

Those factors are important, because they affect how the figures that are discussed and set out in the Budget planning documents and in the monitoring rounds, are, in the end, reflected in the final amounts that need to be authorised for issue from the Consolidated Fund to cover the approved expenditure. That is undeniably complex, but essential to meet the twin requirements that we keep expenditure within the departmental expenditure limit, as set by the Treasury, and seek authorisation for no greater amount of cash expenditure than is set out in the Estimates.

This is the first time that the Assembly has dealt with Supplementary Estimates. This time last year, the entire process of approving the Appropriation Order was dealt with in three hours in a Standing Committee of the House of Commons. This is also the last occasion on which we will seek appropriation of cash as the sole manifestation of Assembly control of expenditure. We are planning a transition to resource accounting and budgeting, subject to final approval of the Government Resources and Accounts Bill.

11.00 am

The Main Estimates for 2000-01 were considered and approved by the Assembly last June. The Estimates provided the detailed basis for the allocation and use of resources for the purposes prescribed. The Estimates were followed by in-year monitoring rounds in June, October and December, as a result of which changes were made to the allocations. The changes were made possible by the distribution of additional money received from the Treasury; the revised treatment of rate rebates; and the redistribution of easements in the spending plans for certain areas, which included increased receipts.

The changes have been accompanied by detailed statements at each stage and form the basis of the details

set out in the booklets that have been made available to Members. Although it was not possible to have prior consultation with the Finance and Personnel Committee before announcing the Executive's decisions in the monitoring rounds, my officials and I have been available to explain the position. Apart from the late addition of £18 million to the budget for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which was made last week, there has been scope for scrutiny following each monitoring round.

The total figure for the Supplementary Estimates is £195,599,000. That will be used to defray charges that fall due for payment during the year ending 31 March 2001. The detailed allocations contained in the booklet have been determined by Departments, following careful consideration and approval by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Departmental Ministers will be better placed than I to explain and justify the detail, but I will try to deal with the matters raised by Members. If I am unable to answer, I will refer the matter to the relevant Minister for more detailed consideration.

The decisions taken following the monitoring rounds provide a picture of how that figure of almost £196 million is made up. For the reasons that I have given, the reallocated amounts do not correspond exactly to the net surplus figures that followed the monitoring rounds, because a number of technical adjustments were made at those stages. However, during the monitoring rounds, Departments declared £148 million as easements, and that figure was weighed against bids for additional resources totalling £418 million. There is some double counting in the figures for bids; bids that are unsuccessful in one round are likely to be repeated later. However, the figures help to illustrate the process, and I will say more about how that relates to the allocations to individual Departments.

Some of the changes relate to departmental running costs. Restructuring costs of £9 million were met from resources carried forward from the previous financial year. That was necessary to ensure that the new Departments had sufficient administration resources to implement the Programme for Government.

As was the case with the approval of the Main Estimates last June and the agreement of the Budget for 2001-02 in December, decisions about the allocation of resources have been influenced by the equality requirements set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and the requirements of New TSN, the Programme for Government and the Executive programme funds. We must keep such considerations in mind, for they will shape spending strategy and will bring about the changes and improvements that we wish to see emerge from the significant resource commitments for which the Assembly is responsible.

I know from the interest demonstrated by Members and Committees, especially the Committee for Finance and Personnel, that this is not a responsibility that is

assumed lightly. As an Executive and Assembly, we have a duty to ensure the highest standards of propriety with regard to public expenditure. That is an important aspect of the authorisation, management and control of expenditure by the Assembly and by individual Departments and the bodies funded by them. The efficient use of resources is no less important as that is the means by which the greatest amount of goods and services can be provided for the community that we serve with the resources available.

Those are, of course, matters in which the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have a particular interest. They are able to examine how public sector bodies perform in meeting their objectives, doing so with due regard to propriety and efficiency. As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I acknowledge the important function they perform. I also express my appreciation for the interest, proposals and work of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which has been assiduous in considering financial and other issues, often at very short notice.

Turning to the allocations for individual Departments, I will begin with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. In Vote A, which provides for Northern Ireland expenditure on national agriculture support measures, a net £8.1 million is sought. That includes £7.1 million for the special aid package, payable under the less favoured area compensatory allowances, and £1 million to cover higher than anticipated demand for the environmentally sensitive areas scheme. In addition, £29 million is agrimonetary compensation for the arable and beef sectors. That is annually managed expenditure outside the scope of our monitoring rounds, and is offset by a reduction of £3 million for less favoured area compensatory allowances, which will be paid from guarantee funds, fully funded by the Intervention Board Executive Agency. Agrimonetary compensation is designed to offset the effects of currency appreciation on agricultural support prices and compensation payments, which are set in euros.

In Vote B, which provides for local agriculture support measures, a net increase of £24.8 million is sought. That includes £16.7 million for controlling outbreaks of animal diseases, including brucellosis and tuberculosis, which was announced in June and October monitoring, and £2.2 million for business and environmental training of farmers in less-favoured areas, most of which was allocated in the June round.

In the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, a net increase of £7.7 million is sought in Vote A. That includes £2.1 million to tackle health and safety issues at sports grounds, £0.9 million for the completion of capital works for the Odyssey Millennium Landmark project, announced in June monitoring, and £1 million for capital investment in public libraries, announced in the October monitoring round. Other additions include provision to meet pressures from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland

and for museums, the Northern Ireland Millennium Company, and to allow for essential research and consultancy costs.

Moving to the Department of Education, an increase of some £7.8 million is sought. There is an increase of £20.1 million for capital works and repairs to schools, of which £6.2 million was provided under the Agenda for Government in June monitoring. One and a half million pounds is being provided for primary school reading schemes, as announced in October monitoring, and £0.6 million is allocated to provide gap funding for certain EU Peace I projects, pending the allocation of Peace II funds — both of those additions are under the Agenda for Government. There are also additions of: £3.3 million for school fuel costs, announced in October and December monitoring; £1 million for the purchase of school buses; £1 million for energy efficiency measures; £5 million for the EU Peace I projects; and £0.75 million for the Irish-medium trust fund, recently announced in December monitoring. Those increases are offset principally by reduced requirements of £25.5 million as a result of slippage into 2001-02 of expected spending on teachers' pay and on information and communications technology provision for schools.

With respect to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, a token increase in vote A and a substantive increase in Vote B are being sought. In Vote A, a token £1,000 is being sought by the Industrial Development Board (IDB) to cover self-adjusting changes, where any increased requirements are offset by savings.

Thus, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is not seeking any extra spending power at this time. By including a token estimate of £1,000, we are able to bring to the Assembly's attention the adjustments within the Department's previous total allocations that have emerged as the year has progressed. Those include an addition of almost £1 million for the European peace and reconciliation programme.

In Vote B, which covers other economic support measures, such as administration, energy and miscellaneous services, a net increase of £12.1 million is required. That includes: £9.9 million carried forward from 1999-2000 under the end-year flexibility arrangements for the Moyle interconnector; £6.3 million for the European Peace and Reconciliation Programme; and £2.5 million for expenditure on the Information Age Initiative, which was announced last July, and the venture capital fund. Some offsetting savings have been declared elsewhere in the Vote.

With respect to the Department of the Environment, a net increase of £4 million is being sought. Of that amount, £1.7 million is for grants to maintain historic buildings, which was allocated in the October and December monitoring rounds, and £1.4 million is for increased grants in support of district councils, the bulk of which was allocated in the October monitoring round. The

remainder is in respect of additional costs for more road safety education officers; planners to progress the area plans; the full resourcing of the planning appeals commission; and for providing additional resources for environmental services.

As regards the Department for Regional Development, a net increase of £7.7 million is being sought for Vote A, covering expenditure on roads, transport and other services. The main items are: £7.5 million for roads maintenance, most of which was announced in the December round; almost £2 million towards the capital cost of a replacement ferry for the Strangford ferry service; and an additional £2.6 million for running costs in the Roads Service, provided in the October monitoring round.

An extra £6 million is being sought in respect of the railways public service obligation grants, announced in June, and £2.7 million for railways capital provided in the December monitoring round. A further £2.1 million is needed for bus fare concessions, bus fuel duty rebates and rural transport. These increases are partially offset by a reduction of capital spending on roads, a decrease in public liability claims and by increased receipts.

In Vote B, which covers expenditure on the Water Service and related services, a net increase of £5.7 million is being sought. The main items are: £3.2 million allocated in the June monitoring round to meet the increased costs of sludge disposal; £1.7 million additional costs associated with flooding emergencies and the cryptosporidiosis outbreak during late summer 2000; and £1.6 million for running costs, which were provided in the October monitoring round. The increases are partially offset by an increase of £2.5 million in receipts.

As regards the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, a token vote of £1,000 is sought in Vote A, again so that the attention of the Assembly can be drawn to adjustments within the Department's allocations. This mainly involves an increase of £3.9 million for mandatory student awards provided for in the October monitoring round, which is offset by reduced requirements on student loans and from slippage for capital works at the Springvale campus.

In Vote B, a net increase of £194,000 is sought. The main increase of £6.6 million is to provide gap funding to sustain projects under the old single programme, which need transitional support pending the allocation of funds under the Transitional Objective 1 programme.

That is offset by reduced requirements on Worktrack and other training related programmes and through efficiencies gained from the amalgamation of Government training centres with further education colleges.

For the Department of Health, Social Services, and Public Safety, an additional net provision of £43.4 million is sought in Vote A for expenditure on the health and personal social services programme. The increases

consolidate the additional funds made available to the Health Service at each monitoring round. They include £19 million towards winter and other hospital pressures; £7 million for community health and personal social services; and £3 million to meet commitments carried forward from last year. A further £18 million is now included to help eliminate the deficits of the health and social services trusts, as announced last week.

11.15 am

With respect to the Department for Social Development, an additional net provision of £6.2 million is sought in Vote A to meet the Department's administration and other miscellaneous costs. That includes £10.6 million to fund running costs, capital, and other administration pressures in the Department, £4.1 million of which is to assist with the implementation of the welfare reform and modernisation programme. Most of those funds were allocated in the December monitoring round. The increases are offset by an increase in receipts of £4.4 million, mainly from the Social Security Agency for administering certain services on its behalf.

In Vote C, an additional net provision of £25.8 million is sought for expenditure on urban regeneration and community development, which includes £23.2 million for the EU peace and reconciliation programme and £2.2m for gap funding for the community and voluntary sector announced in the June monitoring round. Allocations for gap funding to other Departments are also included in the appropriate votes.

In Vote E for the Department for Social Development, which covers social security administered centrally by the Department, an additional net provision of £15.1 million is being sought. That is mainly to reimburse the social fund for expenditure on cold weather payments, and increased and retrospective awards of winter fuel payments, most of which scores as annually managed expenditure. The additional requirements also include increases in housing benefit and payments into the Northern Ireland National Insurance fund. These increased requirements are offset by reduced expenditure on the independent living funds and discretionary rent allowances.

The Department of Finance and Personnel seeks an additional £8.8 million in Vote A. That includes £5.2 million on capital expenditure for new works, resulting from the restructuring of Departments, which was mostly allocated in the June monitoring round. An additional £5.5 million is sought for running costs to reflect the carry-forward of end-year flexibility in connection with the provision of Government purchasing, research and statistical and legal services to other Departments. That increase is partly offset by increased receipts across the Department.

In Vote B, which covers superannuation and other allowances, an additional £15.3 million is sought to cover the cost of pensions, lump sums and gratuities to former civil servants. The main changes to the Vote are

annually managed expenditure items and are, therefore, not a charge on the departmental expenditure limit.

Finally, an additional provision of £2.4 million is required in Vote A by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. That is mainly for disability rights, victims, additional allocations to the EU peace and reconciliation programme, and administration costs. That deals with the resolution for the spring Supplementary Estimates. As I stated, I will do my best to answer any questions that Members may have.

The second Supply resolution issues a cash sum of some £3,806 million to be granted on account towards the defraying of costs incurred by Departments and the use of resources totalling some £4,306 million for the same purposes in the year 2001-02. The cash sum and resource totals, for which approval are sought, represent a Vote on Account pending the bringing forward of the main Estimates to the Assembly in May or June. A Vote on Account at this point in the financial year, prior to the year in which the cash or resources will be used, has been a normal feature of Government financial management.

The need to proceed in this way arises from problems of timing given that, after the approval of the Budget in December by the Assembly, detailed work has to be undertaken by Departments and by the Department of Finance and Personnel to disaggregate and allocate resource requirements for individual purposes, often through very narrowly defined line entries. It is to be hoped that this helps Members to appreciate further why it was necessary to seek the completion of the Budget stage of the process before Christmas.

I draw the Assembly's attention to an important innovation in the way in which the Vote on Account is presented. For the first time, it will reflect not only the allocation of cash to Departments but an allocation, up to a limit, for the use of resources. I drew the attention of the Assembly to this first allocation of resources based on resource budgeting in my statement on Budget proposals in October 2000.

The Vote on Account will see the first implementation of that approach, which will have important consequences in ensuring that assets are properly valued and that the full resource cost of expenditure can be brought into account. That in turn will involve much more attention being directed to the setting of targets, measurement of outputs and the attribution of resources to the achievement of the objectives for which they were originally intended.

The Government Resources and Accounts Bill, which is currently under consideration by the Assembly, provides for the necessary changes in financial measures to support the introduction of resource accounting and budgeting and to secure the authority and control of the Assembly in relation to the use of resources, in similar terms to those which exist for cash allocations. Those changes are

important, though largely technical, and will also impact on the Budget Bill that I introduced earlier today.

The Vote on Account will fund Departments to implement the ongoing programmes and services for which they are responsible and which formed part of the Budget decisions taken in December 2000. There will be an opportunity for a full debate on the detail when the Main Estimates are finalised in June. This is the first Budget for which the Assembly has been solely responsible and, therefore, the first opportunity to begin to apply our collective judgement to the priorities and to the social and economic outcomes that we wish to achieve through public expenditure.

We have established several important cornerstones upon which we wish to build our policies and develop our thinking further. These include, of course, the equality considerations to which we must have regard, recognition of need through New TSN, the Programme for Government and the priority areas and initiatives that will attract additional funding through the Executive programme funds.

In commending these resolutions to the Assembly, it is right that we should pause to recognise the importance of being able to make these decisions in a devolved Assembly for the first time for a complete financial year. It is also appropriate, as I noted in the context of the Supplementary Estimates resolution, that we ensure appropriate levels of management and control over the use of these resources. We must be seen to use them with maximum effect to ensure the highest quality and greatest range of services possible for the citizens of Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's detailed statement on the Budget and the Supplementary Estimates. It is important to note that we have £196 million made available to the Department in the current year, either through reallocation or as a result of additional funds provided by the Chancellor.

I welcome the allocations made to the various Departments. We have discussed those on previous occasions. In particular, I note the issue of funds to health, education and infrastructure, as well as the important role that we have in rebuilding the failures of the past. Several services have been underfunded to the extent that they have been deprived and, in some cases, are falling apart. It is important to note the change and restructuring taking place and that the money will be available for that.

I welcomed the Minister's previous announcement about a reduction in the increase in regional rates. That will take some pressure off rural areas and small businesses. The Finance and Personnel Committee suggested a reduction in the increase in domestic rates and its members would have welcomed that. However, it is not possible at present. Will the Minister continue to re-examine

the rates as a means of tax raising? Could we consider alternatives? The rating system is an unfair way of collecting tax and it has a detrimental effect on communities, especially the business community.

In the past, the Finance and Personnel Committee expressed concern about the absence of consultation with Committees prior to the allocation of funds through the monitoring rounds. At present, the reallocations are presented to the Assembly as a *fait accompli*, giving Committees no opportunity to influence the outcome. It is important that Committees have an opportunity to put forward suggestions, and they should have an opportunity to discuss with and present their views to Departments for future monitoring rounds.

There should be a revised arrangement in which the Department of Finance and Personnel anticipates the likelihood of additional money. That anticipation should be put to the Committees for discussion so that they can have an opportunity to influence Ministers before the Executive make the final decisions on the reallocation of money. In that way, there would be more collective responsibility in how money is reallocated. The Executive may not take the Committees' opinions fully on board, but they must be involved in the discussions.

I welcome the introduction of the Vote on Account as a means of ensuring that the Departments' work will continue while the main estimates for 2001-02 are being considered and adopted by the Assembly. It should be noted that the new practice has been adopted by the Department of Finance and Personnel exceptionally when the Vote on Account has been calculated at 45% of the incoming Main Estimate rather than being based on the previous year's Estimate. That will provide a larger sum than normal for Departments. The change has been made necessary because of the complications arising from the introduction of resource accounting. Will the Department revert to the former practice or will it continue with the new practice?

When reporting on the Budget proposals in November, the Finance and Personnel Committee mentioned some measures that must be taken to reassess the application of the Barnett formula. The Barnett formula fails to address the issues relating to the present infrastructure deficit, the low population deficit, the population of regions — east and west — and the need to follow social deprivation to target that social deprivation and need. The Barnett formula — for it is simply a population head count — does not have the ability to do that. Will the Minister involve the Committee in discussions to review the Barnett formula, and possibly look to a co-ordinated approach with the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the British Parliament? A co-ordinated approach would be of benefit to everyone. Targeting need is an issue that must be examined.

The Executive Committee should press ahead with the structure of a staffing review of the Civil Service to obtain the maximum possible levels of efficiency and value for money in the future.

11.30 am

The Minister should seek to impress upon his Colleagues in the Executive Committee that Assembly Committees ought to be engaged at the earliest stage of the preparation of the 2002-03 Estimates. The first consultation should take place before Departments submit their initial bids to the Department of Finance and Personnel for consideration in spring and early summer. That would enable Statutory Committees to respond quickly and effectively to the draft Budget proposal when it is presented to the Assembly. We suggested that the draft Budget proposal should be the first item of business for the new session in September. That would be the new means for working out the financial year. If Committees were consulted in advance we would have a free-flowing consultation, which would avoid people feeling that they do not have time to discuss these subjects fully. If all Committees and Ministers were involved, everyone would be better informed and consulted.

The Minister and his Colleagues in the Executive should continue to ensure that targeting social need and other work to address deprivation are given high priority. The Minister said that he would continue to ensure that that happens. All possible steps should be taken to maximise the benefits gained by European funding. The Minister referred to gap funding and the new round of European funding. The new round of European funding should be allocated as quickly as possible. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee (Dr Birnie): I congratulate the Minister on an intricate presentation in which he observed Charles Dickens's advice, which he put in the mouth of Mr Micawber, about keeping his expenditure limits just within the size of his income. Overall, the Northern Ireland Budget will now do that for the remainder of the financial year.

On behalf of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee I will concentrate on the Supplementary Estimates and raise several points on the basis of some of the more significant changes in the pattern of expenditure in our Department.

First, an additional £0.5 million has been allocated in Vote A for increased administrative costs, and £100,000 of that are extra devolution-related costs. Also, £200,000 has been allocated for improved computer systems for student awards, and £161,000 has been allocated for the administration of New Deal. My point is not necessarily that such extra administration is wrong — it may well be needed — but that all additional administration costs must be carefully justified.

Secondly, a further £135,000 has been transferred to the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (NICATS), which recently gave evidence to my Committee. On the basis of what we heard of its work, we welcome the additional resources for NICATS. We note the progress that it has made on a vertically and horizontally progressive system of qualifications. It seems to be ahead of the game with respect to its counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Thirdly, the Committee recognises the increased provision of roughly £4 million for mandatory student awards, and the Minister hinted that that is a demand-led expenditure.

Moving to Vote B for the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, we see an increased provision of almost £1.5 million for administration costs associated with devolution and some information technology costs relating to private finance initiatives (PFI). There are obviously issues, in principle, relating to the pros and cons of PFI, which we may return to in a subsequent debate. We recognise that if there is to be PFI then the IT systems should be as good as possible — we trust that there will be sound purchasing of IT systems.

On Vote B for the Department, we note the reduced requirement of about one third of a million pounds because of a lower than expected uptake on the Department's management development programme. As a Committee, especially given our priorities with respect to upgrading human capital in the Northern Ireland labour force, at face value we have concerns about that. It is obviously a case of demand-led expenditure — the Department can take horses to water, as it were, but it cannot force them to drink. Nevertheless, it should concern us all that in the Northern Ireland economy — despite the fact that there are some excellent and world-class management teams — there are cases of Northern Ireland firms, whether in the manufacturing or service sectors, in which management over the years has lacked imagination and sufficient international experience. That may explain some relatively recent job losses. I, therefore, put down a marker relating to the lower than expected uptake on that management development programme.

Finally, we note a reduced requirement of almost £4 million on the Worktrack programme because of a lower than expected uptake. We wonder what is going on there. The more optimistic scenario is that it reflects the reduction in long-term unemployment in the Province. However, we want to be realistic, and there may be more pessimistic interpretations on why the uptake of Worktrack has been lower than expected.

I support the motion on the Supplementary Estimates. We trust that the concerns that I have raised on behalf of the Committee will be dealt with appropriately by either the Finance Minister or his Colleague, the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the first native Budget that allows the Executive and the Assembly to work together on budget allocations. I appreciate the Minister's handling of these affairs. He has shown that he has tried to be fair and equitable to everyone. We have seen, through the Executive programme funds, that Departments have the opportunity to discontinue their current patterns. It is not about the Departments extending them and rolling them over, but about standing at the crossroads and seeing how they can redirect or prioritise many aspects of their expenditure.

There is now the opportunity for new innovation and for Departments, in particular, to become more proactive, rather than reactive, with their budgets. That can be seen by the increases reflected in the new allocations to Departments relating to the December, and other recent, monitoring rounds.

The Children Fund, the consultation on a commissioner for children, the £2 million set aside for gap funding, and free transport for the elderly are just a few examples of the innovation that we hope to see more of in the future. We have seen an extra £273,000 allocated to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for disability rights, victims and research. That is a welcome move in creating a more fair and equitable society for everyone in Northern Ireland.

On departmental priorities, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been given extra resources to tackle the deficits in the health trusts. It has been given gap funding for the community and voluntary sector. It is to be hoped that the £100,000 taken out of the mental health budget, especially in the Down Lisburn Trust area, can be returned to the mental health budget and services sooner rather than later. I hope that that will be seen as a priority. That is one area where we could see a real change in people's quality of life and, considering the huge increase in the number of suicides among young men, in the long term, save many lives.

We must consider the £360,000 allocated to essential repairs to classrooms. How will that be allocated by the Department? Considering the current number of ancient mobile classrooms which must be repaired, how will that money be prioritised? Is that throwing good money after bad? Should we be attempting to repair them, or should we be replacing them so that we will be saving money in the long term? What effect do they have on our pupils, especially with regard to their performance and their health and safety?

What value for money will we get from the £465,000 allocated for post-primary consultation, known to many of us as the Burns review? What will the outcome of that review be? Will it simply tell us what Prof Gallagher has already told us — that the 11-plus and selection must be scrapped? Will it make a recommendation about what our post-primary education system should be?

Should we be changing it completely or keeping our grammar and secondary education systems? Further down the line, after the Burns review, will we be told that we need another large amount of money to go into consultation with regard to secondary education?

Although I have had some reservations about the Departments' expenditures, the main issue for me is that I, as an Assembly Member, have the opportunity in the House to approach a local Minister, who is available to listen and take on board my points of view on a local funding issue.

My final point is to do with the Government's resource accounting budget, which gives the opportunity for transparency, accountability and, more importantly, feedback to the Assembly. That clearly illustrates the true cost of running Departments and has the effect of improving the financial management of the Exchequer.

I support these motions.

Mr Poots: I congratulate the Minister on the delivery of his speech. He outlined how the money is to be spent, clearly and concisely, and I appreciate that.

Almost £8 million has been added to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's budget, of which more than £1 million is to be allocated to capital spending on libraries. That means that £2.5 million is to be spent on library provision. Once again I must mention library provision in Lisburn. For the past 25 years, there has been insufficient library provision there. Other towns, such as Portadown and Strabane, have jumped the list and moved ahead of Lisburn, and I challenge the Minister to look seriously at that issue again. We have heard a great deal of talk about private finance initiatives, but clearly those are not suitable for this project. Lagan Valley residents will not tolerate the Minister's trying to fob us off with private finance initiatives in respect of that issue.

An extra £25 million has been allocated to the agriculture budget. That is a large additional amount of money, but it will make little difference to farmers. There has been a lack of innovation on the part of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development officials, and, to a greater extent, the Minister is singing from the same hymn sheet as the direct-rule Ministers were. There was an opportunity to introduce animal welfare and environmental grants schemes, which would have been similar to the old sub-programme for agriculture and rural development (SPARD) scheme. That would have helped farmers to afford improvements. Not only are farmers' incomes decreasing each year, but farms are running down and deteriorating as the years go on. There has been an opportunity for the Minister to do something about this, but so far she has failed. We will continue to challenge the Minister on those issues in the coming year.

11.45 am

I am a member of the Environment Committee, and the Department of the Environment has received an extra £4 million. Steady progress has been made by the Environment Committee and the Minister of the Environment. I especially welcome the £1.7 million that has been allocated for historic buildings. That will release matching funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, thereby bringing money to the Province. Those who appreciate our built heritage will also appreciate the extra money.

The extra money for road safety officers and for the Planning Service is most welcome. However, the Committee is still concerned about the Environment and Heritage Service. There is not yet sufficient funding to carry through much of the work that is demanded of it by the European Union. Those issues must be addressed.

I am concerned that the Minister of Education continues to allocate money to pet projects such as his Irish-medium education fund. There is clearly not a large demand for it. There is a large demand for new schools and new classrooms for the children. There are children in mobile classrooms in conditions that they do not deserve to be in, and the Minister does not appear to prioritise his money to that end.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment does not seem to spread tourism funding evenly across the Province. The figures speak for themselves. Certain areas receive sufficient funding for tourism while other areas receive negligible funding. The moratorium on grants outside the Greater Belfast area goes against Lisburn, Newtownabbey, North Down, and other council areas. Those areas do not have decent hotels, because no one wants to put in the full funding while grants are available in Belfast city centre. The Minister must reconsider that.

The gas pipeline to the south-east of the Province is not getting much of a hearing. All efforts seem to be put into the gas pipeline to the north-west — and that is fair enough. However, a large amount of business is done in towns in the south-east of the Province, such as Dromore, Banbridge, Craigavon, Portadown and Newry, and a large number of people live in those areas. The gas pipeline to that area is equally as important as the pipeline to the north-west of the Province.

Turning to the Estimates for the Department for Regional Development, I would like to mention the Antrim-Knockmore railway line. An extra £20 million has been allocated to the railways. That £20 million, and a lot more, is needed to make the railways safe. Part of the initial AD Lyttle report suggested the closure of the Antrim-Knockmore railway line. It will cost £428,000 to buy replacement buses and to fence off the line and an additional £246,000 per year will be needed to subsidise the bus routes on that line.

I ask the Ministers concerned to look at the value of the railways to Northern Ireland and the value of that line in the context of the regional strategic framework and find the resources to keep it open. Closing it would be a retrograde step. When railway lines are closed, they are closed for good, with the exception of Bleach Green, which is opening again after 20 years. In this day and age, we are meant to be seeking safer and more environmentally friendly methods of transporting people. The Assembly would be sending out the wrong message if it closed any further railway lines.

I welcome the additional funding for maintaining roads. A little in a large pot is required. When some representatives of the Department for Regional Development came before our district council they said that there is not enough funding in the maintenance budget to resurface some roads for at least 100 years. If we are going to have to wait 100 years for some roads to be resurfaced, they will be in a very poor state. We cannot continue to ignore the state of our roads — we all use them. Sufficient funding must be put into the roads budget, especially for roads in rural areas.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety received £43.5 million. I would like to see a large amount of funding going to the Health Service if it resulted in more hip operations taking place, or in people not having to wait so long for open-heart surgery. I do not like to see the wastage that is in the Health Service, and I am concerned about it. I do not like to see the wastage that occurs in the preparation of documents in Irish, in prescription fraud and in theft from hospitals. I challenge the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to consider how it could save and reallocate money according to the real needs of the people and not just carry on as things are at the moment.

The Department for Social Development received an extra £6.2 million. Historically, much of its funding for urban regeneration has gone to Belfast and Londonderry, but there are many other important towns in the Province which would like to see a bit more of that funding coming their way. People in those towns feel that they have been hard done by over the years, and the Minister for Social Development has the opportunity to address that.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel discussed rates. We should be looking at a situation where the out-of-town shopping centres should be charged higher rates than those paid by shops in town centres. Businesses in town centres are not working on a level playing field, because out-of-town shopping centres have free car parking. The rateable valuation of out-of-town shopping centres should be increased to allow town centre businesses to compete. I am concerned that, while many of our towns and villages are boarding up their shops, large shopping centres are being constructed.

I am concerned at the increasing departmental running costs of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy

First Ministers (OFMDFM) — now over £11 million, which is an increase of £239,000. That Department is top-heavy, with a lot of under-secretaries and high-grade civil servants.

While extra money was being allocated to OFMDFM, the funding for victims was not receiving its full allocation. Less than half of the amount sought was received, and only £500,000 was sought in the first instance. I quote from the draft Programme for Government:

“as an important part of addressing human rights, it is important that special attention is paid to the needs of those who have been most directly affected by the violence of the last 30 years. The needs of victims and survivors are complex, ranging from coping with serious injury through to physical and emotional trauma, along with dealing with often adverse economic circumstances.”

We must look seriously at finding a reasonable amount of money to try to meet the needs of victims.

The Community Relations Council receives almost £6 million. At some stage that funding must be looked at. There is less violence than previously in Northern Ireland, but we certainly do not have good community relations. Substantial funding has gone into community relations in the last 10 to 15 years. One must ask if community relations are better or if any significant difference has been made. It must be decided whether the money which is put to that purpose is well spent.

I also want to raise the issue of electronic government. No resources have been allocated to that, but a wish list has been set out. None of the desired achievements will be possible, however, without adequate resources.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to be brief. I do not want to go into the Estimates Department by Department, for I want a time to come when each Committee can deal with those aspects of the Estimates that are relevant to its Department. That would be the best way to proceed in the future, and I know that the Minister has addressed that very issue himself. It would perhaps take away some of the need for people to itemise issues in the Chamber. I do not want to deal with any specific items myself.

I would like to deal with the overall question of public financing. There has been a learning curve in the Assembly and the Executive, and a lot of work has been required. There has been the negotiation of the Programme for Government, the Budget, and so on. That has been crucial work, and I commend the Minister, and the Executive, for having produced everything that has been done so far.

I would like to have a much more wide-ranging debate, though obviously not today. I want to flag up the need to have an overview. When I raised the question of the regional rate recently, I made the point that I wanted to reduce it to the level of inflation for one year to allow time for a much wider overview of it. We have looked at the Barnett formula. There is no doubt that this area has

not been dealt with favourably under the Barnett formula, and there is a need to look at it. Mr Molloy and others have already raised that.

There is the question of the Executive programme funds. How do we allocate money for targeting social need? We are consistently told that that is a theme. It is Government policy and a requirement of the Good Friday Agreement, but we do not, in my view, appear to take it seriously enough. That is not a reflection on any of the Ministers, of course, but we are not getting proper details of the way in which we deal with targeting social need and how we deploy money. I know that it is not only money which has to be deployed to target social need, but there is obviously a significant consequence for the overall finances if we do deal with targeting social need in the way in which people expect us to.

There is of course the matter of European money. There are the vexed matters of private finance initiatives (PFI) and public-sector borrowing. I welcome the fact that the Finance and Personnel Committee has now launched a public inquiry into the use of PFI. It is clear that PFI appears to underpin a good deal of the work and aspirations of the Executive. There is a compelling and growing body of evidence that the PFI schemes of the past were not necessarily that successful. The key question — that of having important public services remaining in public ownership — must be addressed by the Assembly. I advocate that we try to map out some time for the Assembly to debate the overall question of public financing.

We also have to deal with the cross-border tax variations and, as I see it — as, indeed, do many economists who are not Nationalists or Republicans — the need for a single-island economy. I am drawing attention to the need for a full, public debate on public financing.

I welcome the public service agreements and the Minister's Government Resources and Accounts Bill. Those are ways by which we can measure public spending better and more effectively. As I said to some officials recently, it is important that public service agreements are established. They detail and highlight what is being financed. The Department must bear in mind that the contrary is also true. They also identify what is not being financed. They therefore help to make all the parties, the Executive and the Assembly as a whole more accountable to the public.

I would like to echo one of the earlier comments. We need to take time to perform our duties in the Executive and the Assembly, but we also need to think in more imaginative terms as time goes on. We do not need the carry-on and carry-over policies that some Departments have unfortunately been carrying out. There is a need for innovation and imagination. There is a need — and I know that the Minister has addressed this in recent debates — for us to take stock and to have an overall

view of public financing and the responsibilities that we all have.

12.00

Mr Close: I commend Mr Micawber, sorry: the Minister, for his detailed presentation. I am sure that I am not the only Member who recognises the many frailties of our understanding of the complexities of the cycle of public expenditure. Each opportunity presented to us should be used as a chance to learn, as we try to get to grips with what is perhaps the most important subject for debate in this Chamber. After all, this issue affects every man, woman and child in Northern Ireland.

Having expressed my compliments to the Minister, I will now take a more traditional route and express yet again my deep disappointment at the lack of time that has been made available to Members, Committees and those who are not on Committees to carry out a proper scrutiny of these spring Supplementary Estimates. Last year the Minister referred to the tight time schedule, and the record will show that he said that this restriction was unacceptable and that improvements were needed.

One year on, one must question how much has really changed. I concede that, over the last six to nine months, there has been an opportunity to see the figures produced in the monitoring rounds. But, as I pointed out to the House, that happened retrospectively. The Committees saw the figures after the job was done. We have been asked to accept a *fait accompli*. I question, as I have done in the past, whether that constitutes proper scrutiny. In my book it does not. The advice that each Committee member is required to give to the Minister on the financial exercise should be taken on board before the matter goes before the Executive. We have not yet got that right.

I echo the sentiments of Mr Maskey, who said that we need to sit down and find a set of procedures that suits what we want to do on behalf of the tax-payers, our electorate. Our focus should be on trying to meet time barriers. We must reorganise ourselves in such a way as to give us the time we need to do the job for which we were elected. Scrutiny, as I have said before, means examining in minute detail. It is a totally different concept from consultation.

It strikes me that at the minute we are still operating on a consultative basis — “Let us have a wee word with the Committee; let us have a wee word with Members, see what they think, and then proceed to do what the Executive want.” I am sorry, but that is not acceptable. That must change. I am not trying to be negative; I am trying to be positive. I am trying to bring about, with other Members, something that has never happened before, a situation in which we, as accountable representatives, have the necessary knowledge to enable us to explain things, as necessary, and to enable us to ensure that

money is spent in the most efficient and transparent manner possible.

To highlight this, last year the spring Supplementary Estimates documents were available on approximately 17 February. Today is 19 February. Is that progress? What additional time and opportunities have been given to us? We need to look very seriously at this. If I were a suspicious person I would be concluding that the concept of scrutiny may be something that is slightly bothersome to some people. I would not like to leave the Chamber with that sentiment. Scrutiny is important; it is essential, and we must create the circumstances and allocate enough time for it. We must be about accountability and transparency. I live in hope that that will happen sooner rather than later.

I would like to make some general comments on the spring Supplementaries. I apologise in advance if some of my comments or questions appear silly to some people. I am trying to get to grips with the overall situation, and one must often ask silly questions to get the correct answers. I take comfort from the fact that even the Minister referred to the complexities of the subject. Therefore, I suppose, I can claim that ignorance is bliss.

Looking at the overall figure of the Supplementary Estimate provision, I note that an additional £195 million is being sought. That represents approximately 2.5% of the main Estimates. The figure sought last year was not a hound's howl from that in percentage terms.

Is 2.5% of the Main Estimate the size of provision normally sought through the spring Supplementaries? If that is the case and things are budgeted so that we get an additional 2.5% through the Supplementary Estimates, it begs certain questions about some of the votes. For example, 50% is being sought for national agricultural support. Why is that? Has there been particularly bad budgeting, or do we just stick a notional figure in the original Estimates? Bids have included a 10% increase for culture, arts and leisure; 40% for urban regeneration under the Department for Social Development; 8% for finance and personnel; and an additional 7% for the Office of the First and the Deputy First Minister. Interestingly, over 100% of an increase has been requested for superannuation and other allowances. The Main Estimates provision was over £14 million; now they are seeking £15.2 million to bring the total amount to £29.3 million.

We must study and query those bids. Do they follow some general policy? Comparison with last year's supplementaries certainly gives credence to that view. For example, last year an additional £10 million was sought for national agricultural support; this year it is an additional £8 million. The IDB bid last year was for a token amount; ditto this year. The Finance and Personnel bid was for £8.7 last year and for £7.7 million this year. Last year, an additional £3.4 million was sought for the

Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency's running costs; the figure for this year is £3.5 million.

Those similarities pose the question: is it anticipated that top-ups will always be available? Having pointed to the similarities, I must mention some exceptions, as it is often the exception that proves the rule. Last year OFREG was looking for an additional £355,000 for publicity and consultancy. This year the original provision was £527,000, but now it is seeking an additional £890,000. It strikes me that that requires an explanation.

It is also important to focus particular scrutiny on the figure for superannuation and other allowances. I have spoken on this area and asked questions about it before. Page 77 mentions:

"redundancy and early retirement costs to former civil servants",

part of which is funded by Her Majesty's Treasury. Last year there was an original provision of £5.5 million, which was increased in the Supplementaries by £7.8 million giving a total of £13.3 million. This year the original provision was £3.7 million, and now, in front of us, it is seeking an increase of £97.9 million, giving a total of £101.6 million. The type of escalation in those figures requires an explanation, particularly in view of the recent publicity over certain golden handshake or golden goodbye settlements that have been reached in some sectors of the public service.

The escalation in those figures requires an explanation, particularly given the amount of recent publicity over golden handshake or golden goodbye settlements that have been reached in some public-service sectors. Questions can justifiably be asked.

To create a situation in which we get things right and get our heads around the Supplementaries and the budgeting process, we need to look at the comments in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report for 1999-2000 and read across from that report into the supplementaries. Changes in procedure and in Departments mean that that is not easy to do. However, some interesting facts emerge from an attempt.

A number of surpluses in the different Departments are obvious at the year-end of the auditor's report. For example, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure had a £5.2 million surplus. Last year it spent £153 million and had a surplus of £5.2 million, yet this year there is an estimate of £175.5 million. Where is the read across between what is spent in a particular financial year and the estimate for provision for the subsequent year? There should be some connection, some reason, for deciding, on whatever basis, on a particular figure. The industrial support and regeneration account of the IDB had a surplus of £97.6 million. The board spent £144 million last year. Social security is an interesting one. It had a surplus of £97.5 million when the various heads are added together.

I will be interested to hear the Minister's response. However, if year in, year out there can be surpluses, and if the figure spent in a particular financial year does not appear to have any real bearing on the figure provided for the subsequent year, the impression given is of a certain laxity in budgeting for any particular service. One can see under £7 million in loss statements last year, of which £5.2 million lay in the IDB's Vote B. Analysing the reasons behind those losses poses questions on the proper financial controls applied throughout the Departments. If the respective Committees were able to perform their scrutiny roles properly, perhaps we would be in a better position to get to grips with the reasoning behind those losses. It would provide us all with a better opportunity for transparency in dealing with the issues.

In mentioning the Comptroller and Auditor General's report, I must draw attention to the fact that he found it necessary to qualify six accounts, some of them not for the first time. The common fault line that appears to run through the reasons for those qualifications was the lack of proper financial control. That resulted in payments being made without invoices or sufficient evidence to support them, clerical errors and weaknesses in tendering and purchasing procedures et cetera. Those are matters that we as an Assembly have to try to ensure are got right sooner rather than later. This apparent sloppiness with regard to accounting in certain areas cannot continue. It has to be right, and it has to be seen to be right.

12.15 pm

This year the Water Service is seeking more money. Last year it was forced into the situation of having to make an ex gratia payment of £450,000 because it had not got basic facts right. It had not completed land acquisition but had employed contractors to start work. It had not obtained planning permission, yet had employed contractors. The sum of £450,000 may appear to be small fry in the overall Budget for Northern Ireland, but to the man, woman and child in the street it is not. To those waiting for hip replacements, or for a social care package, or whatever example one chooses, that is a large amount of money.

Through our constituency offices, we are all aware of individuals who feel they are being short-changed by Departments not giving them that to which they are entitled. Those individuals who are deprived in our society feel that it is important that this type of error or laxity cannot be seen to be happening again and again.

I mentioned social security. According to the last audit report, over-payments of £65 million were made. That has a dreadful impact on the socially deprived in our society. It makes them want to weep and question what is going on. We, as the custodians of the public purse, have got to be absolutely sure that what we are doing — and what the Departments are doing in our

name — is seen to be above board, absolutely beyond reproach, transparent and accountable.

I do not highlight these issues to give the impression of being overly critical. I recognise that, by and large, there is absolute transparency and accountability in the vast bulk of the issues confronting departments. We should take great pride in the operation of our civil servants. I do not think that can be stressed heavily enough. However, I raise those points so that the Minister, in reflecting and dealing with the issues that confront him, can recognise something he said in an earlier debate — that the money is in the system to do various things that we need to do now. We need to do those things now because, in many respects, the Assembly and the Executive are seen to be on trial. People want to see fundamental change, and they want to see it now. In many respects, they cannot wait for an uncertain number of years. The money is in the system, and I believe that the Minister, his officials and the Executive should be doing their utmost to ensure that wastage and inefficiency are cut out now, so that the schemes that are necessary to go ahead can do so.

Other Members and myself have referred to the increase in the regional rate. Some said that the money was there and that the figure could be reduced. I found it sad that it had to be an exercise akin to pulling teeth to get the necessary movement and the necessary reductions in the rate increase. I regret that, due to illness, I was unable to be here to thank the Minister for the small mercy on 12 February. The sudden pain in my stomach reminded me of the practice of sticking pins into little puppets, and I wondered if somebody was doing that to lay me low so quickly, just when we were about to deal with the rates.

Interestingly, on the same day, a Standing Order was moved with great haste through the House, which now means that accelerated passage will be the rule — rather than the exception — for the most important issue we deal with. That was a fundamental error. We should have been concentrating on getting procedures right rather than changing the rules to have accelerated passage as the norm. With every matter other than finance, Ministers will have to explain to the House why they are deciding on accelerated passage. Unfortunately, I missed that debate and did not get the opportunity to make my point. I just mention it now *en passant*, as it were.

I want to make a bit of a party political plea on a constituency basis, as other Members have. The money is in the system for the railway that Mr Poots mentioned, namely, the Knockmore line. The consultation period on that is coming to a close. The big issue that has to be considered by the Executive and by the Minister for Regional Development and his colleagues is that of hardship. Is there hardship, or will there be hardship, if that line closes? Clearly, the answer to that question is

“Yes”. The people of Glenavy, Ballinderry, Lisburn and Crumlin will suffer hardship.

It is a totally backward step. It is reminiscent of the old Beeching plan, under which they were shutting every line that appeared. I do not accept this talk of mothballing. How many railway lines have been mothballed and then reopened? None. The money is available in the system to keep that line open, and that should be done. That message should come out from the consultation, and I hope — and I am not making a political point — that the Minister will go to the Executive, on this one issue, to argue the case with his Colleagues and ensure that that money is made available. It is in the system. He should ask for it, beg for it, and get it. That will be recognised by the people in the Lagan Valley constituency, and others, who will suffer hardship if that particular line is forced to close.

The question of out-of-town shopping developments has been raised. We in Lagan Valley are fortunate in many respects. We have a regional shopping centre, known as Sprucefield. However, things can be pushed a little too far. If development continues at Sprucefield at the rate that is currently proposed, it will be the death knell of a number of the shops and core businesses in the centre of our town. Is that progress? In my book, it is not. The character of our towns and villages needs to be retained, and therefore out-of-town shopping should be restricted. I ask the Minister to look at the type of proposals that Minister Dempsey in the South is currently considering, or may already have put in place, for restricting the size of such developments.

Reference has already been made to the rates. I will leave that to the rate revaluation that will be coming up. I hope that they get their sums right this time. Out-of-town shopping centres were not included in the last revaluation. I imagine that they have been riding rather easily until now, and I hope that that will be rectified. How are Thiepval Barracks, Maghaberry Prison and other Crown properties of that ilk dealt with in regard to rates, compared to the rate base in Lagan Valley or the borough of Lisburn? I understand that they may not be paying their full whack, yet I know for a fact that their bins have to be emptied. There is an issue here with regard to the rating system —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Allow me to interrupt for a moment. There is no time limit on Members' contributions. However, given the number of Members, especially from the smaller parties, who have indicated a desire to contribute, if each of them chooses to speak for 25 minutes there will be very serious difficulty in including them all.

Mr Close: I appreciate that point. If and when we reach the stage of having full and proper scrutiny opportunities through the Committees, and other opportunities to really get to grips with this, long speeches will not be necessary. Anyway, 25 minutes is not that long. I was

unaware that so many people wanted to speak; a few names must have been added recently, so I shall conclude.

Are town plans likely to be superseded by the metropolitan plan? How much money will be wasted? The Knockmore-Sprucefield road link is needed to ease congestion in Lisburn. The building of the road has been put back again and again — sometimes, we are told that the work is on a 15-year plan, sometimes that it is on a 25-year plan. Could the Minister use his good offices, with the money that is available, to bring that plan to fruition sooner?

Ms McWilliams: I welcome the Estimates and the move to resource accounting. It will be easier for Committees and the Assembly to follow Budget lines.

As with other Estimates, I have studied the appropriations-in-aid. We should consider that carefully as we move towards private finance initiatives. Although I have gone through the Budget and the Estimates, I find it difficult to follow how much appropriation-in-aid comes to any Department through the sale of public land and buildings. That is an important issue. Constituency offices receive many telephone calls about what has happened to public land — whether it has been sold and, if so, how much money has gone to the public purse and how much to the developers. We need to ask such questions, so I welcome the move to a new way of budgeting.

I am concerned that much of the new money is available because of poor planning. Some of the circumstances were unforeseen and were beyond any Minister's control. However, there were failures. I am concerned by the fact that £10 million of slippage money has appeared in the Department of Education's budget as a result of the failure to provide schools with the information technology that they needed. Was that because of a failed public-private partnership? If so, how that will be addressed in the future? I would welcome a response now or in writing.

We should pay attention to the Estimates because they involve a huge sum of money — £196 million. I echo other Members' concerns that they have not had enough opportunity to scrutinise the figure. However, it is good that we have the opportunity, unlike Westminster, to debate spring Estimates. The more that we debate the issue in this Assembly, the more the public will see that we are trying to be open and transparent and that we can be held accountable for where the money goes.

I am concerned that the Estimates for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety show that £5 million went to deal with clinical negligence. That could not have been foreseen. However, I understand that that is not the total. One figure mentioned to the Committee was close to £20 million. We will have to pay more attention to that; huge sums of money are being reallocated to cover costs that arise from negligence.

12.30 pm

It is also interesting to note, as regards the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, that £2.5 million will not now be spent on the Springvale campus. Is it the case that this Department, like many other Departments in respect of capital investment, could not spend the money in time, or is it that the money was no longer required? The latter would be unusual. Given that it is such a substantial sum, the response will be interesting.

I echo Dr Birnie's views on the moneys that have now been made available as a result of a reduction in unemployment or because of the inability to market some programmes well enough, particularly those concerning management development. As Dr Birnie said, Northern Ireland requires a great deal of training, if it requires anything. It is sad that the money could not be spent, given that a budget was set up for training. The funds will now have to go elsewhere, to be spent by others before the end of March.

The Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment requires an extra £1.5 million because of changes due to devolution. It would be interesting to know — as it would for other Departments also — what is meant by changes due to devolution. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has had a substantial amount of money given to it because it is a new Department, and because of changes due to devolution. The Supplementary Estimates indicate that the £1.5 million is also in respect of the private finance initiatives (PFIs). We need to be able to answer questions from the public about what that money is spent on in relation to PFI.

Finally — this is a repeated plea of mine — we need to change the headings used for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The largest sum of money is the £12 million under the heading "Community Relations, Equality and Victims – Current". We need to see that figure broken down further. We need to know how much is going to the Equality Commission, towards human rights, to community relations or to the Victims Unit itself.

That organisation must have been doing a very good job because it required very little money in this Estimate. It speaks volumes about excellent planning. However, every time I speak about this matter I say that the entire budget for those areas should not be on one line. A breakdown should be given as it is in other Departments.

Inasmuch as I welcome the Estimates, I remain concerned that much of the document refers to poor planning in Departments and substantial slippage as a result of some failed initiatives, particularly in PFIs.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I intend to review the debate situation at 1.30 pm. We may continue after that time because of the large number of Members wishing to speak.

Mr Leslie: In this debate, there is the risk of trotting the same horses around the paddock again. The same applies to tomorrow's debate on the Budget. Technically, we are rounding off a Budget that we did not scrutinise. Next year, when we deal with the spring Estimates, we will be rounding off the Budget that will be laid before the House tomorrow. In that respect, we should remind ourselves that, at the behest of the Finance and Personnel Committee, we had a thorough debate on that Budget in November, with a view to making it possible to influence the setting of the final Budget.

It is the case that by the time you get to the Estimates the Budget has been set and you are simply putting the agreement made a few months earlier into prescriptive form. Overall, the structure we have devised during the course of the past six months is probably quite good. Next year, when we have a full run at it, including an opportunity for Committees to do their work, between Easter and the first round of Budget setting in the autumn, I hope that we will do a great deal to influence the shape of the Budget.

I wish that I could echo Assembly Member McWilliams's confidence that moving to resource accounting will make it easier to understand the accounts. I suspect that it will make it much more difficult. Maybe after a couple of years the clouds will lift, but I am certainly not looking forward to wrestling with the first edition. I am glad that there is some parallel running of the old system to give us a clue in the first year of the new system.

What will be significant in those resource accounts will be the valuing of Government assets. I hope that the ability to readily see the extent of our assets may cause people to think creatively about those assets and whether we are making the best use of them and examine opportunities for looking at how we raise and spend our money in several different ways. That may in itself provide some of the answers as to how we manage to get a quart out of a pint pot. If we were to take all the demands for money made by Departments, Members and Committees seriously, we would be at least trying to fill a quart with a pint pot.

On the much discussed subject of the Barnett formula, I and other members of the Finance and Personnel Committee were in London last week. We had the opportunity to — very informally, I am glad to say — kick this around with one or two Members at Westminster.

We need to be cautious in addressing this issue. There are very real risks of stirring up a hornets' nest. What one has to remember is that the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, the English regions, the Mayor of London — every single one of them — have the same intention: they want more money in their pot.

Therefore, all things being equal, it will have to come out of somebody else's pot, and not one of those entities

will agree to any money being taken out of their pot. We have to approach this with some caution. The only other thing that can happen is that the overall size of the pot has to be increased, and there is only one way that that can happen — by increased taxation. I have said in the House before, and I will continue to say, that I am exceedingly averse to increased taxation. The way to stimulate the economy is by lowering taxation, not by raising it.

In the context of the debate about rates, I am relieved that it has not proved necessary to make the increases that were originally outlined to the rates. If there is a realistic opportunity of getting a better outcome on Barnett or some revised formula, we may have to do that. We should be aware that that would almost certainly be in the context of higher rates. However, we have to ask ourselves, if we are not likely to get the better outcome, whether it might be better to get by on less and not have what one might call the negative stimulus of ever-increasing rates. Those matters require serious consideration.

I also remind the House that when you increase tax, whether it is rates or anything else, you are making an assumption that the Government can spend the money for the better public good than people could if it were left in their pockets. That is an exceedingly doubtful contention, and there is only a tenuous link between cost and benefit. That became apparent on the mainland last year when we saw protests over the level of tax on fuel. Some 75% of the cost of fuel for motor cars is taxation.

Some Members regularly draw attention to issues in relation to targeting social needs and targeting particular areas of deprivation. I am aware of the problem. There are a quite a number of such places in my constituency. Unfortunately, Moyle District Council in North Antrim shares the highest unemployment rate in Northern Ireland with Strabane. I am conscious of the need to find some means to address that. However, it should be in the context of getting Northern Ireland's unemployment rate down from its current level of about 5.5% — which is a big improvement in itself — to 3%. That figure is regarded as being fairly close to full employment in relation to those whom it is possible to employ. That is how we will be able to address most of these problems.

In addressing the issue, we must focus on our skills base and the provision of training in new skills. It is clear from the problems in agriculture and textiles that there are a number of skills for which there is less of a market — we cannot produce a product in Northern Ireland at a competitive price using those skills. We must therefore be proactive in finding ways to re-equip workers who have been adversely affected by those circumstances with other skills that can be applied to businesses that are in a growth phase. All Members will have noticed the situation that has arisen in Wales. A considerable number of steelworkers are being made redundant, and it looks as though there may be an

opportunity to redeploy a significant number of them in part of the telecommunications industry.

We must be alert. We must be realistic about what is happening to our economy and to some of our traditional industries, and we must put measures in place to address those problems. It is not particularly helpful to the affected workers, or to anyone else, to start howling with anguish after the problem has manifested itself, when it is obvious that the problem is there right now. In that respect, I am particularly anxious about, and will continue to closely view, the allocation of moneys to the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment and to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Rather than pre-empt tomorrow's debate, or leave myself with nothing to say in it, I will conclude my remarks.

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Dallat): I am pleased with the approach being taken by the DUP and the Alliance Party on out-of-town shopping centres. Mr Poots and Mr Close are to be congratulated for the concern that they expressed this morning about the uncontrolled development of such centres. They are, of course, representing the views of the 20,000 people employed in the independent retail sector. My only regret is that they failed to support the motion that I brought before the Assembly a few months ago on that very issue. Nevertheless, the views voiced today are important. It is to be hoped that a new motion, which will be guaranteed support from both the DUP and the Alliance Party, can soon be put before the Assembly. That would be a great source of comfort to the many small shops in towns and villages throughout Northern Ireland.

I now turn to the more important issues of services and how we spend our money. Tomorrow, there will be widespread support for increased powers for the public auditor. The Assembly can then have a handle on the millions of pounds expended by the bodies that draw on the public purse. The amount stated today, which the Comptroller and Auditor General requires, is £2,327,000. Will the Minister confirm that that amount includes the additional costs of carrying out the extra duties to which I referred and which I hope will be passed when the Assembly debates the Government Resources and Accounts Bill?

I impress upon the Minister the need for there to be no unnecessary delays on reports prepared by public auditor. I recognise that, as recently as last week's Question Time, the Minister provided an undertaking that there would be no such hold-ups.

12.45 pm

By way of example, I refer to a report on the Water Service that was published recently. The report took almost two years to agree. That is totally unacceptable

and does not represent good value for money. Perhaps today would be a good time to send out a clear message to all Departments that when we allocate money to the Comptroller and Auditor General to ensure public money is well spent his reports should not be delayed. They must be made available at the earliest opportunity so that the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) can scrutinise them with a view to improving value for money. The Minister gave us an assurance that that would happen, and I simply emphasise that again.

However, when reports come before the PAC there must be more than just a little smack on the knuckles. Where serious bad practices are uncovered, they must be addressed, because it is only then that the public will recognise that the Assembly is making a real impact on how public money is being spent.

I refer to a serious report last week on serious deficiencies in the tendering procedures of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), which led to printing contracts being awarded involving millions of pounds. Not only did the contracts go to a company whose chief executive is also chief executive of the NITB, they did not go to the person making the lowest tender. Those disclosures have undermined confidence in the NITB's procurement procedures and call for action beyond a ticking off from the PAC.

No one is claiming impropriety, but there is little dispute that the chief executive, Mr Roy Bailie, should not be holding a key position in NITB while at the same time, in another capacity, providing millions of pounds of goods and services to NITB.

The money we allocate today to the Northern Ireland Audit Office must bring about real change if we are to conduct the financial affairs of our publicly funded bodies, and that includes NITB. To date, there is not enough evidence that things are about to change dramatically. That worries me and will no doubt worry the Assembly.

The PAC, under the chairmanship of Mr Billy Bell, has done a good job. However, the enormous energy applied by that Committee must not be ignored or undermined by reluctance, or by the bad practices which crept into Departments over 30 years of direct rule when there was limited opportunity to scrutinise or criticise Government expenditure.

The money allocated to the Northern Ireland Audit Office today will assist the better use of public money, but it also requires a determination to stamp out bad practices when they occur. If we deal with that issue, many of the concerns expressed today can be addressed with a view to providing better value for money. The Assembly can make a real impact by taking the reins and insisting that the standard of services provided are improved, and it can really make the changes necessary to get better value for money.

Mr Hay: The lack of accountability has been highlighted in what has been announced this morning. The Committees have not had the opportunity to properly scrutinise what has been announced this morning. It is right that we, as public representatives, lay down a marker on that serious issue.

The Minister's announcement last Monday concerned a reduction in the proposed 8% increase in the regional rate. The Minister fully explained how it was possible to reduce the regional rate. However, there was a head of steam building up in the public domain, especially in the small business community.

Reality struck when most councils worked out their rates estimates for the year. During our city council's discussions on rates estimates and council expenditure, the Finance Minister's announcement of 8% on the regional rate was uppermost in councillors' minds. The council expressed concern about that announcement. The pressure from the small business community in Northern Ireland and local government agencies led to the Minister's announcement last Monday. The announcement was welcomed by everyone — especially by those in local government and small business who are facing difficult decisions and challenges.

The Minister's announcement on gap funding was also welcomed. This has been a problem for some time in Northern Ireland, especially since it became clear that Peace II was not going to hit the ground as quickly as was intended. There was panic when most people realised that. Most of those involved in projects, especially those in the voluntary sector, realised that by the end of March there would be serious difficulties for the work that they had been doing under difficult circumstances and for many of the projects that were funded under Peace I.

Will the Minister tell the House how much money is left for the various organisations under Peace I? I am open to correction, but I understand that that money must be spent by the end of June. The public is concerned that if the Peace I money is not spent — and we are talking about several millions of pounds — it will be taken from Northern Ireland.

Members and the Minister have been lobbied by various groups and organisations about the Peace I money. That money could provide funding for the voluntary and community sectors until Peace II hits the ground. It is difficult for organisations to understand why money cannot be made available when there is still a huge amount to be drawn down and spent under Peace I.

Will the Minister indicate how much money is still available, by what date it has to be spent and whether Northern Ireland will lose that money if it is not spent?

There are a number of district partnerships in the Province. Some have spent 60% of their allocation, and others have spent 70%, but there are partnerships that

have spent as little as 50%. That is a worrying trend of which the Minister must be aware.

In the context of regional development, I welcome the additional resources announced for roads maintenance.

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

However, the allocation falls short of what is needed. It does not go far enough. The Minister has inherited a 30-year underspend in Roads Service generally. The same applies to all other Departments. However, the problem of resources for road maintenance continually comes up in the Regional Development Committee, and it is causing deep concern.

The other worrying problem is the reduction in capital expenditure for Roads Service because of delays in the commencement of schemes. When those schemes eventually get the go-ahead, will money then be made available? We do not know which schemes have been delayed and why they have been delayed. There are capital schemes across the Province which need to be looked at seriously and which need expenditure. The Minister must address that.

The Regional Development Committee has discussed the Knockmore railway line. It is wrong for the hon Member Seamus Close to say that railway lines that have been mothballed stay mothballed. That is not the case. During direct rule, Ministers had a policy of closing railways across Northern Ireland. If they could get away with it, there is no doubt that they would still be doing it today. When the Regional Development Committee examined the matter, it was obvious that that was its clear policy.

The Minister for Regional Development and the Committee are conscious of the need for a good public service rail facility across Northern Ireland. Railways are uppermost in our minds. People need a reason for moving from the private car to public transport. The Minister and the Committee are committed to looking seriously at the whole railway network. Other Committee members have raised concerns about how the Knockmore railway line issue has been handled. The Committee is awaiting a number of reports, and we will be deliberating in the future. It is wrong to say that when lines close they are mothballed. Under direct rule that would have been the case, but under the Assembly and the Minister for Regional Development that will not be the case.

Generally we very much welcome the Minister's announcement of extra expenditure. He will never please everybody, but if he pleases everybody sometimes it may be enough to get him elected.

1.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have another 15 Members on my list. The debate must end at 2.30 pm, and the Minister

is entitled to 40 minutes to sum up. I suggest that from now on we limit speeches to eight minutes.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is ironic that I get up at the moment that the time is reduced to about 50% of what I need. I always like to touch on the different Departments, as it is often the only opportunity that we get while we have Committee struggles with which to deal.

Take the Department of Health, for instance. The trusts have got an extra £18 million, and they have to decide what they want to do with that. They have been struggling with their debts and have also been told by the boards that they have to keep within their limits. Take the western area, where there has been a continual loss of services in places such as Enniskillen and Omagh. Services are continually being drained away from us. Quite often you wonder whether the pressure is on all the time for people to actually pay for themselves, rather than letting the NHS do what it is supposed to do. There seems to be a drive towards that all the time.

We are talking about resources and the price of resources. Private operations are taking place in NHS theatres. These are all questions people will ask. At the end of the day, who is paying for what? It all comes out of the same budget. NHS patients have to wait and suffer. Some trusts, such as one in my area, are in the business of leasing land, while at the same time trying to acquire land in case we ever have to build a new hospital, which I think will be necessary in that part of the Six Counties. At a later date, the budget from here might have to be used in a much greater proportion than the amount that they are going to gain from the leasing to buy back land that might be needed. I want to flag that up because it is a very important issue regarding the budget for the Department and for the trust.

I always welcome any extra spending on education. However, central administration funding has been mentioned again, and boards have got considerably more. It is administration versus what goes into the school or learning. It looks as though we have 5% going to children or learning and 95% going to administration and pay. There is a certain difficulty in people's minds about where administration is going and why there has to be so much emphasis on it.

Mr Poots described Irish-medium education as wasted funds. Irish-medium education is a growing area and Irish is an important language. Germany and other countries consider their local language to be number one, and they will not allow any movement on that. That is what we should be doing. Social inclusion is part of the Good Friday Agreement and part of the successful future that we need through all the negotiated points of the agreement.

I also welcome money going to the libraries. That is important. I often wonder whether there is as much going to libraries in rural areas as there is to libraries in

urban areas. People in rural areas often have to rely on mobile libraries.

I am a member of the Agriculture Committee. Without going over everything that we talked about, I want to say that there is nothing extra for farmers now, just as there was nothing in the last funding round. It points out the commitment of Government to the future. There has to be a change in future Budgets. The Department has asked for more money for administration costs; that is where the difficulty lies. The Department is bound up in administration, and farmers find that taxing and expensive. It has to move away from red tape, as do all the others.

As was mentioned, there is a social services surplus — there has been year after year, even going back to the days of direct rule. However, in many instances people are failing to receive the money to which they are entitled, because they are in weak and vulnerable situations, and bureaucratic pressures target them in a drive to save money in relation to fraud. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will have to look at that.

Fermanagh lost another 90 jobs last week at the Aldervale textile factory, and there were further losses in Newry. I have asked the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, as well as other bodies, to look at the facts behind the job losses and to understand that that is not something that we are making up, it is a fact. I want to see action to help put that right, and there must be equality of spending in the region, and the wrongs in relation to job losses must be put right. There must be parity in respect of the money that is drawn down for us at a local level and on an east/west basis. The situation with regard to the Industrial Development Board (IDB) and the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) — which is not delivering for us in those areas — needs to be looked at. Obviously they are going through a phase of change, and we hope that that will help to deliver something different and more positive to us in the future.

As regards the Department for Regional Development, the roads maintenance budget in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone area is vastly underfunded. The area has a small percentage of class A roads that require gritting all the time, so we get much less from that budget than Belfast, for example. There has been talk about equality in road budgets, but there is an increasing failure and weakness in the road structure at all levels from here to Fermanagh. The number of pot holes is increasing, and many people are asking about compensation for damage to their vehicles. People are taxed for road maintenance, and they are also taxed when they have to fix their vehicles when they are damaged. That is happening more often, and more money must be allocated to rural areas in the roads budget. The Department needs to look again at how things are done in order to try to save money.

Rail transport is important. My constituency does not have rail links, but if it did we would be more positive about the budget for that.

The Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee (Mr O'Neill): On behalf of my Committee, I welcome those alterations that have produced additional funding for the Department — especially increased provisions in research and consultation exercises and in capital spending for libraries.

In addition, I stress our gratitude to the Department, as well as the Minister of Finance and Personnel, for providing a considerable increase in funding to address urgent health and safety issues at sports grounds. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that is of major concern to many people.

Likewise, we should record our gratitude for the increased community involvement finance for millennium celebrations.

In line with the Committee's report — the long-awaited inland fisheries report, which I hope to see finally published before the beginning of March — money has been made available for a scientific study of that matter. That is necessary to enable us to ascertain the impact of hydroelectric schemes on river fisheries. It is a major step forward in recognising our aspiration for clean energy sources, while ensuring that those do not disturb the quality of river life or any related environmental aspects.

On the Vote on Account, some £71.4 million has been indicated for the forthcoming year. We welcome the increases for areas such as libraries, health and safety in sports grounds, the languages body and the attempts to provide access to and participation in the arts by young people, especially those from the more disadvantaged sections of the community.

With regard to the Department's total bid, I must emphasise that, although it is a small Department, it considers the bid to be modest in comparison with its assessment of need. We therefore argue for as much sympathy as possible from the Department of Finance and Personnel. It got little more than 25% of what it asked for, and for a small Department that is something that merits attention.

There is a great need for funding to buy out the commercial fish nets from around the Northern Ireland coastline. Unfortunately, we were unable sufficiently to impress that need to secure the necessary funds. There are many things that could impact on the dreadful condition of our wild salmon stocks and other fish species, such as sea trout. The most important thing that we could do to change that downward trend in the population graphs is remove coastal netting licences. Our inquiry — and we are awaiting the publication of the report on that — has underlined the importance of fishing as part of a recreational tourist industry. That is important to the economy of Northern Ireland and to the anglers. We are coming from a low base, although the potential for economic development is great and meaning-

ful, as indeed is the revenue return to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

On behalf of the Committee, I emphasise that we are concerned that the spending plans do not include any funding for safety improvements to existing motorcycle road racing facilities. This matter has taken up a lot of time in the Committee and has become one of great public concern over the past 12 months or more, which saw many tragic deaths that spurred the Minister and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to set up a special team to look into it. The Department has made a number of recommendations, which cannot be implemented without a considerable degree of financial support. This issue requires urgent attention, and I hope that by my re-emphasising its importance, it will not get lost. The Committee generally respects the difficulties that the Department of Finance and Personnel faces. However, the bids that we have made have not succeeded to the extent that we would like.

1.15 pm

I listened to the debate with interest. There was much comment on the control, monitoring and scrutiny of budgetary activity. Quite justifiably, great emphasis was placed on the elimination of waste and poor accounting procedures.

I was particularly interested in the Public Accounts Committee and its recent work concerning the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Its report drew particular attention to the Department's accounting procedures, and it was quite right to do that. However, many Committee members, in their subsequent comments, put an unfortunate spin on the activities of some of the community groups involved. On behalf of those hard-working voluntary groups, I must say that a poor impression was left.

I have not been the first today to introduce Dickensian references. In criticising a particular scheme in Ardglass, the comments of Seamus "Uriah Heep" Close about delivering money around each individual member made for a damaging statement. We are all anxious to ensure the best in public accountability, that everything is open to scrutiny, and that better value for money is achieved. I hope, however, that when something deserves attention we will be more careful about how our findings are presented.

Mr McCarthy: Most of the important points have been covered. My deputy leader, Mr Seamus Close, spoke eloquently for almost half an hour. However, I have a couple of points to make.

Mr McHugh, Mr Hay and Mr Poots spoke about the underfunding of the roads system. Although I welcome the Minister's speech, in which he said that funding has been provided for a new vessel to operate between Portaferry and Strangford, some of my constituents are

still disappointed at the Assembly's reluctance to even consider the possibility of a bridge across Strangford Lough.

I am particularly concerned about the apparent inequality in the Department for Regional Development's distribution of funds to different areas of Northern Ireland. My constituency of Strangford would appeal to the Minister for Regional Development to allocate more funding for road maintenance in rural areas. Modern, large vehicles, tractors and milk tankers have destroyed rural roads, and will continue to do so.

I do not know whether the Minister for Regional Development knows that some milk distributors are considering introducing even broader tankers. Someone mentioned the gritting of roads. If broader tankers are introduced, there will be no need for gritting, because rural roads will be so badly cut up. Such vehicles destroy rural roads.

The Roads Service division in my constituency does not seem to have the funding to repair roads or for simple minor road-widening schemes. Thus, we have an outcry from constituents whose cars are wrecked when they use those roads. As has been said, compensation is hard to come by. I ask Mr Durkan to ensure that Mr Campbell distributes funding on a fair and equitable basis.

Secondly, I would like to mention health issues. Again, I welcome the new investment, which is going into the provision of a decent Health Service, but much more needs to be done. We need more funding for cancer research, for example. We need more ambulances. Many other facilities in the Health Service need much more funding.

I conclude by putting down a marker. I must impress on the Minister that we look forward to the implementation of the report of the Royal Commission so that in due course we will provide free residential and nursing care for our elderly. That is a major problem which needs to be acted upon, and I hope that it will come before the Assembly soon.

I finish by welcoming the Minister's statement. I hope that he will take what I have said into consideration.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I congratulate you on finishing in less than half your time. It is a good example.

Mr Kane: Although I readily accept the complexity and scale of the task of compiling budgetary proposals, I assume that areas in the scope of the Budget have been less than provided for and that that will serve as a lesson for the Minister and his Department of Finance and Personnel in the future. These areas where lessons may be learnt are no doubt numerous and should be given consideration. No one will draw comfort from bogus percentage increases, which, when considered carefully, produce only minimal changes in funding levels.

I fail to see how the vision steering group will be able to provide the long-term and medium-term strategies that it is hoped will put the agriculture industry back on any kind of firm footing. That message is interpreted in the industry to mean that low priority is being given to the industry and its problems. Frankly, I fail to see how the allocation of £10 million will be enough to enable us to implement the recommendations of the vision group that we must implement if we are to tackle problems of this magnitude. Furthermore, the figure fails to account for the percentage of the sum that will be swallowed by administration.

I risk being repetitive when I mention how vital farm capital investment grants are. Let me just qualify the term "farm capital investment" by saying that this is not an attempt to provide every farm in the Province with state-of-the-art farmyards and livestock accommodation. It is a call for assistance to reverse the decline that has occurred on farms during the past five years. For example, on a local farm, when an official from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development arrived to inspect animals for the first stage beef special premium scheme, he was accompanied by a health and safety inspector. Why? If the facilities were substandard on that farm, how do you blame the farmer, and who is listening to the calls for assistance anyway?

Finally, despite announcements about research on the eradication of tuberculosis and brucellosis in cattle, the inadequacy of funding has been demonstrated over the past week. I say this with reference to Greenmount Agricultural College, where over 200 breeding animals have been slaughtered because of an outbreak of brucellosis. Farming could do without that level of uncertainty about those diseases. It says something about the Department of Finance and Personnel's allocation for research when the diseases continue to be unchecked. It also says something about the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's housekeeping when an outbreak occurs in one of our agricultural colleges.

I conclude by thanking the Minister for his presentation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr Kane. That was creditably brief.

Mr Savage: I welcome the Minister's comments. However, the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee did not get the opportunity to discuss the papers in question, so I cannot respond on its behalf. The Supplementary Estimates are a housekeeping exercise that are designed to obtain formal approval of decisions on the reallocation of funds following the various monitoring rounds. From that perspective, the additional funds announced for agriculture, following the monitoring reviews, will be contained in the supplementary figures sought.

As Deputy Chairman of the Agriculture Committee, I must comment on the notice given with the papers. Members of other Committees will agree that there has

been no time for informed debate at Committee level. Our Committee was given little opportunity to participate in the Budget process, including the monitoring rounds, so we will be pushing for greater involvement in the 2001-02 financial year. We will also be seeking, at an appropriate stage, information on expenditure from the Department for Regional Development's budget. The true value will then be seen of the additional allocations which we are being asked to support today.

We hear of the huge amount of money to be channelled into agriculture, but the entire farming industry in Northern Ireland needs to be given an injection. The industry requires environmental schemes as well as restructuring to streamline services. I also ask the Minister to consider seriously the proposal for a long-term, low-interest loan scheme, which would give the entire industry a whole new lease of life. Such a scheme could stand alone as it would structure itself.

Another emerging issue, which has been touched upon by many Members, is the state of the Province's roads. My own constituency of Upper Bann is one of the fastest growing areas outside Belfast. The increase in traffic and industry in that area is placing a good deal more pressure on our roads. An in-depth review of our infrastructure is needed, and I hope that our roads will benefit from such a review. The Roads Service's regional offices inform us that they are prepared to carry out developments, but that they are prohibited by a lack of finance.

The lack of Water Service schemes is also a major problem. Since Christmas and "the big frost", a mile-long stretch of road in my area has become covered in patches where pipes have burst, which can be seen approximately every three metres. An unbelievable amount of money has been spent on the maintenance of local water supplies. I presume that money has been made available for that purpose, because every other day there is a burst pipe in the area.

1.30 pm

Many Members have highlighted work that needs to be done in different areas.

I welcome the news that money is going to be spent on a rail service. Over the past two days the rail service has been in the headlines because people have misused it in an attempt to make it difficult for others to use. I hope that a measure can be introduced so that those people who are making life miserable for our commuters can be taken to task for it. The system is being abused, and it could do without that abuse. I hope that all those issues will be taken on board.

Many matters have been discussed this morning, and I am not going to repeat them because I have seen Mr Durkan writing all morning. I do not want to add to his summing-up list, as long as he keeps Upper Bann to the forefront. Many things in my constituency need attention.

However, there are level-headed people in various sectors in Upper Bann, and all they need is an injection of money. It does not take much to make a big difference. If that can be taken on board, the results that will flow will be unbelievable.

The Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee (Mr A Maginness): Mr Savage implored the Minister to be mindful of Upper Bann. I would like him to keep North Belfast in his thoughts also.

I welcome the Minister's speech today. It was delivered with characteristic skill and effectiveness. We are used to his skilful presentation and analysis — it is of great benefit to all who are trying to follow the detail of the figures presented today. Several of the announcements about additional expenditure are particularly welcome to the Regional Development Committee.

Resources are scarce and money is clearly in short supply. Nevertheless, resources have been used imaginatively, and the Minister and Departments have effectively maximised the use of those resources for the people of Northern Ireland. That is not to say that all is perfect and rosy in the garden — far from it. However, we welcome the additional funding to allow for free travel for the elderly from October 2001. We also welcome the £5.3 million for the road infrastructure, in particular for structural maintenance. The allocation of an additional £3.1 million for a modern integrated ticketing system for bus and rail is important if we are to have an effective co-ordination of rail and bus services and for the development of a realistic and effective public transportation policy. I greet the additional grant of £19.6 million for the rail infrastructure as a timely intervention by the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to support our under-resourced railway system. It will add significantly to the development of a public transportation strategy for Northern Ireland. The extra £14.5 million for water and sewerage capital investment is heartening, as that area that has been starved of funding for many years.

Although that will not cure what is an immensely difficult problem, it is a welcome start. The £41.9 million from the Chancellor's initiative for capital road projects is necessary to relieve the road infrastructure problems in Northern Ireland. I welcome the additional £7 million from the Executive programme funds' infrastructure/capital renewal fund to deal with these problems. That represents an overall increase of about 10% on expenditure over previous years, which the Regional Development Committee welcomes.

However, I wish to highlight remaining areas of under-funding. Most notably, if bus and rail services are to provide an effective, reliable and affordable public transportation system, major investment is required. The first stage of public consultation over the regional transportation strategy is due to be completed shortly. It is likely that a central theme — and I hope it will be a

central theme — will be a public transportation system that supports a socially inclusive and vibrant economy. That cannot be realised without the required financial investment. Therefore, I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give it his immediate attention. The draft Programme for Government recognises the importance of an effective road infrastructure to support a modern and vibrant economy. Consequently, it is important that funding is targeted at existing bottlenecks along key transport corridors such as Toome, which the Minister for Regional Development knows is a top priority, as does the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

The draft programme of work also states that we will undertake a programme of road maintenance, based on good practice treatments. What additional funding will be made available for that programme of work? Water and sewerage have consistently been underfunded, and it is estimated that an additional £3 billion will be required over the next 10 years. The extreme weather conditions that we suffered recently have shown that the water and sewerage infrastructures are not capable of coping with the problems that have arisen. They require immediate attention and major investment, and I urge the Minister to look at those favourably.

I welcome the additional funding available in the Executive programme funds' infrastructure/capital renewal fund — a total of £7 million this year, £40 million next year and £100 million the following year. How will that funding support the Department for Regional Development's priorities, which are largely infrastructural? Secondly, how will it support the findings of both the regional development strategy and the regional transportation strategy? Finally, how will the Department for Regional Development and other Departments have access to the fund? The Minister must give clear advice on the criteria that will be used for that.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important debate. It is clear that many Members are interested in having a say on where money ought to be spent and how it should be made available. We welcome the opportunity this presents to us, in that spending priorities can now be made by a locally elected Assembly. There are a range of issues that Members have already mentioned, such as education, health and transport. Of particular concern to me, however, is that Mr Durkan should make money available to his ministerial colleagues — Sir Reg Empey in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and Dr Farren for his responsibilities in training and employment, given the sad news of the job losses at the Adria textile plant in Newry last Friday. A total of 165 jobs will be lost. Announcements of that nature are to be regretted, and it is important that the Ministers with responsibility for enterprise, trade and training should be given an opportunity to prove to the workforce — and to the people of Newry and the surrounding region — that the

Assembly is interested, is concerned and will rightly allocate moneys towards redeployment and training and trying to attract inward investment to the Newry area.

Although the announcement was not completely unexpected, the manner in which it came was a shock — especially to the employees. I have some criticisms to make of Adria in that respect. It is regrettable that they kept their employees in the dark before the announcement was made, and they have a duty, therefore, to put proper procedures in place to allow for the retraining and alternative opportunities that we spoke of earlier.

I join my Colleague Mr George Savage in condemnation of the continuing rail disruption in my constituency of Newry and Armagh. The railway line is continually dogged by hoax bombs or by real bombs. Those present a real danger to local people, as well as a great deal of inconvenience to rail and road users, local inhabitants and the industrial sector. It is important to continue to highlight that behaviour of that kind is completely unacceptable. It is an indication that security levels should remain high in the south Armagh area, and therefore the Government ought not to be taking any pre-emptive strikes to remove any of the security installations. I wish to place that on the record, although I do so in the context of welcoming the indication from the Minister that there will be increased moneys made available to upgrade the rail network.

The people of Northern Ireland will want to see the Assembly work in practical ways. They will want us to prove that the substantial investment in public funds, which went into creating and sustaining the Assembly, was worthwhile and can be seen to have tangible results. Changes in the road infrastructure, health and education and all other aspects should be made as quickly as possible. I commend the Minister, wish him well and hope that he will remember the constituency of Newry and Armagh in any considerations of the allocation of finance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: In the Chamber at the moment we have only one other Member to speak after Mr Clyde, and that is Ms Gildernew. Some of you have been saying nice things about the Finance Minister, but he has been sitting here taking notes since 10.30 am, and I am sure he would like some lunch. I would not be averse to the two Members finishing shortly, and then we will have a short suspension. The sacrosanct 2.30 pm start for Question Time is almost upon us.

1.45 pm

Mr Clyde: I welcome the opportunity to add to this debate and to call for financial support to facilitate the provision of slip roads from Antrim Hospital onto the M2. For too long, the people of South Antrim have been forced to endure long and unnecessary detours from the hospital, across the town, before joining the motorway that runs adjacent to the hospital. I understand that the

Department for Regional Development would look favourably on the construction of slip roads. That would significantly shorten journeys and provide easy access for ambulance journeys to specialist services in Belfast hospitals.

Not only would that provide a more rapid response for the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service attending emergency situations, but it could well mean that a life could be saved. I call on the Assembly to give serious consideration to road provisions that would have the support of not only the local community and patients using Antrim Hospital, but the United Hospital Trust. The availability of funding would allow proposals to move ahead immediately. It would not only improve the quality of health services, but allow for optimum performance at all times.

I also appeal to the Assembly to make money available for more orthopaedic beds in the Royal Victoria Hospital. Currently, elderly people with broken limbs have to wait in Antrim Hospital for up to six days before admittance for surgery in Belfast. Also, patients attending the fracture clinic in Antrim Hospital were sent home on Wednesday 7 February because there was no doctor available to supervise the removal of the plaster casts. For people in their 70s and 80s, that is far from acceptable.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Far be it from me to keep the Minister from his lunch. I welcome the Minister's statement. It has been a valuable exercise. That we now have locally elected Ministers making the decisions about where money is spent has been of benefit to everybody.

One of my major concerns is the gap funding in the voluntary and community sectors. Although I welcome the £2.2 million that has been made available, there is still a serious shortfall in those sectors. Many groups have been doing invaluable work in the community and voluntary sectors, and those jobs are now on the critical list. Training, skills and experience could be wasted. Thousands of jobs are in danger, and people who have, for many years, carried out work that, by its nature, is difficult to quantify are in danger of losing their jobs. I want to see funding put on a secure footing. People do not know how long they will have jobs. The uncertainty in the sector is damaging.

Some people have to spend a great deal of time administering a system that is complicated, and working to as many as eight or 10 different sets of criteria for different funders. We must simplify it.

I would like the Minister to clarify a few points that arise from his comments last Monday. In relation to gap funding and room to manoeuvre, he mentioned projects that were not based on criteria that were as close as possible to those adopted in the new programmes, and where they do not succeed under the new peace programme. Are the criteria based on the old figures or the

new figures? He mentioned a safety net that would be available if Departments needed additional spending power. Can he comment on that and on the cases in which an exit strategy for funding will be necessary? Some projects are not likely to come under the Peace II programme. I ask him to go into more detail on that. There has been a good deal of confusion over whether gap funding is based on the old criteria or the new and on how it is going to work. When will the new criteria be in place to allow the sector to evaluate and make bids?

Among the issues that concern the Social Development Committee is that of urban regeneration. Over the last few years, Belfast has benefited from most of the money spent in that context. I do not often find myself in agreement with the DUP, but Mr Poots was right when he said that a lot of that money is spent in Belfast and, to a lesser extent, in Derry. Meanwhile, towns and villages across the North are not benefiting from these resources.

Towns are struggling to encourage people to spend their money locally rather than drive to out-of-town shopping centres. I must declare an interest in town centre regeneration schemes because I am involved with one in Dungannon. If we fund these schemes, we may create a level playing field.

Housing does not feature in the Supplementary Estimates either, and that concerns me. There are still huge waiting lists, and 17% of social housing in Fermanagh is deemed unfit. Increases in homelessness are also continuing, and we are trying to introduce an updated system to eradicate fuel poverty. However, the pilot schemes have proved that, in this initiative, the rural community will be at a disadvantage. If we bring in half-measures, we cannot expect to end fuel poverty, and that will have a knock-on effect on education and health.

Poverty and social exclusion are among the worst indictments of our society, and unless real resources are channelled into the Department of Social Development the problems that have plagued the vulnerable in communities — the elderly, children, single parents — will continue.

Targeting social need objectives will not be met unless Departments take seriously their obligations. Our Budgets should reflect the needs of the marginalised and vulnerable in society.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Carrick: I draw attention to the reduction in budgetary provision for watercourse management and flooding. Although there has been a £1.76 million reduction in the running costs of the Rivers Agency, capital provision has been increased by £1.56 million.

What provision has been made for the recommendations that will stem from the Lough Neagh management strategy? I refer particularly to the urgent need for flood

control measures along the River Bann basin. It is vital that the plight of farmers and landowners be given the same weighting and consideration in respect of their production land as will be given to commercial fishing, tourism, recreation and conservation.

It is time that the Assembly showed some teeth in dealing with cross-cutting issues. Resources must be made available to address the raft of issues associated with the management and exploitation of our natural assets, especially Lough Neagh, which has been neglected over the past 50 years. An example of such neglect is the discharge of Lurgan sewage and effluent into Kinnego Bay via the Woodvale River over the past 60 years. There is evidence that the water quality in the harbour is poor and that there has been a build-up of silt on the bed of the harbour.

Resources are required for the removal of the contaminated layer on the lough bed. It must be removed if water quality is to recover. The relevant Department has been reluctant to clean up the harbour bed. If we hold to the view that the polluter pays, we must find the resources to enable that Department to carry out the work — if we wish to promote the lough for recreational and tourist purposes.

In addition to improving the water quality in the lough, there is the need to address the whole system of feeder rivers and watercourses in a strategic manner and examine new engineering solutions to alleviate flooding of agricultural land. A comprehensive study should encompass the economic cost benefits of releasing potential development land, especially around Portadown, which hitherto has blighted and stunted the natural growth of the town. I call on the relevant Department and on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to find the vital resources to enable that work to be carried out. We need to promote our greatest natural asset — Lough Neagh — as an attraction that will bring tourists and allow people to enjoy the recreational facilities and at the same time allow the farming community to enjoy the full use of their production land. We are not talking about taking additional wetlands into production; we are talking about preserving the traditional production land.

I will just touch on the issue of fraud and the haemorrhage from the public purse to which my colleague Seamus Close referred this morning. His comments have my full support. If additional administrative costs identified in the Minister's statement are being directed to reduce fraud and block that haemorrhage, the Assembly will be doing the citizens of Northern Ireland a good turn.

Mrs E Bell: I congratulate the Minister on the Budget statement and the wide ranging issues dealt with in it. Members have already covered the points I wished to make, so I will simply outline my comments, which, I hope, will be linked to the others.

With regard to education, I ask again where the moneys will be allocated for the implementation of the Burns review. I support the idea that resources will be given to all young people, through participation at school, so that they can reach the highest possible standards of educational achievements. I ask the Minister to encourage the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Education to ring-fence resources for the provision of non-teaching staff for special schools. We have been campaigning for that for some time, and no definite action has been taken so far. Children are suffering on a daily basis. I did compliment the action programme for education in the Programme for Government, and I hope the moneys are found to implement those proposals fully.

On the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, as a Committee of the Centre member I have to say that I would like an outline of specific resources. The many different remits — from human rights to victims, including the whole process of equality legislation — must have moneys available. Will there, for example, be adequate money available to implement the Bloomfield Report? Will the Equality Commission have enough money to enable it to carry out its important remit?

2.00 pm

I have to support Mr Poots, who commented this morning on libraries provision. Of course, in my case, I would put forward Bangor library as an urgent priority because of the state of the building. I am aware that the Minister has promised action, but I want to use this opportunity to highlight again the conditions and the use of the library.

I welcome the funding allocated to the Department for Social Development for voluntary bodies and community groups. However, I again urge the Ministers in the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to expedite the core funding under Peace II with our European partners.

My Colleague has spoken about the roads situation. I want to touch on the railways situation. That is one issue where there is all-party consensus. I ask again that we let people — especially those who travel on the railways — know exactly how the Department for Regional Development's money will be allocated and spent.

I also express my disgust at the destructive actions on Saturday on the Belfast to Dublin railway line. If the people who disrupted the services felt they would destroy the feeling of camaraderie and friendship on both sides of the border, they were wrong. The team — thank goodness — and the thousands of supporters won through. I hope that the Minister will show strong support to Translink for its handling of the situation.

I finish by stating my support for my Colleague's remarks on the timetabling of the exercise and the need for more consultation. Notwithstanding that, however, I congratulate the Minister and his Department on their work on the Budget process. It is a complicated process, and, as time goes on, we will, I hope, get it right.

We may still have concerns about the process, but the Estimates and Vote on Account show clearly the advantage of a devolved Assembly. We, as Assembly Members, can see the ways in which the money is being spent and how we can be answerable and accountable to our voters.

I support the two motions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We will suspend proceedings until Question Time at 2.30 pm. This debate will resume at 4.00 pm. Judging by the voluminous notes that the Minister has taken, I guess that the remaining 55 minutes will be taken up mostly — if not wholly — by him.

The debate stood adjourned.

The sitting was suspended at 2.02 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Victim Support: Finance Allocation

2.30 pm

1. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail allocation arrangements for the moneys announced for victim support.

(AQO 824/00)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Mallon): The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has made no allocation of money to Victim Support Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Office recently announced a support package of £1m for that organisation. Victim Support Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Office are responsible for the detailed arrangements concerning the use of that money.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Deputy First Minister believe that the allocation of £6.67 million under Peace II funding to support victims is adequate in comparison with the cost to date of over £33.8 million for the Saville inquiry? Will the Deputy First Minister ensure that Peace II money reaches the real victims of terrorism, and not the perpetrators of terrorism?

The Deputy First Minister: I am afraid that, with regard to this, the Assembly Member is comparing apples with pears. The reality is that no one in the devolved Administration has any responsibility for the Bloody Sunday tribunal. Our efforts should be directed to ensuring that money available for victims from Europe is used to the best effect.

In relation to the question of funding for victims' groups, the devolved Administration is aware that the victims of violent action have been one of the most neglected sections in society over the past three decades. The Executive intend to ensure that, alongside other organisations operating in this field, victims' groups have the capacity to access support and funding opportunities from Government, European and other sources.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Deputy First Minister's comments about victims. They are an important element in society. One hopes that the Executive will continue to give them proper support.

With regard to Peace II, what provision for victims does the Deputy First Minister see in it? Indeed, what remains from Peace I for the support of victims?

The Deputy First Minister: The Peace II programme will contain a specific measure for victims with funding of approximately £6·67 million. The closing date for applications for funding under Peace I was 31 December 1999, and therefore no money remains in Peace I for victim support. However, money already allocated can be spent until 31 December 2001.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Will the Deputy First Minister keep the early victims of violence in mind? Only small amounts of money were paid out then. For instance, an Armagh woman whose husband was shot had five sons. They received £500 each, which was an insult. Will the Deputy First Minister keep that in mind, and can that be rectified now by paying suitable moneys to those victims?

The Deputy First Minister: This is an important question in the sense that everyone in the Chamber has, I suppose, been astounded in the past by the way that people and families who suffered bereavement of that type did not have access to the type of support that was required.

The Member touched upon the crucial point of how we can effectively cater for the individual victim, as opposed to victims' groups. In relation to both those parts of the question, we in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will certainly try to ensure, first, that people who choose to remain outside victims' groups are not forgotten and, secondly, that those in victims' groups will have the capacity and financial resources to develop the type of support that they most need.

Police Board

2. **Mr Dalton** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail any discussions they have had with the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State regarding the establishment of the new Police Board.
(AQO 855/00)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): We have not jointly discussed that matter with the Prime Minister, the current Secretary of State or, indeed, his predecessor. However, our respective parties have, of course, met each of those named persons to discuss the issue.

Mr Dalton: Does the First Minister agree that the failure of the SDLP and Sinn Féin to offer their support to the Police Service is undermining confidence in the agreement? Is it not true that if the Ulster Unionist Party had taken the same attitude to the establishment of the Executive that those parties have taken to the Police Board, there would not even be an Assembly at the moment? Is it not a disgrace that at this difficult time, with pipe bomb attacks and parliamentary activity continuing, those who complain daily about the attacks have not got the decency or the moral courage to support the police now?

The First Minister: I understand the Member's points, although I might have couched them in slightly different language. Everybody is anxious to see progress being made on the issue, especially for the last reason that the Member mentioned — namely, the violence that is occurring and, in particular, the unacceptable level of pipe bomb attacks by some Loyalist elements.

We congratulate the Royal Ulster Constabulary on the success that it has had against the pipe bombers, but I am concerned that the continuing uncertainty about policing arrangements will have the effect of undermining the effectiveness and morale of the RUC and limiting its ability to deal with that serious issue.

Mr Roche: Will the Minister confirm that he would be totally opposed to the introduction into legislation of any retrospective powers of investigation for this Police Board? Does he agree that it would be unthinkable for the representatives of fully armed terrorist organisations to be allowed to participate, through the board, in the policing of Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: Order. Before giving the Minister the opportunity to reply, I remind Members that questions to Ministers — and I refer not just to this question — are supposed to refer to the Ministers' areas of responsibility. There is a tendency for Members to go outside that and ask for opinions. There are other contexts where that is entirely appropriate, but in this context questions are supposed to refer to ministerial responsibilities.

The First Minister: We have discussed the matters raised by Mr Roche with Ministers on several occasions. However, he has to take account of the fact that we now have legislation on the statute book that defines the position with regard to the measures that he mentioned. I am sure that he, like myself, would like to see sensible progress made on the issue as quickly as possible.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): Does the First Minister acknowledge that the delay in establishing the Police Board is leading to a situation where the most vulnerable in society are under threat as a result of the hundreds of police officers currently leaving the force and not being replaced?

The First Minister: That relates to the answer that I gave earlier with regard to uncertainty having the consequence of undermining the effectiveness and morale of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, especially when we have these rushes of pipe bomb attacks, which I am sure that the Member deplores as much as I do.

Northern Ireland Executive: Brussels Office

3. **Mr Fee** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline progress made in establishing the Northern Ireland Executive representation in Brussels.
(AQO 846/00)

The Deputy First Minister: The role of the office is primarily to service the needs of the Executive. To that end, it is planned that the head of office will take up post in March 2001. His or her deputy will be recruited shortly afterwards. Staff will be based in accommodation provided by the UK permanent representation until the work of fitting out the office has been completed, probably in May. A wide range of consultations have taken place to ensure that the facilities provided by the office meet the needs of the Executive.

Mr Fee: I am delighted to hear that the timescale for getting the office in place is so short. What arrangements will there be to ensure that the needs of the Assembly and its Members in representing their constituents will be fully met by the new office? Will we have access to the advice and support of the new officers in representing our views in the European Union?

The Deputy First Minister: The office's role is to service the needs of the Executive in respect of developing and implementing EU strategy. That is likely to involve direct relations between the office and the 11 Departments, and it will entail detailed input into particular policy areas. I can assure Mr Fee that the office will also play a role in promoting Northern Ireland's wider interests in the EU, and, as part of that role, it will seek to assist Assembly Members in carrying out their responsibilities.

The hon Member will agree that recognising our part in Europe is important. When the First Minister and I recently met President Chirac and the Minister for European Affairs, Monsieur Moscovici, they did not focus on French issues; they focused on European issues and our role in Europe. We have much to offer other regions in Europe, especially those experiencing ethnic conflict. Therefore, it is important that we encourage all public representatives to engage in the wider issues of Europe, and I have no doubt that the office, when it is fully opened and staffed, will be able to assist all Assembly Members in fulfilling that important role.

Mr Taylor: Brussels is one of the main tourist centres in Europe. Where will this new office be located? Will it be in a back street behind the European Commission premises and inaccessible to the public, or will it be in the centre of Brussels, where hundreds of thousands of tourists can see Ulster in the wider European scene, as the Deputy First Minister has suggested?

The Deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has been assured that it will be located in a prime site at the heart of the administrative centre in Brussels and that it will be accessible to everybody. We will take every opportunity in the opening and running of it to ensure access for Assembly Members and other organisations that wish to promote the interests of Northern Irish people. That will be successfully achieved if Members work collectively.

Republican Terrorists

4. **Dr Birnie** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail any discussion with the Government of the Republic of Ireland regarding the activities of Republican terrorists. (AQO 868/00)

The First Minister: The Deputy First Minister and I have not jointly discussed that matter with the Government of the Republic of Ireland, but our respective parties have met members of the Irish Government and their officials to discuss the issue, just as we have discussed the issue with our Government.

Dr Birnie: Does the First Minister agree that for as long as the IRA refuses to decommission, its dumps in the Republic of Ireland will not be secure? Will he undertake to impress upon Mr Ahern the need to apply rigour in tracking down any terrorist still at large in the Republic of Ireland, especially the Omagh bombers? Perhaps the leader of Fianna Fáil should learn from the ruthlessness that some of his predecessors applied to Republican dissidents.

The First Minister: There is evidence that some material from mainstream IRA dumps has found its way to dissidents and has been used in recent incidents — including, possibly, the Omagh bomb. The first part of the Member's question makes that important point. There is a serious risk to the public so long as those dumps are not secured and for as long as dissident Republicans or any other dissident paramilitary groups are operating.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has impressed upon the Irish Prime Minister the importance of that matter, and he has assured us of the steps he is taking. We would love to see the issue dealt with speedily and simply if possible; it is extremely important.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Before the First Minister takes the second step of approaching the Irish Government, he should take the first step of approaching his own Government. Will he inform the House of what steps he has taken to challenge those people in his own Government who are clearly linked to a terrorist organisation? What steps has he taken to put in place worthwhile sanctions that will prevent those people from using the ballot box in one hand and the Armalite in the other to progress their Republican agenda? What worthwhile sanctions will he now put in place?

2.45 pm

The First Minister: If the Member had been listening carefully to my answer he would realise that I made reference to the discussions we had with our own Government on this issue — our own Government being Her Majesty's Government. The issue of this Administration is a matter of a completely different order entirely. The Member should not get those matters confused.

Mr O'Connor: Have the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister made any representations to the Irish Government or the British Government about the recent spate of pipe bombings across Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: The Member raises a very important issue, and I am sure he is very much aware of it due to the problems that have occurred in his own constituency.

In the first five or six weeks of the year, there have been no fewer than 41 pipe bomb attacks. This is a very serious matter, which I have raised with the appropriate authorities, and I am sure that the Deputy First Minister has raised it also. We are glad that the RUC has had some success. I commend Mr O'Connor for the work he has done in his own constituency and, in particular, for the way in which he has encouraged the RUC and supported it in its work in Larne.

Victims' Commission

5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister whether they have had any discussions with the Minister of State regarding the establishment of a victims' commission. (AQO 854/00)

The Deputy First Minister: The Junior Ministers, Mr Haughey and Mr Nesbitt, who have responsibility for victims' issues in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, regularly meet with their Northern Ireland Office counterpart, Mr Ingram, to discuss a range of matters relating to victims. Their next meeting is scheduled to take place before the end of this month, and a victims' commissioner or ombudsman is among the matters to be discussed. It is an idea which needs to be considered carefully and evaluated before any firm proposals are brought forward.

Mr Beggs: Will the Deputy First Minister give his backing to the suggestion made in the House of Commons on 23 January by Jeffrey Donaldson, the MP for Lagan Valley, that the victims' liaison unit be expanded to become a victims' commission, with an increased remit and greater resources to focus specifically on providing funding and support for the victims of terrorist violence? Does the Deputy First Minister accept that, even in recent months, those who have suffered at the hands of terrorists have not been adequately or speedily supported by the system?

The Deputy First Minister: As Mr Beggs will know, the victims' liaison unit is part of the Northern Ireland Office. The devolved Administration has no role, therefore, in determining its operational remit. As outlined in the answer to the original question, the issue of a victims' commission or ombudsman needs to be considered carefully and evaluated by the Northern Ireland Office and the Administration before any firm proposal can be brought forward.

With regard to his second point, I refer Mr Beggs to what I said in response to Dr Paisley's question. The issue of victims needs to be considered carefully — not just examined — and decided upon in such a way that the individual and the groupings have the resources to give the full support needed.

Mr O'Neill: Is the Deputy First Minister aware that in some people's minds, not least in the minds of some Members of the House, there is confusion about the delineation of victims' responsibilities between the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Northern Ireland Office. Will he clear up the confusion by stating who has responsibility for what?

The Deputy First Minister: I thank the Member for his pertinent question. There is confusion in many minds at times. In broad terms, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is responsible for all devolved matters, and the Northern Ireland Office is responsible for reserved and excepted matters.

We appreciate that it is confusing for those on the ground. For that reason, an information leaflet was sent at the end of January to victims' groups, individual victims and the victims' spokespersons of political parties. The leaflet set out the responsibilities of the respective units and each of the Northern Ireland Departments. That exercise received positive feedback from a variety of groups and will be built upon by the continuation of a rolling programme of visits to victims' groups by the victims unit. I agree with Members' general feeling that we need to be in a position where there is much more clarity in relation to this issue. I believe that the will is there to see if we can bring that clarity to it.

Mr Gibson: What are the views of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on this morning's announcement that a private civil action is being taken to try to bring the Omagh bombers to book? That group of victims — and I think that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister would have to agree — received assurances at the time that the perpetrators of that heinous action would be brought to book. The draconian measures promised in the respective parliaments have proved ineffective. A £1 million effort has been launched this morning. Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister consider helping the victims of Omagh? Where legal authority has failed, can they assist with civil action?

The Deputy First Minister: I was among those who stood in Omagh that night, and I will never forget the devastation and the effect. I have no hesitation in stating my sympathy with those who were killed or bereaved and for the entire community of Omagh, which has coped in a remarkably efficient and effective way.

The First Minister and I have been to Omagh on several occasions since, and we will be there again to help with the various projects in which we have been invited to take part. I note the question posed by Mr

Gibson. We will take, as we will have to do, legal advice in relation to the matter, and we will continue to do what we can, as individuals and in our ministerial roles, to help people who have been bereaved and families that have been devastated so terribly.

Civil Service: Statutory Functions

6. **Mr Maskey** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline on whose authority permanent secretaries have been seeking to establish conventions by which the Civil Service will work with the Executive Committee and the Assembly in respect of statutory functions. (AQO 847/00)

The First Minister: Permanent secretaries have sought guidance from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the departmental Committee interface. The head of the Civil Service has since been engaged in informal exchanges with the objective of improving the working relationship between Departments and the Assembly.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. Do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree that the sentiments expressed in the memo distributed by Mr Ronnie Spence on 12 January are totally unacceptable insofar as he says that while Committees in the Assembly may have legal rights, they are poking their noses in where they should not? That sentiment is unacceptable. Do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister acknowledge that the seeking of guidance by the permanent secretaries and the head of the Civil Service was only sparked by the leaking of that memo and the public controversy surrounding that?

The First Minister: I understand the point that the Member makes, and if permanent secretaries were attempting to limit the statutory position or proper role of Committees in any way, that would, of course, be quite wrong. However, the situation evolved in a slightly different way. The consultations to which I refer came before and not after the memo in question. There is no intention, in any way, to limit the proper role of the Committees. The Committees are mentioned in the agreement itself, where we agreed that Committees will have a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department with which each is associated. That provision in the agreement is embodied in the legislation and, in particular, in the power of the Committees to send for papers.

That legal power is accepted by permanent secretaries. How it is to be exercised to enable the relationship involving the Assembly, the Committees and the Departments to run smoothly is a matter of detail to be looked at. I refer the Member to the protocols which have been developed in Wales and Scotland to spell out that relationship in more detail. It is not a matter of undermining the Committees — that would be quite wrong — but of trying to ensure a smooth and harmonious

relationship. Any impression given by the memorandum that the objective was otherwise is misleading.

Mr Dallat: The First Minister referred to Scotland and Wales. Is he aware that conventions have been agreed in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly? Given that this problem first arose in a Government Department run by a DUP Minister who refuses to sit down with his Executive colleagues, does the First Minister agree that there is a need to agree conventions so that the Assembly can function properly and all relevant information can be made readily available?

The First Minister: The Member has made the important point that officials, including permanent secretaries, operate under the direction of their Minister. One assumes that the permanent secretary was acting in that way when he penned the memorandum, but that is another matter.

The main point that the Member made was in relation to the position in Wales and Scotland. He is quite right — protocols have been developed and published in Wales and Scotland on such matters. Members who are interested will find them stimulating. That will be quite educative.

Mr Leslie: I welcome the First Minister's comments regarding the role of the Committees as defined in the Belfast Agreement, especially the section on policy development. Does he agree that, notwithstanding what is in the agreement, the natural inclination of Ministers, and particularly of their officials, is to sideline the views of Committees as far as possible?

The First Minister: It was clearly in the minds of those who negotiated the agreement — and in the minds of those who then translated it into legislation — that the Committees of the Assembly should have an important status that would go beyond that of a Westminster Select Committee. In referring to policy development, the Member has put his finger directly on that point.

It is fair to say that most Ministers try to work closely with the Committees when discussing and developing policies. We commend that approach because it limits any scope that there might be for friction in the relationship. But there is a difference in viewpoints between the Minister and Committee members, so we should not be surprised if different opinions occur from time to time. As with so many other things, we have to work through this rather unusual arrangement because the position of our Committees differs from that of the Westminster Committees. We have to work through that and, in doing so, developing our own protocols and precedents on how we proceed could be a useful exercise.

Charter Marks (Government Agencies and Departments)

7. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on

the award of Charter Marks to Government agencies and Departments. (AQO 862/00)

The Deputy First Minister: The Charter Mark scheme is open to all public-sector organisations that deal directly with the public. Overall, we have 169 holders of the award in Northern Ireland. Of these, 30 are in Government Departments, and 19 in agencies. We are pleased with Northern Ireland's success in obtaining Charter Marks. All the latest winners, including 50 from local organisations, were in London last week to receive their awards. Junior Minister, Mr Nesbitt attended the ceremony to show our support. Winning a Charter Mark award is a great achievement, and it is outward recognition for providing an excellent service to the public.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Deputy First Minister agree that the Charter Mark system has become rather meaningless in certain instances, given the failure of some Departments to be efficient and the fact that in some cases they cost taxpayers millions of pounds?

3.00 pm

The Deputy First Minister: The cost is currently defrayed by the Cabinet Office, although it now places a charge on various types of firm. The charges are £500 for firms with up to 50 employees and £600 for others. We cannot measure the value of the award in monetary terms alone; it is a mark of efficiency and effectiveness that all Departments and agencies should aim to achieve. I congratulate all those sectors of our organisation in Northern Ireland and other organisations that have done so.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

New Deal for Sport

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the implications for sport in Northern Ireland of the recently announced programme, New Deal for Sport; and to make a statement. (AQO 849/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The New Deal for Sport is a recently launched partnership initiative between the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. The initiative aims to provide assistance to staff delivering physical education and sport in schools by extending the New Deal programme. The initiative, which is being taken forward on a pilot basis, will create a role for sports assistants working alongside existing school sport co-ordinators. It applies only to England at this stage. As Minister with responsibility for sport, I will monitor developments closely to see whether there are potential benefits for Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister agree that implementing the New Deal for Sport — or a similar scheme — in Northern Ireland would bring many benefits? Does he also agree that there is a need to increase sporting activity among all age groups and that such activity can bring people many social and health benefits?

Mr McGimpsey: I am keen to see the introduction of any initiative that has the potential to improve the methods of delivering sport to the young and offering potential employment opportunities. However, it is important to note that it is a pilot scheme. We must wait and see whether it offers any opportunities. If so, we will need to decide how they could be introduced in Northern Ireland. I agree with the thrust of the Member's question; there are huge benefits to be gained by increasing participation in sport.

Mr McMenamin: I congratulate the Minister on setting up the task force to investigate soccer in Northern Ireland, and I look forward to seeing its conclusions. Does the Minister agree that there should be special emphasis on schools, with particular regard to providing funding to allow children to take part in all sports in an integrated manner?

Mr McGimpsey: Participation is a key issue, and we seek to promote it. The Youth Sport programme, run by the Sports Council, is a Province-wide initiative that aims to develop links between local schools — primary and post-primary — to ensure that there is equality of after-school sporting opportunities for all young people. The pupils involved are eight to 16-year-olds. The scheme is inclusive and raises participation rates.

Irish Language

2. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the steps he is taking to remove restrictions on the development of the Irish language. (AQO 848/00)

Mr McGimpsey: I take seriously my responsibilities under the Belfast Agreement with regard to languages. There has been considerable progress since the agreement was signed. Funding for the all-Ireland Irish language agency, Foras na Gaeilge, has increased. Its total budget for this year is £7.2 million, of which my Department will provide £1.8 million. That will increase next year to £10.1 million, of which my Department will provide £2.53 million, representing an increase of 40% on the funding allocated for 2000-01.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for his answer, although, with respect, I do not think that it addresses the specific question. Recent comments made by the Department for Regional Development indicated that there are legal restrictions on the use of the Irish language, for example, in public signage. Has the Minister considered

the matter with a view to identifying such legal restrictions? If so, what must be done to remove them?

Mr McGimpsey: Directional signs are the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development, and Mr Maskey must thus ask that Department and its Minister to identify the restrictions — if there are any. Street names are a matter for district councils.

Mr Fee: I thank the Minister for his comments, but the original query was on the steps he had taken to remove those restrictions. Could the Minister look specifically at what is happening in the Newry and Mourne district? Townland and place names can be bilingual there. Names of buildings, such as the Ardmore RUC station, can be signed in more than one language. The Minister's Department and others are involved in the promotion of the Slieve Gullion area of outstanding natural beauty. Where is the sense in investing in so many different facilities if the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service will not allow the indigenous names of places or any semblance of the Irish language to be used?

Mr McGimpsey: The Council of Europe's European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is being ratified by the United Kingdom, which includes Northern Ireland. The Irish language is covered by Part III of that charter. One of the Department's initiatives is an interdepartmental group to co-ordinate action plans for implementing Part III in respect of Irish. Each Department will have its own action plan. How we proceed with that initiative, and what steps will be taken, are matters for discussion. We will take it one step at a time.

As far as signage is concerned in the Member's area, I repeat the answer I gave Mr Maskey. Directional signs are a matter for the Department for Regional Development, and his question should properly be directed to that Department. Questions regarding street names and so on are matters for local authorities. Whether building signs are bilingual — or trilingual, as might be more appropriate under the agreement in many Northern Ireland areas — is a matter for the owners and the people who operate the buildings concerned.

Mr McFarland: The Minister will be aware that, during the nineteenth century, Irish was rescued largely by those from a Presbyterian background. Can he assure me that when he is dealing with the Council of Europe's charter, the same effort will be put into Ulster Scots as is currently put into Irish?

Mr McGimpsey: I can give an absolute assurance that equity of treatment is the cornerstone of the Department's approach to language. Ulster Scots is recognised by Part II of the Council of Europe's charter. However, Ulster Scots and Irish are at different stages of development, but Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch is confident that its language will achieve Part III status in 10 years. That is an ambitious target, but it is serious. I must point out that,

since devolution, funding for Ulster Scots has increased tenfold.

Battle of Moira (637 AD)

3. **Dr Adamson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline whether he has any plans to commemorate the Battle of Moira (637 AD).

(AQO 858/00)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has no plans to commemorate the Battle of Moira. That represented the final and disastrous attempt of the Ulaid King Congal Cáech to challenge the growing supremacy Uí Néill dynasties of the midlands and the north-west. The battle was fought on 24 June 637 AD, not far from Moira village. This year marks its one thousand three hundred and sixty-fourth anniversary and is of no particular significance.

Dr Adamson: The Battle of Moira was one of the most significant battles in early Irish history. It was significant in three respects: politically, ecclesiastically and culturally. It was significant politically because, following the battle, the old links with Scotland were broken. In fact, you might say that the first union was dissolved. It was significant ecclesiastically because, following the battle, the cult of Patrick —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Adamson, can you get to your question, please?

Dr Adamson: I must reply. The cult of Patrick moved from Connor in Antrim, where it was formed, to Armagh, which became the ecclesiastical centre of Ireland. Culturally, it engendered a series of sagas, some of which are still —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, Dr Adamson. Unless you come to your question, I am going to rule you out of order.

Dr Adamson: Some are still prevalent today, especially Seamus Heaney's great work 'Sweeney Astray'. The Minister must agree that he would be contributing to cultural education if his Department recognised events such as the Battle of Moira as historic, rather than historical. Would it not help the development of a shared sense of identity for future generations in Northern Ireland if we paid more attention to those events which have not been trademarked by mural painters? That could perhaps be brought about through the Columba Initiative.

Mr McGimpsey: I replied originally that I thought that the Battle of Moira had no particular significance. I now stand corrected by the remarks that Dr Adamson has just made. I am aware that it is one of many battles fought over the centuries between the Uí Néill and the Ulaid. I also recognise that it has a significance. What I have ascertained actually came from a book that Dr Adamson edited. The historic significance of a battle in 637 AD needs to be better represented and explained before we begin to commemorate it. It is clearly something that

Dr Adamson feels strongly about. There are obviously resonances, both within the Chamber and without.

Mr A Doherty: Taking account of what Dr Adamson has just said about the significance of the historic battle, will the Minister, in the interests of efficiency, consider setting up a committee of one — namely, Dr Adamson — to make preparations for the commemoration of the battle? Will he further require him to report 12 months before the date of that commemoration and to make his report in the language in common use at that time?

Mr McGimpsey: I realise that that was somewhat tongue-in-cheek. It is important to recognise that some 10 years ago Dr Adamson was instrumental in having an interpretative panel commemorating this battle unveiled inside the Moira demesne. Unfortunately, the panel was vandalised and has not been replaced. Lisburn Borough Council may have a role in replacing it. I would not begin to suggest that Mr Doherty was the one who vandalised it.

Allocation of Funds: Equality-Proofing

4. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how he intends to ensure that all funding provided through his Department is equality-proofed.

(AQO 835/00)

Mr McGimpsey: For the most part, funding from my Department is distributed through its non-departmental public bodies and the North/South Language Body. They are all public authorities by virtue of section 75(3)(b) and (c) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and are required to produce equality schemes. Such schemes detail the policies, including funding policies, which will be subject to equality impact assessment. My Department's funding will be equality-proofed in that way. In my routine review of the performance of non-departmental public bodies, I will monitor their progress on commitments in their equality schemes.

Ms Lewsley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Perhaps he can answer a few further questions. Can he inform me how sport for the disabled is resourced? What percentage of the Exchequer and lottery sports funding has been allocated specifically to funding sports for the disabled? Moreover, can the Minister tell the House what the Sports Council for Northern Ireland is doing to promote the participation in sport of people with disabilities?

3.15 pm

Mr McGimpsey: I regret that I cannot indicate specific amounts, but I will certainly write to Ms Lewsley with information about Sports Council funding and on the other matters about which she asked questions. I gave the information in response to a similar question in the past, either in written or in oral form. However, I will certainly update those facts if required.

The Department and the Sports Council take their responsibilities seriously with regard to equality. Their individual equality schemes will bear testimony to that by ensuring that everyone is treated equally. Participation and access will be key themes in the Department's approach to sport, not least with regard to those suffering a disability.

Mrs Carson: Almost all Culture, Arts and Leisure funding is distributed via the bureaucracy of "quangoland". However, does the Minister not accept that equality might be better safeguarded if funding were provided by more direct means, such as through local government? Will he undertake to ensure that the matter is considered as part of the review of public administration?

Mr McGimpsey: All parties agree that a review of public administration is required. Clearly, when that review takes place, all bodies, such as the Sports Council and the Arts Council, which are in the remit of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, will be included. Those bodies are governed by equality schemes and programmes under the new targeting social need programme. Changes and improvements have taken place, and those will ensure that everyone is treated fairly. We are trying to ensure that no barriers to access, participation and involvement are put in place by the Administration or the public bodies for which it is responsible.

Athletics

5. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans to promote athletics throughout Northern Ireland.

(AQO 831/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland is responsible for the promotion and development of sport in the Province. The council works closely with the Northern Ireland Athletics Federation, which is the governing body for athletics. Athletics has benefited recently through various National Lottery-funded talented athlete programmes, which are aimed at improving athletes' performance levels and the quality of potential athletes. Lottery awards have also been allocated to capital projects, which will enhance sports development opportunities for future generations of athletes.

In addition, the proposed Sports Institute for Northern Ireland at the University of Ulster's Jordanstown campus will offer specialised training facilities and top-of-the-range back-up services to enable those who are part of it to perform to their full potential.

Mr Hilditch: Does the Minister agree that, although Northern Ireland has hosted and promoted several international events in recent years, that appears to have been to the detriment of grass-roots athletics in Northern Ireland, which appears to be in constant decline?

Mr McGimpsey: I am not sure that I agree that the sport is in constant decline. For example, the Sports Council recently made several awards under the various

talented athlete programmes. I have not heard the Northern Ireland Athletics Federation say that it is in serious decline.

To an extent, all sports are in competition with each other in developing their participants. We in Northern Ireland often fail to recognise that there is great sporting activity here, and that includes athletics. It is wrong to ignore that fact or to fail to develop the talent. If Mr Hilditch has examples of where the sport could be improved, I will be happy to discuss them with the Northern Ireland Athletics Federation and the Sports Council.

Mr J Wilson: Given that we wish to encourage more young people into sport, is the Minister in a position to indicate whether his Department will offer assistance to the Antrim athletics stadium, which is one of the Province's better known stadiums and is much used by schools from a wide area?

Mr McGimpsey: I am aware of the problems surrounding the Antrim stadium. It is now about 20 years old and requires investment — probably considerable expenditure. We have been in discussions with and sought clarification from the council on several issues. It is estimated that about £1.6 million will be required to bring the Antrim Forum back up to standard. We are proceeding with the matter as best we can, and we will look at how we can manage to give support to Antrim Council to ensure that the venue is upgraded. It plays an important role in the sporting life of the Province. Mr Wilson is quite right — 60% of its use is by schools.

Mr McCarthy: The Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee had a worthwhile presentation last week from a very athletic group called the Northern Ireland Karate-Do Wado-Kai. Has the Minister any plans to give more support, that financial or otherwise, to that very athletic sport?

Mr McGimpsey: I cannot be specific on that group, or that sport. The Sports Council is the intermediate funding body, which is responsible for encouraging and developing sport. The group should make an application to the Sports Council in the first instance. If it feels that it is being treated unfairly or is not being given due consideration, it is quite free, through Mr McCarthy or others, to come to the Department, and I will ensure that its case is considered. It is a matter of satisfying criteria for funding, and if it does that, funding will be forthcoming.

EU and IFI Funds (West Tyrone)

6. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the criteria used by departmental agencies when distributing European Union funds and funding from the International Fund for Ireland to West Tyrone. (AQO 813/00)

Mr McGimpsey: I am not aware of any agencies under my authority that are at present responsible for

distributing European funds or funds from the International Fund for Ireland anywhere in Northern Ireland.

Mr Gibson: I presume that the Lottery Board and the Sports Council are under the Minister's aegis. Is he aware that the last allocation of funding by those bodies was of 49% to GAA sports and 4% to football? One is a cross-community activity, and the other is regarded as being exclusively Roman Catholic. Would the Minister care to comment?

Mr McGimpsey: I am not aware of the precise details. I can certainly investigate the matter and write to Mr Gibson about the balance of funding between football and GAA. It is, however, a matter of making an application. Applications which satisfy the criteria are successful, and those which do not, are not. If he has specific examples, I will be happy to investigate them for him.

I have heard this sort of thing said before, but any time when I have looked at the matter I have been unable to satisfy myself that there has been unfair treatment. We are anxious to ensure that this does not happen. Equity and fair treatment are the cornerstones of funding allocations through all bodies under the Departments of the Administration.

Mr Hussey: Will the Minister say whether his Department has any responsibility for the distribution of Peace II money and whether such money will be allocated to West Tyrone? Indeed, following the previous question, I ask whether the money will be shared more fairly than Lottery Fund money is.

Mr McGimpsey: With regard to the third part of that question, I attempted to deal with the suggestion that funding needs to be shared more fairly in my answer to Mr Gibson.

I will investigate that matter, and if we come up with something, I will communicate with Mr Hussey. The Department expects around £4 million of Peace II funding over five years to be spent on water-based tourism. As one would expect, funding will be allocated against set criteria. Bids that come forward from West Tyrone will determine its allocation; I cannot predict what will go to West Tyrone until bidding starts. Funding has not yet begun, so bids from West Tyrone are premature.

Cultural Traditions: Museum Exhibitions

7. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the role of museums when mounting major exhibitions with respect to the depiction of cultural traditions. (AQO 825/00)

Mr McGimpsey: One of my key strategic objectives is to promote greater understanding and respect for cultural diversity. That includes promoting a greater understanding of and respect for the different cultural traditions in Northern

Ireland. Both the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI) and local museums have an important part to play in the process. MAGNI is required by statute to promote awareness, appreciation and understanding of people's culture and way of life with particular regard to the heritage of Northern Ireland. That approach is reflected, for example, in its current Icons of Identity exhibitions and its work to commemorate the Act of Union. It also plans, as it said in its vision statement, to tell the history of the people of Ireland with particular emphasis on the history and heritage of Northern Ireland.

Mr Armstrong: Is the Minister satisfied that museums show due regard for the culture of most people in Northern Ireland, which is Ulster culture? Can he say whether any plans have been developed to commemorate the Act of Union with a suitable display or exhibition in one of our principal museums, such as the Ulster Museum?

Mr McGimpsey: To answer the first question, if any of us were satisfied, none of us would be in public life. There is always room for improvement, no matter what you look at. We will continue to do what we can to strengthen and to improve.

On the question of the Act of Union, an exhibition is currently under way. It will be displayed in the Ulster Museum at the Botanic Gardens in Belfast for a period of three months beginning in June.

Mr O'Neill: I am quite sure that the question was referring to the Act of Union of 1801 between all of Ireland and Britain. However, perhaps I might refer to the actual question relating to museums and their role. Has the Minister got a date yet for the publication of the report into regional museums? Does he agree that the report has been long awaited and that it will have considerable significance in promoting cultural identity in Northern Ireland? Has he begun preparations for a funding stream to implement what we hope will be the enlightened recommendations of that report?

Mr McGimpsey: I assume that I missed or lost the first part of the question. Is the Member referring to the local museums and heritage review? The review steering group intends to present the report jointly to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of the Environment by the end of February. I have not seen it, but that will mark the end of the review, and the Departments will then consult and respond to the steering group's recommendations, which will fall under several headings. The resource implications will be a part of that, and I have no doubt that Mr O'Neill and the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee will have suggestions. I look forward to sharing the review with the Committee and to hearing its suggestions and considerations in due course.

TG4

8. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the benefits of the wider availability of TG4 in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 845/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Policy in respect of broadcasting is a reserved matter and is the responsibility of the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

In the recently published communications White Paper 'A New Future For Communications' the UK Government said that it aimed to give effect to the commitments in the Belfast Agreement relating to the broadcasting of Irish-language programmes and to the support of film and television production in Northern Ireland.

3.30 pm

The wider availability of TG4 in Northern Ireland allows more of the Irish-language community in Northern Ireland to watch Irish-medium programmes. It also increases awareness of the language generally and affords viewers the opportunity to learn the Irish language through the medium of television.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat. I appreciate that the complete provision of TG4 throughout Ireland, and other matters pertaining to broadcasting are, indeed, reserved matters. None the less, I seek a commitment from the Minister to lobby the Irish and British broadcasting authorities to ensure the complete availability of TG4. Yesterday they had excellent coverage of the game between Bellaghy and Crossmolina, but too few people who wanted to see it got to do so. I also ask the Minister to lobby the BBC to commission new programmes in Irish. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, the time is up. Will you answer Mr McElduff's question in writing?

Mr McGimpsey: I will.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Fishing Industry

1. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail if additional European Union funding will be available for the fishing industry; and to make a statement. (AQO 810/00)

8. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the date when the bid for Fishing Industry Finance and Grants (Fisheries Guidance) Programme funding will be approved by the European Commission; and to make a statement. (AQO 817/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): Under the Community Support Framework, the European Commission has approved 29 million euros for assistance to the Northern Irish fishing industry. However, details of how such funding is to be allocated between the different fisheries measures have still to be agreed by the Commission, as they are contained in the overall Northern Ireland Transitional I programme.

I am, therefore, not in a position to outline how the funding will be allocated. As the Member will appreciate, I cannot tell him exactly when the European Commission will approve the operational programme, but I am reasonably confident that approval should be forthcoming before the end of March.

Mr Shannon: There is much talk in the fishing industry about the assistance that could be offered, and the Minister mentioned the sum of 29 million euros. I understand from the fishing industry that there could be £20 million available. Will the Minister give us a breakdown of how the funding will be allocated? For instance, how much will go on decommissioning and how much on the promotion of the finished product? More importantly, will the Minister tell us the start date for the scheme? The fishermen and the fishing industry need the finance now. Will there be sufficient financial assistance to take on the task of maintaining the fishing industry?

Ms Rodgers: I cannot give details of the scheme, for it has not yet been approved. It would be wrong of me to pre-empt what will, or will not, be approved. Similarly, I cannot give a start date until the approval is through. I hope to receive it by the end of March 2001 at the latest.

As to what can be done for the industry, I am obviously considering a decommissioning scheme. My officials are consulting with the industry about the possibility. I cannot give a breakdown as yet, for the reasons that I have mentioned, but we are having consultations about it, so that when we do — as I hope — get the go-ahead, we will be ready to move on it as soon as possible. Apart from that, I am taking all other possible measures. In relation to the specific questions that the Member has asked, those are the only answers I am able to give.

Mr O'Neill: We all realise the difficulty that the Minister and her Department are in while they await definitive guidance from Europe. However, the Minister will have plans for the decommissioning of fishing vessels. Will she detail for us what sort of decommissioning she would like to see? What plans does she have for such a scheme?

Ms Rodgers: The decommissioning scheme will be aimed at reducing capacity to help fishermen with the difficulty of balancing the conservation of stocks with the preservation of their livelihood. The scheme is with the European Commission for approval.

In anticipation of the programme being approved in the next few weeks, I am developing the details of the

decommissioning scheme and consulting with the fishing industry. However, I am not yet able to provide those details.

Mr Taylor: Since funding for the fishing industry comes from the common fisheries policy, which has failed the fishermen of County Down and is now under review, will the Minister say whether the Department has made any representations in relation to the review of the common fisheries policy?

Secondly, does she support the idea of regionalisation? Thirdly, as funding from the common fisheries policy is partly expended by the Northern Ireland Harbour Fisheries Authority, is the Minister aware of the growing concern among Portavogie fishermen about delays and decisions made by the board of that organisation, and will she make representations to ensure more speedy and efficient decision-making processes for that board?

Ms Rodgers: In relation to the common fisheries policy, I expect to see a Green Paper in March, and we will be making our contribution to that through the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I have already had informal discussions with European officials, and I am aware that a review of the common fisheries policy is being prepared. The Northern Ireland Harbour Fishery Authority is no longer in deficit because of the hard work of board members.

The board is considering several issues, and the Member may be referring to the improvements to Kilkeel harbour. The board is examining the situation and is considering the wider implications of an integrated plan for the entire Kilkeel area. To date, they have not requested any funding from me, but they have been working well within their difficult remit.

Grant Applications: Appeals

2. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline progress towards the establishment of an appeals mechanism in respect of grant applications to her Department. (AQO 864/00)

Ms Rodgers: My Department will shortly issue a consultation paper to the industry as the first step towards establishing an independent appeals mechanism for decisions concerning livestock and area-based payments. I hope that, following consultation, we will be able to proceed with setting up the structures required to have the new appeals procedure operational before the end of the year.

Mrs E Bell: I am glad that the new procedure should be in place by the end of the year because on 5 December 2000, in response to the question from David Ford, the Minister said:

“We have a draft in preparation”.

Scotland already has an ombudsman, and Wales will commence consultation in the autumn. When will we see progress here? May we have a timetable for that?

Ms Rodgers: I am aware that the Scots have already got their appeals mechanism in place and that England and Wales have begun the consultation process. We hope to start consulting in the next few weeks, and that is a statutory obligation. Following consultation, we will assess the results and go through the Nolan procedures to establish the independent mechanism.

It is difficult to put a timetable on that work. I will be moving as quickly as possible because I recognise the importance — especially under the Human Rights Act 1998 — of having an independent mechanism so that people can feel that they have the option to bring an appeal for independent assessment outside the authority that made the decision.

Importation of Condemned Specified Risk Material

3. **Mr Kane** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she is aware of the import of condemned specified risk material (SRM) from the rendering plant in County Cavan. (AQO 870/00)

Ms Rodgers: I was aware that imports of SRM were taking place. However, it was derived from animals slaughtered for human consumption, and none was derived from condemned animals. Processed SRM from Monery By-Products — now called Monery 2000 Ltd — in County Cavan was exported from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland for landfill at the Tullyvar site at Aughnacloy. The imports were under licence from my Department and took place from July 1999 until December 2000.

New European Union rules on SRM were introduced by the European Commission on 29 June 2000 through Commission decision 2000/418. That decision, which came into force on 1 October 2000, made it illegal to export SRM to another member state, except for the purposes of incineration. As the Republic of Ireland authorities lacked the necessary landfill facilities to deal with the material, they requested that the trade continue beyond 1 October 2000 while they sought a derogation from the Commission. That approach was unsuccessful, and the Republic of Ireland authorities immediately stopped the trade in December 2000. No further trade has occurred since.

Mr Kane: Did the import practice stop in accordance with EU regulations that prohibit the transfer of such material? In complying with the regulation, has the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development admitted that the material was SRM? Can the Minister confirm that Monery 2000 Ltd is a designated plant for SRM? Was one day's notice given to allow a veterinary inspection to be carried out every time consignments for Aughnacloy were dispatched? Can the Minister be

satisfied with the integrity of licences for such material, given that Mr Fox from the Irish Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development found himself in prison for falsifying licences?

Ms Rodgers: There are six or seven questions, and I may not have heard them all correctly, but I will do my best to answer. If I miss one, I will respond in writing.

First, the imported material is buried at Tullyvar, and it will remain buried. It was processed to the required EU standard before burial. The processing reduced any risk from BSE to negligible proportions. Prior to import, the SRM was processed to standards laid down by the Commission — decision 96/449/EC, which requires the material to be heated to a core temperature of 133°C for 20 minutes at a pressure of 3 bar. The particle size of the raw material prior to processing must be reduced to at most 50 mm by means of a pre-breaker or grinder.

I further reassure the Member that imports were subject to strict veterinary controls laid down in the licence granted by my Department. Those controls required processing before import to the required EU standard; advance notice of the import; veterinary certification by the Republic of Ireland authorities that the material had been processed to the required EU standard; transportation in sealed, leak-proof containers to arrive during working hours; and containers and vehicles to be cleansed and disinfected before leaving the Tullyvar landfill site. There were also veterinary checks of the consignments on their arrival at Tullyvar to ensure that those conditions had been met.

Mr Douglas: Specified risk material is being put into the landfill site at Greenhill Road in County Antrim, and as much as 100,000 tonnes of meat and bonemeal — some of which may be contaminated — is being stored throughout Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that, with hindsight, SRM should never have been accepted from the South?

Ms Rodgers: As regards SRM coming in from the South, we were not able, under the EU free-trade regulations, to refuse such material. That was the case until the EU changed the regulation and stipulated that such material should not be transported from one country to another. At that time the Republic of Ireland sought a derogation, and while that was taking place the practice was allowed to continue. However, as soon as the derogation was refused, the practice was stopped.

3.45 pm

I cannot comment on the Member's other question because I do not have the specific details here. I will answer him in writing.

Mrs Carson: It is difficult to get answers about what actually happened at the Tullyvar site. I welcome the interest shown by the DUP in trying to get an answer to questions that I have been raising for some considerable time.

The Minister mentioned that the material arrived in sealed containers. I would like an assurance that they were really sealed. Can we be assured that they were permanently sealed and that there is no risk of material from the dump at Tullyvar getting into the watercourse or being siphoned off into it as part of the procedures?

Can the Minister assure me that she will work with the Department of the Environment to ensure that no more dangerous materials are imported into Northern Ireland? Will she put pressure on the Republic of Ireland authorities to abide by their responsibilities in respect of trans-frontier transport of waste?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that the convention is to ask one question rather than a series.

Mrs Carson: There are so many issues. I will raise them in a written question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure the Minister will be quite happy to answer in writing.

Ms Rodgers: I know that the Member has already raised those matters with me in writing.

As regards the risk to human health and SRM getting into the watercourse, the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) — an independent scientific advisory committee — has made it clear that the risk of BSE from buried SRM is negligible. That is the advice which we have received. Of course, any risk to human health would be a matter for the Food Standards Agency, not for my Department.

As regards whether the containers were sealed, the answer is yes. They were inspected on arrival. Veterinary checks were carried out, and everything was found to be in order.

Sheepmeat

4. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to say when she expects the European Commission to bring forward proposals for the review of the sheepmeat regime. (AQO 829/00)

Ms Rodgers: I understand that the Commission aims to bring forward proposals for the reform of the sheepmeat regime for discussion at the next Agriculture Council meeting in March. Knowing this, we have been pressing the case from a UK and Northern Ireland point of view. Indeed, my officials attended a meeting with the Commission on 10 January to discuss the matter.

That proved useful, and the Commission was advised of the importance of the sheep premium to sheepmeat producers, and in particular of the less favoured areas supplement to hill farmers, who suffer from a lack of alternative agricultural activities. The Commission officials were also told that, while we were keen to see the regime simplified — and can see advantage in a move to a flat rate premium because it would introduce a degree

of certainty into the regime for producers — any flat rate must be fair. We will be following developments closely.

Mr Bradley: The recent announcement regarding the regime seems to indicate that Brussels wants to replace variable premiums with fixed headage premiums. I do not know how we will be able to deal with that. However, does the Minister agree on the importance of a much higher flat rate than has been the case recently?

Ms Rodgers: I am aware of the falling value of the sheep annual premium in recent years. That has been due partly to the strength of sterling, but also to the differential between the market values in the rest of Europe and the UK — and Northern Ireland in particular — which means that our subsidy is less. In fact, a flat rate has been suggested by the Scottish college that carried out a study on behalf of the Commission. The farmers and I would be happy to see a flat rate introduced, and it is a possibility. It would need to be set at a much higher rate, because recently the annual sheep premium has gradually decreased every year, and that is clearly unacceptable from our point of view.

Farm Incomes

5. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of farm incomes in Northern Ireland; and to make a statement.

(AQO 827/00)

Ms Rodgers: Income figures for Northern Ireland, which were published on 31 January 2001, show that, at the aggregate level, the total income from farming and the return to farmers and all their family members working on farms rose by 6% to £98 million — 3% in real terms — in 2000.

At the individual farm level, it is forecast that the average net farm income will have increased by approximately £3,000 per farm in 2000-01, with improvements in all farm types other than cereals. In the cases of general cropping, in less favoured areas, cattle and sheep, pigs and poultry and mixed farms' average incomes are expected to return to profit from loss. However, the average income from lowland cattle and sheep farms is expected to have remained negative, despite some improvement.

Although I welcome this improvement, however slight, incomes remain low by historical standards. The figures reflect the serious problems experienced by the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland in recent years. The weak euro has been the primary cause of the industry's difficulties. The payment of agrimonetary compensation, worth almost £14 million to Northern Ireland in 2000, has been an important element in bolstering incomes. While the increase in agriculture income is small, it

represents a hopeful sign that the worst of the income difficulties may be over.

Mr Fee: I thank the Minister for a detailed answer. I know that she understands better than most that there has been a serious decline in recent years across every agriculture sector, be it sheep, beef, dairy, poultry, cereals, or whatever. The news that the Minister gave is extremely welcome, but is it her Department's assessment that the recession in agriculture has finally bottomed out, and what are its predictions for farm incomes over the next few years?

Ms Rodgers: I agree with Mr Fee about the difficult times that the farming community has been through from an income point of view. I would like to think that they have bottomed out. However, much will depend on future movements in the sterling/euro exchange rate. There are now some grounds for mild optimism in the short to medium term. They include the recent strengthening of the euro and the generally improved prices currently prevailing for several commodities compared to those in the early part of last year. However, there has been another slight decrease in some prices in recent days.

Against that, the BSE problem in other EU countries has the potential to have a negative impact on beef prices in the British Isles. It will clearly have an effect on our market, and that is why I will argue for the payment of all agrimony compensation while it is still available.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister accept that, although there may have been a tiny increase in the total agriculture income last year, it has fallen by a massive 73% since 1995 — more than in England, Wales or Scotland? How much importance does the Minister attach to reversing the decline, and does she have any plans to achieve that?

Ms Rodgers: I recognise that the rise comes against the backdrop of a steep fall in recent years. I also note that although our income level is slightly up, that is not the case in Great Britain. Indeed, Wales had a negative return in that it had a fall of 105%.

However, in relation to what I can do to address it, as I have already said, I will lobby for the full agrimonetary compensation to be paid. I am looking at every measure that we can take to improve marketing, skills and the quality of beef. There are issues beyond my control, such as the effect that the present BSE situation is having on the markets in continental Europe with the consequent domino effect in Northern Ireland. In that situation, I can only appeal to the good sense of consumers to exercise choice when buying and for retailers also to play their part.

Organic Farming

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the differential rates of grant paid to organic farmers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 866/00)

Ms Rodgers: I am seeking to encourage the development of a vibrant organic sector in Northern Ireland. Under the Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan 2000-06, £9 million has been made available for a new organic farming scheme, which will be open to applicants from 1 March 2001. Those resources will enable the 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.

Payments to producers under the organic farming scheme will total, over a period of five years, £450 a hectare for land eligible for the arable area payment scheme (AAPS) and for land in permanent crops. Payments of £350 a hectare will be made for improved land not eligible for that scheme, with £50 a hectare for unimproved grassland or rough grazing land. Most of the payments will be made in the first two years, and producers will also receive lump sums of £300 in the first year, £200 in the second and £100 in the third year towards the initial costs of advice and training.

In the Republic of Ireland, under the rural environment protection scheme (REPS), organic farmers receive annual payments of 181 euros (approximately £110) a hectare for land in conversion and 91 euros (approximately £55) a hectare for land fully converted, up to a maximum of 40 hectares. The REPS agreement is for five years, but it can be renewed with payments for fully converted land continuing at the lower rate.

The need for ongoing payments to organic farmers is likely to emerge in the report on the strategic study of the organic sector, which is being completed. I will study any such recommendations carefully, though there is no financial provision for any such payments.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for detailing what is currently paid, but she did not refer to the fact that the UK is the only country in the EU that does not make provision for ongoing payments under the organic aid scheme, or something similar. Does she accept that Northern Ireland producers have particular problems, given the land border with a member state that pays such an ongoing grant? Does she also accept that there is a real danger that farmers in Northern Ireland could convert to organic production because of the current level of grant and subsequently be undercut by producers elsewhere in Europe unless there is ongoing support?

Ms Rodgers: A study of the organic farming scheme is currently taking place. I am willing consider the report that I will get from those consultants following their strategic study of the Northern Ireland organic sector. I am open-minded on the issue, and I await that study's recommendations. I also have to bear in mind — and I remind Mr Ford of this — that resources will always be a problem, but I will do what I can to deal with the issue.

Mr Hussey: The Minister will now be aware of the seven-point plan brought forward by Mr Fischler for

dealing with beef prices. It includes an exemption to use set-aside land for organic farming. Has she assessed the impact of that proposal with regard to her previous answers?

4.00 pm

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

Ms Rodgers: I am aware of the seven proposals that have come from the Commission, and at present I am discussing those proposals with the industry. This morning I had a meeting with the Ulster Farmers' Union. I will consider all the implications, but I have not assessed any one in particular. I am going to the agriculture meeting in Brussels next Monday, and it is to be hoped that I will be in a better position then to give a fuller answer to the question.

Quality Beef Scheme: Non-Genetically-Modified Feed

7. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that the difficulty in sourcing non-genetically-modified feed for farm animals may affect the implementation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development quality beef scheme.

(AQO 840/00)

Ms Rodgers: I assume that the Member is referring to the farm quality assurance scheme, which is managed by the Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland on behalf of the industry. I understand that industry representatives are considering the potential under the scheme to provide some assurance that animals have not been fed genetically modified foods for some period prior to slaughter. This is a commercial matter for industry interests to consider and decide how they wish to proceed. I am advised by the Northern Ireland grain trade that it is possible to supply genetically-modified-free feed, but at an additional cost.

SUPPLY

Spring Supplementary Estimates (2000-01) and Vote on Account (2001-02)

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Assembly approves that a further sum not exceeding £195,599,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges which will come in course of payment during the year ending on 31 March 2001 for expenditure by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas. — [Mr Durkan]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That the Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £3,806,414,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002 and that resources not exceeding £4,305,870,000 be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002. — [Mr Durkan]

Mr Durkan: I listened with great interest to the points that have been raised by Members. Members' participation has fully reflected the opening comments of the Speaker this morning about the debate providing an opportunity to raise matters of interest or concern to them. Twenty-one Members took that opportunity, and that reflects the high number of Members who contributed in earlier Budget debates.

The Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee, Mr Molloy, mentioned his concern about the process for Assembly consideration of the financial cycle. That same theme was picked up by other Members, including Alex Maskey, Seamus Close, Monica McWilliams, William Hay, Gardiner Kane and George Savage. Their criticisms and concerns are noted and will form an important part of considering how improvements can be made. I assure Members that the issue will be carefully considered.

There are practical and timing issues, but it is the aim of the Department of Finance and Personnel to ensure that Committees have a greater role and involvement in scrutinising the financial proposals and performance of their Departments and that the Finance and Personnel Committee is as fully involved as possible at an early stage.

I understand Members' concerns, and I will not attempt to argue that the processes that have been followed so far have been adequate, much less perfect.

As I have emphasised repeatedly to the Finance and Personnel Committee, the timetable for each monitoring round is constrained, but there is room for more discussion with the Committees before a result is achieved. I will explore further how that best can be facilitated.

However, I have told Committee members on several occasions that they are free to ask questions at the various stages of the processes that are now culminating in the Estimates. That applies for discussions about the annual Budget as well as for each monitoring round. Committee members need not await a procedural starting gun from me to begin scrutiny and questioning. The Department of Finance and Personnel has not turned down any requests for information or elaboration, and I would be surprised if any Department had done so.

Concerns have been raised today that people have not had enough time to consider the Estimates. The Estimates cover allocations previously announced in monitoring rounds and in the second set of Estimates in the Budget. Committees have had information available to them that they could pursue with relevant Departments or question the Department of Finance and Personnel about. Committees have been quite free to pursue the sort of questions that were raised today through the channels available to them, based on the information that they had from the previous monitoring decisions and the previous Budget proposals.

I am aware of the views that were specifically articulated by Mr Close about the adequacy of the role of the Assembly and its Committees in contributing to thinking on the allocation of resources and the scrutiny of detailed Estimates. I cannot be unconditional in responding to those arguments. The Executive have a clear responsibility in the process. However, given Mr Close's views and the views of others, I am willing to consider how we can close the gap he described. I will take the views of the Finance and Personnel Committee on the matter. We need dialogue to enable a better all-round understanding of the constraints and the opportunities to refine and improve what happens. That is not just in the interests of the Assembly and the Executive, but in the interests of the public.

In response to the Finance and Personnel Committee's report, the Executive plan to bring forward the draft Budget as early as possible after the summer recess. That was underlined again today by Mr Molloy.

I welcome the comments of several Members, including Mr Leslie and Ms McWilliams, on the introduction of resource accounting and budgeting and the related work on the development of public service agreements, which Mr Maskey welcomed. Those are important steps forward for improving financial and operational management in Departments. They will further enhance the accountability of Departments to the Assembly and address many of the concerns raised by Members in that regard.

For example, better information should be available on the true costs of services, the position of the Department against budget and, more importantly, progress against the delivery of departmental objectives that the Assembly wants to see. Those developments provide further opportunities to enhance the scope of the Assembly and its Committees in playing a major role in the development of the spending plans.

I will attempt to answer as many of the Members' points as possible. However, it would not be appropriate for me to make definitive responses on some issues that are currently subject to other processes, such as consideration by the Public Accounts Committee.

I want to stress that the spending plans of 11 Departments, which cover a very wide range of public services, change materially as each year progresses. At each point, whether setting the original Budget or in each monitoring round, we make the best estimates possible at the time and judge what can be committed.

Thus, while the pattern has been that we have needed Supplementary Estimates of 2% to 2.5% of the Main Estimates provision, that arises through a different combination of factors in each year that cannot be predicted at the start of the year. However, it would be wrong to assume that that implies that there is always money available and that we can afford to do more than we have announced.

The Executive have faced hard choices, and that will continue to be the case as we go forward. Mr Molloy acknowledged our role in reallocating resources and welcomed the reduction in the regional rate from that originally proposed. Other Members, including Mr Poots, also touched on that point. He asked us to keep under review our scope to raise income through other means. We will do that, although Mr Molloy will be aware that the opportunities to add to resources from local revenues are very limited.

However, the review of the regional rate will be thorough and wide-ranging. That is the place to explore the concerns that Mr Molloy, Mr Poots, Mr Close and others have raised about various aspects of the regional rate.

I want to emphasise that, as I explained last week, we acted on the rates increases as soon as action was possible, as had been promised all along. Given the many requests for additional funding that we have heard today in the course of the debate, I have to repeat that we need the revenue from the rates. We need not damage the case we need to make to the Treasury on the Barnett formula. Now is not the time to address the Barnett issue in full, but I note and welcome the comments that several Members made on it. I take Mr Molloy's point, also referred to by Mr Maskey, about the product of the Barnett formula in relation to our needs. That will be addressed with determination.

It is worth saying that the interests of Scotland and Wales may not coincide with our own, and we cannot presume that there can be a united approach on the subject just because we desire one.

Mr Leslie's cautious observations about the nature of the challenge on Barnett should be well taken. However, the 2000 spending review highlighted the inadequacies of the Barnett mechanism in funding the devolved regions. I have made representations to the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary of the Treasury, as have the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, on the issue. It is imperative that the problem be resolved before the next spending review. The full introduction of resource accounting and budgeting means that it is imperative that the Treasury recognises the level of need in Northern Ireland and the structural differences between Northern Ireland's and Great Britain's public sectors.

Mr Molloy raised the question of whether our approach to determining Votes on Account in future will be based on a percentage of estimated spend rather than the previous year's expenditure. That will be determined in the light of experience, but obviously, and most importantly, we do not wish to seek approval for an inadequate resource for the period to be covered.

Dr Birnie referred to the management development programme, as did Ms McWilliams. Reduced requirements have been declared on that programme, because some schemes were insufficiently developed to allow them to run in the current year. However, schemes that are in operation are running at almost full capacity.

The Department expects all planned schemes to run at or near full capacity next year. Dr Birnie also mentioned recruitment to the work track programme — another point taken up by Ms McWilliams. Recruitment to that programme has been slower than expected. When the programme started in August 1999, the Department estimated that capacity would build up to 1,050 places early in 2000-01. At present 850 people are in the programme, and recruitment is continuing.

Mr Poots raised points on several areas, including wastage and fraud in the Health Service, victims, urban regeneration, Department of the Environment funding, road maintenance and the Antrim to Knockmore railway line.

I attach a high priority to ensuring that wastage and fraud, in any service, are rigorously addressed. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is also determined to prevent, detect and pursue fraud anywhere in the health and personal social services. To that end, it has implemented a broad-based action plan to counter both patient-based and practitioner-based fraud and plans to extend counter-fraud measures to the wider Health Service.

On Mr Poots's comments on victims, and in reply to concerns from Ms Bell, I can say that the Executive

attach a high priority to their needs. Detailed proposals for the expenditure are still to be finalised, but it will be important to ensure that the £320,000 allocated to the Victims Unit will be used as efficiently and effectively as possible. We should also bear in mind that funding will be complementary to a further allocation of £6.7 million available from Peace II later this year.

4.15 pm

The Executive are committed to the pursuit of policies that directly address divisions in the community. We are following policies and supporting practical measures that will, over time, help to ease community divisions and thereby reinforce new political institutions commanding widespread public support.

I also note the comments about urban regeneration. That is primarily for the Minister for Social Development. While welcoming the in-year increases for historic buildings, road safety officers, planners, and so on in the Department of the Environment, Edwin Poots pressed the need for further resources for the Environment and Heritage Service to implement European environment Directives. The Executive and the Assembly have recognised that need by providing an extra £9 million in next year's Budget.

Mr Poots, William Hay, Kieran McCarthy and Gerry McHugh all stressed the need for further investment in roads maintenance. The additional allocations made in the December monitoring indicate that the Executive are aware of the need, in the context of available resources and competing priorities. Mr Hay's points on the slippage in roads capital expenditure are a matter for the Minister for Regional Development.

Mr Poots, Mr Close and Mr Hay raised the question of the Antrim to Knockmore railway after the Bleach Green line reopens. That is initially a matter for the Minister for Regional Development, but I must point out that the appraisal that underpinned the reopening of the Bleach Green line was based on the Knockmore line closing.

Delays in the provision of a new library for Lisburn occurred because of the lack of a suitable site. The favoured site had difficulties attached to it in the form of rights of way, but those have now been resolved, and the South Eastern Education and Library Board will complete its purchase. Provision of a library for Lisburn by conventional means would cost approximately £3 million. Adoption of such a route would have an adverse impact on the Department's library development programme. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is finalising the outline business case for the project, and it expects to allow the board to proceed with the PFI solution in the near future.

Mr Poots also raised the issue of the gas industry. The Executive are keen that the natural gas industry be

extended outside the greater Belfast area. However, the development of a natural gas industry in the south east — Craigavon, Newry and Banbridge — depends on the private sector constructing a gas pipeline between the Republic and Northern Ireland. Proposals by British Gas Keyspan to construct a North/South pipeline from Belfast to Dublin have become less attractive due to the possible introduction of a public service levy on all new gas pipelines in the South and their failure to sign firm long-term contracts with major gas users — the power stations.

Mr Dallat raised the matter of Audit Office funding. In that connection, most of the additional powers arising from the Government Resources and Accounts Bill are discretionary or permissive and are not expected to have immediate spending consequences. Funding for the Northern Ireland Audit Office will be kept under review but will not be impeded by my Department.

I was pleased to note the welcome given by many Members to the Assembly's increasing role in making its own decisions about financial allocations. The decisions taken following monitoring rounds reflect our judgement of such matters based on available information and views that have been expressed. I note the support for increased allocations for social purposes in the health, education and disability areas, as expressed by Patricia Lewsley, and the general support of Esmond Birnie for the Supplementary Estimates, linked to the proper view that money must be spent efficiently.

The question was raised as to why we should further invest in temporary school accommodation when the need is for longer-term provision of adequate facilities. That is a valid point. Inevitably we must secure an acceptable level of accommodation while the longer-term issues, which will require substantive funding, are addressed. Although we cannot resolve all of the shortcomings in capital provision in the short term, they will have a full place in our collective deliberations about priorities and needs as we progress through the next financial year.

Seamus Close typically covered a considerable amount of ground in his contribution to the debate. I have answered some of those points already, although I am certain that I will not be able to respond to his satisfaction on every point. I compliment him on the close scrutiny that he has given to the spring Supplementary Estimates booklet. All the time constraints about which he complained did not diminish his capacity in that regard.

Mr Close also referred to the need for extra expenditure to bring forward the preparation of area plans and to implement the proposed Knockmore-to-Sprucefield road link. The spring Supplementary Estimates provide additional resources in this year for the preparation of area plans, as does the Budget for next year. The Knockmore-Sprucefield road link is a matter for the Minister for Regional Development to prioritise in his overall road capital budget.

On the matter of superannuation, a total of £97,951,000 is required to meet redundancy and early retirement costs, of which £91,426,000 is in respect of Prison Service redundancy schemes. The Prison Service costs have been fully offset by the Northern Ireland Office from moneys provided by the Treasury. The remaining £6.5 million costs relate to a few minor schemes, the most notable covering Government training centre instructors.

Resources for Irish-medium education were referred to by some Members, namely Mr Poots and Mr McHugh. Some were in favour while others were in some doubt. There are clear commitments in the Belfast Agreement to supporting the Irish language and integrated education as measures to embed parity of esteem and reconciliation. Pluralism and real choice should mean that parents do not have to bear unnecessary financial burdens. It should also mean that the smaller sectors have a realistic chance to develop, not only in large population centres, such as Belfast and Derry, but across rural areas.

The matter of clinical negligence was mentioned by Ms McWilliams. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is required to meet agreed settlements for clinical negligence in full. Total provision of £7.9 million has been made in 2000-01. Of this, £4.9 million has been provided by health boards from their Main Estimate provision and £3 million by the Executive in December monitoring. £5 million is earmarked to meet anticipated claims in 2001-02, but that figure will need to be kept under review.

Prof McWilliams also referred to the Springvale project and PFI. I note her comments about the latter. However, the institutions are taking steps to set up a private finance initiative project board and to engage consultants to complete the outline business case. Building work has commenced on the community outreach centre, and an official European Community notice will be issued shortly, inviting tenders for the building of the applied research centre.

The main Springvale campus had been to open in September 2003. Following some legal and technical issues, which have taken time to resolve, the opening of the main campus has been deferred by one year, until September 2004. The in-year easement results from that delay.

Roads Service winter gritting was mentioned by Gerry McHugh and — I suppose from a slightly different angle — by Kieran McCarthy, as was Health Service expenditure. The detailed allocation of roads maintenance funding is a matter for the Minister for Regional Development, but I understand that gritting is undertaken in accordance with a programme based on the volume of traffic using a road, rather than its location.

As regards health, the Executive are concerned to ensure that Health Service expenditure is managed as effectively and efficiently as possible. Following the

Executive's agreement to my proposals to resolve the Health Service deficits through an injection of £18 million of additional funding, it was also agreed that 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 should oversee a joint consultancy exercise. The origins — and the consequences — of the recent growth of deficits in the health and personal social services boards and trusts would be examined, as would the effectiveness of new arrangements recently put in place by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure improved transparency and accountability.

Several Members, including Francie Molloy, Alex Maskey, William Hay, Michelle Gildernew and Patricia Lewsley, raised the matter of gap funding between Peace I and Peace II. Most welcomed the provision. I am fully aware of the difficulties faced by the community and voluntary sector in sustaining activities during the gap between Peace I and Peace II funding. In the current financial year the Executive have made gap funding available to address the problem. However, it is also widely recognised that gap funding is no substitute for having Peace II funding in place.

On 12 February, I announced to the Assembly that Departments would be authorised to make advance payments for projects that they judge will be eligible for funding and successful in an application under Peace II. In reply to Michelle Gildernew, I emphasise that the criteria used will be those that will apply to Peace II funding. They have been developed after detailed discussion involving all Departments.

Some judgement will be required as Departments apply the criteria. The safety net I mentioned on 12 February will help deal with the risk that there might be some cases where Departments assist a project in the short term, which does not in the end prove eligible for funding under Peace II. Two million pounds have been set aside under the Executive programme fund for social inclusion and community regeneration, with the aim of ensuring that the issue is fully dealt with.

Gerry McHugh mentioned libraries in rural areas. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure plans to carry out a review of the public library service that, among other things, will examine the extent to which it meets the needs of its clients, both as individuals and as communities. Individual allocations to education and library boards are made on the basis of an assessment of relative needs. That takes account of the home population in each board area. It is a matter for each education and library board to decide whether the public is better served by a static or mobile library. At present, there are 25 mobile libraries providing public services, and eight providing a service specifically for the housebound.

While welcoming the additional resources for roads and transport programmes in the Budget for 2001-02, Alban Maginness asked that more funding be provided for roads maintenance. As I said, the Executive are very aware of the need to maintain the roads infrastructure. We must look to the forthcoming regional transportation strategy to consider how our transport investment needs can be afforded in the context of the limited resources available.

4.30 pm

Mr Maginness also raised a question on water and sewerage funding. He asked me to increase investment in water and sewerage services in particular. As Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee, he recognised that an additional £14.5 million was included in the 2001-02 Budget, approved by the Assembly in December. Beyond that, water bids on the Executive programme funds will of course be considered. In the future, it will be for the Assembly to consider the level of investment necessary in water and sewerage services and how best they can be funded, given the limited resources.

Ms Gildernew drew attention to housing unfitness and fuel poverty. She highlighted the need for increased spending to reduce the level of housing unfitness, to shorten waiting lists and to address the problem of fuel poverty. In 2000-01, the Housing Executive has been provided with additional funding of £16 million, of which £2 million will be used to combat fuel poverty and a further £3.5 million to provide disabled adaptations. As Ms Gildernew pointed out, that does not feature in the Supplementary Estimates. This is because, as I explained in my opening remarks this morning, some aspects of spending, such as the capital spending of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, are outside the vote system. In next year's Budget, the Assembly has approved further additional expenditure in those areas in recognition of the importance that the Executive and the Assembly attach to the need for affordable investment in social housing.

Several Members raised issues about the increases in the costs of departmental administration. Mr Kane commented on the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and similar points were made by Mr Savage. It is important to point out that the Department has direct and unavoidable responsibilities for providing essential services to the farming community.

Mr Poots and Ms McWilliams made points about the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. It is important to point out that some of the new responsibilities, which are central to the implementation and operation of the agreement, fall to that Department, with particular demands on senior staff. It is necessary that such important work be funded.

Mr McHugh spoke about the Department of Education. The central administration costs are a relatively small proportion of the overall provision.

I will try to cover a few further points that were raised in the course of debate. Both Mr Leslie and Mr Kennedy referred to skills in the Northern Ireland economy. The Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment has been taking steps to put in place a range of measures to identify current and emerging skills shortages and to implement training and education programmes to fill them. The programmes are open to both the unemployed and those in employment who wish to improve their skills and employability.

Mr Poots spoke about the moratorium on grants for hotel development. Following an independent review of hotel supply and demand in Northern Ireland, the Tourist Board introduced a policy in January 1997, which suspended financial support to hotel development projects within a 10-mile radius of Belfast city centre. Given that hotel developments have taken place without selective financial assistance in the area, it is likely that the moratorium will remain in place for the foreseeable future.

Ms McWilliams spoke about increased administration costs for the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The departmental running costs allocation for the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment includes an additional £0.9 million to meet the cost of the private finance initiative contract with ICL for the provision of information technology services.

The increase is necessary because the baseline provision for phases one and two did not meet existing needs, and those facilities are vital to the proper functioning of the Department and its job centre network. The balance of £0.6 million was required to meet the increased workloads needed to support the Minister and to respond to the Assembly's requests for information. Increased expenditure on administration in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure stems from the need to put in place the structures necessary to support the Minister and to respond to enquiries from the Assembly. Because it is a new Department, expenditure is also required to research and develop strategies to meet the needs of its diverse portfolio.

This has been a wide-ranging and interesting debate, and I have responded to as many points as possible, while trying to ensure that I do not spend too much time on my winding-up speech. I thank Members for their valuable contributions, not just in this debate but through the Committees, correspondence and questions posed here on other occasions. If I have not responded to any substantive point, I will be glad to reply in writing myself or ask the relevant Minister to do so.

I want to underline a point that I made at the beginning of this winding-up speech. I recognise the frustrations of Members if they feel that information important to a debate on a motion subject to resolution is not available to them as early as they would like.

The Estimates bring together, in a procedural form, the effects of announcements that have already been made and trailed in the Chamber and in the Committees. I note the concerns and the interests expressed by individual Members and by people speaking on behalf of their Committees. I would not discourage people from pursuing those questions in future on the Floor of the Chamber or through their Committees.

Many of the issues that have been discussed give rise to questions about the adequacy of information and whether priorities are sufficiently robust or policy principles sufficiently transparent to determine how effectively or equitably the Departments are allocating money across the region. Those questions should not just be saved for plenary debates, but neither should they be directed to the Minister of Finance and Personnel exclusively. Members and Committees should pursue the issues through the means available to them.

The Assembly offers Members a great opportunity not just to influence allocations but to hold Departments accountable for them. For that reason, the Assembly was designed to allow the public interest to be reflected in spending plans. It is also meant to ensure public accountability with regard to how well we manage that expenditure and how we deliver the outcomes that we promise as part of those programmes.

Inadequate as our procedures have been to date, they will improve. Resource accounting and budgeting will help, but I know that all the improvements will not come just from the change in the financial management system. I accept that there is a need for change in the procedures: information must be available to Committees, and the feedback from them must be taken into account.

Although Committees have had the information from monitoring rounds and from the Budget, I am not aware of any further requests for information or elaboration on any points that have gone unmet, either by my Department or by any other. I hope that people will reflect positively on that as they go about their business through the other channels available to them as Members of the Assembly.

Mr Gibson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the debate, a number of us were unable to speak because of the inadequate allocation of time. Some Members were able to contribute rather gloriously and eloquently, but others lost out. In the Minister's Estimates, there was no indication of thinking for the future on rates, which is a vexed question for every party here. The current system is a hangover from the window tax of many centuries ago.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is there a question?

Mr Gibson: It is a question. Would it be possible, in the review of local government, to examine how we raise local taxes?

The Deputy Speaker: You started with a point of order, but you are now asking a question. Ministers do not have to answer questions.

Mr Gibson: I stand admonished.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Assembly approves that a further sum not exceeding £195,599,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges which will come in course of payment during the year ending on 31 March 2001 for expenditure by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £3,806,414,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002 and that resources not exceeding £4,305,870,000 be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002. — [Mr Durkan]

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURES

4.45 pm

Resolved:

That Mr Ivan Davis should serve on the Committee on Procedures. — [Mr J Wilson]

Motion made:

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

WATER AND SEWERAGE SERVICES (WEST TYRONE)

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús ba mhaith liom a rá gur maith a thuigim gur mór an gnóthas é soláthar uisce agus séarachais, agus go bhfuil ardcháilíocht seirbhíse éifeachtacha ag an chuid is mó de na daoine.

Mar sin féin, is fiorthábhachtach aird a tharraingt ar an tearcmhaoiniú dona atá ann le roinnt deiceanna de bhlianta anuas agus ar an phráinn atá leis an bhonneagar a athnuachan.

I acknowledge that the provision of water and sewerage services is a major undertaking. Most people enjoy a high-quality and efficient service. However, it is important to draw attention to the serious underfunding over several decades and the urgent need to renew the infrastructure and improve drinking water quality and effluent treatment to comply with EU Directives.

I appreciate that funding pressures have increased with the growth in demand and that even more rigorous environmental standards are expected nowadays. The level of investment required for water and sewerage services will be substantial if we are to maintain and improve existing amenities. If we are to ensure proper provision of such essential public health services, then the debate at the macro level must focus on structural, funding and regulatory arrangements for delivering water and sewerage services. We must make sure that services meet the challenge.

The real problem in west Tyrone is a human rights issue. First, I acknowledge a decision recently made by the Minister for Regional Development to move the major waste-water treatment works in Omagh from Hunter's Crescent on the Derry Road to an out-of-town site. That campaign was long but successful, although there are still concerns about the new location. The Minister is listening sympathetically to Omagh District Council on the matter. Omagh is, after all, identified as a key service and growth centre in the 'Shaping Our Future' documents.

For years, Omagh District Council and I have taken an interest in the campaign to ensure that all rural homes are connected to a public water supply. I issued a millennium challenge to previous Ministers of the Environment — British direct-rule Ministers included — on that matter. In west Tyrone, there is an unduly large number of homes that are not connected either to public water mains or to the sewerage system. We all accept that the availability of good quality water and sewerage services is an essential requirement in any society and is fundamental to the maintenance of public health.

In this day and age, it is inconceivable for city dwellers to consider that even 2% of homes in the North

are not connected to public water mains and that 17% are not connected to the public sewerage system. Those are merely figures and statistics that do not reflect the personal hardship. In fact, they mask the real daily hardship for families that lack the amenities that the rest of us take for granted. Hot water from a tap, fresh water for family use — that is hardly a luxury.

I will give some examples of how people are affected socially and healthwise. There is a female pensioner in Greencastle, County Tyrone, living on a small farm. She has to walk to a well every day, which is simply a spout coming out of a wall built to protect access for the lady. I showed a photograph of that to Reg Empey recently, and he was alarmed that such a situation could exist in this day and age. A mother of young children at Backglen Road, near Mountfield in County Tyrone, regularly travels to Omagh to collect four-gallon drums of water for bathing and other everyday uses in her home. The irony of that situation is that the family lives three quarters of a mile from a reservoir, the main source of tap water for the Omagh area. Fortunately, the issue is being addressed.

Families in rural Donemana are apprehensive about offering a cup of tea to a visitor because of the stigma attached to not having clean, hygienic water in their homes. People have difficulties with central heating, and others have no washing machines. There are various families affected in Whitebridge Road in the Sixmilecross area of County Tyrone. Examples include farm dwellings and the absence of a fire hydrant at a forestry division outpost. People who have plans for expanding small engineering businesses in the locality face tremendous difficulty.

One elderly man had a water test report carried out on his well. An undue presence or level of *E.coli* was detected in the water after the gentleman had spent eight days in intensive care in Craigavon Area Hospital. That raises questions about the environmental standards of many of the water wells currently in use. Dr Wilson, a clinical scientist who carried out tests on the water sample taken, revealed it to be unchlorinated water. There was an unsatisfactory resolution due to the presence of *E.coli*. The real hardship in that case speaks for itself.

The application procedure is the question. When people do not have running water in their homes they apply to the Water Service to be connected to a public water main, and the financial viability is considered. The Water Service previously allowed a maximum of £2,900 for water mains connection. Fortunately, that was increased to £5,000 recently for an individual unit or home. A home in a rural area was previously allowed £2,300 and no more towards sewerage connections. That figure was recently raised to £4,000. That was announced in May 2000. It was welcome because that kind of figure makes a difference for some families.

However, more work obviously needs to be done where the allowable cost limit has not made a difference

for individual families. Again, referring to one of the examples I used earlier — and I am not blaming anyone — it is unrealistic, where a proposed scheme is estimated to cost £20,900, for the Department, under the new scenario, to allow £5,000.

Mr Hussey: The Member is aware of, and welcomes, the recent increase in the cost-benefit analysis figure for water and sewerage connections. Does he agree — I suspect that this is where he is heading — that in circumstances such as those cited, we need some additional criteria to be introduced, particularly in areas of west Tyrone, given the sparse population and the distance from supplies?

Mr McElduff: Absolutely. I welcome Mr Hussey's comments. He understands the issue because he represents the same area as myself. As well as additional criteria, sources of funding in addition to the Department must be found.

A typical letter coming back from the Department's Water Service reads something like

"I refer to your request for the provision of a public water main at a certain road. Unfortunately, this scheme has proved to be uneconomical. The estimated cost of the necessary work is £13,000. In this case, it is uneconomical by £10,100."

People on low incomes are expected to make up the deficit simply to access something that everybody else takes for granted. Such problems are everywhere in the North and, I contend, in west Tyrone in particular. I can list Omagh, Drumquin, Gortin, Cranagh, Dromore, Creggan, Mountfield, Sixmilecross, Dunnamanagh, Castlederg, Newtownstewart, Douglas Bridge and Killen. This is not an isolated problem; it is significant.

We have had many debates in the Chamber about rates and the regional rate accounting for services from which people benefit. Assembly Members representing rural areas have been very vociferous — across all parties — about the deficit in services such as the roads infrastructure and proper access to hospitals in rural areas. That is another area where people wonder why they pay rates and what they get in return.

I am asking for greater will on the Department's part. I would like to see an interdepartmental focus on this question. Surely the Executive, through the Programme for Government, need to address this in an urgent way. What are the Executive programme funds for? They should be for areas like this. I want to see Minister Gregory Campbell going forward with a bid to ensure that all homes are connected to water supplies.

The 2001 census will provide analysis of housing stock and population figures. Therefore, if the millennium challenge has come and gone — and there has been some response in relation to the increased allowable cost limit — let us go for a challenge from 2001 to 2011 of eradicating any deficit of this nature.

The Assembly has to make a difference in such areas — along with the Water Service, district councils, community groups, the European Union and rural development agencies. Let us have a task force aimed at bringing to the starting blocks those homes and families in rural areas that do not have public water main connections.

The necessary resources need to be made available to achieve the standards set by EU Directives. There is a real perception that such a situation predominates in areas west of the River Bann. People often say to me that they pay tax and rates like people living elsewhere.

In departmental or Government terms, the sums of money required to redress the huge imbalance are not massive. Doing so will dramatically enhance the quality of life for many rural families — if the will exists to put it right.

5.00 pm

I have a copy of the Department of the Environment's Water Service capital works programme for Omagh and Strabane districts, which was issued in November 2000. There are various categories and states of readiness pertaining to hamlets and rural settlement patterns: category one — sewage treatment works required to facilitate rural development; category one — schemes that are already under construction or are scheduled to start; category two — other schemes scheduled to begin in the next two years; and category three, which is probably the greatest area of concern — schemes that are under consideration but may prove to be economically unfeasible.

This concerns townlands and areas such as Clanabogan, Newtownsaville, Tattyreagh and Roscavey. Those are examples from the Omagh district in particular, where property developers have plans to facilitate housing in rural hamlets, but are being held to ransom by the absence of adequate sewage treatment provision. The Rural Housing Association Ltd also has plans to build in some rural areas, but that scheme too is being held back by inadequate sewage treatment works.

Those are two areas that I deliberately focused on: the absence of public water main connection for homes and families in rural areas, and the need for joined-up government for rural development and the provision of adequate sewage treatment works for hamlets. The west Tyrone area plan, which is being developed, must take account of the growing need of hamlets in west Tyrone. There must be joined-up government.

Any new arrangement or structure for delivering water and sewerage services must be capable of securing facilities of the highest quality at the lowest possible cost to the consumer and of maintaining and improving safeguards for the environment and public health.

In local terms, pertaining specifically to west Tyrone — but also to other areas where the problem is evident we must ensure that 100% of existing homes are connected

to a public water main supply. Rural development needs must be matched by adequate sewerage schemes to serve homes, schools, businesses and other properties in settlements such as hamlets. Indeed, the concept of hamlets is growing.

It is crucial that the development of hamlets be enabled and facilitated in line with commitments to rural communities made in the Programme for Government and guidelines set out elsewhere. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Byrne: I support the case made by Mr McElduff, and I thank him for raising the matter. I made a similar case in February 1999, also detailing the problems of electricity supply in rural areas.

Many properties in west Tyrone have never been connected to a public water supply. It is difficult for many people to comprehend that at the start of the twenty-first century there are still people in rural communities who do not enjoy that basic public amenity. Purely in terms of new TSN and equality, those unfortunate people must not be expected to live much longer without the Department for Regional Development connecting them to a public water supply.

No matter what the technical, logistical or even economic difficulties, those people deserve the provision of a public service such as water. It is essential for public health and for public service reasons. Parents and children who live in isolated communities, especially in the Sperrin Mountains, upper land parts of Omagh and Strabane districts, do not enjoy such basic amenities.

There are also many households throughout west Tyrone that do not enjoy connection or access to a public sewerage system. The lack of public sewerage facilities is hampering development in many parts of the Omagh and Strabane district — Clanabogan, Drumnakilly, Gortnagarn, Tattyreagh, Aghyaran, Newtownsaville and Roscavey. Indeed, other rural settlements are also being hampered.

Many rural communities that have been growing over the past 10 years are now being prevented from further developing due to environmental pollution resulting from a growing density of septic tanks. Many small rural schools will only survive if we can have housing development provided near them. That will only happen if there are, in particular, public sewerage connections.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

As Mr McElduff said, the EU water quality and waste water treatment standards require that those public services be provided. I pay tribute to the Department for Regional Development, for over the past 18 months there have been about 82 new connections to the public water supply in the Omagh and Strabane districts. I pay tribute to the officials who have endeavoured to provide a supply, given the economic parameters and constraints.

Up until May 2000 the thresholds were £2,900 for water and £2,300 for sewerage. Since then, those have changed to £5,000 for water and £4,000 for sewerage. However, for someone living in a house in an isolated area, there can be a deficit of £5,000 between, for example, the £15,000 which is allowed and the £20,000 that is needed to provide a water supply. There needs to be some sort of discretion applied.

I ask the Department for Regional Development to consider the matter so that isolated houses or groups of houses could be afforded, in particular, a public water supply. I understand that in very isolated areas without a high density of population, the septic tank is sufficient to handle the sewage. However, if we are serious about new TSN and about equality, then, wherever one lives in Northern Ireland, one should be entitled to a public water supply.

I am not going to list the areas without a public water supply, but the topography of west Tyrone is such that it has a large section of the Sperrin Mountains upper lands. There are difficulties in those glens and due consideration needs to be given to that. Beyond west Tyrone there are problems in parts of north Antrim and in south Down. However, we feel particularly aggrieved that in the Omagh and Strabane districts there are many households that still do not have such a basic amenity. I support the motion, and I hope that some discretion can be applied.

Finally, I have been told that the new threshold for financial limits applies only to existing properties and, therefore, takes no account of new houses that may be built on any new stretch of pipeline for water. That is perhaps where discretion could be applied and the basic needs of the people met.

Mr Gibson: It seems that every Monday afternoon is west Tyrone afternoon. We had a similar discussion last week. I welcome all Members to the area of the most profound, undiluted, unpolluted raw beauty in the whole Province. We had a problem 10 years ago when the area plan was launched.

One means devised by planners to keep rural people in rural areas and to encourage rural development was to create hamlets. That having been accepted as the best way forward, it was discovered that prior to direct rule one Department, never corresponded with another. When such things as sewerage were discussed, I discovered that hamlets were unheard of in what is now the Department for Regional Development.

Fortunately, since the end of direct rule and the appointment of Ministers Peter Robinson and Gregory Campbell there has been a change of heart. People in rural areas appreciate that. Many isolated people who could not get water under the old £2,900 scheme have taken advantage of the new £5,000 scheme — already over 80 people have done so. That has been a godsend to them. Well done to the Ministers involved, because

that was the first progress for rural dwellers after 10 years of lobbying.

There are 29 hamlets in the Omagh District Council area and a similar number in that of Strabane District Council. Only the other week Cllr Byrne and I went to Clanabogan. After much lobbying, half of that hamlet is getting a sewerage system. Topography prevents the other half being done at present. The half that is being done now is considered to be more cost effective. No recognition was given by one Department because the Departments did not correspond. Therefore, there is now a great time lag and drawback to development.

Hamlets originate round a church, a school and possibly a local shop or post office, and in the past they have made do with local septic tanks. However, farmers are coming under increasing pressure. The sheughs and burns that serviced their farms are now being threatened because the hamlets are expanding and septic tanks are pouring into the local water supply. Farmers feel threatened, and the developers and builders do not want to proceed because they do not want to upset the balance of nature. So they await instruction from the Department for Regional Development.

I am grateful that the matter is being taken seriously by the Department. A new sewerage works is different in appearance from those of the olden days. It is no longer a crude construction of metal work and concrete blocks that existed in unsightly forms at the end of villages. Now they can be well screened and levelled into the ground so that they are not an architectural obscenity. The matter is being taken on board by the Departments, and I am glad to see that the technological process is beginning to match up.

I congratulate the Minister for Regional Development on coming to Omagh. After all the requests that Omagh people have made, he is the one Minister who has accepted. He has been there three or four times already. Every time he has come to Omagh he has brought money. Anyone coming to Omagh is welcome if they do that. West Tyrone has never had as much development as it has had recently. There has been the Leckpatrick scheme, phase two of the Strabane bypass, the Newtownstewart bypass, stage three of the Omagh bypass and the Garvaghy Road scheme. That amounts to £16.5 million.

5.15 pm

That is in contrast to 30 years of bombed buildings having to be replaced and of compensation having to be paid out. We could have had good roads, sewerage facilities and water supplies, but we had to do without, because the money had to go elsewhere. I am delighted to see someone aping the “Give them all water” challenge that was issued in millennium week in the Omagh council chamber. I am delighted and flattered to see that. The fact that funding for sewerage schemes has been increased from £2,300 to over £4,000 has been most welcome.

Ten years ago, the Department of the Environment made the decision to help the rural community diversify, but now, as part of the Government's policy of rural proofing, of making equality work, of ensuring that equality is accessible, there will have to be a further cocktail of funding to help the Department supply those areas that are presently beyond the scheme.

I received a letter last Thursday from the residents of Backglan Road, which is three miles from Omagh. The irony was that their land was in the catchment area of the local reservoir, yet they were at such an altitude that they needed a pump to receive a water supply. They were delighted to have fresh water coming into their household for the first time, and two young children were able to enjoy bathing and showering in their own home instead of going to the local facilities in Omagh town. Of the benefits that come from investment, family contentment is one of the greatest.

In the name of the people who have yet to be provided with sewerage facilities, I ask those involved in planning to collaborate. The new jargon is "joined-up government", but I call it "corresponding with each other in ordinary, friendly terms". We must get to the stage where we do not have a situation where the Planning Service decides one thing, and you come along 10 years later trying to play catch-up. If collaboration had been taking place then, we would not be in this dilemma now. A cocktail of funding should be put together so that development in the rural community, which is still necessary, can continue, hamlets can be created and schools kept open.

If sewerage facilities are not available, development cannot happen. If we can get a package together in respect of sewage disposal for the hamlets, we will be able to solve some problems immediately, and we will also be able to sustain rural development. We will be able to keep schools and churches open and all the local facilities going, but it is a matter of keeping things rural. I am appealing for a cocktail, comprising funding from Europe and partnership boards. We must use the various sources available and put together a variety of packages that will enable rurality to be highly thought of rather than having the connotation of deprivation.

I say to both Ministers involved: Well done. You have been good and kind to west Tyrone, but help us to go further by bringing together joined-up government and, above all, a package that will sort out the sewage disposal systems in almost 40 hamlets in the area.

Mr Hussey: I too welcome the chance to contribute. The Member who raised the matter is trying to address the question of establishing a quality of life equal to that enjoyed by others throughout Northern Ireland.

The issue of cross-departmental involvement, correspondence — whatever you want to call it — comes to the fore. I stress the importance of a clean water supply and good sewerage facilities to the health and well-being of

people in rural areas. We know that care in the community is one of the issues coming through in the health proposals, and it is a growing area. How can people be sent to their own homes to be cared for in the community when they have not got an appropriate water supply or sewerage facilities? That is a cross-departmental issue.

There is stifling of the regeneration of the rural community that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is trying to encourage. Many of those who live in the country and small isolated households are at the older end of the age spectrum. It has been rightly pointed out that younger people want and expect better facilities. Older folk are prepared to put up with it because that is where they have always lived. Therefore, those younger people who seek to develop a new home to start a new life and who wish to live in the country are prevented by the fact that we have not got the sewerage facilities and water supply that we want.

Small rural businesses taking part in the rural regeneration that we hear about in the Chamber cannot be got up and running because the appropriate facilities are not there to support them. There seems to be an effort to force our communities to move to the towns. The closure of schools and churches in certain areas has been mentioned. The community facilities that they offer through a church hall, an Orange hall, a GAA club, or whatever, need to be aided and supported by the facilities that we are imploring the Minister to supply. The business of forcing people into towns is a growing issue for the rural community. One of the factors forcing them into town is the lack of the facilities we are addressing today.

Mr Gibson and others have mentioned hamlets in rural areas, and I am sure that some Members will recall that the proposed crossroads developments — the smaller version of the hamlet — were all stifled because of the lack of proper facilities to allow the planners to say "Yes, we will allow that to go ahead."

It has all been said. The areas have been identified. I am surprised that Mr McElduff did not identify the area of Aghyaran as one of the major outlying areas in west Tyrone and the Strabane District Council area. I support the general thrust of the motion. I trust that we will gain support in the Assembly today and that the Minister can give us some hope that, perhaps with a tweaking of the criteria and funds coming in from other Departments, he will be able to give us in the rural community the facilities that I know he wants to provide.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): My Department's Water Service has maintained a high level of capital investment on upgrading water and sewerage facilities in the Omagh District Council and Strabane District Council areas in recent times. However, continued investment remains necessary over a much longer period to achieve the higher level of modern service properly expected by all customers. Subject

to funding, my Department has planned a very significant construction programme in the west Tyrone area.

I want to deal specifically with that matter before responding to the comments that were made during the debate.

In the five-year period up to 2000, a total investment of £18 million was targeted at five major water supply projects and 10 sewerage projects across the area. That included the upgrading of the water treatment works at Castlederg, which is ongoing at a cost of £10 million. This year, construction work has started on a £6 million programme, which is largely targeted at improving drinking-water quality. Improvements to the Lough Braden/Lough Macrory water supply system will continue with the £4 million upgrading of the Lough Braden treatment works.

Planned expenditure over the next five years includes £9 million for four water supply projects to ensure an adequate supply of high-quality water. This will comprise the upgrading of the Lough Macrory water treatment works and the provision of a new river intake to the Derg water treatment works to cater for increasing demand. Over the same five-year period, £22 million is to be spent on waste-water treatment facilities to ensure compliance with modern regulatory and European Directive standards. The work will also serve to protect the environment, including the river systems of the area. The construction of new waste-water treatment works is planned for Omagh and Strabane, subject to the resolution of all the relevant practical details, including planning approval and land acquisition. Between 2005 and 2010, an investment of £14 million is to be made on water main improvements across the region. A programme of studies has commenced to quantify detailed requirements.

I will now discuss the reasonable cost allowance referred to by a number of Members. Despite the investment I outlined, I am acutely aware that a small number of properties do not have access to mains water supplies. Generally, they are located in remote or isolated areas, and mains water connections have previously proved to be impossible on cost and technical grounds. In May 2000, the reasonable cost allowance used to determine connection to a water mains was almost doubled to £5,000 for existing properties. I should stress that the previous scheme was in place for more than 15 years. We estimate that the increase will enable approximately one third of unconnected properties in Northern Ireland — or some 1,800 properties — to have access to mains supplies for the first time.

Since the increase was announced, 12 properties in the Omagh District Council area, which were previously considered to be uneconomic, have been connected to

the main supplies. Mr Byrne said that 82 property owners have taken advantage of the scheme in the past two years.

A further five water main extension schemes are at the design or construction stage. Those schemes, which involve the laying of some 3,300 metres of new water mains, will enable a further 13 existing properties to be connected.

The Water Service has identified 39 properties in the Omagh District Council area that cannot be connected to mains supplies, despite the increase in the reasonable cost allowance. The remote location of those properties also precludes connection on technical grounds, since it is not possible to keep water disinfected as it travels through long mains. However, I strongly believe that all households should be able to enjoy access to quality water supplies, so I have instructed my officials to consider providing financial assistance to householders to improve the quality of their private supplies. The Water Service has undertaken a study of unconnected properties in its western division, which will inform the scope of any such grant scheme.

5.30 pm

As regards planning approval for hamlet developments, the Water Service is routinely consulted during the consideration of any planning application on the subject of the feasibility of providing water and sewerage services to new developments. However, planning policy with regard to hamlet developments is a matter for the Department of the Environment.

In conclusion, I must refer to the revised charging guidelines. The announcement that I referred to regarding the increase in the reasonable cost allowance for existing properties in May 2000 also referred to a review of the charging guidelines for the provision of infrastructure to new developments. The review has now been concluded, and my officials will shortly undertake a consultation exercise on the draft proposals arising from the review. They will also take account of equality perspectives as they undertake the task.

I view with all seriousness the fact that some people have not got access to a mains water supply. I will endeavour, insofar as it is practicable and possible, to ensure that the quality of water that is supplied to those homes improves over the coming years. I hope that the review that I have just outlined regarding new developments will be announced in the near future. Obviously, I will undertake to study closely any proposals that I get in relation to the consultation exercise that follows that announcement.

Adjourned at 5.32 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 20 February 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

CIVIC FORUM

Mr Speaker: During a debate on a motion on arrangements for obtaining from the Civic Forum its views on social, economic and cultural matters, moved by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on 6 February, a point of order was raised by Mr Peter Robinson as to whether the First Minister had misled the House.

The Deputy Speaker asked Mr Robinson to make available to my office papers to which he had referred. Subsequently, on 12 February, the First Minister raised a further point of order in response to the allegations made by Mr Robinson, and I indicated that he should supply to me the papers which, he ventured, showed that he had not misled the Assembly. I undertook to study both sets of papers and provide a response.

I have received both sets of papers and have given the matter careful consideration. It appears that a meeting of some kind took place under the auspices of the Civic Forum on 20 December in the morning, which considered and, indeed, suggested an amendment to a motion on the relationship between the Assembly and the Forum. The management committee of the Forum, meeting that same afternoon, agreed that that motion — amended, as it seems, that morning — should go forward to the Assembly.

It is clear from Mr Robinson's comments and the correspondence that he has provided that the burden of his argument is that the meeting on the morning of 20 December was not competent to make decisions for the Forum as a whole. It is also clear that he is judging the conduct of the Civic Forum's business against the standards and procedures followed by this Assembly and other public bodies with which he is familiar.

From my reading of the papers, it would appear that the Civic Forum does not operate in quite that way. For example, in the minute of the meeting of the management committee held on 20 December at 2.15 pm it is recorded that it was agreed that a quorum of 50% should be applied to plenary sessions and that decisions should be made only when a quorum was present.

Laying aside any other unusual features of this decision, it would seem that the management committee considered itself entitled to set down standing orders for the Civic Forum without reference to the body as a whole, or it could be that the minute is inaccurate or incomplete. If the former is the case, then a sub-group other than the plenary has much more substantial competence in respect of the body as a whole than would be customary. That could explain how the meeting of the morning of 20 December 2000, despite not being called a plenary, could speak for the Civic Forum as a whole. If, however, the minute is substantially inaccurate, and there is some evidence of inaccuracies in the documentation, it then becomes difficult to judge the question put to me on a perusal of the papers of the Forum.

To summarise, the First Minister advised the Assembly that the Civic Forum had considered the terms of the motion and had amended it. It appears that both the management committee and another meeting of less certain composition did, indeed, consider and amend the proposed motion. The First Minister advised that the date of the meeting was 20 December 2000. That also seems correct. From the evidence supplied to me by both Members, it appears that the procedures of the Forum's meetings are different from the more formal arrangements that one would normally expect of a public body. I cannot see, on this basis, how one could rule that the First Minister had misled the House. Indeed, his actions were to the contrary.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before the First Minister apologises to the Assembly, as is being requested by his Back-Benchers, have you looked at the e-mail from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister of 19 December, which makes it clear that it is a meeting of a group? How can one explain away an e-mail that refers to the meeting as a group? If you are correct that the quorum for a meeting of the Civic Forum is 50% — 30 members — this meeting, by the admission of the First Minister and his colleagues, was one of 20 people. Therefore, it did not meet the quorum and could not speak on behalf of the Civic Forum.

Mr Speaker: So far as the question of the quorum is concerned, the decision, according to the minute, was arrived at subsequent to that meeting and would not refer back.

There is an old adage that as one lives, one judges one's neighbours. Usually, that is meant in a rather negative sense. The Member has given a more positive meaning to this matter: he has an expectation that the Civic Forum will operate the kinds of procedures and standards with which he may be familiar here.

Mr P Robinson: That applies to any public body.

Mr Speaker: That may be so. However, I have judged whether it would be appropriate for me, as Speaker, to enter into the question of how the Civic Forum conducts its business. I have taken the view that it would be

improper for me to add to any confusion that may exist that this Assembly and its Speaker have any responsibility for, or any authority with regard to, the running of the Civic Forum.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is absolutely clear that the statements I made to the House were precisely accurate. Furthermore, it is clear, as you have said, that it is not proper for this House to sit in judgement of the Civic Forum and its procedures. It is also clear that if anyone has been misled, it is Mr Robinson.

Mr P Robinson: I have been misled by Mr Trimble.

The First Minister: It is Mr Robinson who has been misled by those who supplied him with partial information. I would have hoped that he would be capable of learning from his mistakes and have the decency to apologise for his quite improper behaviour.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not clear what the point of order is. If it is that it is not possible for this Assembly to raise questions about the Civic Forum, there may be a question as to whether the Forum, if it is to be an accountable body — and that is not wholly clear to me — is to be accountable to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. If there is any question about issues being raised in the Assembly, the Committee of the Centre scrutinises the affairs of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. That would be a proper place for the question of accountability of the Civic Forum to be raised and whether the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has any accountability. I am by no means sure, in these somewhat muddy waters, that that is necessarily the case.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before the kindergarten tantrum of the First Minister, it was fairly clear that he does not consider the Committee of the Centre to be pertinent in this respect. The motion that he brought to the Assembly was not submitted to the Committee of the Centre. I assume from your ruling that you do not think that the Speaker is competent to answer questions about the propriety of the arrangements for the Civic Forum. However, is it not proper for the Speaker to indicate that they are shambolic? The Civic Forum has become nothing more than the lapdog of the First Minister, whose office is even responsible for putting out the notices of its meetings. What degree of independence can there be from a body that is in the pocket of the First Minister?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have made it clear that I have no desire that there should be any confusion in the minds of Members or the public as to whether the Speaker has any authority in relation to, or bears any responsibility for, the procedures and standards of the Civic Forum. It is best for me to leave the ruling as I have made it. Other Members have made their comments, and we will leave them at that.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to raise a matter that took place in the House on Tuesday 13 February in my absence. It was referred to me yesterday when I came to the House. Mrs Nelis, in a statement, said

“For example, I could talk about the thousands of Catholics who were forced to move south in 1969 as a result of pogroms by the RUC and the B-Specials. Some of them, for all we know, may be sitting in this Chamber. However, we do know that the founder of the DUP, Dr Paisley, was a prime mover in the lead-up to the pogroms in 1969 and certainly all pogroms since.”

This is a very serious accusation — that I organised the persecution and massacre of Roman Catholics. I am very glad that these matters were looked into by a public, sworn inquiry — the Scarman inquiry. I have a copy of the report in my hand. Judge Scarman had this to say:

“[Dr Paisley] neither plotted nor organised the disorders under review, and there is no evidence that he was a party to any of the acts of violence investigated by us.”

He also said that my role was no different from that of the political leaders on the other side of the sectarian divide. That gives the lie to the accusation that was thrown out in this House. However, I know that the Republicans do not want to see me in this House because on three occasions they attempted to kill me. When I was on the Albert Bridge with my son, they fired on the car in which I was travelling, and it was only by a miracle that the bullet did not penetrate the armoured vehicle. A group of gunmen also visited my church prayer meeting. Fortunately I was not —

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is not normal to take points of order during personal statements.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: They wanted to make an attempt on my life. Fortunately, I was not present. Then on the day that Rev Robert Bradford died, an IRA den was discovered opposite my house. They intended to murder me in my garden on the same day that Rev Robert Bradford was murdered. Those happen to be facts, and I am very glad that I am alive today to be able to make a statement in this House.

10.45 am

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that if a Member intends to make remarks about a Colleague, it is normal to inform him. That is standard procedure in other Parliaments. It may be too much to expect Members here to advise individuals of such an intention, but it could be done through the Speaker's Office. It is unfortunate if points are made about other Members, particularly in their absence without due warning having been given. I understand that such remarks are sometimes made in the

heat of a debate, rather than during a planned speech, but it is generally best if we can proceed in an orderly fashion.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand your point about the desirability of giving notice to an individual about whom one intends to make a personal reference — that is quite right. It may not, however, be desirable for you and your Office to interpose. It would be easier if notes to convey such information were posted on the notice board, and it would have been appropriate if that had been done in this case.

Mr P Robinson: You may correspond with the Provos, but we do not.

Mr Speaker: Order.

I am grateful to the First Minister for his concern — I understand what he has said. I am not sure that notes on a notice board would be the best way of dealing with this, but my Office and I will continue to give the best possible service.

We will move on to the Second Stage of the Budget Bill — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Ervine: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, though perhaps it could be said that I am seeking clarification. Since I am very often slammed and damned in my presence, and certainly in my absence, is it now perfectly legitimate for me to trawl through every Hansard and ask for a right of reply?

Mr Speaker: Well, Mr Ervine is a merciful and gracious man. I trust that he will not take the opportunity to trawl through Hansard, however fascinating the Official Report of this House may be, so that he can respond in that way. However, he is correct in saying that he and other Members about whom allegations have been made in the House are entitled to request an opportunity to make a statement, as Dr Paisley did this morning and as other Members have done on other occasions. Despite what has been said, if a Member intends to make such references, it helps if he advises the Speaker's Office in advance, as Dr Paisley quite properly did.

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I appreciate that Members who consider themselves to have been defamed have a right to reply. However, is it appropriate for a Member to quote, in his defence, from the report of a discredited British inquiry, such as the Scarman Report?

Mr Speaker: As ever, Mr Maskey has made an ingenious point of order. It is, of course, perfectly in order for a Member to quote, in his defence, anything he feels to be appropriate, as Dr Paisley did.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. To what extent can Members expect the protection of the Speaker in these situations? An accusation was made against Dr Paisley to the effect that he had committed a

criminal act and that he was responsible for the murder of individuals. On a previous occasion, when an accusation was made in the House by a Member from this side against members of the Provisional Sinn Féin/IRA movement, you ruled on the issue. In fact, you even put the Member out of the Chamber. To what extent should the Speaker, whoever it was at the time, have ruled against the comments made about Dr Paisley?

Mr Speaker: I will look at that question. It is not one that I have addressed, since I was not in the Chair at the time. If it seems to me that it would be appropriate, in this case, for action to be taken, I will respond. If not, I shall simply leave the matter there. However, I will look into it as the Member has put this question to me.

BUDGET BILL

Second Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):
I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 10/00] be agreed.

In moving this motion I wish to make some helpful points. The debate follows on from the Bill's First Stage yesterday and the Supply motions for the 2000-01 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2001-02 Vote on Account, which were also considered and approved.

The Bill has been given accelerated passage because of the change to Standing Order 40 agreed on February 12. That procedure was made conditional on confirmation from the Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee that the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill. That condition has been met, and the confirmation was given in a letter dated February 16 from the Chairperson of the Committee to the Speaker.

Once again, I express my appreciation to the Finance and Personnel Committee for the attention that it has given and continues to give to matters of public expenditure and to related procedural issues.

The purpose of the Budget Bill is to give legislative effect to the resource estimates approved through the Supply resolutions passed yesterday. Given the wide-ranging and valuable debate, I do not intend to detain the House with unnecessary repetition of the detail implicit in the spending authorisation contained in the Bill. I gave much of that detail when I spoke yesterday. However, for the benefit of the Assembly I wish to summarise very briefly the main features of the Bill in accordance with the nature of the Second Stage debate envisaged under Standing Order 30.

The Bill authorises the issuing of £195,599,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund in respect of the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2000-01 and appropriates this sum to specific services as set out in schedule 1.

Yesterday, Members received copies of the detailed spring Supplementary Estimates booklet and the Vote on Account statement.

The Vote on Account provided for in the Bill for 2001-02 is to allow funds to continue to flow to public services for the early months of the incoming financial year until the Main Estimates can be presented to and considered by the Assembly. For the Vote on Account, the Budget Bill seeks the issue from the Consolidated Fund of the sum of £3806,414,000 and its appropriation to services as in schedule 2. In addition, it seeks the

Assembly's authorisation for the use of resources amounting to £4305,870,000 as set out in schedule 3.

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

The concept of authorising resources is new and will be fully covered by amendments to the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, which will begin its Further Consideration Stage later today. The necessary elements are being put in place to ensure clear, unambiguous and firm control by the Assembly over the use of resources by Departments and public bodies when the change to full resource budgeting takes effect from 1 April this year. At the same time, it is important to ensure that expenditure and resource use authorised under separate statutory provision can proceed in addition to that, subject to the limit set in the Bill. That is the purpose of clause 4(2).

The change to resource budgeting represents a milestone in the development of better management and information systems about the true costs and impact of policies, with the aim of promoting better design policies and improved value for money in the future. Resource budgeting is the basis upon which Northern Ireland and other devolved territories will be required to develop and support their bids for resources under the Barnett rules.

I was most interested and, indeed, encouraged by the many views expressed by Members during yesterday's useful debate. As I said yesterday, having had such a debate, there is little more that I can now add to the substance of the Budget Bill. I will, however, endeavour to respond to any points raised by Members.

As an Assembly, we are quickly coming to grips with our responsibilities to authorise and control public expenditure. The fact that we are doing so at a time of transition to a new accounting concept sets an additional challenge. However, this is a challenge that we gladly embrace, since the approval and control of resources epitomise the responsibilities we have accepted as public representatives.

Dr Birnie: In welcoming the Second Stage of the Budget Bill, it is worth repeating its historic nature. As has already been said, this is the first Budget by Northern Ireland people for Northern Ireland people in more than a quarter of a century. It is worth dwelling on the change that that represents.

The allocations of money are not an end in themselves; they are a means to an end. What is significant are the services and results that they will buy. The Executive need to work in conjunction with the scrutiny Committees to prove that devolution makes a positive difference. We are witnessing the beginnings of such a positive difference with, for example, free public transport for the elderly and the projected enhanced student support. This Budget represents the beginnings of a collective achievement by the Executive. In order to achieve further good results — in other words to get good value for money — this Budget offers at least two novel features, namely the

public service agreements and the Executive's programme funds. These, of course, will be subjected to scrutiny both in Committee and in the House in the near future.

A subject that seems to be of perennial interest in these debates, and that needs some enlightenment, is the regional rate and the principles of regional taxation. It seems that the level of business rates in Northern Ireland is broadly in line with that in Great Britain. My party is pleased that the Minister has been able to reduce the projected percentage increase in the business or commercial rate.

Anomalies remain in the ratings of individual business properties in various parts of the Province. For example, in Belfast there is evidence that properties on relatively depressed arterial routes carry the same rating burden as properties in prime locations in the city centre. That hardly seems equitable and should be the subject of speedy review. There is the linked issue of the base for commercial rates, which I will return to in a few minutes. I am glad that there is the prospect of a review of the ratings base. However, there are strong grounds for arguing that vacant properties should be subject to rates.

11.00 am

Domestic rates present a very different picture to business rates. The Northern Ireland Economic Council (NIEC) recently argued that policy formed for the Province must be based on sound evidence. That is a good piece of advice on which many parties in the Chamber should reflect. Some parties' comments about the domestic rating situation have been less than frank, perhaps because they are overly excited at the prospect of a forthcoming general election.

Here are some of the relevant facts: in the year 2000-01, the total regional and district rates in Northern Ireland averaged £386. I base those figures on work carried out by the Assembly's research and information department. That compares to an average council tax for England, in the same year, of £697. There is a considerable difference. However, we must remember that in England and Wales, householders pay a quite considerable, additional amount of money. In 1999-2000, they paid £248 on average to the private water companies for water rates. The total bill in England and Wales, equivalent to the combination of our district and regional rate, is around £950, whereas here it is under £400.

It is true that average incomes are lower in Northern Ireland. However, the average income for a property owner in Northern Ireland is around 90% of the England and Wales average. However, our average rates bill totals about 40% of that of England and Wales.

Given that, and that the projected increase in domestic rates is to be 7% in Northern Ireland — the same as this year's projected council tax rate in England and Wales

— it is hard to argue in principle against that percentage increase, however politically attractive it may be. No doubt, some Members will do so because of the anticipated election.

Mr Close: Does the Member accept that the cost of electricity, fuel, clothing, and so on, is substantially higher in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain and that that must be taken into consideration?

Dr Birnie: I thank the Member for his point. He has been one of the main crusaders on the issue, but I continue to believe that the statistical evidence suggests that his crusade against the domestic rates increase is a misguided one. It is true that some categories of domestic expenditure in the Province are lower than in England and Wales, but not in every case. Average mortgage payments, for example, are lower here.

We must also bear in mind the Barnett formula. Our Executive will find it hard to argue for an increase in public spending in Northern Ireland — based on claims of higher needs — if at the same time we have a rates bill that is much less, on average, than that in England and Wales. Moreover, we are also trying to have a lower percentage increase in those rates.

Let me turn to the issue of whether we should change the base of local property taxation. I get the impression from some parties in the Chamber that they feel that a base in terms of assessed rental property values is an unfair one. It has been argued, for example, that families of different sizes or incomes living in the same house size and location are being treated unfairly because they end up paying the same domestic rates bill.

All that that argument is really saying is that the regional rate is not an income tax, which is simply a statement of the obvious. I wonder whether some of the parties who have opposed the 7% increase in the domestic regional rate are really arguing for a poll tax, which would get around this apparent — and I stress “apparent” — anomaly. I see that Mr Close is shaking his head. Perhaps they are arguing for a supplement to income tax — that people in Northern Ireland should pay a higher rate of income tax than other parts of the United Kingdom. Well, if that is what they — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Molloy: Does the Member accept that because of the way that the housing benefit system operates in relation to rate relief, it really is a form of poll tax? The number of people who live in a house becomes part of the housing benefit assessment.

Dr Birnie: I do not think that that is relevant to the point I am making.

If parties want to change the system of property taxation from the current assessed rental values, they must be very clear whether they want to base it on a poll tax standard or a change in the standard rate of income

tax. We will need to think very carefully whether that is the road that we want to go down.

I favour keeping the tax base as wide as possible. Indeed, that is the position of the Ulster Unionist Party. A tax on property — in some form — should be included so that the rate of tax can be kept as low as possible.

Should we have what is, in effect, a separate or regional form of taxation in Northern Ireland? It can be claimed — and I must concede that there is some force in the arguments put forward — that the regional rate has become a sort of regional tax by default. Should we continue with that situation or should we attempt to move to a different form of regional taxation? The economic theory is that if we were to have a specific regional tax it might make all of us — and the Executive in particular — more responsible in our spending decisions. If the House and the Executive wished to present the case for an increase in public spending, we would also be answerable to the electorate for raising the revenues.

I suppose that, in theory, there is something attractive in that situation. It would certainly make Assembly Members and members of the Executive think twice about suggesting increases in public spending willy-nilly. However, that is very much a theoretical argument, and it is not clear how it would work in practice. I note that, although the Scottish Parliament has the power to increase income tax above the standard UK rate by 3p in the pound, that power has not yet been used. I do not think that it is likely to be used in the foreseeable future. As I said earlier, if Members want Northern Ireland to have an income tax rate higher than that in the rest of the United Kingdom, they must bear in mind the disincentive effects that it would impose.

That would be a further disincentive, over and above some of the points that Mr Close made in his intervention about our higher energy charges, for example. The whole issue of whether there should be regional discretion on taxation is one which this House will have to return.

My party and I welcome this Budget. As we consider tax levels and types of taxes, we should bear in mind that this House will be failing all the people of Northern Ireland if it does not spend as much time seeking to devise policies to increase the total amount of wealth in the Northern Ireland economy as it spends debating policies that seek to redistribute wealth.

Ms Lewsley: As Dr Birnie said, this is the first Budget that we have seen from a Northern Ireland Government for many years. The introduction of resource-based Estimates means that we can move away from cash Estimates alone, towards expenditure on resource and cash bases. The most important thing is that the Budget will now be administered by local Ministers, which will

help to reassure the Northern Irish public that local issues will actually be addressed.

Departments now have the opportunity to redirect or prioritise many aspects of their expenditure, and there is the opportunity for innovation and, in particular, for Departments to become proactive rather than reactive with their budgets. Value for money is essential in order to promote optimum return from the limited resources available, which will involve allocating funds to particular areas of need and social deprivation.

The Assembly is at a crossroads, and we must address the years of underfunding of direct rule. We must set realistic targets to redress the balance and to target social need.

The additional moneys available through the Budget to schools will, I hope, ensure that the Minister of Education can prioritise the issue of mobile classrooms, and in particular the conditions in which many of our children are being taught. In addition, there is the possibility that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will ring-fence money, particularly for mental health.

Those issues, along with many more, will be a testament to our intention, as a new Government, to begin the process of change. Part of the uniqueness of the devolved Government is interdepartmental working. A good example of that is the promotion of interdepartmental co-ordination to deal with the issues affecting people with disabilities. That is one of the most positive measures to build a stronger, more concerted way to alleviate current difficulties, and to promote social inclusion for one of the most disadvantaged sections of our population.

Our aim should be to provide better access to services and facilities for the disabled, thus bringing them into line with the rest of society. With this combined effort across Departments, there will also be improved access to cultural and leisure facilities for people with disabilities. That will promote access to both social and work activities, which can only be seen as a very positive move towards inclusion for the future.

The targets defined in the Programme for Government must be regularly reviewed and examined to enable us to turn them into realistically achievable objectives. We cannot do that without adequate funding in the first place. The new facility to borrow on account will enable the Departments to ensure continuity in the provision and delivery of services. I support the motion.

Mr Berry: In this Bill, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, once again, is apparently in a very generous mood. Unfortunately, he does not seem to know to whom he should be most generous. I am sure that that is part of his main problem, which raises a fundamental point: upon what basis is the Minister making his decisions? How will we know whether he has all the information that he requires in order to make those decisions? What

criteria will he use for deciding the rules for disbursement? Such fundamental issues will form the basis upon which he can show his generosity. I hope that he will clear those issues up.

11.15 am

There is anger about the above-inflation increase to the regional rate. If more money has been found, we should go back to the drawing board on that wild and ludicrous rise. There will be an outcry throughout the country when the rates bills start coming in. I will tell my constituents that the Executive are to blame.

This is not the first time that we have heard the announcement of further moneys. The Department seems to be unsure about how much money there is in the kitty at any given time, so we get frequent piecemeal announcements. The Northern Ireland Audit Office should go over the finances and tell us exactly what is available. There is a general impression that not only is there a lot of money, but there would be even more were the Minister to look in the right places. If that is the case, I have no doubt that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will be out on the highways and byways searching for the money.

We do not want a repeat of the fiasco of the trust deficits. Some trusts, such as the Royal Victoria Hospital, have a culture of overspending. The Minister should take a close look at that. There is a perception in the community and in the Health Service that some trusts just spend and spend and that no one monitors the situation. That is a sad reflection on the Health Service. Health professionals tell me that they feel that there is a mentality that the only thing that matters is the survival of the Royal Victoria Hospital, even if that would mean the closure of the entire Health Service.

The Republic of Ireland's financial scandals, which have led to the setting up of numerous tribunals, may pale into insignificance in comparison to the evident wanton disregard of this Executive. It is essential, therefore, that the Minister knows what is happening. Has he approached the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister about a reduction in the number of quangos? Huge savings could be legitimately made if that were done, but the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have said nothing on that matter. What is the Minister's policy to reduce bureaucracy in order to make savings and, thus, reduce the need to raise the regional rate?

There is anger in the community about the lack of funding for the Health Service. The Minister made a welcome statement last week about tackling the trust deficits. However, more needs to be done, and more money must be invested in the Health Service, so that everyone in Northern Ireland and the Health Service can deal with the community's problems.

Mr Neeson: One of the most important effects of devolution is that we have inherited the problem of the gross underfunding of public utilities over the past 20 years. It is not just health and education; the whole infrastructure has been affected. I hope that the Assembly will address these issues, not only this year but also in years to come.

The importance of devolution is that it essentially creates greater accountability. We have not totally fulfilled our role of providing accountable government at this stage. I say so for several reasons, one being that we are a fledgling Assembly. If we are to fulfil our role of providing accountable government, the scrutiny role, of Committees in particular, must be greatly increased. The Assembly and devolution provide the opportunity to bring about change and to deal with the issues affecting the people of Northern Ireland. I will mention a few of those for the benefit of the Minister.

First, there is the question of the natural gas pipeline to the north-west. I still think that there is not enough clarity about the Executive's role in that project — whether they are being aggressive enough in providing a level playing field for all the people of Northern Ireland. When I talk about the pipeline I include the west of the Province, Craigavon, Newry, and so forth. It is important for us to be strategic in planning our infrastructure for the future.

I hope that the Budget takes into account the creation of the single development agency for industrial development in Northern Ireland. This is a very radical move forward and I hope that the necessary funds will be made available for it. As regards infrastructure, the Assembly has inherited a railway network that is more or less clapped out and on its knees. Sufficient funds must be made available in the coming year to bring about the radical changes required to improve the rail network. That should include the retention of the line between Lisburn and Antrim.

Members will be aware that I am still deeply concerned about the future of the port of Belfast. Delays on reaching a decision on its future are creating problems for port users and for Northern Ireland's transport infrastructure. That is because the port plays such a key role in providing access to the Province.

Many people have expressed concern about the delays and lack of clarity about the future of Peace II funding — especially those in the voluntary sector. I want some clarification about what is happening. Many voluntary organisations do not know whether they will survive into next week, never mind next month. The Executive has a role to respond to such serious concerns.

One principle that I would like to have seen encapsulated in the Programme for Government is that of sharing. If we are to move forward in Northern Ireland, we must do so through the creation of a more integrated society. It is not just a question of integrated

education. We have to address the principle of sharing housing, the workplace and many other areas.

In his opening remarks, the Minister referred to the Barnett formula. We all want to see that issue addressed. Nevertheless, I suggest to the Minister that similar concerns are felt by Members of the Scottish Parliament and of the National Assembly for Wales, so it would be helpful if the three devolved bodies got together on that important matter.

Dr Birnie mentioned public service agreements (PSAs). They will provide major opportunities for developing innovative improvements to life in Northern Ireland. However, this year, very little time was given to various Committees to address the whole question of PSAs. I was particularly concerned about the fact that, in relation to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, so much more money is to be spent on the electricity interconnector.

In an area where a great deal of money has already been spent — and the scheme is fairly well advanced — surely this money could have been directed to other energy schemes that would provide greater benefit to people in Northern Ireland.

I believe that the Assembly is working. People on the streets are beginning to see change. Reference was made to the introduction of free transport for the elderly. However, many more issues need to be addressed. Only by operating a system of accountable government and allowing the Committees to have a greater scrutiny role will we be able to provide the accountability that my party and the people of Northern Ireland want.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Deputy Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee, Mr Leslie.

Mr Leslie: Mr Deputy Speaker, you kindly called me as the Deputy Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee. I should point out that my remarks on these issues will be made in my personal capacity.

If Mr Neeson had been here yesterday, he would have heard some remarks about the Barnett formula, which were quite pertinent to what he has just said. If he were to go to Scotland he might be surprised to find that there is exceedingly little enthusiasm for revisiting the Barnett formula, because the Scots do rather well out of it. If you were to try to renegotiate the Barnett formula, you would find Northern Ireland saying “The Scots should have less, so that we can have more.”

Given the current construction of the Government, I am not sure how well that argument would wash. Those are matters that no doubt the Minister will have to wrestle with again in the future. Enough was said on that subject yesterday, especially by me.

In his remarks about the Health Service, Mr Berry referred to his concern that the money was probably not being spent as well as it might be. I dare say that that may

be the case. However, I thought it conspicuous that the Member did not refer to the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office Report, which identified the very considerable shortcomings in the administration of social security payments by the Department for Social Development. Indeed, as regards the quantum of sums over which the Northern Ireland Audit Office expressed concerns, the greatest related to methods in the Department for Social Development.

I dare say that the reason Mr Berry did not see fit to mention this is that, of course, that Department is run by a Minister from his own party. Perhaps he should urge his Colleagues to put their own house in order while he is urging others to do the same.

Another matter in relation to the Department for Social Development concerns me, and I trust that the move to resource accounting will highlight the issue. I refer to housing debt — a matter that is dear to your heart, Mr Deputy Speaker.

11.30 am

At each monitoring round so far, it has been stated that a considerable proportion of the proceeds — about one third, at the last monitoring round — has come from sales of Housing Executive stock. We then gleefully spend that money. However, the House should be aware that that is living off capital and that, meanwhile, the Housing Executive bears debt incurred from the cost of those houses and has to service the interest.

Resource accounting will provide a proper picture of assets and liabilities, and I trust that it will become very clear that this is a deteriorating situation. I hope that the Minister of Finance is concerned about the matter and that he will be discussing how it should be addressed with the Minister for Social Development. Some way must be found to reduce the debt; otherwise the more houses that are sold, the less rental income the Housing Executive will have with which to service the debt. That is becoming a serious problem, and it will get more serious as more houses are sold. The Assembly must be made aware that while it is busily spending this capital an increasingly underfunded liability is building up.

The rates issues go round and round, and as my Colleague Dr Birnie said, several parties are trying to be disingenuous about it in order to score political points as an election approaches. It is simply not possible to demand more money and then deny the source for raising that money. The pool of money available for public expenditure in Northern Ireland is set by the Barnett formula essentially and is a grant of money from the Parliament at Westminster.

We must be conscious at all times that unofficial estimates — there are no official estimates — imply that Northern Ireland's tax base would probably contribute roughly half of total public expenditure in the Province. Therefore the other half is contributed by taxpayers in the

rest of the United Kingdom, and when one examines that figure, one realises that it is being contributed by English taxpayers. They are also funding Scotland and Wales, though not to the same extent as Northern Ireland. We must be conscious that we are living off other people's generosity. We should therefore temper our demands in this respect, lest the whole issue be investigated in detail. That may put Northern Ireland in a somewhat disadvantageous position.

I have said in the House on many occasions — and I will continue to do so — that I am no fan of taxation. Rates are a form of taxation. The best way to stimulate an economy is to try to reduce all types of taxation and allow money to be spent as people, rather than the Government, choose. That may not work to people's benefit as much as the Government might like to think.

In reality, if we are going to continue demanding more money — be it for public transport or the Health Service — it has to come from somewhere. Apart from the grant from Westminster, the only other source is rates. I would be reluctant to increase rates by anything other than a very modest rate, and we must be highly cognizant at all times of the value of services we get for that money. I simply do not think it realistic to demand money without explaining where it will come from.

You will get more money if you have less government, for every aspect of government costs money. If one has less government, there will be more money or less tax — one can take one's pick. In particular, I remind the Minister that the Committee has mentioned to him from time to time the need for a review of the cost of governance. I regard that as an increasingly pressing matter.

Members will be conscious that a review of public administration, including quangos, trusts and boards, and the structure of councils is expected reasonably soon. An essential objective of the review should be that the resulting administration should cost significantly less than it does at present.

That seems to me to be the best approach we can take towards making more money available for other aspects of public expenditure, given that there will always be demands vastly in excess of what is available.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I did not intend to speak this morning, as a great deal was said about this yesterday. I certainly do not want to repeat yesterday's comments. However, Mr Leslie has referred to them.

My party is very conscious of the need for the question of finance raising to be discussed. We know and accept entirely that one cannot continually make demands without making the provision to satisfy those demands. We are acutely aware of that, which is why I stated yesterday that there is a need not only for a review of the rates — which has already been mentioned several times — but also for an overview of finance raising by

the Executive and the Assembly as a whole. That deals with Barnett, tax variations, and so on.

I am concerned about some of the remarks made by Mr Paul Berry of the DUP in regard to health trust deficit; there was a mixed message from Mr Berry, and Hansard should show that. He made offensive remarks about some of the health trusts when he talked about their deficits and about the review that was mentioned last week by the Minister, Mark Durkan. Concerning the health trust deficit, he said that the trusts have an awful habit of overspending. In fact, he said that they have "a culture of overspending" and specifically mentioned the Royal Victoria Hospital.

His comments were quite disgraceful, given the record of questions and motions tabled by DUP Members, particularly in regard to health matters. If one added up the bill for all the demands that they have made, one would find that it would amount to a considerable sum of money. That is fair enough — we support many of those demands.

Because the matter was raised in the way that it was by the DUP, I want the Minister, in his closing remarks, to acknowledge that the matter of health trust deficits is not simply one of mismanagement or overspending by the trusts, but that there is a very clear shortfall in the budgets of most of those trusts. The health needs of the people whom those trusts serve must also be dealt with and calculated.

Mrs I Robinson: I welcome the opportunity to hear what the Minister of Finance and Personnel had to tell us about his spending arrangements. We must consider the amount of waste that has been exposed by the Northern Ireland Audit Office. For example, in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety payments of £17 million were made without any clear evidence to support them. On the subject of health, can the Minister advise us whether any of the extra moneys allocated to health will be used towards paying for the Minister's legal advice in respect of her decision to close the Jubilee Hospital?

I am concerned about the surpluses in many Departments; they do not seem to have any impact on future estimations. Perhaps the Minister will deal with that issue in his summing up.

I am also concerned at the absence of any reference by the Minister to the vast amount of fraud that is costing all Departments millions of pounds. What pressure is he bringing to bear on Departments concerning fraud? In the Health Department, for example, £14 million is lost through prescription fraud alone.

That brings me to the recent issue of organ retention. Will the Minister be giving money to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in order to

give assistance to families who have to bear the extra cost of reopening graves? One elderly person who rang me had received a grant of £800 to help bury her late husband, who died some six months ago. The grant fell short by approximately £500, and she is still trying to pay this off. She now has to reopen the grave — at a cost of £250 — after her late husband's organs were returned. If there is money available, the Government should provide some to help to rectify this tragedy.

The Departments made a catalogue of errors. The Northern Ireland Appropriation Accounts for 1999-2000 list areas in which error after error was made. Will the Minister tell us what he intends to do about that? Will he consider that the sums involved may equal or exceed the amount that he is dealing with today?

There is money in the system, and that makes the above-inflation rate hike unnecessary. Will the Minister look again at the money available and consider whether the rate increase can be reduced further? When householders receive their rates bill for the next financial year they will realise the vast bureaucracy and costs that have come from the Belfast Agreement.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is receiving another huge increase of £193,000 for setting up an office in Brussels. Can the Minister of Finance tell us what he will do to reduce such bureaucracy?

Given that extra money exists, it is imperative that it is distributed fairly. In the education sector, for example, there is a huge gap between the underfunding of capital projects in the controlled schools sector and the lavish amounts spent on the maintained and integrated schools sector. Old school buildings must be improved. There are schools in the Strangford constituency that are over 100 years old and unfit for educational purposes. Any extra money should be targeted at those schools.

Money must also be given to small rural schools. After much lobbying, the primary school in Derryboy in the Strangford constituency is being extended. However, that school will require ongoing resources to maintain its standards. Will the Minister target money towards small rural schools?

The biggest problem facing schools such as Derryboy Primary School is the transfer of pupils to the nearest high school, which, in this case, is Saintfield High School. Derryboy is a feeder school for Saintfield High School, which is unable to take all the pupils. Extra money should be spent in Killyleagh, where a new school could be built to deal with the rise in population and future developments in Strangford.

I welcome the mention of winter fuel payments. That issue has been debated in the Assembly and Members have raised it with Ministers.

I am concerned about job losses in the textile sector. Will the Minister tell the House what moneys can be identified in his Estimates that will go directly towards combating the depressed state of the textile industry? If there is no such money, why is that so, and will he do something about it?

What extra money is available to resolve the debate about maternity services? Will there be extra funding to provide for the new build at the appropriate locations? The historic underfunding of the Ulster Hospital is another matter of concern. For a decade, the hospital has been by-passed in capital expenditure rise. However, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is aware of the needs of the hospital. Will the Minister take that issue on board?

The list of issues that must be tackled is huge and I am concerned that Members did not have enough time to examine the issues in greater detail. Will the Minister tell Members that more time will be given for their thorough analysis of his proposals the next time that he announces his Budget Estimates?

Ms Morrice: I commend this historic Budget. It is appropriate that the Assembly is moving into the era of setting its own Budget. Mr Maskey, Mrs I Robinson and others raised the issue of financial control. I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee, so I am aware of the huge discrepancies outlined in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report.

The Assembly needs to know how much control the Minister will have to ensure that such a report never appears again. Will this new type of resource budgeting lead to better financial controls and ensure better handling of public money all round?

11.45 am

Another point, raised in part by Mrs I Robinson, concerned not just time for Members to review the Budget, but also a clearer understanding of the procedure and the process. There is no breakdown of where the money is going. We have no idea how much funding will be provided next year for the children's fund, women's issues and road safety. It is vital that we see the breakdown. Can we learn any lessons, and in the next budgetary round lay out details and put Estimates down hand-in-hand with the Budget Bill?

Much adding and subtracting is required to work out how much we receive in one financial year compared to the previous year. What are the increases and the decreases? What are the percentages? We need to have easy access to those figures so that we can make comparisons and decide whether to support the movement forward. Mrs I Robinson referred to the textiles industry, which is another important matter. We need to know what is being done there, and we need to have a breakdown of exactly where the money is going.

I disagree with Mrs I Robinson's point about the lavish amounts being spent on integrated education. I totally denounce that. Integrated education has been around only for the past 20 years, since 1981, and the other sectors have been receiving money for a lot longer. It is about integrated education catching up.

We are only at the draft Programme for Government stage. How flexible will the Budget be to accommodate changing priorities as a result of the approval of the Programme for Government? Are we being given a fait accompli, or can the money be moved? There are many other ongoing negotiations with regard to the Programme for Government.

I have two final points. First, there is the problem of European funding and funding of the gap between Peace I and Peace II. I commend the Minister on his efforts to provide gap funding for projects that otherwise would have had to close as a result of the lack of European funding. Gap funding is needed for projects for women returners, projects for the long-term unemployed, projects for cross-border issues and projects that have no finance other than European money. Funding is needed to sustain them until the new round of European funds is available.

Furthermore, serious consideration should be given to mainstreaming these projects. We cannot rely on European money for the rest of our time, and we are all aware that it is running out. The Government and the Executive need to recognise the value of these projects, such as cross-border, cross-community peace and reconciliation projects, which are very important to the future of Northern Ireland. They should be funded not just from European funds, but from Executive funds. Mainstreaming is vital.

I have had calls from people in voluntary and environmental organisations, saying that they can see the money in the Executive Programme funds and want to know how to get their hands on it. Transparency and openness are vital. I want to know what the Minister will do about that. How does a group access those funds?

Mr Dodds: There is a need for more clarity and explanation about how the Executive Programme funds will be managed and used. Ms Morrice asked how groups can access them. They will not get access. I understand that it is Departments that will get access, by making bids. Therein lies a whole series of other questions such as how those bids will be prioritised and how Departments should manage the submission of such bids. Will they be asked to come forward with new ideas following the drawing-up of their own priorities? Can they put forward bids on issues that are already part of their own spending priorities? We need more explanation about how those funds will be managed.

One of the concerns raised is that, to some extent, a reserve of money has been held back by the First Minister

and the Deputy First Minister, in particular. No doubt, as has happened with other announcements, the Finance Minister will be given the plum job of coming to the Assembly to make an announcement, whereas the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will have already announced it at a press conference in the Long Gallery.

There is an issue when the Executive, or the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in particular, make announcements during the course of the year on public spending priorities. I hope that when there is bad news to announce, the Finance Minister will ensure that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will rush forward with the same alacrity into the Long Gallery on a Thursday evening to make announcements. They seem pretty selective in the announcements that they make.

The scrutiny of the Budget has clearly been unsatisfactory up to now. Reasons have been given, such as the time constraints we have been under. The Minister gave commitments yesterday and on previous occasions that the cycle will be revised to ensure that the Budget is introduced as early as possible after the summer recess. I welcome that. It is vital to have as much debate and scrutiny of these Budgets as possible.

The Minister also made the important point, which we should all take note of, that we do not need to wait for the start of any particular procedure in order to begin this process. This is something that we can pursue actively, at all times, in our Committees and elsewhere. That is an issue that we need to look at very closely.

I also want to discuss the regional rate increase. I am sure that the Minister will not be surprised to hear me raise it. At the time, I welcomed the fact that the increase in the business rate for next year would be reduced from more than double the rate of inflation to about the rate of inflation. However, the Minister reduced the increase in the regional rate for domestic householders by only 1% — from 8% to 7%. That is a great failing on his part, and on the part of the Executive.

In a valiant effort, Dr Birnie — who has left the Chamber — defended that decision by saying that it was hard to argue against it; it is not hard to argue against it at all. We are being asked to accept a rise in the regional rate for domestic householders that is double the rate of inflation. Those people have already faced such an increase in the past two years. What is the Minister's plan for the next two years? Originally, he planned another 8% increase over the next two years, so I would be grateful to know whether he has revised that plan in light of the representations made to him on the issue, not just in the House but outside it as well.

Mr Leslie argued that if we wanted to spend more money, we would have to explain where we would get it from. He was quite right; that is exactly why, in tabling an amendment to reduce the increase in the regional rate from 8%, as it then was — it is now 7% — to the rate of

inflation, we suggested areas in which expenditure should be cut. I remind Mr Leslie and other Members what those areas were: the North/South Ministerial Council and the implementation bodies. That would fit in well with Mr Leslie's other comment that we would get value for money by having less government. Well, that is one suggestion for him.

Rather than trotting out clichés about seeing where the money will come from before making bids, my party outlined where the cuts should be and suggested that the Budget should be amended accordingly. Unfortunately, Mr Leslie and his Colleagues voted against it, preferring to have more, rather than less, government and bureaucracy, and all for political reasons. I remind Mr Leslie and his Colleagues and Members from other parties who talk about expenditure on administration that it was they who voted to have 10 Departments. Many of us argued that that number of Departments was unnecessary and would simply increase the cost; the Minister gave a figure of £26 million a year to the Finance and Personnel Committee. That is food for thought for Members.

Mr Leslie referred to Mr Berry's speech, which criticised some aspects of health expenditure. He asked why Mr Berry had not raised the question of expenditure caused by social security errors. That issue is being addressed by the Department for Social Development, whose plans received general endorsement from the House. No one will make any excuses for errors or fraud; those problems must be dealt with. However, many who are entitled to benefits under the present system do not claim their full entitlement; that is sometimes forgotten. Tens of millions of pounds are left unclaimed every year by those who are entitled to benefit.

Mr McCartney: Is the Member aware that claims for disability allowance in west Belfast amount to about three times the total for such claims in North Down? Disability allowance does not relate to economic circumstances.

12.00

Mr Dodds: That is a good point and one that needs to be put on the record.

Some people in west Belfast may have been misled by the poor example shown by the Sinn Féin Member for that area as regards the charge of the abuse of benefits that is directed at people with genuine disabilities. Should there be any doubt as to which Sinn Féin Member I am referring to, it is Mr Maskey.

As regards social security, the rules for entitlement, and the difficulties in procedures for social security claimants are set down in Westminster, not in this Assembly. The problems and difficulties that occur here also occur across the water. This issue must be addressed in consultation with Alistair Darling, the Secretary of State for Social Security.

Mr Leslie — and this is not a “bash Mr Leslie” day, although he did take a potshot at us — did not mention the Comptroller and Auditor General's report regarding the revelations surrounding the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB). The report identified great weaknesses in financial procedures. I throw the same question to him: perhaps he did not mention it because a Member of his party is the Minister responsible for the NITB.

In conclusion, I mention the vexed question of capital receipts and house sales — an issue that has come before the House before. Mr Leslie raised the matter, and I commend him for that. There is a danger in living off capital receipts. Furthermore, there is a strong argument that if so much money is being taken out of the housing sector in Northern Ireland, then a greater proportion of that money needs to go back into the sector to address the great social need that is there. In common with other Members, I urge the Minister to look carefully at that. I understand that there are constraints in terms of Treasury rules; however, as regards the Minister's monitoring rounds, I urge him to take account of the pleas of many in the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You will not be surprised that I listened to that last point with some pleasure.

Mr McCartney: Although many points have been competently and articulately dealt with by other Members, I must address the relationship between the finances of Northern Ireland — as administered by the Assembly — and those of the United Kingdom.

The Minister of Finance in Northern Ireland has the unenviable job of allotting portions of the cake to particular sectors; however, it is the Chancellor of the Exchequer who determines the size of the cake. What steps has the Minister taken, or will take, in relation to the finances of Northern Ireland that will address the peculiar problems arising from steps taken on reserved fiscal matters, which have a dire and particularly acute effect on the Northern Ireland economy?

Will the Minister also state what steps he has taken, or will take, to address the effects for Northern Ireland of being the only part of the United Kingdom sharing a land border with a foreign country?

The Minister will be aware that the agriculture industry has suffered enormous hardship as a result of the incompetence of central Government, particularly in relation to BSE. This has resulted in Northern Ireland beef producers being lumped in with the rest of the United Kingdom as regards the re-entry of beef exports into Europe. This is despite having the best record and the best system in the EU for tracing and detection, and a far lower incidence of BSE than in any other part of the United Kingdom.

That was despite the fact that the proportion of beef cattle produced in Northern Ireland that went for export to Europe was far, far greater than that from any other

part of the United Kingdom. As a result, Northern Ireland suffered disproportionately.

I want to hear the Minister's comments on fuel — motor spirit and other fuels. He will be aware that since 1995, the level of motor fuel lawfully imported into Northern Ireland has dropped by perhaps 50%, at a time when the number of lawfully registered vehicles here has increased by 125,000. Everyone knows that perhaps one third of all motor fuel used in Northern Ireland is the product of smuggling and that the Treasury is losing not tens of millions, but hundreds of millions a year.

However, let us set aside for the moment what the Treasury is losing and look at the effect that this smuggling — which is effectively controlled by paramilitaries, represented by parties in this Assembly — is having on lawful traders in Northern Ireland. Petrol retailers are closing because they cannot compete with those selling smuggled fuel. Hauliers are going out of business because while central Government are increasing the duty on motor fuel, the Government of the Republic of Ireland — starting off from a lower charge for fuel — are reducing it. I appreciate that the Minister has no direct control over this, but these matters are seriously influencing the economic well-being of Northern Ireland. It will be interesting to hear what steps the Minister, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have taken to ensure special arrangements for Northern Ireland, since we are in a special position. We have a land border with another country, whose economic position enables it — largely through the payment of British funds into the EU, which are then used to subsidise the Republic — to have lower fuel prices that are used in turn to destroy some of our industries to the benefit of the Republic and to the detriment of the British Exchequer. Some of those issues need to be looked at.

Mr Close: I thank the Member for drawing the Minister's attention to that list. Would he add to it the tax on aggregates? That is another issue affecting the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr McCartney: I would indeed, and I am grateful to the Member for raising that point. That is another tax that will have a discriminatory effect on those businesses in Northern Ireland that are utilising aggregates and other substances heavily used in the construction industry.

Another is the climate control levy, which will be levied in Northern Ireland and will have a very severe effect on our industry and industrialists. Already we have the highest electricity costs in the United Kingdom. Why? It is not, I am glad to say, because of anything done by this Assembly; it is due to the incompetence of central Government when they negotiated electricity generation costs some years ago.

That burdened Northern Ireland Electricity with contracts that are uneconomic and over-generous, and that apparently cannot be changed. It also means that

the Northern Ireland business user pays way over the odds for his electricity, as does the domestic user. With regard to business energy costs, there is no suggestion that special arrangements will be made for the climate change levy for Northern Ireland to take into account the excessive costs for energy.

I appreciate that many of these matters are outside the control of the Assembly, the Executive and the relevant Minister. What we want from the Minister is a statement regarding the representations that he and his Colleagues will make to central Government to specifically look at problems arising from our geographical position. Those problems require not special treatment in the sense that we are preferred above other parts of the United Kingdom, but special treatment in the sense that our peculiar difficulties arising from our geographical position are catered for.

I want to focus on several issues. The Assembly has been granted one tax-raising power — that of increasing rates. When anyone is given a power there is an overwhelming inducement to exercise it, whether it is justified or not. Having been given a power to raise money through increasing the domestic and the regional rate, the Executive could not resist using that power even though the revenue it would produce would be minuscule compared to the harm it would do.

At an earlier sitting, I asked the Minister whether he was aware that many in the community were astonished to find that he was able to unearth millions of pounds worth of finance by hoking down the side of the sofa or rummaging behind the piano, as I put it rather graphically and colourfully. Curiously enough, none of this newly found, some might say ill-gotten, gain was used to reduce rates, except business rates. I approached the Minister privately and was glad to note — and I give him full credit — that he came before the Assembly and announced a reduction in the proposed increase in the business rate.

Small businesses provide the backbone of our commercial life. None of them is making vast sums. Many of them continue as small businesses only out of a desire to be independent and to work for themselves. They pay their rates and taxes; they educate their children; they do not draw unemployment or other state benefits. They are the backbone of this community.

One of my constituents in Holywood, a single parent running a small business, found that her rates had increased over the past four years, due to revaluation and rate increases, from £70 to £242 per month. The result was that, if the proposed business rate increase had been put through, she was simply going to close her business.

12.15 pm

It seems illogical for the Executive to be handing out millions upon millions to the IDB for the purchase of new

jobs, sometimes at up to £40,000 per job. Very often the people who are coming in here, attracted by the huge grants and subsidies, are on the fly. Once they have exhausted the possibilities of making an easy buck and the going gets tough, they leave. Everyone in this community — Unionist and Nationalist — suffers. This money is being paid out to attract new jobs, while rate increases are effectively destroying the livelihood and jobs of those who have continued to support the community and be of benefit to it, rather than a drag upon it.

Increasing the business rate at all — even though it is now to be increased only in proportion to inflation — is a regressive step. The word in the financial world is that one of the steps that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will take when he distributes all the largesse before the next election is an inducement to the business community in the United Kingdom. He plans to reduce the business rate. We have a Chancellor of the Exchequer in the United Kingdom reducing the business rate in an economy that is extremely buoyant. We have the Minister in this sensitive, accountable Northern Ireland Executive proposing to increase the business rate for businesses that are under the cosh. If that is an example of the Assembly's bringing sensitivity, accountability and accessibility to the electorate of Northern Ireland, then the Minister should take up a job as a pantomime dame. That is what ordinary people will be saying. Why are we doing this? It defies common sense.

Finally, I want to make one or two points about —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Three Members want to speak before the winding-up speech, so please be brief.

Mr McCartney: I will be very brief. I am grateful for the indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I want simply to echo the remarks of Mrs I Robinson about the funding of the Ulster Hospital. The Ulster Hospital has been grossly underfunded for many years. Since it absorbed the Newtownards Hospital, the position has become acute. In some departments, such as the orthopaedic department, it has had to stop elective surgery entirely because it can cope with emergencies and casualties only. That situation should not be permitted to continue.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members have heard my remarks about timing. I would be very grateful, therefore, if Mr Gibson, Mr Shannon and Mr O'Connor could keep their remarks to the main issues so that the Minister can respond.

Mr Gibson: I return to the point made by Mr Paul Berry — that we very much want to see the Ulster hallmark on the Minister's Budget. What criteria is he using to set the direction for Northern Ireland regional Government? The Budget, which I am sure is a splendid account of the figures and the anticipated projections, is in truth a very conservative Budget. It probably follows in the steps of Westminster. In light of the arguments

that have been made — and they have been reiterated again this morning — there are clear differences because of our unique position. I do not want to have to highlight those again, except to mention one particular field.

Figures show that hospitals in Northern Ireland are greatly underfunded in comparison with those in Scotland — apparently, there is a funding difference of approximately 14%. Will the Minister find out whether figures that show that Scottish hospitals receive 20% more funding than those in England and Wales, while Northern Ireland receives just 4% to 6% more, are correct? Will he explore this matter with his counterparts in Westminster?

Yesterday, I raised a point of order with regard to rates, and I was severely admonished by you, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I will return to the matter today. We spend £40 million on "North/Southery", yet the infamous former Taoiseach, Mr Haughey, removed rates from the agenda. What secret did Mr Haughey hold, and why should we spend £40 million to find out?

The forthcoming review of local government will allow us to examine the different areas of administration. I detect a feeling among Members that we are still living with a hangover from direct rule. At times, I detect a reluctance on the part of Members to impart necessary information. Transparency has been requested, and we need information so that we can make informed judgements.

Four years ago, I discovered that when the Western Education and Library Board and the other boards came under pressure to make cuts, they were suddenly able to make savings and streamline their administration. They were also able to make league tables for specific areas. What is being done to hone our present administration and to make it accountable? Dr Birnie and Mr Leslie meandered along various avenues to seek solutions to the problem, but they concluded that less government is needed and mentioned the need for accountability and responsibility. Those are important requirements, but the Minister of Finance and Personnel needs to focus on the areas which are under the most severe pressure.

The entire rural community has been devastated by the plague of BSE. At the moment, there appears to be a lack of vision and strategy on the part of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. It is reactive rather than giving the rural community a way forward. This is the largest sector of the community; it needs serious attention and it demands help. The people there do not want to live off handouts, and they do not want to harvest grants alone. Farmers want to be restored to their rightful status as part of the primary industry of this Province. I appeal to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to take that on board.

Finally, rurality have been equated with deprivation. Yesterday afternoon we expressed the need to play catch-up in rural areas. In his Budget, Mr Durkan has the oppor-

tunity to make sure that we have equality, and that means providing capital funding for rural schools and funding an acute services hospital in the south-west of the Province. Those are basic provisions, but they are essential to enhance the meaning of the term "rurality" so that it is no longer associated with remoteness and deprivation.

The new Executive have an opportunity to stamp the hallmark for an Ulster way forward. At the moment, I fear it is lacking, but I anticipate that the Minister will do an honourable job in his excellent office.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must ask Members please to keep their remarks to about five minutes. Otherwise we will not be able to keep within our timescale, and we will have very little chance to hear the Minister.

Mr O'Connor: I support the Minister of Finance and Personnel. As you yourself would probably guess, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is extremely important to me that I touch on issues pertaining to the Department for Social Development. We see a lot of money being spent on administration in that Department, and the reason is that the benefit system is far, far too complex. There are grave errors in the benefit and child support system and in the Social Security Agency.

The Minister has already introduced the Child Support Bill, which we very much welcome. However, we want to see the whole system of administering benefits streamlined to make it much easier. Mr McCartney talked about people working to stay off benefit, but many people do not really have any choice. Their circumstances mean that they have to claim benefits such as disability living allowance (DLA). DLA should be the easiest benefit to claim; in fact, its administration makes application most difficult.

With regard to incapacity benefit, people who are cut off and decide to appeal are relegated to income support, 25% of which is taken away from them. These people who are living on the breadline are therefore further penalised by anomalies in the benefits system. It takes away their right to appeal because they cannot afford to live on so little money.

Many Members have touched on individual needs in their constituencies, which would best be served by the relevant Minister. It is not for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to decide how every single pound should be spent in Northern Ireland. If it were, there would be no need for any other Ministers.

In welcoming the Budget Bill, I want to draw attention to the capital receipts on housing which Mr Leslie touched on earlier. That stock is dwindling. We cannot continue to go to the well for water, because sooner or later there will be no water in the well. What will we do then? Some of our best public sector housing has been sold on. We are now talking about going into private finance initiatives to build public-sector housing.

I am not a businessman, but private finance means that somebody has to get a cut. There must be profits for shareholders somewhere down the line, and those will be at the public expense. I do not believe that that is the way forward.

I very much welcomed the statement from the Minister of Finance and Personnel in the House last Monday when greater powers for the Comptroller and Auditor General were approved by the House. The powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General should enable him to play a vital role in properly reviewing public administration and how our money is spent.

I also want to touch on the points made by Mr McCartney about the damage done to our economy by climate tax, aggregate tax, smuggling and counterfeiting. We also have corporation tax, which makes it difficult to compete on a level playing field. What Mr McCartney has just done is show how much better off we would all be in an Irish Republic.

12.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr O'Connor. Your last few words raised the temperature somewhat.

I call Mr Shannon and ask him to be as brief as possible.

Mr Shannon: The first issue I want to address is roads. The Minister of Finance and Personnel will say that he has no responsibility for roads; that that is the responsibility of the Minister for Regional Development. However, if sufficient funds were made available to that Minister, he could make use of them.

The Comber bypass has been a point of discussion for 30 years. Both local councils have seen the bypass as their number one priority. We have had various assurances from Government Ministers; Ministers who flew in on a Monday morning, flew out on a Friday and told us that the Comber bypass was one of their priorities. Still we have no bypass, and that is having a detrimental effect on Comber. Many factories and shops have shut down. The town is stagnating and local retail trade has decreased by almost 50%. The Department has not addressed this issue, and I am making a plea for an urgent allocation of money for the construction of the Comber bypass.

The bypass was originally planned for 2001; it has now been postponed until 2003-04. The problem of traffic and congestion was recognised some 30 years ago, but the problem has still to be addressed. We can do something if sufficient funds are set aside. The need for the bypass has been well documented locally and in the Department for Regional Development.

Secondly, I want to address the lack of health and social services funding, especially for special schools. Speech and language therapy and occupational therapy have been reduced in special schools. The Department of Health says that it is not its responsibility, as does the

Department of Education. The two Departments are playing ball with children's special needs. That has been a matter of concern in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area, where severe underfunding has made it necessary to cut back on therapy sessions for children. Funding is needed for resources and staffing. The staff provide a special service, but they are trying to balance resources with needs and responsibilities. Schools must meet the complex needs of each child. Each child's circumstances are unique and need special care. It is important that funding is set aside for that.

In my constituency of Strangford, discussions with the Eastern Health and Social Services Board about resources for therapy have not come to a fruitful conclusion. The board says that the finances are not available. If the Minister can make the finances available to the Department of Health, I am sure that the issue could be addressed directly.

Some 50 children in my area are waiting for special needs care. Children with learning difficulties and physical disabilities also require those benefits. I am concerned that the issue has not been addressed.

Children suffer if finance is not made available. That falls back, and reflects badly, on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education and us, as elected representatives. We urge the Minister to ensure that sufficient finance is made available to ensure that children's occupational therapy needs and language needs are looked after.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you for being so brief, Mr Shannon.

I want to apologise for something that is entirely my fault. I was in the Chair yesterday and am in it again today. We allowed ourselves a little bit of latitude on a Supply motion yesterday, and we are doing the same with the Budget motion today. We have discussed all sorts of topics. It is not fair to the Minister to see his two objectives added together and adumbrated — several times in some cases. I apologise for not being as severe as I ought to have been yesterday, and possibly today as well.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Bearing in mind the Minister's difficulties that you have highlighted, the House would be quite willing to give him a little time out so that he can separate his various responsibilities and bifurcate into Supply and Budget over lunch.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We will return at two o'clock. Minister, having dealt most effectively with Supply yesterday, can you pick a way through what is Supply and what is Budget and deal with the Budget today?

Mr Durkan: Mr Deputy Speaker, I welcome your observations. It saves me from making points that Members may feel are defensive, procedural pedantry. Nevertheless, the contributions, although perhaps not pertinent to the

requirements of the Budget Bill, touch on the wider Budget considerations that Members feel are important to reflect upon. Given that latitude, and the spirit in which Members spoke, I will try to deal with some of the points raised, many of which were raised yesterday.

Given the underlying recurrent theme yesterday, today and on previous occasions when I have been here — and there have been quite a few — for all the lack of accountability that Members refer to, I must say that I am doing very little in relation to finance. I am doing nothing without the authority and agreement of the Executive Committee. There is little beyond that which I am not presenting in the House. I am open to questions whenever we make statements. We are bringing those various measures together. I accept that we are in the difficult situation of having to take several procedural devices close together. It is hard in those circumstances for Members to tell precisely what is what, and there is a tendency in the debates for everything to get crammed in.

Given the concern about the lack of accountability and the talk about a lack of responsiveness, I will try to respond to many of the points. Today, 13 Members contributed. There were 21 contributions yesterday. Thinking back to the debate on the Budget, the contributions were in the high twenties, as they were for the debate on the draft Budget on the motion that was tabled by the Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee, Mr Molloy.

For all the criticism about the lack of consultation, there have been opportunities for Members to speak, without too many time constraints, on many of those issues. Many of the issues that have been raised today were also raised in previous debates. I have noted the points and have tried to respond on previous occasions, but they come back.

The issue of rates and taxation was raised earlier by Dr Birnie, and I welcome that contribution. It chimes with points that I have made. Members need to think fully about the implications and the complications of the issues that are involved here. It is not just a matter of sloganeering our way through these problems. If we are serious about addressing the issues raised by the regional rate, then we must also be serious about pursuing the Barnett formula. We need to join up our thinking on all those points.

If we are going to make a case to the Treasury about Barnett, then we need to be aware that it will be countered with other points. In that regard, I would not be at all surprised to find some of the sweeping statements about wasteful, extravagant expenditure and the supposed lack of financial control on some programmes in Northern Ireland being read back to us in discussions with the Treasury. I ask Members to think more about all these issues, rather than make the assumption that, on any given day, the Department of Finance and Personnel has three wishes that it can ask for, and automatically receive, from the Treasury. We have to make a case.

Dr Birnie and Mr Leslie, picking up on Mr Neeson's argument, made the point that even the Barnett case is not straightforward. It is not even straightforward between the devolved territories. Therefore, we must take care to have a strong, well-developed case, and also to put it forward in a sound political context.

If we are to make the sort of cases that we have been told we need to make to the Treasury — not just on Barnett but also on UK fiscal measures, as Mr McCartney said — then let us be clear. If I were to take some of the main points raised here today and on previous occasions, I would be saying to the Treasury, "We want more money for public expenditure. We are wasting the money that we are already getting. We do not want to raise any more money from our own households through the rates. We do not want to pay UK taxes. We want special exemptions from UK taxes and we want to be exempt from raising revenue of our own as well."

We would not survive very long in that conversation with the Treasury. I ask Members to listen with care to everything that has been said in the House. We will try to reflect, as an Executive, on all the positive contributions — and many positive contributions have been made. However, let us remember that all those points and contributions need to be read and considered in balance with each other. None of them can exist alone. If that is true of the world in general, it is certainly true in Government. Everything is connected to everything else. We cannot make our case on any of these issues on a purely free-standing basis. We need to make a case on most of those issues.

Mr McCartney: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. On the issue of rates, the amount that is being collected is minimal compared to the amounts that the Minister has found and where he could spend it. It is not an either/or situation.

Mr Durkan: I will come to that point later, because issues were raised about the monitoring rounds and this notion of finding money wherever we find it.

12.45 pm

People are rightly saying that I and the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, who have a particular representational role on behalf of the Executive and the broad regional interest, need to be making those cases to the UK Government and the Treasury in particular. We need to make those cases with care and consideration. We need to ensure — as I have already said — that we join up our thinking on those points.

Patricia Lewsley, Iris Robinson and others raised the question of funding for schools. To reiterate what I said yesterday, we obviously have to continue to invest in temporary school accommodation, even though the need is clearly for longer-term provision of adequate facilities. That is simply because there are longer-term issues that

need to be addressed, and in the interim we need to make sure that there is, at least, acceptable accommodation. Those longer-term issues need to be addressed through the education budget.

One means of addressing some of those longer-term issues is through private finance initiatives (PFIs) and public-private partnerships. Given the limitations of our resources, we have to identify other means that can be marshalled to assist the public policy aim of having adequate schools capital facilities.

Patricia Lewsley and Paul Berry also mentioned the pursuit of value for money. The Executive are pursuing that agenda in several ways. That is also vital for this Assembly and, not least, for the Public Accounts Committee. We are developing public service agreements, and the importance of those was underlined by Esmond Birnie. We are trying to manage the transition to resource budgeting, and to ensure that we have proper appraisal procedures. We will pursue all of those rigorously. I hope that in doing so, we have the support not just of the House, but also of the respective departmental Committees. Those measures will be most telling as they apply, and are applied, at the departmental level.

That brings me to a general point about the contributions today. Some Members seem to be under a misapprehension that I, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, have a directive role in relation to every bit of public expenditure that is discharged or managed by any Department or any agency. Members need to recognise that many of the very valid and useful points that have been raised today are particularly relevant when it comes to the departmental determinations, as far as spending priorities and spending allocations are concerned in departmental budgets.

As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I am in an unusual position. People tell me that I am interfering with what Departments want to do, that I am fussing around, that I am stopping Departments doing things and not affording people the flexibility or discretion that they need. It is alleged that the dead hand of the Department of Finance and Personnel is stopping and curtailing everything. At the same time I am told that the Department of Finance and Personnel is allowing Departments to do too much according to their own devices and whims.

The reality is that we are presenting the broad Budget allocations for the different Departments and the different programmes. Decisions within those Budget lines are taken at departmental level. I hope that the departmental Committees are informing themselves of those decisions, are making their own concerns and interests felt, and advertising their own particular priorities that they want to see reflected in those allocations.

Some of the important roles of Committees have been stressed — not least the importance of scrutiny. The Committees also have policy development and priority

informing roles. I do not believe that a Committee's role should be confined to post hoc scrutiny. As Mr Dodds said, I hope that Committees will not feel constrained by the cycle of financial proceedings, and that they will still pursue those matters in their own time.

Mr Dallat: Is the Minister suggesting that those Members who refuse to sit on Committees would serve the Assembly better if they put their name down for the Finance and Personnel Committee and contributed positively to the Assembly?

Mr Durkan: I was not addressing any particular members of any particular Committees — or any Members who are not on any Committees. However, if anyone wanted to join a Committee, I could suggest some people that I would like to see replaced on certain Committees for a while to give me a break.

Mr McCartney: Democracy precludes serving on Committees with trigger-men.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot allow remarks made from a sedentary position.

Mr Durkan: Questions have understandably been asked, notably by Mr Berry, about the criteria for the allocation of money. The process of public expenditure allocation is not one that lends itself to an easy formula for producing correct figures. Public expenditure is not managed on that basis anywhere.

We must try to balance resources against needs. We must also constantly reappraise and test the allocation of resources against perceived needs, first to check whether needs have changed and should be recognised in a different way, and secondly to see whether opportunities to meet needs have changed and can be responded to.

The change to resource accounting and budgeting should help with those matters. Spending plans should become a closer articulation of public policy priorities and public service interests than they have been in the past, because it is the focus on outcomes and outputs, not just on inputs, that helps us to make the change.

Ms Morrice said that people wanted to see a comparison between this year's allocations and last year's. I believe that what people and the Assembly really want to know is whether money allocated for a particular purpose is really being used to the best effect for that purpose, or whether money could be released for other needs. We need to move away from treating budgets simply in terms of the incremental changes to inputs and start to examine the real uses to which money is put.

Resource accounting and budgeting will help us to achieve value for money — a point that was made by several Members, including Ms Lewsley. That is because, with better information on the cost of services and a new focus on achieving objectives, there will be a renewed emphasis on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of government. Those "three Es" will sit strongly and

positively with the "fourth E" of equality, which we have a particular duty to have regard to since the agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Berry raised points about the Health Service deficits. I have to agree with Mr Maskey on this, as Mr Berry seemed to make some contradictory claims. He began by presenting a picture of wasteful expenditure — some sort of management abandon — in particular in the trusts and ended up talking about the previous chronic underfunding of the Health Service. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel are jointly consulting to look at the causes and the consequences of these trust deficits. They are serious issues and we recognise that they pose serious questions, not just about financial control but also about service delivery. Clearly there is a question about whether the trusts are underfunded, and whether that is then reflected in the deficits.

Moreover, we have to address the serious issues of financial control. If the Assembly is to set budgets — and secondary allocations are made by the Departments based on those budgets — we have to ensure that everyone managing funds does so within the lines and limits of the set authority. The change to resource accounting and budgeting makes a difference here. Up to this point the spending of the trusts has been outside the departmental expenditure limit, and the deficits did not show up in the system for that reason. Under resource accounting and budgeting that will no longer be the case. Any emerging problems should show up early on and will be dealt with on that basis. The problem of cumulative trust deficits should not recur in the same way under resource accounting and budgeting. Other issues need to be addressed, and that is why we are consulting.

I have already touched on the points raised about Barnett. The First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and I did make representations to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in the last spending review. The real case that we need to make has to be in the context of the next spending review. Barnett and how UK fiscal measures affect Northern Ireland, which was raised by Mr McCartney, are matters that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister continue to make representations to the Treasury on, as do other Ministers. Sir Reg Empey, as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have made several representations to the Treasury on the matter of fuel tax.

The same applies to the climate change levy and to the aggregates tax. I, along with officials from several relevant Departments, met representatives of the Quarry Products Association. With further information from them we have been continuing to make that case. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister raised that

matter in their last meeting with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. They pointed out — and we continue to do this — that some of these measures have an adverse effect, in economic terms, on Northern Ireland, for many of the reasons that Mr McCartney gave. Some, which are meant to be environmental measures, obviously have a perverse effect on Northern Ireland. They do not achieve their environmental aims and compound our economic disadvantage in other areas.

Mr Leslie and Mr O'Connor raised an issue with regard to housing. The Department for Social Development and the Housing Executive have jointly commissioned a strategic options study, which is examining options for the future financing of social housing. My Department has been consulted and I hope that we can look forward to a presentation in due course.

1.00 pm

I dealt with Mr Neeson's question about the gas industry yesterday. We recognise the importance of the Port of Belfast, and the Department for Regional Development is addressing that issue. The Regional Development Committee has also been looking at the matter and has been considering options.

We have pointed out some considerations that people will need to have regard to if we are to make diligent decisions. Some are not of our making, or of our choosing. Nevertheless, they are there and, in the realistic public interest, we need to bear them in mind.

Points were made in relation to railways, and some railway lines in particular. Again, I covered most of those yesterday.

The fraud issues — including those raised concerning the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — are taken seriously. I have underlined that before. I hope Ministers take all incidents of fraud, and all possibilities for fraud, seriously. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety takes the issue of fraud seriously — be it at the level of service users or practitioners. Measures have already been announced and undertaken in relation to several aspects of health and social services.

I have already dealt with schools.

There were some issues raised concerning gap funding. I had hoped that I had dealt with some of those yesterday. Nevertheless — in case there are any outstanding issues or concerns — I will repeat what I said. Last week, I announced that part of the December monitoring round involved setting money aside to cover Departments in starting to make allocations to groups that they believe — on the basis of a sound judgement — would be eligible for Peace II funding. The moneys being allocated to the Executive programme funds for social inclusion are there as a safety net, in the event that Departments make allocations to groups or projects that do not qualify for

Peace II funding. The Departments will be covered against that, as will the peace fund. This is something more than the previous forms of gap funding. We are now starting to look at making allocations on the basis of the criteria for Peace II. There are no guarantees, and sustainability criteria were written in for all groups to have regard to at the start of Peace I. They were also underlined in an interim report in 1997. The different funding agencies and bodies have had to have regard to sustainability. It is not just a matter for the Government.

Members may want to consider that, looking at the funding for Peace II — and at the issues of sustainability, which are obviously going to arise at the end of Peace II — developing the type of arrangement we have created with the Executive Programme Funds gives us one means of trying to pick up on those issues. It also enables us to mainstream — as we have been requested to do by Ms Morrice and others. I hope therefore that people will give some long-term thought to what we are trying to achieve with the facilities provided by the Executive programme funds. Given that the significant additional money that we receive from Peace II will be lost in some years' time — and we are aware of the important programmes that it supports — the Assembly will have to question its attitude to raising additional resources through the rates. I do not know how we are meant to meet that loss in the future if we forego the option of raising additional money through rates.

I have covered most of the new points made today. Obviously, I will endeavour to write to Members on any matters that I have not been able to cover. For instance, Jim Shannon made a point about roads at the end of the debate, which was covered yesterday. The spending decisions relating to many of those points cannot be determined by the Minister of Finance and Personnel — they need to be addressed and answered by the relevant Ministers.

I have had regard to the procedural issues raised. Jane Morrice wanted to know if the Estimates were going to be provided hand-in-hand with the Budget Bill. If anything, I thought that most Members were making the opposite criticism: that the Estimates and the Budget Bill are too close together. Perhaps that is one of the reasons for the confusion about which channel we are meant to be in at a particular time. In future, I hope that we can ensure that the Estimates are available a bit earlier so that Members can give them proper consideration.

However, allow me to stress that the allocation made for the deficits came out of the December monitoring round, even though it has had to be reflected in the spring Supplementary Estimates. Given that they had to be updated with such an adjustment, the spring Supplementary Estimates were turned around in very good time.

I reiterate that we will work with the Committees on improving the cycle to ensure that there is time for fuller

consideration and greater contribution. Contributions do not always have to take the form of post hoc scrutiny by Committees, and that does not just apply to the Committee of Finance and Personnel; it applies to the other departmental Committees too. I hope that we can achieve better spacing between the Estimates and the Budget Bill and that that will allow for full and proper consideration of the Estimates. This should also free the Budget Bill from some of the confusion that has beset it this morning.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you for your masterly expositions, both today and yesterday.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 6/00] be agreed.

The sitting was suspended at 1.09 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

GOVERNMENT RESOURCES AND ACCOUNTS BILL

Further Consideration Stage

2.00 pm

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 (The Consolidated Fund)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):

I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 2, lines 8 to 13, leave out subsection (4).

The following amendments stood in the Marshalled List:

No 2 (clause 3): In page 2, line 28, leave out “subsection” and insert “section”. — [Mr Durkan.]

No 3 (clause 4): In page 3, lines 4 and 5, leave out subsection (4). — [Mr Durkan.]

No 4 (clause 4): In page 3, line 10, leave out “service on account of which” and insert

“Northern Ireland department or other body to which or person to whom”. — [Mr Durkan.]

No 5 (clause 4): In page 3, line 12, leave out “subsection” and insert “section”. — [Mr Durkan.]

No 6 (clause 5): In page 3, line 22, leave out “an Appropriation” and insert “a Budget”. — [Mr Durkan.]

No 9 (clause 6): In page 3, leave out from “an Appropriation” in line 30 to end of line 33 and insert

“a Budget Act, direct that resources accruing to a department or a relevant body or person (‘accruing resources’) may be used for any purpose in any financial year in addition to resources authorised by Budget Act to be used for that purpose in that year.” — [Mr Durkan.]

No 10 (clause 6): In page 3, line 38, leave out “an appropriation in aid” and insert “a use of accruing resources”. — [Mr Durkan.]

No 11 (clause 6): In page 3, line 41, leave out “appropriation in aid” and insert “use of accruing resources”. — [Mr Durkan.]

No 12 (clause 6): In page 4, lines 1 to 4, leave out paragraphs (a) and (b) and insert

“(a) the money may be used in accordance with the Department’s direction, and

(b) in so far as not so used, it shall be paid into the Consolidated Fund.” — [Mr Durkan.]

No 13 (clause 6): In page 4, line 6, leave out “appropriation in aid” and insert “use of accruing resources”. — [Mr Durkan.]

No 14 (clause 6): In page 4, line 7, leave out “Appropriation” and insert “Budget”. — [Mr Durkan.]

No 18 (schedule 1): In page 15, line 2, leave out “an Appropriation” and insert “a Budget”. — [Mr Durkan.]

Mr Durkan: This group of amendments is largely technical and represents the tidying-up of the way in which the Bill will set the framework for subsequent Budget Bills.

The starting point is that the control system up to now, based on cash control, has involved money being voted to services structured in a series of votes. The money available through a vote can be spent only on services within the ambit of the vote, and the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) will subsequently view expenditure on activities outside the ambit as irregular and not properly chargeable to the vote. That would then trigger qualification of the accounts and, if necessary, questions from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). This is a central aspect of the Assembly’s control of spending.

With the introduction of resource accounting and budgeting, there is a need for a shift of emphasis from control on the basis of cash to resources. The proposal is that cash should be allocated and controlled at departmental level but that the Assembly’s control of spending at service level should be preserved by a requirement that resources are used only within the ambit of the relevant request for resources.

Thus amendments 1, 3 and 4 provide for future Budget Bills to appropriate cash at departmental level, and they remove the requirements to identify cash draw-downs from the Consolidated Fund at a lower level. I stress that the raising of the level at which this control applies will be balanced by a new control on the use of resources at service level by Departments. I will say more about that later in relation to amendments 7 and 8.

Amendments 2 and 5 represent the simple tidying-up of terminology in the Bill — the removal of incorrect references to “subsection” and their replacement with “section” — and do not effect any change in its scope or its purpose.

Amendments 6, 14 and 18 simply replace the reference to “Appropriation Act” with the reference to “Budget Act” in order to reflect the change in title of the legislation referred to.

Amendments 9 to 13 deal with the simple change in terminology. Up to now, within limits defined in the Estimates, cash received by Departments could be used by them in addition to that directly appropriated by the Assembly. The term “appropriation in aid” has been applied to this concept. However, in future, such sums will be considered on an accruals basis and will be used to supplement resources authorised by the Assembly. Thus, the term “appropriation in aid” will be inappropriate and consequently will be replaced by “accruing resources”.

The Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, the Minister has written to the Committee indicating that he was minded to move these amendments.

He pointed out that the amendments were being proposed to ensure that the new resource accounting procedures would be afforded the same degree of legislative support as the outgoing cash-based system. The Assembly has been given certain powers with regard to the allocation of sums of money as appropriated by Assembly legislation. Those powers are provided under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 but do not extend to non-cash-based resources. The Government Resources and Accounts Bill is being amended to provide the Assembly with the same powers in relation to the resources that are not cash-based as it already has for sums of money.

Members of the Finance and Personnel Committee have now received a further letter from the Finance Minister, which sets out the reasons for the amendments, but they have not had the opportunity to consider them in detail. However, on the basis of the Minister’s initial explanation of their effect, Committee members raised no objections to them.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3 (Payment out of Consolidated Fund: standing services)

Amendment No 2 made: In page 2, line 28, leave out “subsection” and insert “section”. — [Mr Durkan.]

Clause 3, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill

Clause 4 (Payment out of Consolidated Fund: sums authorised by Act of the Assembly)

Amendment No 3 made: In page 3, lines 4 and 5, leave out subsection (4). — [Mr Durkan.]

Amendment No 4 made: In page 3, line 10, leave out “service on account of which” and insert

“Northern Ireland department or other body to which or person to whom”. — [Mr Durkan.]

Amendment No 5 made: In page 3, line 12, leave out “subsection” and insert “section”. — [Mr Durkan.]

Clause 4, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 5 (Application of sums issued)

Amendment No 6 made: In page 3, line 22, leave out “an Appropriation” and insert “a Budget”. — [Mr Durkan.]

Clause 5, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New clause

Mr Durkan: I beg to move amendment No 7: After clause 5, insert the following new clause:

“Use of resources

—(1) The use of resources by—

- (a) a Northern Ireland department, and
- (b) any relevant body or person,

for any purpose in any financial year must be authorised for that year by Budget Act or under section 6 and must not exceed any amount so authorised in relation to that purpose.

(2) Subsection (1) does not apply to the use of resources for services which are under any statutory provision payable out of —

- (a) the Consolidated Fund;
- (b) the Northern Ireland National Insurance Fund; or
- (c) any other fund established under a statutory provision.

(3) Subsection (1) is subject to section (Use of resources without Budget Act)

(4) A body or person is a relevant body or person for the purposes of this section and section 6 if an estimate is approved by the Assembly for that body or person in respect of each financial year.”

The following amendment stood in the Marshalled List:

No 8: After clause 5, insert the following new clause:

“Use of resources without Budget Act

—(1) If a Budget Act is not passed at least three working days before the end of a financial year (“year 1”) authorising the use of resources mentioned in section (Use of resources) (1) for the service of the next financial year (“year 2”), the authorised officer of the Department may, subject to any Budget Act subsequently passed, authorise the use of resources for the service of year 2 for such purposes and up to such amounts as he may direct.

(2) The aggregate of the amounts authorised under subsection (1) for the service of year 2 shall not exceed 75 per cent of the total amount of resources authorised by Budget Act for the service of year 1.

(3) If a Budget Act is not passed before the end of July in any financial year authorising the use of resources mentioned in section (Use of resources) (1) for the service of the year, the authorised officer of the Department may, subject to any Budget Act subsequently passed, authorise the use of resources for the service of the year for such purposes and up to such amounts as he may direct.

(4) The aggregate of the amounts authorised under subsection (3) and (where applicable) the amounts authorised under subsection (1) for the service of any financial year shall not exceed 95 per cent of the total amount of resources authorised by Budget Act for the service of the preceding financial year.

(5) In this section “authorised officer”, in relation to the Department, means the Permanent Secretary or such other officer as may be nominated by him for the purpose.” — [Mr Durkan.]

Mr Durkan: These amendments are a direct consequence of the transition to resource accounting and budgeting, and they are the most significant to be considered today. They will put in place a statutory basis

for the control of resources by the Assembly, together with an associated fail-safe mechanism in the event that the Assembly fail to authorise the use of resources for any year.

I previously mentioned the raising of the level at which the control of cash will apply. Amendment 7 balances that higher level of cash control by introducing in subsection (1) a control on the use of resources by Departments. That is a more stringent control than the previous cash-based approach, since it is possible that resources can be consumed without the use of cash.

In effect, this bases the control on departmental activity rather than on spend. I propose that the interpretation and application of this requirement should be the subject of discussion with the Assembly and especially with the Finance and Personnel Committee over the next few months.

For the Vote on Account the structure of the distribution of resources has been set at broadly the same level as in the former cash vote structure. That preserves the Assembly’s control in that Departments are unable to spend more on a particular set of purposes than the Main Estimates provision without seeking a Supplementary Estimate. However, I want to provide an opportunity for the structure of the new resource Estimates to be discussed more fully. We should take the opportunity to satisfy ourselves that we have a practicable and acceptable structure that helps to show the relationship between the objectives for each request for resources. This work should be tied closely to our work on public service agreements and should help us to develop a better and more transparent financial planning system.

It could be argued that it is not necessary to introduce powers with regard to the authorisation of resources for use by Departments, leaving the Department of Finance and Personnel to bring forward resource-based Estimates as a matter of policy and convention. That is, in effect, the position in Westminster. The Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000 has no provision corresponding to that. However, the Executive have decided that this fundamental aspect of control by the Assembly should be firmly and specifically embodied in statute. It is important to note, however, that the new control should apply only to specific expenditure in the scope of the resource budgeting envelope.

Consequently, there is a need to provide for some exceptions. That is the purpose of subsection (2). It is no different from the position under the previous cash regime when the funds mentioned were outside the cash control. Subsection (3) is a reference to amendment 8, which I will turn to shortly. Subsection (4) simply defines the Departments and bodies to which this new control applies as those bodies for which an Estimate is approved. They are currently the main Departments — the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas (OFREG), the Assembly

Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Amendment 7 will have the effect of making actions by Departments that commit resources subject to authorisation by the Assembly. That will apply even if they do not immediately require cash.

Making a commitment to a contractor would be immediately recognised in the accounts of the Department. Under resource accounting and budgeting, that would have to be within the constraints set by the relevant Budget Bill. Therefore, amendment 8 contains a fail-safe mechanism, which parallels that in section 59 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to allow for the possibility that the Assembly might not approve a Budget Bill in time. Section 59 relates only to cash control. The creation of this safety net is a prudent but, it is hoped, redundant step in respect of public expenditure. I emphasise that it is the responsibility of all Members to ensure that this provision remains redundant. However, if it does not, for whatever reason, the mechanism is essential in that it will ensure the continuity of public services in Northern Ireland.

I hope that Members will readily acknowledge that we could not tolerate a situation where the absence of authority for Departments to act would mean a break, however brief, in the provision of essential public services, which include vital protections for us all and include meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged in the community.

2.15 pm

Mr Molloy: I have nothing to add at this stage.

Amendment No 7 agreed to.

New clause

Amendment No 8 made: After clause 5, insert the following new clause:

“Use of resources without Budget Act

—(1) If a Budget Act is not passed at least three working days before the end of a financial year (“year 1”) authorising the use of resources mentioned in section (Use of resources) (1) for the service of the next financial year (“year 2”), the authorised officer of the Department may, subject to any Budget Act subsequently passed, authorise the use of resources for the service of year 2 for such purposes and up to such amounts as he may direct.

(2) The aggregate of the amounts authorised under subsection (1) for the service of year 2 shall not exceed 75 per cent of the total amount of resources authorised by Budget Act for the service of year 1.

(3) If a Budget Act is not passed before the end of July in any financial year authorising the use of resources mentioned in section (Use of resources) (1) for the service of the year, the authorised officer of the Department may, subject to any Budget Act subsequently passed, authorise the use of resources for the service of the year for such purposes and up to such amounts as he may direct.

(4) The aggregate of the amounts authorised under subsection (3) and (where applicable) the amounts authorised under subsection (1) for the service of any financial year shall not exceed 95 per cent

of the total amount of resources authorised by Budget Act for the service of the preceding financial year.

(5) In this section ‘authorised officer’, in relation to the Department, means the Permanent Secretary or such other officer as may be nominated by him for the purpose.” — [Mr Durkan.]

Clause 6 (Appropriation in aid)

Amendment No 9 made: In page 3, leave out from “an Appropriation” in line 30 to end of line 33 and insert

“a Budget Act, direct that resources accruing to a department or a relevant body or person (‘accruing resources’) may be used for any purpose in any financial year in addition to resources authorised by Budget Act to be used for that purpose in that year.” — [Mr Durkan.]

Amendment No 10 made: In page 3, line 38, leave out “an appropriation in aid” and insert “a use of accruing resources”. — [Mr Durkan.]

Amendment No 11 made: In page 3, line 41, leave out “appropriation in aid” and insert “use of accruing resources”. — [Mr Durkan.]

Amendment No 12 made: In page 4, lines 1 to 4, leave out paragraphs (a) and (b) and insert

“(a) the money may be used in accordance with the Department’s direction, and

(b) in so far as not so used, it shall be paid into the Consolidated Fund.” — [Mr Durkan.]

Amendment No 13 made: In page 4, line 6, leave out “appropriation in aid” and insert “use of accruing resources”. — [Mr Durkan.]

Amendment No 14 made: In page 4, line 7, leave out “Appropriation” and insert “Budget”. — [Mr Durkan.]

Clause 6, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled to clauses 7 to 17, I shall, by leave, put the Question on these clauses en bloc.

Clauses 7 to 17 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 18 (Advisory Group)

Mr Leslie: I beg to move amendment No 15: In page 9, line 27, leave out “take full” and insert “consult with and take”.

The following amendments stood in the Marshalled List:

No 16 (clause 20): In page 11, line 2, leave out “at any reasonable time”. — [Mr Molloy.]

No 17 (clause 20): In page 11, line 25, after “nature” insert “, has received significant public funds,”. — [Mr Dodds.]

Mr Leslie: During the first Consideration Stage of this Bill last week, I advised the House that if my amendment

relating to this clause was successful, I would move a further amendment this week to effect the necessary changes. I was aware that some tidying was needed in the drafting. In the subsequent period, I consulted with rather more skilled draftsmen than myself, and consequently the amendment should take care of the outstanding issues. The effect of the amendment will not be in any way to reduce the extra power of

“the group of persons for the time being selected by the Treasury”,

which was the thrust of the amendment last week. The substance of the matter there is that the Department shall take account of all recommendations — that remains intact.

Members may note that the word “full”, which was in the amendment last week, is being deleted. The reasoning is that there is no distinction in drafting between “account” and “full account”. Taking account is taking account, and therefore there is no need for the word “full”. It is superfluous, and I have therefore removed it.

The words “consult with and take” are suggested in order to ensure that clause 18(1) corresponds with clause 18(2), which uses the words

“where a group is consulted under subsection (1)”.

That is required to ensure consistency of language, but in doing so it does not in any way take away from the powers reserved to this group by the amendment last week. Therefore this amendment does the necessary tidying up in the drafting but preserves the import of the amendment that we passed at the Consideration Stage. I trust that the House will support this amendment.

I want to address a few remarks to amendment 17, standing in the name of Mr Dodds. I will not pre-empt Mr Dodds’s own remarks, but I want to focus on the significance of “substantially” in the clause at line 26. Members should recall that this entire clause was inserted at the behest of the Public Accounts Committee and supported by the Finance and Personnel Committee. The Comptroller and Auditor General was also satisfied with it when consulted. I was very happy that this clause was passed last week, as I felt it added considerably to our ability to keep a check on where public money was going.

The question posed by the amendment is whether the Comptroller and Auditor General can properly survey all the relevant money. I invite the Minister to dwell on what he considers the words “substantially funded from public money” to mean. It is possible that the wording of the clause will, in practice, cover the wording proposed in the amendment, but that is a matter, to some extent, of interpretation. I hope that the Minister will enlighten the House when he addresses this clause.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Before addressing the Committee’s amendment (No 16), I want to comment on amendment 15, which relates to

Mr Leslie’s new clause 18, adopted by the Assembly at the Consideration Stage.

This clause introduces the requirement to have a body to oversee the issuing of guidance by the Department of Finance and Personnel to other Government Departments. It has been argued that Mr Leslie’s amendment was flawed because it assumed that the Department of Finance and Personnel would consult with the new body. This perceived weakness has been corrected in the amendment that has been proposed by Mr Leslie and which the Committee supports.

Regarding the Committee’s amendment 16, Members will recall that the Assembly adopted an earlier amendment intended to lift restrictions on the Comptroller and Auditor General and his access to documents during an audit investigation. The Minister has kindly pointed out that there is now a contradiction between the Comptroller and Auditor General’s access powers when pursuing an audit and when undertaking an inspection under the new clause 20. I thank the Minister for drawing that to the Committee’s attention.

The purpose of the amendment is to ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General has unrestricted powers of access when undertaking an inspection of the accounts of any body covered by clause 20. The Committee concluded that it was particularly important that the Comptroller and Auditor General should not be subjected to inappropriate delay when inspecting the accounts of bodies that are remote from the core Civil Service.

Finally, I want to comment briefly on amendment 17, which stands in the name of Mr Dodds.

At Consideration Stage, the additional wording proposed by Mr Dodds was first included in the Committee’s original amendment to extend the C&AG’s powers of inspection. The Committee accepted the Minister’s amendment to extend the powers of the C&AG to investigate bodies receiving public funds. However, the Committee made it clear that the amendment did not go as far as Members wished in order to ensure full public accountability of how public money is used by all bodies that receive significant public funds.

We welcomed the additional amendments made by the Minister to strengthen the C&AG’s power to inspect in advance of the Sharman Report on the audit and accountability of public money. The Sharman Report has now been published and will be considered by the Committee. I am sure that we will endorse many of its findings and recommendations. We will pursue them vigorously in collaboration with the Audit Committee and the Public Accounts Committee when the audit reorganisation Bill arrives in the autumn.

The Committee has not considered Mr Dodds amendment formally and has not formed a view on it. I would welcome an indication from the Minister that he will

take the Sharman Report into account when dealing with the audit reorganisation Bill later this year.

Mr Dodds: As regards amendment 17, the issue concerning the Comptroller and Auditor General's powers of inspection has had more than a fair airing in the Finance and Personnel Committee and in the House during the Consideration Stage last week.

It is fair to say that during consideration by the Finance Committee, the Public Accounts Committee, the Audit Committee and the Assembly, the Minister has taken on board some of our concerns relating to the inadequacy of the G&AG's powers of inspection in respect of private, non-governmental bodies that may be in receipt of public funds. He has moved some way on that issue.

However, concern still exists, and it has been reinforced by the publication of the Sharman Report. This necessitates our coming back to this issue and looking at it in more detail. I will be interested to hear the Minister's definition of these words in clause 20(3)(b):

"the body exercises functions of a public nature or is entirely or substantially funded from public money."

To put that into context, we are talking about the ability of the C&AG to follow public money, to inspect how a government body, a non-governmental organisation, a private body or a community organisation spends public money. It is a fundamental principle that we are all agreed on. The question is: how do we approach it? The Minister has suggested that clause 20(3)(b) is not the most appropriate way to deal with it, and has suggested to the Committee that we leave it to be dealt with by another piece of legislation.

However, the principle is that wherever public money is granted, allocated or appropriated, the C&AG should have a responsibility to follow that money, to inspect how it is spent, to ensure that it is spent in accordance with the wishes of the Assembly and in accordance with the purposes for which it was allocated.

It is very important that, when considering this legislation, we give the C&AG the power to follow public money. We are looking at powers of inspection, not powers of audit. We are talking about the right to inspect; we are not talking about giving the C&AG wholesale power to audit private organisations.

We have now had the benefit of seeing the report made by Lord Sharman. It is a detailed report, and the Finance and Personnel Committee will be looking at it in some detail. The Sharman review of audit accountability was established to examine current audit and accountability arrangements for central government and to make recommendations.

2.30 pm

In page 13 of the report Lord Sharman says,

"Many private sector organisations receive grants and subsidy from central Government bodies. In law, money given as grant ceases to be public money when it is paid to the recipient. However, it is generally recognised that there is a need for public accountability for such monies, to ensure that they are being spent properly and value for money is achieved."

We can all heartily agree with that.

Lord Sharman goes on to give examples of arrangements for access in other countries by their equivalent of the Comptroller and Auditor General and by national audit offices. He points out that there are arrangements in other countries to allow auditors to inspect how public funds have been used. For instance, in France all private bodies that receive money from public funds can be examined by the appropriate body. Where public funds exceed 50% of turnover, all the funds can be examined. In Germany, the appropriate body is able to examine the financial management of private entities that receive grants or guarantees. In Denmark, a similar statutory right of access to bodies — private or otherwise — that receive grants is available, and similarly in Holland.

I draw attention to the Sharman Report because it backs up the points that have been made by many of us concerning the need to ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General has the necessary powers. He himself admitted, when he gave evidence to the Committee, that the original draft of the legislation was not going to give him those powers. The famous example is that of the football club because that happened to coincide with an announcement by the Minister of grant moneys. Certain football clubs, as private organisations, were going to be in receipt of substantial public funds. Under current law — and as originally drafted — the Comptroller and Auditor General would not have the right of inspection to see that that public money was being spent in the way that it should be. That is clearly a loophole, and it needs to be closed. I have tabled an amendment that will address that. At the Consideration Stage last week, a reference to bodies that are

"entirely or substantially funded from public money"

was inserted into the Bill.

I will listen carefully to the Minister, but it is important that at the earliest opportunity we, as an Assembly, insert in legislation the right of the Comptroller and Auditor General to inspect the accounts of any organisation in receipt of significant public funds. The right to follow that money is all-important, and we must ensure that that right is not fettered in any way.

Mr Weir: I support all three amendments. I do not know whether the proposers of the amendments will be happy about this or whether they will regard it as the kiss of death.

I will deal first with the two least controversial amendments. Mr Leslie's amendment was certainly a very good step forward, and it was accepted. It had the power

to tighten up the independence of the advisory body and to ensure that the Department of Finance and Personnel takes account of that body. Mr Leslie's amendment today keeps within the spirit and the letter of his previous one, but tightens up the wording to ensure that it is compatible with the rest of the clause. It is a worthwhile amendment, and there should be no controversy about it.

Similarly, the amendment in the name of the Committee to remove the words "at a reasonable time" was established last week as a principle in another clause, but makes it compatible with the provisions of the Bill. A test of reasonableness will be applied by the courts in any case, but that need not be explicitly included in the Bill. This amendment would make the Bill consistent and bring it into line with what was proposed at Consideration Stage.

There may be great division on Mr Dodds's amendment. I welcome the changes proposed by the Minister last week because they moved much closer to addressing some of the concerns raised. At that stage, I said that I was looking for an amendment to further tighten control, and this amendment does that.

As a general principle, it is important that the Comptroller and Auditor General should have inspection powers to allow him to follow public money. At the outset, it should be noted that we are talking about inspection powers rather than audit powers. I do not, therefore, believe that the powers impose too great a burden on non-governmental bodies. They fulfil the key principle that one must be able to follow Government money. It is an important check and balance to ensure that public money, which is voted through by the Assembly, is not abused in any way.

The key question posed by both Mr Leslie and Mr Dodds is the definition of the terms "substantially funded" and "receipt of significant public funds". I am keen to hear the Minister's comments on this matter, but it strikes me that there is a clear and qualitative difference between those two phrases — they cannot be compatible. The wording encompasses a body that is entirely funded from public funds — that meaning is clear to everyone — yet it also encompasses a body that is "substantially funded" from the public purse.

The term "substantially funded" refers to the proportion or percentage of a body's finances that are derived from the public purse. For example, a voluntary group might have an annual budget of £50,000, of which £40,000 comes from the public purse. That represents about 80% of its budget and, consequently, there can be no argument that it is not "substantially funded" from the public purse. In contrast, the phrase "in receipt of significant public funds", when used to describe a group that has received public funds, refers to the quantity of money involved rather than to the percentage of public money received. Therefore, one could have a private body that has an annual budget of £10 million, of which £1

million comes from the public purse. That is a significant amount of money, yet it represents just 10% of the body's budget. It is arguable that the body could not be described as one which is "substantially funded" from the public purse.

It would be a ridiculous situation if bodies receiving large amounts of public money were to fall outside the remit of the Bill because of the percentage of turnover a grant represented, while small groups that are entirely funded from the public purse were subject to inspection. If we are to avoid the abuse of public finances, we need to cover both situations — a body that is entirely or substantially funded from the public purse and a body that is receiving significant funds.

If the amendment were accepted it would cover both those situations and ensure that public funds are properly spent. The Minister could question the exact meaning of "significant funding", yet the definition of "substantially funded" could also be queried because the percentage of a body's finances referred to is unclear. Clearly, the two terms have different meanings — one refers to proportion, and the other to amount. These matters should be decided by a test of reasonableness applied by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The amendment adds to the strength of the Comptroller and Auditor General, but, what is most important, it enshrines the key principles that public money should be allocated properly and that there should be redress by way of inspection. This amendment, as the other two, is worthy of the Assembly's support.

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Dallat): I oppose the amendment put forward by Mr Dodds, not because of the principle behind it, but because of the recent publication of the Sharman Report. It is necessary for the Audit Committee, the Public Accounts Committee and, no doubt, the Finance and Personnel Committee to study the report in order to bring accountability of the public auditor reorganisation to the next stage. There is, of course, the audit reorganisation Bill which has to be considered in the future as well.

We should also bear in mind that we have an undertaking from the Minister to co-operate with the three Chairpersons. He has given us assurances that he will give serious consideration to the issues that were raised today by Mr Dodds. I welcome that, and support any extended powers that will give greater accountability without having an adverse effect on people who apply for public money, particularly for the community projects referred to. I am worried that if we pass the amendment in the name of Mr Dodds at this time, without due consideration, we may create the very opposite of what we all wish to achieve, which is to ensure that money actually gets to the people who need it most. In no way do I question his sincerity in matters relating to audit issues. Indeed, I thank him for his support this morning

when he added his voice of concern to my worries about the procurement procedures and conflict of interest issues involving the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, contained in last week's audit report. I want to hear more Members speaking out, particularly those who have taken public accounts as a specialist subject.

As Chairman of the Audit Committee, I wish to put on record my gratitude for the remarkable degree of co-operation between the Finance and Personnel Committee, the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee. I wish to put on record my appreciation of the Minister's desire to encourage an open approach to financial accountability. The relationships within the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee are a model for other Committees to emulate.

It is essential that we maintain that partnership because there is no doubt that this is the way forward if we are to address the undesirable practices that have crept into Departments and other agencies that spend money on behalf of the Government. I am sure that real progress has been made in the whole field of public accountability. The public are watching very carefully how we bring that forward in a managed way. At long last, after 30 years of non-accountability, there is a new awareness that this Assembly is beginning to create change, and nowhere is this more evident than in the field of finance and public expenditure.

It is critical that we continue to sing from the same hymn sheet and deliver real change, rather than aspire to change. This Bill, as amended, gives us the scope required to begin the process of extending powers of scrutiny. From that secure base, we can take the process forward, bearing in mind that the Minister has given us an undertaking that he will consider further powers for the public auditor.

We should wait until we have considered the Sharman Report before considering the amendment put forward by Mr Dodds, because we do not want to do anything that would discourage those in greatest need from applying for public funds. Apart from that, I have no fundamental disagreement with it.

Mr P Robinson: I am happy to follow the remarks made by Mr Weir. He put his finger on the key issue, and I will follow on from his speech in a moment. I am not so happy to follow Mr Dallat, who seems to have an identity crisis that we need to resolve. He stood up, purporting to be acting as Chairman of the Audit Committee. Those were his very first words, as the Official Report will show. He then said that he was opposing the amendment in the name of Mr Dodds. I will be interested to hear of the decision of the Audit Committee to take such a position. As he was speaking in his capacity as Chairman, it is a strange position to adopt. Even more strange — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Dallat: I was simply making a plea for an opportunity for my Committee to discuss the Sharman

Report and then perhaps take on board everything that has been said.

2.45 pm

Mr P Robinson: The record will show very clearly that Mr Dallat stood up, purporting to speak as Chairman of the Audit Committee, and said that he opposed my Colleague's amendment. Mr Dallat is shaking his head, so he obviously does not even remember what he said a few moments ago. His justification for that position was even wilder — he said that he was opposing it because of the Sharman Report. I do not know whether he has read the Sharman report, but he certainly could not have understood it, because that report justifies the position that we have adopted.

I am sure that the author of the briefing note for the Committee will not mind if I quote from it:

"It is also interesting, in light of discussions in the Finance and Personnel Committee, that Sharman has accepted the case for public sector audit access to any grant receiving body. This would fully cover the football club example which was of concern to some members of the DFP Committee."

The Sharman Report is therefore a justification for our amendment rather than a reason for opposing it. That means either that the Member was being mischievous in simply attempting to support his party Colleague, the Minister, or that he did not understand the Sharman Report, or simply that he did not read it.

It is clear that the Sharman Report goes further than the proposed legislation. It seeks to create broader rights of access than those allowed under the legislation. Therefore, we cite the Sharman report as evidence in support of our amendment.

Reference to the football analogy was made in the briefing note. It may be worthwhile to outline this analogy for Members who are not familiar with it. It just so happened that on one of the days on which the Finance and Personnel Committee met to discuss this matter, the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister made a statement to the Assembly about funding for football clubs in Northern Ireland. He said that the funds would be distributed among several clubs, but that, as a pre-requisite to drawing down the Government grant, each club would have to cover 25% of development costs from its own funds. This was a reasonable and sensible proposal on the part of the Minister.

However, the Minister then said that two football clubs were unable to take up the funding, because they could not cover 25% of the costs of the development work. Several football clubs may have on their boards of directors a building contractor who, it is suggested, could quote a higher price for work and then give the club a 25% discount. That would mean the Government paying the whole sum. The Minister, from his standpoint, was not able to involve himself in that degree of detail. However, if the Comptroller and Auditor General were able to follow

money right down to the point where it was actually spent, he could make sufficient enquiries to gauge whether the Government were paying 100% or 75% of the money actually spent on development work.

Initially, the Comptroller and Auditor General said that he was satisfied with the wording of the legislation proposed by the Minister. However, when this football analogy was presented to him during the Finance and Personnel's evidence session, he recognised that he had not taken account of that set of circumstances and that the situation could be guarded against by implementing a proposal such as the one which is contained in our amendment. That is merely an example of one set of circumstances, but since then I have been able to let my imagination stretch to many other cases in which the Comptroller and Auditor General would not be able to follow the pounds to check that they were being spent in the way in which the Assembly, or a Department, intended.

We must not pass this legislation only to have to come back to it, as will be the case. One day we will read in the headlines of 'The Belfast Telegraph' that money voted by the Assembly has been used for the wrong purpose or in some way that was not intended.

And we will all throw our hands up and say "This is terrible. We must do something about it." I contend that we can do something about it now by giving powers to the Comptroller and Auditor General that will allow him free access to follow the pounds that are voted by the Assembly, no matter where they go. We have specified a significant amount of money.

We now come to the issue that was raised by the Member for North Down. If we simply say, as the legislation does, that the body in question exercises functions of a public nature, or is entirely or substantially funded from public money, the body's annual accounts will show that a substantial proportion of its funding comes directly from Government sources.

However, if it is a one-off grant, the body will not be classified under this legislation as substantially funded from Government sources. The grant might be a substantial amount in one financial year. There might also be an argument about whether substantial funding is for both revenue and capital spending. Under our amendment, if passed, if a significant amount of money is given even on a one-off basis by the Department, the Department will be significantly funding that body in that one year, and the Comptroller and Auditor General will have the power to pursue the money.

I will mention another factor. To a community organisation in east Belfast, £10,000 might be a substantial amount of money — in fact it might be enough to run the show for a year. However, to a larger organisation, a grant of £10,000 might amount to a very small part of its funding. Are we saying that it is not the amount of

money we vote through this Assembly nor the amount allocated by a Department to a body that matters? Are we saying that it is the scale of the body that determines whether the Comptroller and Auditor General should pursue it? That is the gist of the legislation that is being proposed today: the size of the organisation and its budget will determine whether an amount of money is substantial or not. That is entirely wrong. If the amount is significant of itself, it should not matter what proportion of the overall expenditure or funding of the organisation it may constitute.

Therefore for all of those reasons I support the amendment in the name of my Colleague. I believe that it is in line with what Sharman would wish us to do. Indeed, it may be that he took his lead from the Finance and Personnel Committee and decided that it was necessary to have his report toughened up to deal with this set of circumstances.

I hope that the Minister will not want to push a piece of legislation through the Assembly because he has gone firm on it, or simply for the sake of it. I hope that he is prepared to recognise that Sharman wants the toughest possible role for the Comptroller and Auditor General to enable the man to see what is going on. I trust that the Minister will not try to curtail this amendment for the sake of holding on to his own piece of legislation and attempting to get it through the House unscathed. I regret very much the action taken by the Chairperson of the Audit Committee on his own behalf; I suspect that his Committee has not come to that conclusion.

Mr Durkan: Three amendments have been addressed in this group, and I intend to deal with each of them in turn.

I accept the amendment tabled by Mr Leslie. It removes a technical deficiency to the amendment that was passed at Consideration Stage, and it is acceptable to the Executive. The insertion of the requirement to consult makes good the technical deficiency that I pointed out in the Chamber.

I am pleased to note that Mr Leslie now accepts that to "take full account", as in his original amendment, would essentially have been unworkable because it was impossible to define. A reference to "having regard to", which is the formulation used elsewhere in the Bill, could have been used, but the Executive consider that "take account of" is acceptable.

In light of earlier comments, I stress that it was always my intention that the independent views of the Financial Reporting Advisory Board (FRAB) should genuinely influence and inform the Department of Finance and Personnel on accounting matters. Some Members have pointed out that this was not covered in the original Bill. However, I did address it at the Second Stage of the Bill and said that I wanted views from relevant Committees on how that independent advice could best be provided.

The advice was that it should come from FRAB, and that has been accommodated. It is important to underline that.

I am disappointed that there is a perception that some issues need to be made more explicit. However, I accept the Assembly's view. I am satisfied that my original purpose has been served and that the Department of Finance and Personnel should consult with an independent, expert body before issuing formal directions on accounting matters. Subject to the addition of three words, the clause now stands as I originally submitted it to the Finance and Personnel Committee.

I thank the Committee for its deliberations and thoroughness.

I accept amendment 16 tabled by the Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee, Francie Molloy. As I said during the Consideration Stage of the Bill, the Wednesbury test of reasonableness will apply in any case. The work of the Comptroller and Auditor General will not be made any more effective by the deletion of the words "at any reasonable time". In case there is any misunderstanding, I stress that the test of reasonableness and arbitration on what is reasonable time never lay with the Department of Finance and Personnel. The Wednesbury test clearly falls to the Comptroller and Auditor General; the Department of Finance and Personnel is not the arbiter, contrary to the impression that some Members have given. The amendment is technical and makes the wording in the Bill consistent, as Francie Molloy and I have pointed out. Again, I thank the Chairperson and his Colleagues on the Finance and Personnel Committee for their careful and persistent work in the scrutiny of this Bill.

Amendment 17 raises several points, and several Members have spoken on it. One of the points concerns the stress laid on ensuring public accountability, something we would all like to see. Questions have been asked on how the Executive intend to achieve this. The main way to ensure accountability is for each Department to put in place and to operate effective conditions for grants and for checks to be made on how these are being spent. There seems to be a misapprehension that, once allocations have been made, the Comptroller and Auditor General is the only person who has the power to check on how moneys are being spent and if they are being spent on the purposes for which they were intended.

3.00 pm

It is important to underline the duties and functions that Departments have in that regard and not simply to say that it is entirely up to the Comptroller and Auditor General to find those things out. Due diligence and proper management by Departments needs to be followed through. I hope that all the departmental Committees take an interest in that. In opposing amendment 17, I point out that the amendment accepted from me last week secures access for the Comptroller and Auditor

General to all bodies substantially funded from public funds. The question of what that means has been raised. It means 50% or more. Many bodies receive significant funds well below 50%. In an urgent or particular case, the Comptroller and Auditor General can be given access by order of the Department of Finance and Personnel, which I will deal with later.

I now wish to raise some further points on the amendment. It is an important principle that those who are governed clearly understand the circumstances in which they will be held to account. Those who exercise functions of regulation should not be provided with unfettered discretion unless that is absolutely necessary. As the term "significant" is not defined, the proposed amendment could allow the Comptroller and Auditor General full access to the documents, books and records of virtually all organisations that do business with Government. If amendment 17 is made, the consequences may inhibit people who might otherwise participate through work with voluntary sector organisations. If the Comptroller and Auditor General — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Weir: The Minister said that the term "significant" is not defined. Apart from the verbal assurance that the Minister has given that "substantial" means above 50%, can the Minister say where "substantially" is defined in the Bill?

Mr Durkan: I will continue with the point I was going to make. I was asked to state what "substantial" means, and I said that it means 50% or more. I also said, on the basis of the amendments already adopted, that the Comptroller and Auditor General's access is not unnecessarily restricted. It is fairly clear that it is only restricted where funding is above that level.

Mr P Robinson: That is very disrespectful of the Minister. He really should behave in a way more becoming to his Office. He raises an issue of some importance, yet the legislation does not contain the words that he has uttered in the House. Therefore, the Assembly has the right to probe him so that in any case that may follow, the Comptroller and Auditor General, if not everybody else, knows what the Minister's mind is on the issue. If, in any financial year, a body that does not get funding from a Government source on a regular basis gets a "substantial" amount of money — as defined by the Minister today — even if it is a one-off grant for an item of capital expenditure and not for revenue funding, is the Comptroller and Auditor General allowed to investigate its accounts?

Mr Durkan: I will cover that point as I continue my reply. In dealing with the amendment, I have already made some points. Moreover, if the Comptroller and Auditor General has what might be deemed to be unfettered access to all bodies receiving public funding of whatever amount, some people may feel that they could face disproportionate scrutiny and that honest mistakes could

lead to unwelcome publicity. In relation to the private sector, commercially sensitive information could be open to examination. That could undermine the confidence of existing and potential inward investors to the region.

It could also be perceived by some as amounting to an unwarranted right of interference into the private sector. I make the point — if people will allow me to do so — that we need to take care while trying to achieve sound principles of accountability and in ensuring proper use of public money that Members have identified that we do not undermine our work to achieve value for money by making provisions before we think carefully about them. That might perhaps have the effect of inhibiting some firms from tendering for Government business, precisely because they might find themselves open to inspections that they do not want. Therefore, we need to remember that there are purposes that we want to achieve in the business arrangements that we make.

Mr Close: In light of the Minister's comments, how can we hope to see the full implementation of the Sharman Report, which seek even greater powers than those currently in front of this House?

Mr Durkan: I am coming to that. Many points have been made both here and in the Committees, although some have been represented differently today, and on previous occasions, than earlier in the Committees. Therefore, I think that I have the right to address the points. I do think —

Mr Speaker: Order. Many points have been raised. If the Minister were to conclude his remarks, Members might be able to judge whether he has addressed the questions they have rightly raised. This is the Committee Stage, and therefore a degree of toing and froing is possible and appropriate. If the Minister were to have the opportunity to speak, Members may be able to determine whether the questions they asked have been answered.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not sure whether I am reading too much into your remarks. Are you saying that after the Minister has spoken, we will have the opportunity to ask him further questions? I ask, because the Minister introduced new issues. When I attempted to elicit further details from him, he tossed his head in the air, impatience showing in his face, and he did not seem to want to have interventions.

Mr Speaker: I took from what the Minister said, both subsequent to that occasion and again when he had an intervention today, that he had some of the answers to these questions written down and was eager to deliver them to the Assembly. It will only be possible to judge that when we have come to the end of the Minister's responses. I do have to say — with some degree of understanding — that the Minister has been making responses to the Assembly for almost two full days on several issues. I think it is fair to mention that. He should be allowed to continue. There is a form of

intervention, with which I am familiar in another place, whereby at stages of this kind, Members can get to their feet as the Minister sits down, and before sitting down the Minister may respond. As long as such a procedure is not abused, it may be a useful device in this House also. The proposer of the amendment is, I see, also itching to get to his feet to respond. I mean the mover of No 15.

Mr Durkan: Mr Speaker, before you are asked to rule on a point of order, if a toss of the head is an unparliamentary reflex, I apologise to the House.

I want to take up the point that has just been raised regarding what we can look forward to, and I want to make this very clear. In the points that I have just made, about how others could view the provisions sought by the amendment in the current circumstances, I am not saying that the Comptroller and Auditor General should not be given inspection rights over such bodies. I have made it clear that I am very open to looking further at that area. However, if the Comptroller and Auditor General is to be given those rights, it should be after rather more thought, care and consultation than has been possible in relation to this particular Bill.

Budget statements have been brought forward at draft stage and again at revised stage. In addition, there have been debates on the Programme for Government, and the details of both the Programme for Government and the Budget have gone to Committees. Despite all that, Members have said that there is still not enough consultation for this House and that the relevant Committees have not been able to consider things properly.

In talking about financial arrangements, as we are in this Bill, there are issues not just for the three Committees that have been particularly looking at this — namely, the Finance and Personnel Committee, the Audit Committee and the Public Accounts Committee — but also for other Committees that have an interest in the affairs of business. They might want to consider the implications of this amendment, and might have views to give on it. Committees that are dealing with Departments that have many transactions, or that use the community and voluntary sectors for the delivery of certain programmes, might have a view about the implications of such provisions or what sort of balances or provisions need to be put in to qualify them.

We need to make sure that we have a degree of consideration in this House and with the relevant Committees, rather than adopting a legislative measure now in a simple reflex response to the very valuable Sharman Report. That report was published last week. Among other things, it envisages the development of de minimus thresholds for access, and of protocols governing the conduct of inspections.

When this amendment was pressed at Committee Stage, one of the points that I made was that we should not adopt it, but wait for the Sharman Report and

consider that issue and any other issues that the report raised. People said that they did not want to wait for the Sharman Report; that I would only tie people to it, and that it was a Whitehall document that would not go far. I am glad that people already see the benefit of the Sharman Report, but they are referring to one aspect of it. There are many other issues that we need to take on board and properly consider, not just in relation to that particular point but to other points as well.

Therefore, the amendment is to be opposed. It is not timely, in that sense. I am glad that there does not appear to be a disagreement between us on the relative worth of the Sharman Report. I am not aware that any Committee has yet been able to consider the implications of the Sharman Report in relation to this, or any other, point. We should take the time to do so. It could be in the Assembly's interest, and certainly in the interests of many people looking to this Assembly, or to Departments, as far as the conduct of their affairs is concerned.

We need to recognise that there is a proper role for both the voluntary sector and the private sector in a mixed economy. We need to respect their proper roles, alongside appropriate mechanisms of accountability and regulation, and recognise that people appreciate the value, importance and, at all times, the integrity of public moneys and the uses to which they are put.

Adopting this amendment in the context of the Bill, without wider consideration and consultation, would mean that we would be unable to move forward in a balanced way.

3.15 pm

The amendment also ignores the fact that I gave the necessary assurances to the Public Accounts Committee, the Audit Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee about matters raised by those Committees and in the context of the forthcoming audit reorganisation Bill. I believe that those assurances have been accepted by the Committees. After discussions with the Committees, I introduced, through the amendments made at Consideration Stage, improved inspection rights for the Comptroller and Auditor General in respect of public sector bodies.

Under the provisions of the Bill, the Comptroller and Auditor General will have unlimited inspection and access rights to the accounts documents and records of all public sector bodies. He will also have the right to inspect any records that he requires to carry out financial audits and value-for-money studies on all public money expended. For bodies that are not in the public sector, Departments will have to prepare the documentation required by the Comptroller and Auditor General to carry out his inspections, whether the public money involved is applied as grant-in-aid or as grant. There is no restriction on the Comptroller and Auditor General's

right to inspect the accounts and documentation that he needs to fulfil his function.

The gaps in public sector accountability have been closed by the amendment that I proposed at Consideration Stage. It would be inappropriate to extend those inspection rights to cover voluntary and private sector bodies in this Bill, especially as we have had no consultation with the relevant interests.

The Bill will give the Department of Finance and Personnel wide-ranging powers to give the Comptroller and Auditor General access to documents. I also introduced the amendment that was made to clause 19(10), which now requires the Department of Finance and Personnel to have regard to the views of the Public Accounts Committee in any matters of concern. Therefore, if there is a cause for concern about the use of public funds by a body in any sector, action will be taken.

I assured the Committee that we would consult widely on the issue of additional rights and powers for the Comptroller and Auditor General and that I would submit proposals in the context of the Sharman Report. That report has just been published, and its recommendations are complex. During the passage of the Bill, I have given assurances that the review of audit and accountability arrangements in Northern Ireland would be dealt with in the forthcoming audit reorganisation Bill. I have also emphasised the importance of consultation with bodies that may be affected by any new powers given to the Comptroller and Auditor General. Members will also have to be canvassed for their opinion. To proceed on any other basis would be to put us in a situation in which different Departments and Committees would start to identify problems and concerns for private and voluntary bodies about the implications of the Bill. We should deal with the issues in the round in a Bill that is well placed and well timed to address them; that Bill is the audit reorganisation Bill.

The Sharman Report has been published, and proposals on how the consultation process will be handled will be brought forward. Some Members have emphasised to me the value of consultation on everything else, but they have not done so with that report. It would be premature to speak about the application of the recommendations of the report before the consideration of the report and before consultation has taken place.

I am not saying in principle that we should never have provisions of the type suggested in that amendment. I am saying that we should make the right provisions, reflecting full consideration of all the implications and interests concerned — not least the key public interest that the Assembly has to protect. We have to do that through the right legislation.

Time has been constrained for this legislation because we have had to introduce it in time for the next financial year. The audit reorganisation Bill is not subject to those

same urgencies. In dealing with all three Committees on the legislation, I have stressed, as Members indicated, that examination of many of the outstanding issues could be taken up in the audit reorganisation Bill. The three Committees, as well as other departmental Committees, can also do that through fuller consideration of the implications of the Sharman Report and its significant recommendations

Mr P Robinson: Has the Minister inadvertently forgotten that he was going to come to several questions during his speech? One was from the Member for North Down, who queried where the Minister had tucked away the definition of “substantially” in his legislation. I asked whether in one year a capital project grant would be judged “substantial” if it was 50% of the amount given to a firm, company or community organisation in that year.

Mr Speaker: Do you wish to reply, Minister?

Mr Durkan: I thought I had dealt with the point about 50%. Let me make the position clear: the Comptroller and Auditor General, whether under the current provisions or any other amendment, will take his own view on whatever concerns he may have or that are brought to him. If anybody else was prepared to say that an impediment was being created by saying “No, it cannot be 50% in a given year; it has to be over a longer time or over the life of the project”, or vice versa, I do not think that there would be an issue. No equivalent provision exists in the Westminster legislation. The Department of Finance and Personnel and the amendments provide for our taking account of the Public Accounts Committee’s views on any issues of doubt or concern.

Mr Dodds: I will be brief because we have covered the issues. However, there is a danger that in a debate like this we get so tied up with technicalities that we lose sight of the principle behind the amendment. To clarify and reiterate, wherever public money is spent, allocated and appropriated, the Comptroller and Auditor General should have the right to inspect how that money is spent. That is the clear and certain principle.

The Minister, after cutting away the verbiage and the reasons for not doing it now, kept referring to timely and well-timed. We have an opportunity today to do that vital piece of work to close that loophole — something advocated in Sharman. We should look at what Sharman said now that he has reported. However, we were advocating the closure of the loophole in the amendment even before Sharman. I am delighted that Sharman comes down on the side of those of us on the Committee who were arguing for that. I am not surprised, as it is common sense. Why would we not have that sort of accountability and those powers of inspection? But why wait?

Some of the comments made by the Minister today about public and private companies give rise to concerns on my part about what the audit reorganisation Bill may eventually contain if we say that we will not do this

today but wait until that Bill is introduced. Private organisations may get cold feet. They may want to tender for Government work, but they will not want people nosing around to see how they spent their money.

We have an opportunity now and we should grasp it, because, after all, this clause deals with inspections. Let us ensure that the power of inspection covers the whole ambit of public money.

The Minister tells us that “substantially” means when a body receives 50% or more of public funds. However, he and his officials know, as does everybody in the House, that if that is not defined in the Bill, then it will not be enshrined in law.

The Minister has still not explained why it is not in the Bill. Therefore, his criticism that “significant” is not defined has no relevance since he has not defined “substantially”. It is no good him giving his view if it is not contained in the legislation. It must be in the Bill.

Mr P Robinson: What might be substantial to one body might not be substantial to another. Given that parties in the Assembly receive funding from Government sources, the Comptroller and Auditor General might decide that it would be appropriate to find out whether they are spending the money appropriately.

If he sets this term “substantially” beside the political parties, a poor and humble party like ours may find that the money that we receive constitutes the substantial part of the money that we operate on. However, if another party of similar size receives a great deal of money from American donations, bank robberies, drug dealing or whatever, Government funding may not form a substantial part of its money. Therefore, the Comptroller and Auditor General could not look at its accounts.

Mr Dodds: I thank my hon Friend for his intervention. No doubt the Comptroller and Auditor General will address that example with due care and attention when he comes to examine the parties and their accounts.

I note the Minister’s comment about a reflex reaction as if somehow ours was a hasty decision to move this amendment. As he knows, and as we said at the outset of the Consideration Stage, this has been the subject of in-depth discussion and debate, consideration and scrutiny in the Committee and indeed on the Floor of the House.

Proper care and attention has been given to the issue and it has been debated properly. The matter is before the House, and now is a timely moment to deal with it. Why delay, simply on the ground that the Sharman Report will be looked at in detail, when on this particular point Lord Sharman comes down fairly clearly on the side of those who support the amendment?

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dodds: It is unusual for a Minister to ask a Member to give way when he has already summed up, but I am more than delighted to do so.

Mr Speaker: The Minister is not summing up on his amendment. He is responding to Mr Leslie's amendment, which was moved what seems rather a long time ago.

Mr Dodds: This could go on all day.

Mr Speaker: It is entirely open to the Minister to respond in this way and subsequently to Mr Weir to make his point.

Mr Durkan: I take the Member's point that that was considered in the Committee. I remind him that the Committee decided not to pursue an amendment to this effect precisely because it wanted to await the Sharman Report and have fuller consideration. The Committee also served notice that it will bring these points forward in the audit reorganisation Bill.

Notwithstanding the Finance and Personnel Committee's consideration, the Member should note that these issues have not been considered by other Committees that deal with bodies that might be affected by these provisions. There has been no consultation with any bodies that may be affected.

Mr Weir: The Minister displayed irritation when the definition of "substantially" was raised again. However, on both occasions he failed to answer my question. My question was not about his definition or understanding of "substantially", but about where it is defined in the legislation. I want to be kind to the Minister. It may well be that when Mr Dodds and I examined the legislation, we missed the point where "substantially" is defined. I want to give the Minister the opportunity to answer this question: where in the legislation is the word "substantially" defined?

3.30 pm

Mr Durkan: At no point did I say that "substantially" is defined in the legislation. I said that when we used the word "substantial", that is what we take it to mean. It is not a legislative definition. It is a clear reference to instances in which the figure 50% occurs. Obviously — going back to Mr Robinson's point — the Comptroller and Auditor General does not examine something every year. It is in relation to substantial expenditure.

However, if there is any doubt or concern over an issue, we have made it clear that the Department of Finance and Personnel will be influenced by the feelings of the Public Accounts Committee. Therefore, let us be clear about these matters. There is no ambiguity as far as we are concerned. I am not trying to pretend that something is specified in the legislation when it is not. However, at least I can give a clear reference to the figure of 50%, which can be cited as a formal reference from now on. That is not the same with regard to significant funds.

Mr Leslie: I want to return briefly to amendment 15, which I put to the House some time ago. I thank those Members who supported it, and I thank the Minister for his endorsement of it. I suppose that I could cut and run at this point. However, it would be cowardly if I did not make some remarks about the debate on amendment 17, for I did pose the first question to the Minister on this matter.

The House should be aware that this has been a very thoughtful consideration of important issues of the proper use of public money. Although the debate generated a degree of heat, it has been a worthy exchange. Both this week and last week, the House has debated an extremely significant Bill that will alter our accounting practices and will have considerable implications for the way in which that scrutiny is carried out. While I dare say that it will not receive the attention that it deserves outside these walls, a huge amount of time and effort has gone into the work in the Committees. A great deal of that work has been reflected in the speeches today.

Like Mr Robinson, I think that the Public Accounts Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee should be flattered that Lord Sharman and his colleagues were clearly listening in on our deliberations, because several of them appear to have been reflected in their recommendations.

I have taken a quick look at the Sharman Report, as have other Members present, but I must emphasise that it was only a quick look — there has not been enough time to do more. However, during the course of the debate, which has lasted a bit longer than I expected it to, I was able to have a closer look at a section of the report that is highly pertinent to the matter under discussion.

The report recommends that the Comptroller and Auditor General should, for example, be given statutory access to certain organisations, some of which fall under the ambit of our discussion. Lord Sharman states that that access should be given using the Order-making provision in the Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000, which was passed at Westminster. I point out to this House that that Order-making provision is contained in clause 19 of our Bill. However, clause 20, which was inserted last week at the behest of the Public Accounts Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee, goes further than the recommendation that appears to have been made by Lord Sharman. It gives the Comptroller and Auditor General the right to make an inspection, albeit in defined circumstances. We are arguing about the breadth of those definitions. I submit that they are fairly wide, though they may not be wide enough for Mr Dodds. Nonetheless, I believe that those definitions are fairly wide.

It seems to me that, given the sheer weight of this report and the complexity of some of the matters in it, we have moved the Government Resources and Accounts Bill quite a long way in a short time. We have been

required to deal with this Bill quickly because it must receive Royal Assent before the end of the financial year. I consider that we have probably moved this Bill far enough.

Meanwhile, the work is stacking up for the Finance and Personnel Committee in relation to looking at the Sharman Report and, in due course, considering the audit reorganisation Bill when it comes before us in the autumn. I hope that we can get through a few weeks without financial matters or matters of civil law reform coming up, so that the Committee might have an opportunity to attend to those other matters.

Amendment No 15 agreed to.

Clause 18, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 19 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 20 (Inspections by Comptroller and Auditor General)

Amendment No 16 made: In page 11, line 2, leave out "at any reasonable time". — [Mr Molloy.]

Amendment No 17 proposed: In page 11, line 25, after "nature" insert "; has received significant public funds,". — [Mr Dodds.]

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 32; Noes 52.

AYES

Eileen Bell, Paul Berry, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Seamus Close, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, David Ervine, David Ford, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Billy Hutchinson, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Kieran McCarthy, William McCrea, Monica McWilliams, Maurice Morrow, Sean Neeson, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Alex Attwood, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Esmond Birnie, P J Bradley, Joan Carson, Fred Cobain, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Sam Foster, Michelle Gildernew, John Gorman, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, John Kelly, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Seamus Mallon, Alex Maskey, David McClarty, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Alan McFarland, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dermot Nesbitt, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn

O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Ken Robinson, George Savage, John Tierney, David Trimble, Jim Wilson.

Question accordingly negated.

3.45 pm

Clause 20, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 21 to 27 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 1 (Minor and consequential amendments)

Amendment No 18 made: In page 15, line 2, leave out "an Appropriation" and insert "a Budget". — [Mr Durkan.]

Schedule 1, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 2 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The Bill now stands referred to the Speaker.

ELECTORAL FRAUD

Mr Hussey: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland to report on his plans to counter electoral fraud.

I begin by apologising to you, Mr Speaker, the Business Committee and the Assembly for the withdrawal of this motion from last week's Order Paper. I was involved in other Assembly business, and I appreciate the Business Committee's early listing of my resubmitted motion.

Mr Speaker, you and every other Member will be aware of concerns expressed by a wide spectrum of political, public and business opinion throughout Northern Ireland regarding the possibility of irregularities that occurred in various elections in the past. Despite this, and three very important reports, the Government have been all too slow in initiating appropriate action on voting procedures in Northern Ireland to address this issue.

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

I recommend that every Member read the excellent report prepared by the Committee of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue on the subject of electoral reform, which was presented on 31 October 1997 — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know that Sinn Féin often likes to complain, but there is a cabal in that corner, making it impossible to hear about electoral fraud. I know that they do not want to hear about these matters, because they orchestrate them, but perhaps they will have the decency to let the Member speak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is a good occasion to ask everyone to be peaceful while we discuss this important issue.

Mr Hussey: I was referring to the report of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue, and I suppose that it is appropriate that I did so as you, Mr Deputy Speaker, are in the Chair again today.

One of the most disappointing aspects that emerged from that investigation was the refusal of the then Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland to give evidence to the Forum Committee set up to look at the issue. The same Chief Electoral Officer did, however, give evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs investigation into malpractice on 5 November 1997. I trust that on this occasion, our new Chief Electoral Officer will find it circumspect to respond to this debate. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report into electoral practice in Northern Ireland was published in March 1998, and the then Secretary of State caused the Northern Ireland Office 'Report of the Elections Review' to be published in October 1998.

I want to stress that, despite three excellent reports, there has been little worthwhile action from the Government. Members will be well aware of those parts of the electoral process involving registration of voters, publication of registers of voters, application for absent votes and the voting process itself.

In dealing with possible electoral fraud in future elections — be they parliamentary, local government or other — Members will realise that we are stuck with inadequate legislation and time factors preventing change. The motion has been worded with that in mind and, of necessity, calls on the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland to report to the Assembly his plans to counter electoral fraud in legislation.

Democracy is founded on an adherence to the will of the people expressed solely through the ballot box, with no recourse to other means. Each vote is a building block, with the procedures employed for ascertaining the outcome of the votes cast being the cementing agent of one's chosen form of democracy. It is our duty, and the duty of those placed in positions overseeing our system, to ensure that as little corruption as possible exists if our democratic credentials are to be valid.

I intend to address my concerns about each stage of the electoral process that I have identified, and I am confident that other contributors to the debate will ably and graphically exemplify those concerns as well as raising others.

Many Members are concerned about a system that allows for the multiple registration of voters at unrealistic addresses. Dr Hendron, among others, can testify to examples of this: individual registrations at multiple addresses — quite legal, of course, provided you use your vote only once. There is also the registration of voters who are known to have been living and working in other areas — other jurisdictions even — for many years. There is also the continued registration of those who are deceased.

What liaison is there with the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths to ensure that prompt notification of deaths is recorded so that electoral registers can be updated? What liaison is there with the Planning Service and with local authorities to ensure appropriate occupation levels in small flats, or to identify derelict properties being used as accommodation addresses? Given today's technology, are these questions unreasonable?

This is not to deny that voting in more than one place is wrong, even for those with a legitimate reason for being registered in more than one place. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report says

“an accurate register is vital”.

I am certain that many Members have been contacted by constituents about people whose names do not appear on the electoral register. Indeed, they may have identified

such people themselves. Such non-registration of those entitled to vote must be proactively addressed by the Chief Electoral Officer. It should be his duty to ensure that all who are entitled to vote be included on the electoral register.

Postal and proxy voting can lend itself to abuse. Although we all recognise that there are people who have a genuine need to avail of absent voting arrangements, proper safeguards must be in place to prevent abuse. Earlier closing dates for absent voter applications would assist officials to make the necessary checks as well as providing them with time for the performance of spot check visits to applicants to assist in the validation of applications. Indeed, I welcome moves that have been brought to the fore on this aspect. In a letter dated 10 January 2000, the Northern Ireland Office Elections Unit states

“as a consequence of work undertaken by the review, legislation was introduced to help tackle the issue of absent vote abuse. The legislation now provides for an increase in the time available to the Chief Electoral Officer to scrutinise absent vote applications”.

If the Chief Electoral Officer decides to report to the Assembly, perhaps we should ask him whether he has been given sufficient time.

4.00 pm

The application form should be adapted to include additional information, such as an applicant's date of birth or National Insurance number, which would aid the checking procedure. Properly located, fully accessible polling stations would encourage many to vote in person, rather than seek an absent vote. Checking procedures should be locally based, thus allowing local knowledge to be utilised. The availability of access to the marked register after elections enables those who would seek to abuse the electoral system to identify persistent non-voters, whom they can then target for absent vote applications.

The means of identification to be shown by voters must be seriously reconsidered. The medical card, in particular, has been highlighted as unsatisfactory. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report states

“The medical card is not a sufficiently protected document to provide safe identification and it should no longer be included in the list of accepted identifiers for polling purposes.”

Accounts of the organised mass forgery of medical cards will no doubt emerge as the debate develops.

Mr Attwood is not here. If he were, I suspect that he would have a tale or two to relate to the Assembly. His evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, on behalf of the SDLP in 1998, was very informative. Non-photographic means of identification are inappropriate, and the issue of voting identity cards should be revisited. Some years ago, a commitment to this issue was given by Her Majesty's Government when George

Howarth assured Mr William Thompson, MP for West Tyrone, that the matter of identification would be addressed.

In addition, I received a letter from the Northern Ireland Office Elections Unit in January. It states:

“The Government takes the issue of electoral abuse very seriously and is committed to ensuring that the people of Northern Ireland have an electoral system in which they have confidence. It was following allegations of electoral abuse in 1997 that the then Secretary of State established a wide-ranging review of electoral practice in Northern Ireland to formulate proposals to improve the integrity of the electoral process.”

That dates back to 1997. Why are we still waiting for procedures to be corrected? There is a commitment that a card will be introduced, which will necessitate, among other things, the introduction of registration on an individual basis rather than household registration. Not only will these changes require primary legislation, but it is important that the development of specialised computer technology be carefully evaluated before final decisions are reached. I ask again: how long do we have to wait?

Procedures for challenge in cases of personation need to be enhanced. Is there not cause for concern, and indeed outrage, when one considers the remarks made by a presiding officer when giving evidence to the Forum Committee?

“In my position I could personally identify voters impersonating using allowance books et cetera, but needless to say, it is not my duty as presiding officer to refuse.”

After the most recent local government elections, I received a telephone call from a policeman. He had to watch individuals enter polling stations four or five times, obviously using different medical cards, without challenge. He also encountered individuals who had discovered that their votes had already been claimed. People were stealing votes. The issue of electoral fraud must be faced up to. The consequences can, and do, corrupt election results.

Dr McCrea will relate to this issue, given his experiences in Mid Ulster. The recent by-elections at council level have meant that the RUC can confirm that it is investigating allegations of electoral fraud following the election in Antrim north-west.

The Ulster Unionist Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, the SDLP, Alliance and others have all cried foul at some stage after elections. Sinn Féin has accused those concerned about electoral fraud of whingeing. That surely shows that it would claim to have nothing to fear from proper scrutiny of the electoral process.

I realise that the Chief Electoral Officer will need appropriate resources, finance, staff, equipment et cetera to deal with the concerns that arise today, and I hope that any report produced will include an assessment of such need. Whatever the cost, each elector must have

confidence that his or her vote is equal to, and as valid as, any other vote cast.

I am aware that others wish to speak. In closing, I repeat words that I used when addressing a similar motion in the Northern Ireland Forum in June 1997:

“the purpose of this motion is not to disenfranchise anyone but to ensure that those entitled to vote — and I stress the word ‘entitled’ — can do so.”

— and do so with integrity.

I regret that the issue has yet to be fully resolved, and I trust that it will be.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move the following amendment: after “report” insert

“on the efficiency of the registration process and the balloting process and”.

My reason for tabling the amendment is not in any way to detract from the original motion’s purpose. However, I feared it would focus on only one aspect of the electoral process. If the Chief Electoral Officer is to be asked to report on the electoral process, he should report on the entire process.

I have also moved the amendment because, from my point of view, the purpose of an electoral process is to ensure that every individual who has the right to vote is enabled, facilitated and encouraged to vote. Electoral fraud needs to be addressed. Sinn Féin has nothing to fear from scrutiny of the electoral system or from its being made more efficient. If measures are introduced to modify the electoral system, time will tell how that affects Sinn Féin’s share of the vote.

In moving the motion, Mr Hussey covered the other aspects of the electoral process, particularly registration. He said that the electoral register is vital. I agree that a complete electoral register is vital. If a person is not on the electoral register, that person will not have the right to vote on polling day.

I have experience of seeing people arrive at a polling station on the day of an election only to discover that they are not on the electoral register. Members have to consider votes quite often, but many ordinary people only think of the election on the day of an election.

They have not been registered for various reasons. Many people would claim that they never received forms through their doors. That may be because the electoral registration form is a small piece of paper and because many of our letter boxes are full of envelopes and junk mail, the electoral form is often mislaid. Occasionally people complete the forms but miss the collection; perhaps because no one called to collect them or because they could not find the forms when the collectors called. If people are not registered during the

registration process in August and September, the vast majority of them will not appear on the register at all and will not be able to vote.

One suggestion is that, during the registration process, the Chief Electoral Officer should be given the finances and resources to mount a publicity campaign alerting the public that the registration process is ongoing and advising them of the documents required when casting a vote.

For one reason or another, many people who are registered to vote will turn up at a polling station without the required identification. Perhaps their driving licences or passports have expired, or perhaps they never had any. Their identification may have been mislaid or they might have left the documents somewhere else on the day. Many people do not think about an election until election day.

Age Concern and the Royal National Institute for the Blind made submissions to the House of Commons Select Committee on Home Affairs on electoral law and administration, pointing out the difficulties the elderly face when registering. That issue should be addressed. The elderly, because they are not knowledgeable about the registration process, are reluctant to fill in forms.

Suggestions have been made to the effect that more information should be required at registration stage so that some form of identification card can be produced for the purposes of voting. That would be useful if it led to a reduction in electoral fraud, if not to its prevention. However, if acquiring that form becomes a difficult and complicated process for people with poor sight, the elderly, or those with reading difficulties, they will not have open and easy access to registration.

Vocal and public allegations of election fraud have been made against Sinn Féin. As Mr Hussey stated, several reports have been compiled as a result of those allegations. In the Second Report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs 1998 on the electoral process, the Northern Ireland Office commented that there was a disappointing amount of evidence of vote stealing. It also stated that very little material had been submitted to the review carried out on electoral fraud.

I went to refer to some comments from the RUC in that report. It is not usual for me to depend on information supplied by the RUC.

Mr Ervine: Collusion.

Mr McNamee: Yes, collusion. The RUC said that there was evidence of abuses of the absent system of postal and proxy votes. The Chief Electoral Officer referred that abuse to the RUC, who examined a sample of votes and discovered that 20% of those absent votes that were suspected of being fraudulent were, in fact, genuine.

4.15 pm

They made no attempt to quantify the extent of absent or proxy voting. More significantly, they did not reach any conclusion about any one party's being involved in electoral fraud through absent voting. I refer to other bodies that have contributed to reports on the electoral process and to their determination on which party or parties were involved in electoral fraud.

We all know that parties can appoint polling agents at a polling station to bring instances of personation to the attention of the electoral officers and to call on the RUC to make an arrest if that is appropriate. The RUC has said that there was very little evidence of polling agents informing the electoral officers to enable them to investigate — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McNamee: If any Members wish to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure that they have time to put their names down.

The RUC said that there was very little evidence of its being called upon to deal with personation. We have many vocal, public allegations of electoral fraud, but very little substance behind them, in spite of the reports and the reviews.

I want to discuss comments made by the Chief Electoral Officer in his submission in the report of the electoral review of 1998. He said that, while there were some indications of abuse of postal and proxy votes, he was provided with little evidence to enable him to investigate it. In particular, he said, his attention was drawn to a media report by the SDLP. The SDLP had stated that personation was widespread in the West Belfast constituency. However, despite repeated public assurances from the Chief Electoral Officer that he would initiate a full inquiry on the production of any evidence, he received nothing to substantiate the claims.

As I have said, we have many vocal, public allegations about electoral fraud and about who is responsible, but little of substance to provide evidence for a proper inquiry, investigation or prosecution.

A Member: Intimidation.

Mr McNamee: It would be very surprising if all those who have contributed to these reviews have been intimidated. Several academics were asked to examine the review of the electoral process in the North of Ireland, with particular regard to allegations of electoral fraud, and to give their findings. The academics agreed that both the SDLP and the UUP were most vocal in attacking Sinn Féin and in attributing its successes almost entirely to the abuse of the electoral system. David Trimble, in 'The Irish Times' and the 'Belfast Telegraph' on 24 May 1997 said that Sinn Féin had been guilty of massive electoral abuse. However, the academics who responded to the review suggested that the abuse that does occur is not confined to one party or to one half of the political and religious divide.

Prof Brendan O'Leary of the London School of Economics stated that, although he is doubtful that abuse occurs on a large scale, confidential interviews carried out by him with people from all parties — except the Alliance Party and the DUP, which I assume chose not to have a confidential interview — led him to the conclusion that abuse is perpetrated on behalf of all the parties.

Mr Ervine: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Progressive Unionist Party's name may well be absent from whatever report the Member is reading from, for we never, ever, spoke to Prof O'Leary on this subject.

Mr McNamee: Although I cannot confirm whether that is the case, I accept the Member's point. The name of the Member's party is not specifically referred to in the report. It does, however, refer to all parties with the exception of the Alliance Party and the DUP, and I was quoting from the document published by the Northern Ireland Office, but I accept the Member's clarification.

Furthermore, there is general agreement expressed by those academics, which includes others from the University of Ulster and Queen's University, Belfast, that the recent electoral successes of Sinn Féin — referring, in particular, to the elections of 1997 — are consistent with the political climate and our previous electoral performance.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr McNamee, I must ask you to draw your remarks to a close.

Mr McNamee: I will try to sum up, Madam Deputy Speaker. They also conclude that Nationalist voters had realised that strengthening Sinn Féin's electoral mandate was far more likely to deliver peace than prolong violence. The report went further: it said that Sinn Féin's adroit campaigning on bread-and-butter issues and the strength of our party organisation had been cited as ways in which Sinn Féin had legitimately consolidated its core vote. Those are the views of the academics that contributed to the review of electoral fraud in the North following allegations, which were not substantiated and for which no evidence was provided, and the view was formed independently. Indeed, they concluded by saying that it raised the question of whether there were any ceiling to the rise in Sinn Féin's vote. I ask the Assembly to support the amendment to the motion in order that the Chief Electoral Officer will be required to give a report on the entire process, not only to deal with the question of electoral fraud, if and when it occurs, but also to facilitate and encourage everyone who has the right to vote to do so. Go raibh maith agat.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Given the large number of Members who have asked to speak in this debate and the time allocated for it, I must ask Members to limit their contributions to less than five minutes. I will give notice 10 seconds before the five-minute point.

Dr Hendron: Recently, a friend of mine from County Antrim told me that his great-great-great-grandfather was a sheep stealer. However, he admitted to me that there is one thing that is much worse than sheep stealing, and that is vote stealing.

I congratulate Mr Hussey for bringing this motion before the Assembly. He mentioned 1997, but this problem has been around for much longer than that. This is not meant as criticism — it is merely a fact — but it is only in recent years that the main Unionist parties have been concerned about this problem, and for very obvious reasons. However, it has been around for a long time.

I first came into this Chamber in 1975 — that is over 25 years ago — and certainly for 20 of those 25 years, I felt that I was not quite John the Baptist, but a lone voice in this fight against electoral fraud. If you go back to 1977, 1978 or 1979, before the birth of the present Sinn Féin party, electoral fraud was taking place then. I can well recall that people came down the roads in cars; they came on bicycles; they even came in prams — well, perhaps not prams — but they came in all sorts of vehicles. They were almost like the Scarlet Pimpernel — here, there and everywhere. There was nothing anyone could do about it. People were changing skirts and trousers and putting on wigs outside. It was on a big scale.

That said, although it was very obvious that it was being done, it was not done on a professional scale. Years later, of course, it became very professional, and in recent years it has been so.

I move on to the question of identification, medical cards, social security cards, passports and so on. The medical card identification is a sick joke. Can you imagine trying to get a loan or social security benefit by showing your medical card as proof of identity?

When Tom King was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my colleague John Hume and I went to see him. We presented direct evidence of electoral fraud. Mr McNamee talked about evidence — forged medical cards were produced. I produced them myself. Medical cards are something that I do know something about. Unless you were familiar with them, you would not recognise them as being forged. My party has raised the issue with every Secretary of State since then — Jim Prior, Paddy Mayhew, Mo Mowlam.

In case anyone thinks that this is sour grapes on my part, it did not, in any way, affect my electoral fortunes at the House of Commons. I stood for the West Belfast seat in Westminster four times, and was elected at the third attempt. Electoral fraud can affect candidates at Assembly level and, perhaps more importantly, at local government level. It takes only a few hundred votes either way to change a result.

A colleague of mine put down a motion in the House of Commons relating to the Chief Electoral Officer. The

problem was that there was not a Minister to reply — well, a Minister did reply, but he made it clear that he did not have the authority to do so. The reason given was that the Chief Electoral Officer answered to Parliament.

However, Secretaries of State do have certain powers. Unfortunately, in recent years they have been slow to use them. Young people have boasted of voting 25 and 30 times. It was an easy thing to do. Medical cards were handed out in tally-rooms, and they were easy to produce. The doctor's name was stamped on it. Every doctor has his own code number, and even that could be stamped on the card. All that had to be done was to ring the Central Services Agency and ask for the doctor's list for a particular area, and it would be given to you along with the code numbers.

I am aware of the time factor. Let me just say that identification is a sick joke that has been raised many times. Some sort of card that has a photograph on it, for example, a smart card that has the latest computer technology, is the only way that the public in Northern Ireland can have confidence in the voting system.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I listened with interest to Mr Hussey, and I congratulate him on bringing this matter before the House, as he did before the Forum.

I also listened — and I could not believe what I was hearing — to the brass neck and brazen gall of Sinn Féin. According to them, there is no problem. They even quoted the Royal Ulster Constabulary as their source of information on the lack of fraud in the voting process, yet they know full well that not only does it go on, but it goes on in a very clearly systematic and professional way.

Go to Ardboe at election time. They can be seen taking the medical cards out of the boot of the car and handing them to people. It is done openly, because they have nothing to fear.

They say that no one has come forward to substantiate those claims. However, that may just have something to do with a person calling with a gun at night or with a hood over his head, to tell you that if you make that complaint you will get kneecapped or you may get shot. That would not alarm some Members on the opposite side of the House because it would be second nature to them, considering the political ideology of their party. Let us make no mistake about it; this has been going on, and it is a very serious matter. Some may regard it as something to laugh about, but vote-stealing is not a joke; robbing people of their right to register their vote is not a joke. Many people have gone to polling stations only to find that their votes were already taken.

4.30 pm

I can understand people saying that, in a Westminster election, it may not always mean the difference between being elected and not being elected. However, the first

time I was elected in Mid Ulster, I won by a majority of 78 votes. That was the figure declared. However, if you take into account the fraudulent votes of the next person in line that majority could have been 2078.

Sinn Féin/IRA are the political masters of vote-stealing. They do it without any embarrassment, yet they know it is true. In local government, 0.5% of the vote can take a seat away from a person — 0.2% of the vote has taken seats away from people. This issue really does matter, and we are looking at a situation in local government, and in Assembly elections, which has relevance.

Who would want to hold a seat, knowing that they had won it fraudulently? Only a person with a background of terrorism would try to defend such a situation or want to hold a seat won in such a way. No one with any morality or credibility would want to be in that position.

The British Government must take some responsibility because there was the Forum report. Mo Mowlam promised that action would be taken. She said that she could not take action in time for the Assembly elections but that it would be taken before the next Westminster election and before the local government election.

However, Mo Mowlam has gone; Mandelson has gone; another Secretary of State has come, and still, no action has been taken to stop those who are robbing people of their right to vote. In west Belfast, we found that six people were claiming to be tenants of a one-bedroomed flat. When investigations were complete, there was no one there, despite the fact that six people were registered to vote.

That shows the brass neck of a political party that calls itself democratic. It is a stranger to democracy; it has robbed seats from the SDLP and others, and that is not the way that a democratic system should proceed. The motion demands that action be taken, and that a democracy should be allowed to decide who is elected to Westminster, the Assembly and councils.

Mr Neeson: I regret that the debate is necessary. I was the chairperson for the Forum committee on electoral fraud. That committee took representations from a broad cross-section of society in Northern Ireland and it was clear that electoral fraud was very widespread.

Despite the Forum report, and that from the Select Committee at Westminster, Governments have not responded to the Northern Ireland political parties' concerns about electoral fraud. There is nothing more despicable in a democracy than vote-stealing. People have laid down their lives in order that others could have the right to vote and there is nothing more precious than that right in a democratic society.

I am now more than ever convinced of the principle of "no vote, no photo; no photo, no vote", particularly considering the proceedings of the Forum committee. It is clear that the documentation used in the past for

identification has been abused — none more so than medical cards.

I am also concerned about the whole question of postal and proxy votes. These have been widely abused, particularly in the west of the Province. When I look at some of the constituencies in the west of the Province and compare them with those in the east, I notice a marked difference, which is not down to the weather or the climate. There is something radically wrong when there is such a difference in the applications for postal votes.

Mr J Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Neeson: No, I do not have enough time.

I was very struck by the evidence given by the former Chief Electoral Officer, Mr Bradley, to the Select Committee. He said that when he looked at the applications for postal votes, two thirds of them were marked red — they were discounted and disqualified. That clearly shows the enormity of the abuse of the postal vote system. Rather than having these votes checked centrally, I ask the Government to consider having them checked at local level, where people know the individuals making the applications. Photographic identification should be produced before a ballot paper is handed over.

Several important elements must be considered with regard to registration. It should be necessary for people to provide their signatures — they should be made available to the presiding officer in a polling station. There is also a need to make the polling stations user-friendly, particularly for those with disabilities. That was one major issue that came before the committee in the Forum.

The amendment does not add or take away from the original motion. The important thing is that Government grasp this major problem. As Dr Hendron said, it is nothing new. We know the old adage "Vote early, vote often". Northern Ireland is the only place where the dead walk the streets on election day. These abuses must come to an end if we are to create a society in which it is politics that dominates. This debate has come at a worthwhile time — regrettably too late for the two forthcoming elections — and I congratulate Mr Hussey for raising the issue.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is it in order for a Member to slate a whole society of people west of the Bann by implying that they engage in massive electoral fraud?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. I call Mr Ervine.

Mr Ervine: Yesterday some Members suggested that we spend too long in plenary session. We are now told that we have five minutes to deal with an issue of great significance. This seems ridiculous to me. That is not your fault, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it is something that the Business Committee must give some serious consideration to.

I know that Sinn Féin has never been involved in electoral fraud because Mitchell McLaughlin said so — much as he said he does not know any IRA men in Derry. Of course it has been involved in electoral fraud, but it has not been alone. The Ulster Unionist Party used to make it its forte many years ago. For those who do not want to believe that, let us look at one possibility. If a councillor would take key money off a tenant, would he take a vote off someone it did not belong to? Of course he would.

There has been corruption in the system for years and years. That is why we will be supporting the amendment. It adds to the dealing with electoral fraud, the dealing with the patheticism of having people tell you the difficulties they have when they go to get their vote. They find that are not registered, and they cannot understand why.

It also deals with the methodology of identification. I have watched people arrive with “sea” books — which are very definitive and have photographs — and being refused their vote. Benefit books, which have no means of identifying their owners, are acceptable. It might be somebody else’s benefit book. It might be somebody else’s medical card. We have trundled on through the years with this pathetic system. Every now and again, we jump up and shout about it. Of course, that happens about two or three months before an election.

What is wrong with teaching children at 15, 16, 17, or perhaps when they are about to leave school, what they can expect in the electoral system and how they can become part of the electoral system? Have we thought of doing that? I do not think so. Have we thought of having outreach to the elderly or the infirm? Have we thought about the value of the vote? We hear plenty of lip-service paid to the value of the vote. However, its value is measured by the cost of running an election.

If, of course, you do not believe that the protection of democracy is worth spending the money on, then we should not be having this debate. Something definitive needs to be done that deals not only with fraud but also with getting people easily and properly registered.

Indeed, we may have to go as far as introducing a system such as the one in Australia, where it is against the law not to vote. Many Western democracies find themselves electing people with a minority of the population voting; people who lecture about the political efficacy they have because they have the majority of a minority.

If we are genuine about refining our democracy, about refining how the population elects its representatives, then let us not play games with it. There should be some form of electronic mechanism and an abandonment of those things that are not definitive to the person.

There should be some formula or system in place — and paid for — which ensures that all votes are properly

regulated. For too long we have heard the complaints. If the Shinners were to admit at all that they were involved in electoral fraud they might tell you that what they simply did was rehash and revamp an old system. It is true. The system is ripe for abuse. Therefore, tragically, there will be those who see a prize big enough that they will abuse it.

I support the amendment. However, it should not detract from the wisdom of the Member who moved the motion.

Mrs Carson: I welcome the opportunity to debate this motion. As a representative of Fermanagh and South Tyrone — a constituency that must be in the Guinness Book of Records as having the greatest number of elections of any UK constituency — I know all about the abuse of the electoral system.

In the days before identification methods, we had buses stopping outside polling stations, people being handed slips of paper and directed to vote. We had large caravans filled with items of clothing, wigs, shoes, spectacles, all to facilitate voting fraud. We even had “rent-a-child” with a baby being pushed around giving an impostor the air of legitimacy.

With the introduction of identification methods, we hoped that this blatant fraud would end, but it did not. There has been review after review, but nothing has been done.

The previous Chief Electoral Officer gave evidence in Westminster on his concerns about electoral fraud. He stated that the amount of organised personation that he saw was so great that he went to the Secretary of State. The Chief Electoral Officer realised that identification documents were needed, but was unable to influence those who saw no need to take drastic action.

4.45 pm

Eventually, in 1997, a review was instigated by the Secretary of State of the time, Mo Mowlam. The review concluded with the launch of the ‘Vote Early, Vote Fairly’ document. That document contained many recommendations that could have increased the public’s confidence in the electoral process. After three years, it has still not been implemented. The present Chief Electoral Officer is in a prime position to tell us whether any changes have been implemented and what information can be brought into the public domain.

The main recommendation in the Mowlam report was that voters should have an identity card. I would welcome the introduction of such a card as a positive move to reduce personation at elections. Members have already mentioned medical cards and allowance books; the use of those documents should end immediately, for they are poor means of identification. There are abundant accounts of young people allegedly claiming a vote with a pension book.

In its submission to the Mowlam review, Sinn Féin advocated the removal of all identification documents. That would be a ludicrous state of affairs, once again leaving the system open to abuse — back to busing and caravans full of clothing. There is also serious concern about malpractice in postal voting, which deserves attention. One of the recommendations in the Mowlam report was the placing of watermarks on forms; perhaps that would be a positive step.

The present system is still open to abuse. We can have no confidence that our votes will not be rendered void by electoral malpractice. This is a reserved matter, and I hope that the Prime Minister will take our debate today on board. Perhaps he will implement some change — not for this election, perhaps, but soon. We cannot continue to put things on the long finger and do nothing.

Mr Bradley: I thank Mr Hussey for bringing the motion to the Assembly, although I should also state that there is nothing in the amendment that I oppose.

I oppose electoral abuse, whether it be vote-stealing or building up a party's strength by any other kind of electoral fraud. My concerns were such that I made them known to the Government about 12 months ago. I received a written reply from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Mr George Howarth MP. He stated:

"The Government is committed to bringing forward legislation to counter electoral abuse in the near future and before the next general election".

He qualified that by adding,

"if that is at all possible."

He also said:

"The legislation will be aimed at tackling abuse of the absent voting procedure, both postal and proxy, but will also take steps to ensure that as much as is possible is being done to prevent personation."

I also referred to the use of medical cards for identification purposes. Mr Howarth said:

"I am aware of the concerns about the use of medical cards as an approved means of identification at polling stations, but for the present there is no means of withdrawing this card without putting a large number of the electorate to some inconvenience."

He concluded:

"Before introducing the Bill, the Government will be consulting the parties about the proposals so that they can move ahead with broad agreement among parties in Northern Ireland."

I agree with Mr Hussey that the Government have trailed their feet and have been very slow.

I want to put on record my condemnation of a practice that has been brought to my attention. It is one which, I regret to say, I am unable to do anything about, and so far it has not been touched on in today's debate. After the Assembly elections, my attention was drawn to the practice of intimidatory gangs following postmen on the morning that the postal votes were being

delivered and moving in immediately to confiscate them. They confiscated the unopened package from the recipient to use for their own political gain. That is all the more annoying when often the recipient did not apply for the vote in the first place and was not even aware of it until it had arrived and was taken from him or her 10 seconds later.

That practice is mainly inflicted on the most vulnerable people in society, namely the elderly and those living alone. I appeal to the family members of those who apply for a postal or proxy vote to make an effort to be present when the postal vote is being delivered, because their presence just might deter those paramilitary-type groups from stealing those votes.

I said earlier that I regretted that I was unable to do anything about that activity because the victims are terrified of the intruders and are afraid of retaliation if they pursue the matter or have it pursued on their behalf. I hope that a system will be devised to do away with this most cowardly of all electoral abuse practices. I thank Mr Hussey for bringing the motion forward.

Mr P Robinson: During the course of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue debate on this subject, my party tabled an amendment and we welded the two together and had an agreed motion. This was followed by lengthy sessions when a committee scrutinised the matter and prepared a report which went to the then Secretary of State.

As a member of the Northern Ireland Select Committee, I brought this issue to the attention of the Committee, and it too heard evidence sessions and issued a report. Once again a report was submitted to the Secretary of State. During the period when Marjorie Mowlam was Secretary of State, there was, perhaps deliberately, an attempt to long-finger this issue.

I detected greater urgency during Peter Mandelson's time as Secretary of State, and, indeed, I am sure other political parties had meetings with the under-Secretary of State, George Howarth, on this subject and are aware of the nature of the proposals that he is considering introducing. Those will be welcome in dealing — much more effectively than the existing regulations and legislation do — with those who deliberately, and in an organised way, seek to subvert the democratic process.

This is a significant matter. It is not about somebody playfully stealing a vote or two; it is not about somebody getting one over on the presiding officer in a polling station or about voting for poor Johnny, who is unable to go out himself because he is ill or away on business elsewhere. It is about the organised and almost military use of an organisation to ensure that the outcome of an election is subverted, and they have succeeded in doing that on a number of occasions in local government by-elections.

I believe, without the slightest doubt, that the Mid Ulster Westminster seat was won by the present non-oath-taking Member for that area from my Colleague. The Electoral Office showed us the number of fraudulent postal votes that went through in that area, and it was greater than the majority that Mr McGuinness had over my Colleague.

When a television profile was done of one of Mr McGuinness's close confidants at that time — who has since fallen out with him — it was interesting to hear him admit the extent of the electoral abuse that took place in that constituency; one woman voted over 30 times during that election. We are told that there is no evidence — evidence such as the BBC's 'Spotlight' programme was able to produce of six people claiming to be tenants in a one-bedroom flat — six people in a one-bedroom flat.

Five people were registered as being resident in another one-bedroom flat, and they could not be traced. Six people were registered as sharing yet another one-bedroom flat, but three of them could not be found. Two of five people registered in another flat were also registered at another address in the same constituency and at two other addresses in a different constituency. According to that evidence, the SDLP challenged 200 entries on the West Belfast register, with the result that 102 names were removed.

Attempts at electoral fraud were clearly made in that constituency, and there are countless examples of it. There is evidence that some people were engaged in the printing and writing of names on medical cards. The police raided their centre, but those involved burned the remnants of the medical cards in the fireplace as they tried to hold the police off. A great deal of evidence has been gathered on that sort of activity over the years.

Many people have approached Members about electoral fraud because they are afraid to come out publicly and give evidence on it. They know that the fellow travellers and henchmen of Sinn Féin/IRA would do great damage to them if they gave evidence. Members need not get carried away with the nonsense that there was very little evidence that electoral fraud took place. There was plenty of evidence, and everybody knew that in their hearts. The intelligent view of the Electoral Office was that this was only the tip of the iceberg and much more was happening about which people did not have the full details.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Robinson, your time is up.

Mr P Robinson: This is a major issue that must be dealt with. The sooner it is tackled, the sooner there will be fair elections in Northern Ireland, with the people who win elections ending up in the elected Chamber rather than those who steal the people's votes.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the amendment and trust that the efficiency of the registration and balloting processes will benefit from the debate. It is high time that the veil of secrecy surrounding the electoral process was lifted. Why should Members be furtive about information?

Most Members would welcome the proposal if Mr Hussey, who moved the motion, was sincere and was seeking a change in the electoral system that would make it more open and accountable. However, I suspect that the motion is another attempt by Unionists to engage in the usual Sinn Féin-bashing. It has almost become custom and practice in the Assembly for both Unionist groups to use motions for no purpose other than to attack Sinn Féin, and I am sure that they have dug deep for this one. However, as my Colleague Mr McNamee has stated, the evidence to sustain allegations of electoral fraud is very thin despite Unionists' continuing assertions.

Given its history, the Ulster Unionist Party should be the last party to raise the issue of electoral fraud. However, I welcome its new-found conversion to the democratic process of openness, equality and the principle of one vote per person. Electoral malpractice or the culture of electoral fraud was patented by the Ulster Unionist Party and copied by others long before Sinn Féin ever became involved in contemporary electoral politics.

The most undemocratic electoral fraud ever perpetrated on any people or nation was inflicted on the people of Ireland by the refusal of Unionists and the British to recognise the democratic mandate given by the people to Sinn Féin in the 1918 General Election. That fraud has since been reinforced by the partition of this island under a threat of violence and war. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: Every election conducted under the Unionist regime since the inception of the state was an exercise in electoral fraud. Election day in Unionist-speak was known as "resurrection day" — that was the day when even the dead voted. Derek Hussey speaks of no recourse to other means. Not content with the votes registered by the dear departed, the Unionist regime at Stormont passed laws that restricted voting rights to property owners or tenants with statutory rights. Such restrictions meant that Catholics were disenfranchised, while those registered as multiple property owners had multiple votes.

In addition, to ensure that the Unionists would retain power there was the additional security — *[Interruption]*.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

5.00 pm

Mrs Nelis: No.

There was the additional security of the company vote. In my home city of Derry, electoral fraud was

practised through the process of gerrymandering. Two thirds of the Catholic majority were herded into one ward to ensure that the control of local government remained in the hands of Unionists. The real fraud was the malpractice, discrimination and denial of the democratic right to vote for the majority of Catholics for 50 years.

Unionists should acknowledge that the culture of electoral fraud was introduced to keep them in power. The honourable tradition of voting early and voting often, as so often quoted by their political spokespersons — not to mention Reverends and Grand Masters — is gone for ever, like the missing ballot boxes, never to return.

There is little or no evidence to support the allegations of electoral fraud. There is, however, plenty of evidence available of the intimidation, the harassment and arrest of Sinn Féin voters and election agents and the murder of Sinn Féin workers. Sinn Féin has nothing to fear from the reform of the electoral system — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: Mr Hussey raised concerns about electoral fraud and, indeed, he should be concerned. After all, the honourable Unionist tradition of vote rigging might come into play in the polling stations and Orange halls — certainly not a neutral venue — and it might cost him a seat at Westminster. I support the amendment.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity that my Colleague Derek Hussey has provided to the Assembly. I am somewhat nonplussed at having to speak after the previous Member. The honourable Lady gave us a hysterical analysis, but it certainly was not historical. It was the usual Republican rant, which the House is now used to hearing from the Member. It has no basis in history at all, and the real tragedy is that she actually believes it.

Historically, electoral fraud has been rife in my constituency of Newry and Armagh. In recent years Republicans in South Armagh have been actively engaged in elections instead of ignoring them, and they have been using fraudulent methods to enhance their electoral performance. There is an argument that that is all part of the culture; that, in a misty-eyed way, voting early and voting often should be acceptable.

Electoral fraud has no place, and must have no place, in any democratic country. We have to be absolutely clear on that. These are not just isolated incidents of people dressing up, altering their appearance, or creeping round graveyards compiling lists of the recently dead. It is much more serious than that. There is systematic operation of fraud and the clear evidence continues to grow. It starts with registration and it continues on polling day.

I am aware that, even now, multiple applications are made on registration forms in Republican areas for family members who have long since left home and who are working in other parts of Ireland or the United Kingdom.

Nevertheless, they are registered for electoral purposes in my constituency, and come election day an application will be filed for a postal vote or a proxy vote to enable that vote to count. That is simply unacceptable. As far as the mover of the amendment is concerned, methinks he doth protest too much.

There are many problems in registration. There is clear evidence of the misuse of medical cards. The system is open to abuse. Anomalies exist that allow an incomplete or out-of-date driving licence, including a photograph, to be rejected in favour of a medical card or an unemployment benefit book with no photograph that will be accepted without hesitation.

I have personal experience, from living and working in south Armagh, of presiding officers, poll clerks and election officials, working on election days, being clearly aware of electoral malpractice, but who could not and would not raise any objection out of fear for their personal safety. That is unacceptable, and I therefore fully support this call by my Colleague Derek Hussey.

There is a need to put uniform registration methods into place. I am concerned that there is a gap in the legislation when it comes to registering residents of nursing and old people's homes and ensuring that people who are lawfully competent get every opportunity to exercise their franchise. I join with my Colleague, and others, in calling for the introduction of an identity card, including a photograph, for electoral purposes.

Mr Shannon: I thank Mr Hussey for raising this matter. It is opportune, and certainly an issue of great importance to many of us in this Chamber. The electoral system is the key to a democratic society. Run correctly, democracy will thrive; run incorrectly, democracy will fail — as it has failed in this Province. Electoral fraud has led to the corruption of democracy.

With the Westminster election and the local government election fast approaching, reform of the local electoral system will require debate and discussion. We can do that today, with a view to addressing the problem of electoral fraud. The legislation relating to elections must be tightened up if we are to combat electoral abuse successfully. The very existence and frequency of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland is well documented. It is accepted by the Chief Electoral Officer. William McCrea and Peter Robinson have already given some examples of it.

There is absolutely no doubt that Republicans especially have been involved in corrupting the electoral process — adopting a “vote early, vote often” attitude. There have been major problems with electoral fraud in the past, especially involving personation, postal votes and the use of fake medical cards. Republicans have used the Ecstasy tablet of vote rigging to increase their vote. We should perhaps put on record that if the electoral system were to be changed, the vote that IRA/ Sinn Féin has could be diminished and be put into perspective. We hope that that will be done.

It is essential that the integrity of the electoral process be maintained and that those who abuse the system be restricted from using it. Voting should always reinforce the democratic system — not distort and corrupt it. That is why the only solution is to introduce measures that will stamp out electoral fraud and therefore ensure that democracy is the winner.

At present, absent voting is one of the most abused areas of the voting system. The problem is more acute in areas of personation or the production of fraudulent identification documents. To tighten up on absent voting, legislation has been introduced to extend the period in which the Chief Electoral Officer can examine applications before the relevant forms are dispatched. That is a positive step, but no one can say that it is radical.

There has been a proposal — unfortunately, it has yet to be implemented — which suggests the establishment of dedicated investigative teams to scrutinise all applications at all stages. For example, if a name appears more than once but is registered at a different address it must be investigated.

The use of addresses of houses that are derelict or have not been lived in for some time has become common practice among those abusing the system to secure an extra vote. Some of us are aware of instances in which people have been registered to vote at addresses where the doors, the windows and even the chimneys are blocked up. There is no way in which anybody could get in or out of them; the only ones who could vote from those houses would be the mice. Whether or not they are registered, one can only guess.

I find it incredible that people have been able to abuse this system for so long. It is very important that those who have the right to vote are protected, while those who abuse the system are prevented from doing so any longer.

I want to highlight a couple of issues about appropriate identification at polling stations. What about the production of a firearms certificate? It is not a legitimate means of identification, but it could be — not the firearms, just the certificate. Some people can probably produce many firearms, though whether that is before or after decommissioning I cannot say.

A driver's licence with a photograph on it is another example, but at the moment you must have other forms as well. I would have thought it ample to present a driver's licence with the photo card. It is important that it is the individual who is registered as opposed to his home. The registration of a voter must be checked and double-checked — as it should be with any system — and it would be a way of identifying the issues and providing stronger powers for presiding officers.

Electoral staff have also suffered intimidation. For example, staff were intimidated when a polling station was petrol-bombed at Shantallow in Londonderry. One Member spoke earlier of a complaint that those who

were intimidated in polling stations cannot report the personators. We want an effective and reliable electoral system that can resist deliberate abuse.

Mr S Wilson: I want to deal with a few points that have been made during this debate, but first of all I congratulate Mr Hussey for moving the motion.

Of course, Sinn Féin wishes to run away from this debate. We have seen the Nelson-like behaviour of its Members in the Chamber today as they claim “Electoral fraud, what is electoral fraud? We have never heard of this; it does not affect our party.” It was said earlier that that is akin to the response at the Bloody Sunday inquiry by one of Sinn Féin's members last week, when he made it clear that he did not know whether Martin McGuinness was ever involved in the IRA —

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member must keep to the motion.

Mr S Wilson: Since we are talking about fraud, and about people turning a blind eye to it, I would have thought that I was keeping to the motion, Madam Deputy Speaker. Maybe that is the attitude of Sinn Féin: it is not a matter on which the party wishes to have any information or any opinion. Of course, that is embarrassing to its members.

Mr McNamee quoted the RUC when he said that there was no evidence of challenges. Of course there was no evidence when there was a mob outside a polling station and people inside fingering those who might dare to make challenges. On the logic that Mr McNamee has used today, there was no such thing as the Omagh bomb, since the RUC could not find any evidence against people because of intimidation; there was no such thing as the Enniskillen bomb because no evidence could be provided —

Madam Deputy Speaker: The subject is electoral fraud.

Mr S Wilson: I am addressing the point about no evidence. Of course there is evidence, and it has been quoted here today. Examples include the number of people who have been taken off the electoral register after challenges have been made; the multiple applications from one address; and confirmation from the Electoral Office of widespread evidence that postal votes are claimed fraudulently. Of course there is evidence. There would be far more of it if Sinn Féin/IRA was not backed up by an army of thugs to ensure that evidence could not be brought to light.

We can always rest assured that in its hour of need, Sinn Féin will be ably propped up by the PUP.

5.15 pm

We also had an example of grammatical fraud today from Mr Irvine, who talked about the “patheticism” of this motion.

A Member: Have you looked the word up?

Mr S Wilson: I assure the Member that there is no such word in the dictionary.

Then, in an attempt to deflect criticism from his friends in Sinn Féin, Mr Ervine focused on the Unionist Benches. Unionists also use this tactic, and his refrain was gladly taken up by Mrs Nelis in what some might call an historical speech — it was more of an hysterical speech, and it involved very little history.

Mrs Nelis claimed that Unionists had introduced a property qualification, but that was not the case. A property qualification had always been a stipulation, even under British electoral law until 1949. When that property qualification was abandoned in Northern Ireland in the 1960s, it did not make a button of difference to the outcome of elections. The property qualification applied to Catholics as well as to Protestants, though she chose to overlook that in her hysterical rant in which she attempted to justify her own party's position. There is no justification for the fraud that has been perpetrated, mostly on behalf of IRA/Sinn Féin. It owes the fact that it has won seats on councils, in the Northern Ireland Assembly and at Westminster to what can only be described as systematic fraud against the electorate in Northern Ireland. No amount of support from other people, who might have a common agenda with it, will ever cover this up, nor will the turning of blind eyes.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There has been some misunderstanding — evidence, evidence, evidence. Hansard will record that on three occasions I referred to evidence of abuse of postal and proxy voting. That evidence was supported by the RUC, the Chief Electoral Officer and those academics who were asked to contribute to the review of the electoral process here and examine the allegations of electoral fraud. I did not say that there was no evidence of electoral fraud. However, I did say that there was no evidence of Sinn Féin's electoral successes being due to electoral fraud or of Sinn Féin being the only party involved in electoral fraud. In my opinion, all of the parties referred to have been involved in electoral fraud.

Therefore, let there be no misinterpretation of what I said. I recognise the existence of electoral fraud and how it was addressed. There are, of course, many anecdotes about electoral fraud. We heard Mr P Robinson's account of six people in a one-bedroom flat. — *[Interruption]*.

Mrs Nelis: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I cannot hear Mr McNamee because of the noise coming from a corner of the Chamber.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McNamee: Mr Robinson did not tell us whether the six people voted or the location of the flat. Was it in East Belfast, Upper Bann or somewhere else?

Mr Dodds: It was in west Belfast.

Mr McNamee: The Member did not tell us whether these people had actually voted and, if so, whom they voted for. I accept that electoral fraud exists, but there is no evidence to suggest that electoral fraud is down to Sinn Féin alone. Academics working in this area, who contributed to the review, had little doubt that,

"Sinn Féin's successes have far more to do with genuine increased popularity and demographic factors than with large-scale electoral abuse."

I am quoting directly from paragraph 5.1 of a Northern Ireland Office publication 'Administering Elections in Northern Ireland — Report of the Elections Review, October 1998'. The Northern Ireland Office obviously gives some credibility to those comments as it has included them in the report. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Mr McNamee: The academics also suggest

"the accusations of abuse have had much to do with the disappointments experienced by other parties, in particular —

[Interruption].

Mrs Nelis: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There is tremendous noise and absolute disrespect for your position from the Benches opposite. I wish to dissociate myself from such disrespect.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to pay attention to what the Member has said, and I ask Mr McNamee to continue.

Mr McNamee: I will attempt to continue.

The people who contributed to the review, which was published by the Northern Ireland Office, suggested that

"the accusations of abuse had much to do with the disappointments experienced by other parties who do not wish to admit a decline in support."

They concluded that the academic world expects to see Sinn Féin improve its position still further, whatever measures are brought in to tighten up the electoral process. — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McNamee: I ask Members to support the amendment. I will finish, because the volume at which I have to attempt to speak in order to overcome the noise is unacceptable.

Mr Hussey: First, I wish to address the issues that have been raised concerning the amendment. I find the amendment unnecessary, and if Members had listened carefully to my speech on the motion, they would have noted that issues raised in the amendment had already been addressed. The entire process was mentioned. Registration issues were addressed, with a call for a more proactive approach from the Chief Electoral Officer in order to ensure full representation on the register.

The resources issue referred to by Mr McNamee was addressed, with a call for appropriate staffing, funding and equipment to enable the Chief Electoral Officer to fulfil the purpose of scrutiny in which he and his officers are engaged.

Mr McNamee referred to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report, stating that there was little evidence in it. Polling agents have a problem of duty, vis-à-vis their legal ability to apprehend someone in the course of personation. Mr McNamee forgot to consider the reasons for difficulty in presenting cases of personation, mentioned in paragraph 69 of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's report. The words, directly quoted from the document, which Mr McNamee edited in his presentation, are

"terrorist threat, intimidation in some areas".

Dr McCrea also referred to this problem from his own experiences.

I thank Dr Hendron for his contribution and agree with him and Mr Ervine, and others, that electoral malpractice is not new. Perhaps, in the days when there were just two major parties, each party's efforts were cancelled out by those of the other. I also agree with Dr Hendron that such electoral malpractice was not carried out on the massive organised scale that we see now and I am glad that he supports the idea of photographic identification.

Dr McCrea and others have referred to the lack of Government action; I welcome their comments.

Mr Gibson: The Member will be aware that in the recent Assembly election there were several incidents in West Tyrone in which people who were intending to carry out voting fraud disappeared when challenged. There is no method of recording the number of people who attempted such fraud. The votes that were recorded under protest were never challenged, and the electoral office took no action. The pink forms were produced and put in envelopes, unchallenged, but after the election no action was taken in respect of persons who carried out electoral fraud.

Mr Hussey: I thank my associate — I was going to say Colleague — from West Tyrone. I would not wish the Assembly to think that we were getting into a West Tyrone-only scenario — an accusation that has been made in the past.

Mr Neeson referred to the need for photographic identification and local checking of absent vote applications; I agree totally. I also agree with what Mr Ervine said about past electoral malpractice. To some extent, no party in the Assembly is lily white; we cannot account for all the actions of those who are willing to work and expend their best efforts for our respective causes. Mr Ervine said that he would support the amendment; I suggest that I dealt with the issues mentioned in the amendment when proposing the motion.

Mr Ervine: I acknowledge the fact that the Member addressed the issues in his commentary. However, the motion that the Assembly will vote on does not mention registration or ballot process.

Mr Hussey: I trust that the record of our debate will be considered by the Chief Electoral Officer.

Mr Ervine also put forward the idea of political instruction. I am sure that we would all agree that our young people should be properly instructed in the political situation in which they find themselves. I hope that I have already addressed the points that he made about the value of the vote.

Mrs Carson referred to the Sinn Féin proposal for the removal of the requirement for any means of identification, as mentioned in the report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs. Why does Sinn Féin favour such a move? Mr Bradley has written evidence that the Government recognise the problem; they promise remedies, but do not deliver. Other Members have referred to that problem. I sympathise with him over the "follow-the-postman scenario"; that is a frequent complaint in my constituency as well.

Mr P Robinson talked about the long-fingering of the issue under Mo Mowlam. I hope that the present Secretary of State can reinvigorate the issue and take it forward with a bit more haste.

5.30 pm

Mrs Nelis questioned my sincerity. I can assure her that I am totally sincere in bringing this to the House. I have not been afraid to admit to a knowledge of electoral malpractice in the past. The "Vote early, vote often" scenario existed in our society. It existed on both sides of a simple two-party system at that time, and I do not in any way defend that. Mrs Nelis commented on the intimidation, and indeed murder, of electoral workers. I wonder in which constituency a census enumerator was murdered in 1981. With regard to electoral fraud, I wonder whether any person in the House is aware of eight voters living in a two-bedroomed house. Mrs Nelis said that electoral fraud was perpetrated to ensure electoral supremacy. Do two wrongs make a right? Should somebody continue with such a scenario in a militaristic, organised way now?

Mr Kennedy referred to absent voters, people working and living elsewhere. I can think of one of my constituents: if you are living and working in New York it is difficult to go to the polling station in person. Perhaps that is the reason that person has a proxy vote, in spite of his being a naturalised American citizen.

Mr Shannon referred to derelict properties. I suggested that there should be some way in which derelict properties can be identified to ensure that nobody on the register can claim to live in one.

Finally, Mr Wilson, with his usual exuberance, finished off the debate in fine fettle. I will leave it at that.

The old call, as we all know, was “Vote early, vote often”, but what we are trying to achieve in this debate and in the motion that I have placed before the House is the call that headlines the report of the elections review of October 1998, namely that we vote early and vote fairly.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland to report on his plans to counter electoral fraud.

Motion made:

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

EAST BELFAST REDEVELOPMENT AREAS: COMMERCIAL PREMISES VALUATION

Mr P Robinson: I am delighted to see that the Finance Minister has come back to the Chamber. I hope that he has left his grumpy head behind and is not going to be tossing his head impatiently on this occasion. I hope that he will give us a fair hearing and respond to the debate.

Although the motion refers to East Belfast, it is just as relevant to many other parts of the Province, particularly other parts of the city of Belfast. It might be worthwhile to start with an explanation of how a valuation is determined for a property. The Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA) will inspect it. It will make a determination of the net annual valuation based on the size and type of property, its location and the attractiveness of the setting or, if it is a commercial property, its attractiveness in commercial terms. I should say that I have a background in estate agency, which I left to enter politics.

The valuation of a property determines what portion of the rate being levied across the Province that the property owner pays. As a consequence, it determines the amount that the holder of the property will pay towards services that are provided at a district level or at a regional level. Depending on how much the district or regional rate increases, the ratepayer will be exercised to a greater or lesser extent. Certainly, when a substantial increase in the regional rate was proposed, it set alarm bells ringing for many in the commercial sector.

The case that I bring to the attention of the Assembly does not relate to the level of increase. However, during discussions with traders after the levying of the increase, it was drawn to my attention that special problems occur in redevelopment areas.

If we assume that the VLA has made an accurate assessment of the net annual valuation of a property, that valuation can be changed by a change of circumstances in the area, or by something relating directly to the property. Something interesting happens at that stage, because if one applies for planning permission to extend the property, one can be absolutely certain of what will happen a few months later. One will receive a letter, visit or phone call from the VLA. It will say that the agency would like to carry out a new assessment of the net annual value of the property. Proactively, the VLA — spurred on, no doubt, by the Minister responsible for finance — will ensure that the new net annual valuation reflects the circumstances that then exist. Therefore, if one improves one's property by extending it, one can be sure that proactive action will be taken by the agency concerned.

If, for instance, the use classification of a property is changed, again one can be sure that a new assessment

will follow, to check whether the new use to which one has put the property has a higher net annual valuation than previously. Again, the VLA will move proactively to ensure that if additional money is required from the ratepayer, it will be received.

However, if there are elements to the detriment of one's company, the valuation officer does not seem to know the address or telephone number, nor does he bother to visit.

There are many circumstances in which there will be a detriment to a property. That will arise where there is no proactivity on the part of the Valuation and Lands Agency, the Rates Collection Agency or the Department of Finance and Personnel or whoever has energised the VLA on the earlier occasions.

I draw the attention of the Assembly specifically to the issue of redevelopment. Take, for example, a street of shops that is servicing a local community. The example that I shall give is the Castlereagh Road — an incidence that came up recently.

An arterial route and several shops serve the community in that area. The Department, through its agency, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, decides that it is going to redevelop the area. No doubt, the aim is to improve the quality of life for the people who live there and to improve the housing standards that they will then enjoy.

When it happens, all the customers for those shops are removed from the area. That is not something that crept up on the VLA without notice. It is not as if it is not able to determine that there will be a massive impact on the shopkeepers there. It knows it, and it knows it through the same kind of procedures that tell it when someone is extending his shop or premises.

The VLA knows that if a planning application is approved, there will be an increase in the value of that property, so it reassesses it. It knows that if a redevelopment notice is posted there will also be an impact on a property. The VLA should, therefore, proactively follow to ensure that the rates are reduced for that individual and avoid the hardship for those who have to go to the agency and ask it to carry out that reinspection.

The experience of almost everyone that I have met in dealing with the issue is of an uphill struggle to get the VLA to accept the detriment to a property as a result of that kind of thing. The meagre reduction that has taken place, in the cases where there has been a successful outcome, has not, in any way, compensated for the reduction in income that has occurred as a result of redevelopment.

The outcome, therefore, is fairly clear. I am asking the Minister — and I do not ask or expect him to jump to any conclusions today — to consider looking at how, proactively, he can ensure that the VLA inspects and assesses the change in the net annual valuation of a

property because of redevelopment. The VLA knows that it is happening. It could easily do it in the same way that it can when a planning application is made. The VLA knows that more money is available should it reinspect. Can he set a procedure in motion to ensure that that happens?

I also ask that, if he does that, he take the further step and ensure that the procedures, if the person is successful, ensure a satisfactory outcome. The Minister really must reassess whether adequate reductions are being made, even if only on a temporary basis. One must assume, if redevelopment is taking place, that the customer base will return, but those years can be crucial to the livelihoods of the shopkeepers involved.

If we are to have a thriving community when redevelopment does take place, and we are to have a group of shops after the new houses are built and the people return, it is vital that we do not leave those shops hanging out there, as they are at present.

At my meeting with the traders on the Castlereagh Road, they spoke, one after the other, of the hardships that they are facing as a result of redevelopment. They also spoke of the extent to which they would need to spend their own money to challenge professionally the valuation of their properties.

Whatever they are selling — sweets, cigarettes, clothes, books — their expertise is not in valuation. Their ability to argue their case is limited by the nature of their profession. Therefore, they have to buy in the expertise in order to challenge the valuation of their property — a costly endeavour for them. Such are the conundrums that they face. Their funds are reduced because their customer base has been removed. They have to use their own money to challenge the valuation of their property.

5.45 pm

Will the Minister look at the procedures, with a view to making them more user-friendly and less intimidating for people who wish to challenge the valuations? Will he also make sure that when a redevelopment occurs — wherever it is — the valuation office will reassess the valuation of the properties that will be most affected by it?

Mr Ervine: I commend the Member for drawing the House's attention to an issue that is causing great difficulty. Many people wish that their area could be enhanced, but even after an area such as the one that I come from has been enhanced, the developers usually knock down three houses and build just one in their place. The problem does not exist only during redevelopment — when houses are vacated and the area becomes a wasteland — it continues beyond that point.

Such communities did not ask for the increase in traffic, as people drive by to the many supermarkets that have grown up, like small towns, in east Belfast. We

cannot decry the shops; they bring jobs and people seem to like them. However, those who live on the ribbon development that my Colleague spoke about suffer the loss of passing trade because parking at out-of-town shops is more convenient. They also suffer because they live in areas that have a low level of home ownership. For example, a shop owner might, for his own sake, enhance the property, but he will receive no appreciation for his efforts. Mr Robinson described the position well. If someone wants to renovate their property when the area is being redeveloped, someone will appear quickly on the doorstep to do an upward revaluation. When the area is blighted — I think “blight” is the correct word — no one rushes to their aid.

The redevelopment of an area is not just about giving people nice houses to live in, although that is valuable. It is about retaining the services and the points of contact that have been part of the community. Not only are the residents sometimes scattered to the four winds, but circumstances are created in which traders and other owners of commercial property cannot compete. The point of contact for their services has gone.

Recently, we spoke about out-of-town developments and about a possible need to restrict large developments. There was relative consensus in the House that that was the wrong way to go if we were to hold communities together and retain services. Mr Robinson mentioned the Castlereagh Road, which is as good an example as any; at night, it is like a canyon. That is also true of the Newtownards Road and the Albertbridge Road; there is little activity on them. No one is being drawn to those places; people are being drawn to other places.

The community has taken a good kicking, whether from the planners or from those who can adjust the rateable values to meet the needs that undoubtedly exist, and I ask the Minister to pay specific attention. In fairness, Mr Robinson, in moving the motion, did draw attention to other places — it is not just a question of east Belfast. Many areas in Northern Ireland suffer similar problems.

Sir Reg Empey: I want to make an observation and I hope the Member agrees with me. Although this debate is focused on valuations, a multi-agency approach is required. Planning has an objective of securing arterial routes. Knowing that there is a reduction in the number of people living in the area, you can replace the people who go to the shops if there is somewhere for them to park and shop in the area. That is how the Newtownards Road and the Cregagh Road have survived for years. It is extremely difficult to get that multi-agency approach because of the rigidities of Roads Service and Planning Service.

Mr Ervine: The Member has made the point more succinctly than I could have, and I agree. I also have a feeling that the Member who introduced this to the

House would not disagree. He is quite capable of speaking for himself, of course.

There is great deal of suffering, and until now it has been largely ignored. Now there is somewhere for the issue to be raised, and there is a receptive Minister who, one hopes, will take cognisance of all the difficulties and be prepared to ensure that those difficulties ease.

I have a final point to draw to the attention of this House. I hope you do not rule me out of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, because this expressly deals with the issue of commercial property. Recently, I have been reminded of the difficulty of homeowners in a redevelopment area who find themselves being asked to pay a Housing Executive rent. The Housing Executive will charge them a rent for a substantial time before vesting takes place. When the tenants get the value of their house, they find that they have frittered away a substantial amount paying rent for a house that they own. There are quite a number of issues in redevelopment areas that need serious consideration.

In the future we will have to take a different approach to redevelopment. We need to introduce the concepts pointed out by my Colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We need a holistic approach, cutting across departmental lines and ensuring that the people, whether traders or residents of redevelopment areas, get a better crack of the whip.

Mr S Wilson: I am not going to go over all the points that have been made, as that would simply be a repetition.

From my experience of the issue, let me note some of the excuses that have been made by the Department for refusing to act on this issue. It is not a new issue. Since I was first elected 20 years ago, has been an ongoing sore in redevelopment areas. The first time I came across it was in Castlereagh Street, where 11,000 homes in east Belfast were going to be affected by the redevelopment proposals. Arterial routes especially were going to be affected by the removal of such a large part of the population.

However, the Department's excuse, made time and time again, does not stand up to scrutiny. Mr Robinson has already dealt with the question of resources. The Department very often says that it cannot respond, because so many properties are affected by this that it simply does not have the resources to revalue properties downwards when redevelopment areas are declared.

However, as has been pointed out, properties that have been improved can be dealt with fairly quickly. I would appreciate it if the Minister could give us some indication of why, since most of the shops involved provide local services, example cases can not be taken and then applied across a range of commercial properties in an area. That would mean that every property would not have to be individually revalued, and, at the same

time, cognisance could be taken of the effect that redevelopment has on commercial activity.

The second argument made to me is that redevelopment in adjacent streets may well affect part of the business of shops on arterial routes. However, that is not where they get all of their business from anyway; much of it comes from outside. The fact that they are on an arterial route means that a great deal of their business is left intact, and the removal of some streets behind those shops does not greatly affect the valuation of the properties.

First, one has only to listen to what traders say about their takings to realise that that is not the case. Secondly, it must also be accepted that many of these redevelopment areas cover many properties. Mr Peter Robinson mentioned the example of the Castlereagh Road. Approximately 700 houses adjacent to the shops on the Castlereagh Road have been removed, which represents a substantial customer base.

Mr David Ervine mentioned the Newtownards Road. The present proposal for redevelopment on this road — in fact, there are several proposals, which have rolled into each other over the years — will involve over 800 houses being knocked down. Similar amounts of houses have been knocked down in redevelopments that have just finished in areas adjacent to it. A substantial customer base has been taken away, and to say that redevelopment affects commercial properties only in a very small way is not true.

It does not matter whether you are talking about east or north Belfast, you only have to look at the tracts of areas involved to see that a large number of properties have been removed and, therefore, that a large number of customers have been removed.

The other thing that must be borne in mind is that many of those shops may depend on outside trade. However, whenever redevelopment takes place, it not only moves the existing customer base, it also blights an area; it makes an area unattractive. People do not feel happy about going into an area that seems to be derelict.

Very often there are areas of waste ground; frequently there is rubble lying around. As a result of the isolation, there could be anti-social behaviour, which, in turn, makes it appear even more derelict. Therefore, people steer away from it.

The Department's argument that the removal of the houses in the immediate vicinity will not leave businesses without outside custom coming in is not an acceptable one. It is clear that people are not prepared to come into areas that have been blighted by redevelopment, because they do not look attractive and because of the kind of behaviour that often goes on in them. Because of that blight, people are not happy about taking cars in, for example, and leaving them parked in semi-derelict streets adjacent to commercial properties.

6.00 pm

A third reason, which I have heard from the Department in the past, has been that it is only a temporary arrangement. However, anyone who has lived through the redevelopment process will know that it takes about eight years from the time that a redevelopment area is declared until the redevelopment and new properties are finally put in place. It takes that long for the vesting, relocating people, properties being knocked down, planning permissions being sorted out and getting builders on site.

Areas take eight years to go through that transition, and adjacent commercial properties are detrimentally affected during the entire period. For the Department to argue that it sorts itself out fairly quickly, and that revaluing downwards and then upwards again would tie up resources, fails to recognise how long the redevelopment process takes. Therefore, it is important that the Minister makes some response to the genuine claims of those people who try to hang on in redevelopment areas, so that services are still there when the area is redeveloped.

It is part of planning policy to attract people back into the inner city and to develop on brownfield sites. People will not be attracted if there are no local services. Unfortunately, redeveloping and making inner-city sites attractive again tends to make it more difficult for services to survive in the interim period.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I thank Mr Robinson for bringing this matter to the House and, in particular, for drawing attention to some significant issues and considerations in relation to valuation.

There are a couple of points that may need to be set in context, particularly the question of the basis of rateable valuations. A property's rateable value is based on the rental value that the property would be expected to achieve in its actual state and circumstances. That is based on a valuation date, and the current valuation date for all commercial properties is 1 April 1995, which was the valuation date before the last revaluation. I have already said that there will be a further non-domestic revaluation, which the Assembly has agreed to, effective from 1 April 2003.

Properties were last revalued on rents that existed on 1 April 1995. Accordingly, the rateable values reflect the social, economic and environmental circumstances that prevailed at that time. I recognise that particular point; it is true for all properties. It is common to the valuation base of all properties, even new properties that might be developed and are subject to planning permission, or even, as Mr Robinson said, to valuers who might inspect properties and try to put a valuation on extensions. Every valuation refers to that valuation date in 1995. That is part of the valuation system. Obviously, when there is a revaluation, all ratepayers should be charged

in direct proportion to the rental value of the property that they occupy.

It is important that a uniformity of liability is established, although I recognise that it is eroded over time because there are differential shifts in rental values from one property to another, and from one location to another, for various reasons — redevelopment being one of them. That is one of the reasons why we need regular revaluations. They are the most sensible way to ensure that valuations are as reflective as possible of real and prevailing circumstances.

However, I make the point again that the basis of valuation is not just pure assumption by the valuers. It is based on rental value. It essentially represents the rent the premises would command if let on the open market at a fixed point in time. That represents approximately 40% of rental value, which in turn averages about 8% of capital value.

One could argue that rates therefore equate to about 3% of capital. I am not saying that to minimise the significance of the rate burden, particularly for businesses that may be trading in marginal circumstances — not least because of changes in their circumstances.

There is limited scope between revaluations to take changes in economic circumstances into account. Contrary to what Sammy Wilson said, I believe that if we were continually revising assessments up and down to reflect all sorts of changes — either in the particular trading circumstances of given businesses or underlying and market conditions — the valuation system would soon become unworkable. The concentration at present is therefore on trying to establish regular and timely revaluations.

However, highly localised factors that could be combined with some physical change can be reflected in altered assessments between revaluations. I take it from what Mr Peter Robinson said that he has some knowledge of that, but he believes — or the people who have spoken to him believe — that such reassessments have led only to fairly marginal adjustments in the valuations.

Anything that is being done here is constrained by the rating law, and that governs the conduct of the valuers. It is the rating law that governs this; it is not primarily a matter of resources. It is not a case of the Valuation and Lands Agency choosing not to do something just because it has not got the resources, or of the Department choosing not to allow the agency to do it by not allocating it the necessary resources. A change in the character of an area is really a matter to be picked up in the revaluation.

There is an appeals process. People can appeal a revaluation and, if they are not satisfied, the Lands Tribunal is an independent court in that regard. If people are aggrieved with a rating assessment they can make an application to the district valuer and, if they are still not

satisfied, they can appeal to the Commissioner of Valuation and then to the Lands Tribunal.

The district valuer in Belfast is not aware of any application for revision of the valuation list on grounds of location in, or close proximity to, a redevelopment area. Similarly, there are no appeals to the Commissioner of Valuation or the Lands Tribunal on this issue. Similar points apply to domestic properties. That issue was touched on by David Ervine in particular.

Given that the circumstances of the terms and evaluations are those that prevailed at the time of revaluation, little can be done to change the circumstances between revaluations, as some Members are seeking. Some reductions have taken place, and I will write to Mr Robinson with examples. They may be similar to some of the cases that people have brought to his attention. From the information that is available to me, I do not recognise the problem as acutely as Mr Robinson does. However, I recognise that people believe that revaluations should take place on the basis of any change in their trading circumstances.

No Member mentioned whether there were significant changes in the rents charged on some of these properties. Rents are relevant. If there were localised revaluations they would be based on the rental values that existed at the revaluation date, which, in this case, was 1995. That applies to new valuations to new properties as well as to any other property. They have than in common.

If we were to move in the way that Members want, it would raise the issue of whether we would be working from a uniform base. That is important — not least with regard to the regional rate.

Some Members said that the system is less than responsive and that they find that it is unable to make the revisions and changes in people's circumstances that they would like to see. The law restricts on that. If there are other ways in which the Valuation and Lands Agency is not considered to be user-friendly — as has been suggested — I, and the agency, will examine them.

Some Members referred to the benefits of professional representation. The Valuation and Lands Agency does not require people to be professionally represented, and it does not favour those who are. The agency is interested in fairness, and the valuer will always speak to the ratepayer no matter who else is involved. If there are any issues or grievances about the treatment of individuals, properties or cases that Mr Robinson wants to draw to my attention I will be happy to take those up with the agency.

I did not know the area of east Belfast the Member was concerned about, but I now know that it is the Castlereagh Road. The areas that are formally designated or recognised as redevelopment areas tend to be those with domestic properties. There are five such areas, and the Castlereagh Road is not one of them. Members

talked colloquially about redevelopment areas rather than meaning a redevelopment area as designated by a Department.

I have noted the points that Members have made. Those points strengthen the case for ensuring that the Assembly efficiently progresses the revaluation of non-domestic properties and makes sure that there is a

realistic valuation base for non-domestic rates. Revaluation is the key to that. However, I will make information available to Mr Robinson on any localised reviews that have taken place as they might assist in any representation that he may want to make about a location.

Adjourned at 6.15 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 26 February 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

FOOT-AND-MOUTH DISEASE

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am aware that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is, quite properly, in Brussels today on essential business. Will you inform the Assembly if, in this era of joined-up government, any other Minister has given notice of an intention to make a statement on her behalf on the foot-and-mouth disease crisis?

Mr Speaker: I was not aware of the Minister's current whereabouts. I have not received any request for a statement to be made today on that subject.

POLITICAL SITUATION NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to move to the "foot-in-mouth" disease. On Saturday the 'News Letter' ran what amounted to a detailed confession by one of Mr Trimble's closest and strongest supporters. It stated that the First Minister and the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party had been consistently dishonest; misled or lied to people; duped the electorate; and had been inaccurate in their interpretation of the Belfast Agreement — among other accusations.

The normal procedure in most other legislative chambers is that people would be entitled to some form of emergency debate on a matter which, quite clearly, goes to the very heart of the way such institutions were set up and the way they are running. Can you advise us, Mr Speaker, if there is any way we could have this debate today or tomorrow? The issues are so important that I do not think they can be passed off or left to be put down in a motion for next week.

Mr Speaker: The Standing Orders we have here are, in certain ways, somewhat different from the standing orders in other places. I have looked at this in the past, but I will certainly examine it again to see whether the Member's request can be accommodated. However, so far as I am aware, it is not something that can be accommodated under our current Standing Orders, even in the context of leave, though I will need to check that, as any motion would not be on the Order Paper, and there are certain requirements regarding Standing Orders. I will check the matter and get back to the Member. At this moment I am not aware of any mechanism of the kind he describes.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful for that ruling, Mr Speaker. If a motion of no confidence were to be put down today would that attract a more expeditious procedure?

Mr Speaker: I do not know that a motion of no confidence would be different from any other motion. However, I will check the matter and get back to the Member.

Mr Tierney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you not ruled on newspaper reports in the past? I think you said a couple of times that you would not allow any discussion on newspaper reports. I believe that that is what has been quoted today.

Mr Speaker: Newspaper reports are of themselves not a subject for debate, but, as I understand it, the Member is saying that the substance of the newspaper report is such as to stimulate cause for concern. I hesitate to take the view that nothing that appears in newspapers would be a proper subject for debate here. There may be some such things. I do not think I can rule out of order the concern

that the Member raises. However, this is a wholly political concern, and not for me to judge upon.

Mr P Robinson: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Is there not a distinction between a newspaper report, the validity of which can be questioned, and a actual article, in the first person, from a supporter of Mr Trimble who is accusing him of being dishonest and lying to the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: Newspaper reports may or may not be true. In my experience, the claims of individuals, whether in the first person or in another person —

Mr P Robinson: He is a supporter.

Mr Speaker: — may or may not necessarily be true.

The Member says that the person is a supporter. He will be familiar with the old adage that opponents are people in other parties, whereas enemies are those in one's own. I do not think that I can make any assumptions of that kind. I can only deal with the technical question, and I will return to that matter and clarify it.

Mr Dodds: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it right that you should be casting such aspersions on those sitting behind Mr Trimble? The person who wrote this article in the 'News Letter' is a paid employee of the party in question, and for him to make these allegations against Mr Trimble is astounding.

Mr Speaker: It is not necessary to question the integrity or the standing or the views of sitting Members. We were only, as I understand it, referring to members of parties, and that is a separate matter from Members of the Assembly.

The technical question has been sufficiently aired.

TRADE AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

North/South Ministerial Council Sectoral Meeting

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The fourth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its trade and business development sectoral format took place in Dundalk on Friday 16 February 2001. Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Dr Seán Farren and I represented the Executive. The Irish Government was represented by Ms Mary Harney TD, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. This report has been approved by Dr Farren and is also made on his behalf.

The Council received a verbal progress report from the chief executive of the Trade and Business Development Body, Mr Liam Nellis. This included briefing Ministers on the establishment of its offices in Newry and the appointment of its permanent staff. The Council noted a paper introduced by Mr Nellis, which outlined the main activities carried out by the body in its first year of operation. Ministers welcomed the considerable progress made in establishing the body and the volume of work which had been completed by its board.

The Ministers approved the body's operating plan for 2001, which outlined activities for the year and the associated budget. Major initiatives planned for InterTradeIreland for 2001 include: promoting increased use of equity/venture capital throughout the island; supporting science and technological innovation in companies on a cross-border basis; supporting the development of e-commerce throughout the island, including the establishment of an all-island research fund; assisting in the strengthening of the local supply chain to both major multinational and indigenous companies on the island of Ireland; and promoting the benefits of North/South trade and enhancing market awareness.

In the legislation establishing the body, InterTrade-Ireland was mandated to bring forward to the council proposals for establishing graduate and other placement programmes on a North/South basis. The Ministers approved the body's proposals to introduce two programmes on a cross-border basis.

The small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) business development programme is aimed at giving SMEs access to a wider reservoir of knowledge and expertise through working with a graduate/diploma holder to transfer technology and know-how. The cross-border trade programme is aimed at developing cross-border trade and providing back-up support to SMEs by matching a business from one side of the border with a graduate from the other. Ministers asked that this activity be treated as a key priority that could make an important

impact on developing and increasing trade and business links North and South.

At the North/South Ministerial Council meeting the Ministers noted and approved the proposals put forward by InterTradeIreland to enhance competitiveness. It was agreed that the proposals should be taken forward in co-operation with Departments with a view to an interim report's being presented to the plenary meeting in March 2001. In this regard, InterTradeIreland brought forward a number of specific recommendations in respect of areas such as innovation and information and communication technology in which the body considered it could address all-island competitiveness issues. The Ministers considered and agreed that the body's draft equality scheme should be published.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in this sectoral format would take place in Northern Ireland in June 2001.

Dr Birnie: What progress has been made by the trade body to liberalise public procurement so that firms based on one side of the Irish border can bid fairly for Government contracts emerging from the jurisdiction on the other?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member has correctly addressed an issue that has been of some considerable concern. As one knows, public procurement is a substantial budgetary element here, in the Republic and throughout the European Union. The Member will be familiar with public procurement policies throughout the European Union and with the fact that the whole objective of creating a free market was to give people opportunities to compete and win contracts throughout the European Union.

10.45 am

The Member will be aware that we have a particular difficulty with the currency differential. That militates against those of us who are trying to bid into the euro zone, although there has been some slight improvement there. The body is acutely aware of the necessity to encourage this aspect, and the matter has been brought to the attention of business people at its roadshows — four of which have taken place in the last few months. It is also trying to notify and identify companies that could bid for public work. We believe that this awareness procedure will be successful, and the programme will continue throughout the next 12 months.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his statement given on behalf of himself and my Colleague Dr Seán Farren. I commend the Minister for his work, outlined in the report, on the North/South Ministerial Council. Is the Minister aware that many firms in the Republic of Ireland, particularly in the Greater Dublin area, are very interested in setting up satellite operations in the North of Ireland based primarily on the new technologies, but also in many other skills areas? Does he intend to make

any special arrangements or provisions by way of organisational help or financial incentives? That would bring many of these anticipated developments to a practical conclusion. If I may be parochial, the Minister could also indicate that the best place to locate would be the constituency of South Down. However, generally speaking, anywhere in Northern Ireland would suffice.

Sir Reg Empey: I assume that that was not an invitation to act against one constituency in favour of another. I assure the hon Member that the IDB is acutely aware of the potential benefits of attracting investment from the Republic. There have been two significant investments in the last two months — one by the Bank of Ireland, which has come to Newry in recent weeks. The IDB has reorganised its team and appointed several people to look at that particular market to see what is available. The early signs are encouraging.

In the last four months we have had three major investments. I believe that others will be secured, for we consider ourselves to have significant advantages over the Greater Dublin area in particular. These include lower rates of staff turnover and a significant supply of qualified labour in certain disciplines. This will be one of our key target areas for attracting inward investment, and I assure the Member that the IDB is fully engaged in this process.

The Chairperson of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee (Mr P Doherty): A Cheann Comhairle, I welcome the Minister's statement. I note that InterTradeIreland has focused on promoting the benefits of North/South trade and enhancing market awareness. The Minister mentioned areas in which

"the Body considered it could address all-island competitiveness issues, for example in areas such as innovation and information and communication technology."

Those of us who travel throughout the island will notice that when using mobile phones to make calls either North to South or South to North — even if only two miles up the road — we can be charged at international rates. When in the North, you may find that you are on the Eircell system, and occasionally when you are in the South you are still on the Vodafone network. Could the body take up the issue of creating an island market and cut out the high tariffs associated with international calls, given that many of these companies are buying each other out and amalgamating?

Sir Reg Empey: The points the Member makes about mobile phones make it obvious that he is not a shareholder in Orange. We have all noticed them, and we all complain bitterly about the call charges. However, telecoms issues are a reserved matter. We do, however, point out to Whitehall a number of the issues that we believe to be significant. For instance, in the Programme for Government our objective is to roll out broadband issues to ensure that, from the point of view of targeting

social need, all areas of the Province have the opportunity to access proper services at a competitive rate.

There are huge issues here, and this one is international in the broadest sense of the word. The European Union is looking very closely at telecoms provision and how the market can be open to competition. This Assembly does not have the power to determine. However, any issues which relate to competitiveness — and they do not all fall within devolution — are the subject of an ongoing study. A report is due to be published in September or October 2001, and issues which are a barrier to competitiveness will be identified, whether or not they are in our own remit. I hope that when the final report is presented we will be able to take matters up in this House.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that Northern Ireland is still in competition with the Irish Republic for inward investment? What steps has he taken to ensure that information which may be of use to our competitors in the Irish Republic does not leak from the trade and business development body or the North/South Ministerial Council? For example, if information on an inward investment proposal for Northern Ireland were tabled at a meeting of one of these bodies, our competitors in the South might say “We quite fancy having that inward investment in the Irish Republic” and use the information to their advantage.

What steps has the Minister taken to settle the redundancy package for the staff of the new body, given that after the May election they will all be out on their ear?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member obviously does not appreciate that the North/South trade and business development body is not an inward investment body. It therefore does not have that information and consequently will not deal with that matter. That is the function of the Industrial Development Board for Northern Ireland or the Industrial Development Agency in the Republic. The North/South trade and business development body deals with trade and the promotion of a wide variety of issues, but inward investment is not one of its functions.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his statement. Overall, I accept and welcome the improved employment figures. However, does the Minister agree that comparative figures along the border counties remain a major concern? They are particularly aggravated by infrastructural deficit, to which the Minister has referred — broadband technology and its expansion, and so on. Are benefits perhaps emerging at the North/South cores and missing the respective peripherals? Has the issue of comparative higher unemployment along the border counties been addressed at the North/South Ministerial Council? If not, will it be addressed?

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware of the Member's points, but the North/South Ministerial Council is a focus body. It does not deal with a broad range of social and economic issues. Even within its remit, it can deal with only certain

parts of that remit at a time. The Programme for Government recognises the difficulties in several areas, including the Member's constituency, and is attempting to address them.

I am also conscious that in the Irish Republic there are many people who regard the Celtic tiger economy as, perhaps, having run out of steam by the time it gets to the north-west of Northern Ireland.

It has been put to me on a number of occasions that that is the case. The matters the hon Member mentioned are currently not designated to this body for attention. The remit of the Trade and Business Development Body is primarily to increase trade and awareness. We are trying to promote recognition of companies which are close to each other but which currently do not conduct any business. I am sure the Member will agree with me that it is entirely advantageous to our economy to ensure that situation does not exist.

With regard to employment differentials, peripheral matters, and the issues surrounding telecommunications and broadband technology, there is a specific commitment in the Programme for Government to ensure that no area is disadvantaged. That may mean that significant decisions will have to be made. I have asked for a meeting with the Whitehall Small Business and e-Commerce Minister, Ms Patricia Hewitt. I hope to see her soon to ensure that there is a coherent approach throughout the United Kingdom to these matters. That will be of direct benefit to the Member's constituency.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement. I ask the Minister to bring to the attention of the North/South Ministerial Council and the InterTradeIreland body the fact that we need to see strong evidence of a meaningful graduate exchange programme. In particular, those graduates who are interested in the information technology sector should be encouraged and helped by venture capital, which is vital allowing these young graduates, who have good ideas, to develop small businesses. This would bring great benefit to an area such as my own in Omagh.

Sir Reg Empey: I support the Member's points, and, as he will have heard in the statement, we received a report with regard to the graduate placement programme. To put this into context, it is a not dissimilar scheme to the one run by my Department, on a worldwide basis, called the Explorers 2000 Programme. What this particular programme focuses on is matching companies on each side of the border with potential graduates or diploma holders. The small businesses that we are aiming at are those which currently may not have the resources to employ people with particular skills, whether in accountancy, in marketing or in communications technology skills. Those people will be supported with assistance from the body, and the company would be making a contribution. We are currently trying to match those people so that the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) will receive

a capability that they do not currently have. That is consistent with the objective of improving business and with the Explorers 2000 Programme, which operates on an international basis.

At the council meeting on 16 February we decided to step up the work being done in this field, and we also decided that we needed to be aggressive and to put the resources into this area to ensure that the work is successful. We will be looking closely in the next few months to see, as the programme rolls out, how successful it is. If it is successful we will be prepared to redirect resources, within the existing budget, to support the programme. I believe that it has enormous potential.

Mr Gibson: In view of the fact that most of the SMEs in West Tyrone are agriculturally based and are derived from and often dependent upon the agricultural community, why was there no protection for that community since the threat of the dreaded foot-and-mouth disease? Why were there no protection mats on the northern side of the border to protect the industry along the boundary with the South of Ireland?

Mr Speaker: I commend the Member for the creativity of his question, but he and the House will be aware that this matter is not a responsibility of the Minister. It would be inappropriate for the Minister to respond, despite the point of order raised earlier by Mr Ford.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his report. It is a shame that the full potential of the North/South Ministerial Council is not being realised, owing to the restrictions imposed on it by the First Minister and leader of the Ulster Unionist Party.

11.00 am

The Minister refers to the initiatives being planned by InterTradeIreland. One of them is assisting in the strengthening of the local supply chain to both major multinational and indigenous companies on the island of Ireland. Can the Minister give more details about that to the House? Will he also detail in relation to both indigenous companies and multinationals the current level of co-operation between the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) and the IDB, and Enterprise Ireland and LEDU? Go raibh maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: With regard to the first point, the hon Member will be aware that in order to achieve the full potential of these institutions, a whole range of people have to take action, including those in the hon Member's own party.

With regard to supply chains and the level of co-operation between companies, InterTradeIreland has already held four roadshows, which were designed to raise awareness throughout Northern Ireland and the Republic. It is recognised that the level of trade between the Republic and Northern Ireland is not that which could be anticipated for two jurisdictions sharing a

common border, and another interesting point is that it is proving extremely difficult to get an accurate measurement of what the level of trade is. Work is currently being undertaken to confirm this, as there is quite a significant discrepancy.

Mention was made of multinational companies. Many of them are now in control of vast areas of trade, whether in food products or otherwise. The intention of the trade and business development body is to identify areas where there is potential to bring together people whom we believe can actually do business. It aims to introduce companies to one another and to hold networking sessions so that there is an opportunity for suppliers and customers to meet and to try to encourage them to do business. The comparatively low level of co-operation has struck the organisation since it has been operating. As a direct result, the IDB and IDA held their first meeting in May last year in the north-west. Flowing from that, they are trying to agree how they can jointly promote the area.

As was hinted at in a previous question, we are indeed competitors for inward investment. Although promoting inward investment is not a function of this organisation, the point is taken.

The objective of improving the supply chains is very simple: to bring together companies that could trade with each other but currently do not, and to suggest to companies that do not even attempt to export to or from the Republic that they can. I have seen this work quite well at supplier events, even at local authority level.

The IDA and IDB have met once. They have undertaken a programme of work. I know that there is co-operation between LEDU and Enterprise Ireland. However, it is outwith the functions of this particular body.

Mr Beggs: I would like to return to the issue of all-island competitiveness, especially in the area of public procurement in the Republic of Ireland. Before coming to the Assembly, I worked as a production manager. That involved tendering for work in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland for a company which had ISO 9002 and used internationally recognised products. Despite that, expensive tests were required to be duplicated for inclusion in tenders for public procurement in the Republic of Ireland. Can the Minister give an assurance that he and InterTradeIreland will consult with local industry and trade groups to ensure that the public procurement procedures in the Republic of Ireland allow free and unhindered access to Northern Ireland companies?

Sir Reg Empey: I can assure the Member that that certainly is the objective. The question of testing was one of the issues given to this body in its initial remit. The situation having been examined, it was decided that InterTradeIreland, pursuing the matter itself, would bring no added value. However, the testing authorities in the

Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom as a whole have been brought together — as that is how most of this is organised. Those organisations are currently meeting and working together. InterTradeIreland has moved back from that, allowing those organisations to take matters forward and come up with their own solutions. That is being actively pursued, but it was felt that this body was not the right vehicle to take the matter forward. The authorities have now met and are working on a paper to improve their procedures. There is no doubt that the type of matters referred to by the Member are fundamentally anti-competitive. One of the measurements of the success of the body will be whether such barriers to trade are removed.

Mr McMenamin: Representing the border constituency of West Tyrone, I welcome the Minister's announcement. Does he agree that a priority of the new body should be to ensure that there is an effective exchange of information between businesses and support agencies in both parts of Ireland? If so, how will InterTradeIreland address the issue?

Sir Reg Empey: Yes, undoubtedly. The effective exchange of information and the raising of awareness, which flows from that, are vital. The body will be hosting its own web site, and public or private bodies which wish to put information on the site will be able to do so. That, of course, will be entirely their decision. Nevertheless, a focal point will exist, where people who want to do trade and make contacts will have a specific site to visit. They will be able to exchange ideas and views there.

In addition, the body has set aside a budget for identifying where it can hold localised meetings in both jurisdictions to bring people together to achieve exactly the same thing. As I mentioned earlier, the comparatively low level of meeting, co-operation and information flowing in this area has surprised the body itself — the directors and staff — and all of us. I am sure that the Member will agree that anything to improve that information flow is bound to be beneficial.

Mr Shannon: The Minister referred to the supply chain to major multinational and indigenous companies in Ireland. We are all very aware, especially here in the Province, of the producer, processor, retailer and, ultimately, the consumer supply chain. How will this be promoted and encouraged, and will targets be set to achieve the goal?

Secondly, in relation to North/South trade and enhancing market awareness, can the Minister indicate if there has been an increase in trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic? Who is responsible for promoting Northern Ireland industry and its market awareness in that, and how will its success be measured?

Sir Reg Empey: At present, no specific targets have been set with regard to the supply chains, but it has been agreed that this clearly must be one of the top priorities. Indeed, that was set out in the statement that accompanied the meeting. I am sure that the Member will have

experienced a situation at local council level where people from the district are invited to meet the council to see whether business can be done between the council and those who might supply it. It is a simple, tried and tested method, but it is one that has not yet been done in this context. InterTradeIreland is going to set about developing those supply chains by bringing together people who could do business with each other. I referred to the value of trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic in relation to an earlier question. There is considerable doubt as to what the actual level of that trade is.

Statistics are managed on two different bases in the North and in the South. In the United Kingdom, Customs and Excise has its own measuring system, which covers only companies with a turnover of over £250,000. Figures in the Irish Republic are measured by different criteria, so there is some doubt about the true level of trade. The only way to benchmark whether a body is achieving anything is to see if there is a significant increase, so it is important to have a baseline benchmark at the outset. It is vital to have some such mechanism, because many of the companies are small and many are in the agriculture sector, which we intend to encourage. Much of the trade is not in goods but in service provision, so there is no physical movement of goods over the border, but there could be telephonic communication. Whitehall and its counterparts in the Republic are actively working on this.

The significant differences between each jurisdiction's trade estimates have only recently come to light. The Department also carries out its own client testing, so there is back-up. As the Member rightly points out, much work remains to be done, because this is the only way in which we can measure success or failure. I assure him that this is a matter of urgency and that we hope to have it resolved by September.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the Minister's statement and his positive attitude. May I draw his attention to the setting up of the body's office in Newry and the promotion of e-commerce? The Minister referred to the Bank of Ireland project which is locating in Newry. Can he give the House an assurance that the Newry office will ensure that business is distributed throughout the North and is not just focused in the Newry area? I mention this because the Bank of Ireland had been looking at my council area of Dungannon before the IDB's involvement. When the IDB and, possibly, this body became involved, the project was relocated to Newry. Was any ministerial influence brought to bear on the location of the Bank of Ireland's project in Newry?

Sir Reg Empey: That is a matter for the IDB and not for this body. It is the IDB's responsibility to attract inward investment. The Bank of Ireland looked at the Dungannon area but, as an incoming investor itself chose the Newry site. I can assure the Member that InterTradeIreland had no role to play. I can also assure him that there was no

ministerial involvement that attempted to steer the Bank of Ireland from one location to another. The Department and its agencies were unashamedly involved in trying to win investment for Northern Ireland, and local political representatives from Dungannon and Newry were actively involved in lobbying the bank.

Mr Kennedy: I am glad to hear the Minister respond to any criticism of Newry. Was consideration given at the trade meeting to the continuing crisis in the fuel industry and the ongoing problem of illegal transportation of petrol and diesel from the Irish Republic? Can the Minister update the Assembly on what progress, if any, has been made with Her Majesty's Treasury on this issue?

Sir Reg Empey: The fuel issue was not on the agenda of the meeting on 16 February 2001. In the past 12 months the Member has written to me and has sent delegations to me, so I know how deeply he and his constituents feel.

11.15 am

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, who has now joined us, will be aware that significant efforts have been made, and are continually made, to draw to the attention of the Chancellor the particular difficulties Northern Ireland is experiencing with this. However, it was not dealt with at InterTradeIreland's meeting on 16 February.

Mr O'Connor: I also welcome the Minister's statement. However, to follow on from a point made by my Colleague Mr McGrady about companies setting up satellite sites in Northern Ireland, may I say that I hope that the Minister will keep East Antrim foremost in his thoughts. Will he assure us that he is committed to bringing economic prosperity to people right across Northern Ireland? Can he also assure us that Northern Ireland will not become a cheap labour option for firms expanding in the South, which want to come north because our minimum wage is somewhat less than that in the Irish Republic? If companies relocate to the North, will employees here enjoy the socio-economic benefits enjoyed by employees of those same companies in the South? Moreover, what effect does the Minister believe the euro will have on all of this, and may a special case need to be made for Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: Members really do press well beyond the borders of ministerial responsibilities. I must advise, as I have done before, that the euro is well beyond the remit even of our Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, on the other questions the Member raised, I call the Minister to respond.

Sir Reg Empey: Yes, there is no doubt that a coefficient of creativity is operating in the House this morning, from foot-and-mouth disease to everything that we have in here.

On the question of satellite companies, the Irish Republic is a target market for inward investment — of that there is no doubt. We have achieved, as I said in

response to a previous question, a significant and increasing degree of success. We do market the facts about Northern Ireland. If you compare parts of Northern Ireland with the Greater Dublin area, you can see that there is a lower cost base. That does not necessarily mean cheap wages; it can take account of other factors. The supply of labour and the correct type of labour are, generally speaking, the most important ingredients when choosing Northern Ireland as a location. Because there is pressure in the labour market, companies in the Dublin area are looking at Northern Ireland as an alternative. We are encouraging that, and quite rightly so.

However, there is no question of Northern Ireland's being sold or marketed as a cheap labour area. We do not need to do that because having the people is the priority for this sort of company. If the wages are next to nothing and there are no people, it does not make any difference. Therefore we are focusing on that. In order to improve — and I will try to be creative myself and make my answer relevant — we are trying to develop the capacity of companies to trade with each other and to invest in each other's jurisdictions. That is one of the reasons for the graduate placement scheme that we have introduced. I hope you will mark me out of 10 for that, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Nine out of 10 for honesty, I guess.

Mr Clyde: The Minister has approved the body's operation plans for 2001, which outline activities for the year and the associated budget. Can the Minister tell us what the budget amounts to?

Sir Reg Empey: The budget for 2001-02 is approximately £8.63 million, of which our contribution is £2.88 million. In my statement I said that we approved the operating plan for the year, which set out the tasks to be achieved and matched them to the budget. I can assure the Member that the operating plan was strictly within the budget limits. We will be monitoring that, and it is the responsibility of Ministers to ensure that budgets are adhered to. I believe that they must be signed off by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who will ensure that that is the case. I cannot see him giving his approval to any budget that is not within the agreed limits.

BUDGET BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the five clauses, followed by the three schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 5 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.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the five clauses, followed by the long title.

Clauses 1 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

ASSEMBLY

Environment Committee

Resolved:

That Mr David McClarty should replace Mr Tom Hamilton on the Committee for the Environment. — *[Mr J Wilson]*

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Resolved:

That Mr Tom Hamilton should replace Mr David McClarty on the Committee for Social Development. — *[Mr J Wilson]*

The sitting was suspended at 11.24 am.

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

Oral Answers To Questions

2.30 pm

The Deputy Speaker: Questions 7, 12 and 18, standing in the names of Mrs Courtney, Mr Dallat and Dr McDonnell, will receive written answers. Question 11, standing in the name of Mr Roger Hutchinson, has been withdrawn.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Global Point Development

1. **Mr Clyde** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of funding allocated to the Global Point development at Ballyhenry, Newtownabbey, in terms of capital funding, site clearance and construction. (AQO 913/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): To date, the Industrial Development Board (IDB) has spent £5.1 million on the Global Point development at Ballyhenry. The works, which will result in 100 net usable acres, include major earth works, the construction of access roads and the provision of services and extensive landscaping works. The total expenditure by the IDB on site development is estimated at £6.7 million.

Mr J Wilson: Is the Minister in a position to advise us when buildings are likely to become available for occupation?

Sir Reg Empey: Arrangements are progressing with our partners in this development, Prologis, incorporating detailed provisions for master planning, marketing and future development of infrastructure and building on the park. Only IDB-approved projects will be permitted to locate in the park, but it is expected that the first available unit will be ready for occupation by the end of this year.

Mr Ford: The business park is situated a short distance from the infamous Sandyknowes roundabout, just on the edge of the A8. It also sits immediately adjacent to the Bleach Green railway line. Has the Minister had any discussions with his Colleague, the Minister for Regional Development, on public transport links to the site?

Sir Reg Empey: I have not personally had a discussion with the Minister for Regional Development, but I know that the issue of railways has been examined very closely. Newtownabbey Borough Council has a particular interest

in it, as the site for a halt would be immediately adjacent to its council offices at Mossley Mill.

As the Member points out, there is a huge traffic problem already, and I am quite certain that the developers will be anxious to have the best possible links; a railway halt is one possibility. I know that that is strongly supported by Newtownabbey Borough Council.

Moyle Area: Business Development

2. **Mr Kane** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm his total commitment towards business development in the Moyle District Council area.

(AQO 939/00)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department's agencies, LEDU and IDB, are committed to working in partnership with the council, the district partnership and organisations such as CORE and Moyle Economic Development Forum to ensure that a holistic approach is adopted towards business development in the Moyle District Council area.

Mr Kane: Does the Minister recognise that the lack of manufacturing businesses in the Moyle area and the higher dependence on agriculture — estimated at making up 26% of the workforce — have contributed to higher unemployment and social deprivation? What is likely to be his Department's response in relation to targeting social need, and what has been the uptake of small business set-up grants from LEDU in the Moyle area compared to other council areas?

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware of the Member's strong views on those matters; they have been in evidence whenever I have visited the Moyle area, which I have done on several occasions recently. The Member is right to say that there is still a high dependence on agriculture and tourism. He and his colleagues on the council know that we are working hard on the Campbeltown issue and on other plans that, we hope, will help.

However, there is no disguising the fact that there is a lack of facilities in the manufacturing sector in that area. There is land available in the council area; there are 4.2 acres available at Leyland Road. The dependence on agriculture — an area of particular concern at the moment — highlights the difficulty of creating balanced economies in district council areas.

The situation in the Moyle area is not ideal. There is dependence on agriculture and tourism, both of which are subject to considerable fluctuation. However, LEDU has a number of companies in the Moyle District Council area which have received letters of offer and are doing reasonably well. I accept that the situation is less satisfactory, so far as IDB is concerned.

I assure the Member that there is no lack of commitment on the part of the Department or myself to

ensure, in conjunction with IDB and LEDU, that his district gets as fair a share as possible. However, we cannot dictate to companies where they should start up. I know that his council is working closely with LEDU, under the Business Start programme and other programmes, and I hope that that partnership will continue.

Mr O'Connor: As the Moyle District Council area adjoins my constituency, I too am concerned about the level of unemployment in that district. Does the Minister agree that, through the Causeway Coast and Glens tourism consortium, there is real potential for the creation of jobs in the tourism industry? Is he taking steps to reopen the Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry service?

Sir Reg Empey: I understand that the Moyle District Council area has the highest unemployment rate in Northern Ireland. It vies with Strabane for that unenviable title, so we must be conscious of the difficulties. The Causeway Coast consortium, as with many other self-help tourism efforts, deserves our support. We work closely with Moyle council, because some of the best potential tourist assets anywhere on this island are concentrated within that area, and I wish to see it prosper. The Glens, as well as the Giant's Causeway and other sites, present wonderful opportunities to bring visitors to the Province.

I accept that it is a TSN area and that it requires special treatment. My Colleague, Dr Farren, is particularly aware of the training and employment needs in the district. The tourist board will do all that it can to ensure that Moyle District Council area is given the best opportunities for employment creation.

Mr Leslie: I note what the Minister said about tourism. He is right in saying that the Giant's Causeway must be the number one tourist attraction in Ireland. However, it is not just a matter of attracting coaches filled with day trippers, as has been the case hitherto. To make a difference to the Moyle District Council area, we need visitors to stay overnight, preferably for a week or a fortnight. There are plenty of facilities for tourists, particularly along the coastline and in the Glens of Antrim, but such facilities must be properly promoted.

Can the Minister reassure the House that the all-Ireland tourist body will not simply be a device for sending one-day visitors by coach from the Republic? It should spend a sufficient proportion of its budget to ensure that there is a significant increase in the number of overnight visitors to the area.

Sir Reg Empey: The issue of overnight visitors is key. Coach trips are welcome, but recently visitors have been coming to Northern Ireland for the day and returning to the Republic to spend the night. This is partly due to the currency issue. Regrettably it is also because of other circumstances which make some overnight stays unsatisfactory. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is acutely aware of the problem. The bulk of profit from tourism — apart from people's visiting amenities — is generated by money spent

on accommodation, food and entertainment. Clearly, the potential spend is at a minimum with a day trip, and at a maximum with an overnight stay.

The hon Member is preaching to the converted in requiring that emphasis. We do our best to ensure that the accommodation is of the highest quality. We have had extensive talks with the coach companies, and some of them are increasing the number of coach visits to Northern Ireland. However, that tends to be at the shoulder of the season because of the problem we have in Northern Ireland in the summer. Until that problem is resolved, it will be difficult to achieve the desired level of overnight stays.

Consumer Strategy

3. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his policy on the new consumer strategy. (AQO 934/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Creating and implementing a new consumer strategy, as foreshadowed in the draft Programme for Government, will involve a two-tier approach. My Department will prepare a Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment strategy to focus on consumer issues and areas directly relevant to it. I propose to use the strategy as a template to address consumer areas in which other Departments have interests and where there is the potential for a joined-up government approach, thereby creating a consumer strategy for Northern Ireland.

Dr Birnie: What steps will be taken to ensure that young people have increased awareness of their rights as consumers?

Sir Reg Empey: The strategy will contain a number of key themes — increased education on information for consumers, improved access to high-quality advice, improved representation for consumers, promoting consumer orientation of businesses and better communications and understanding of consumer affairs. The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland has an exceptional web site that recently won national awards. That is a direct way of communicating with young people, more of whom have a propensity to use the Internet.

Placing the consumer strategy in schools is another area that I am keen to investigate. Many young people are specifically and deliberately targeted by commercial organisations and are influenced in some controversial areas. The question is a very interesting one, and I will ensure that it is drawn to the attention of my Department, the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and the Trading Standards Branch.

Small to Medium Enterprises

4. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline how locally promoted small to

medium enterprises (SMEs) can best be served by the new single economic development agency for Northern Ireland. (AQO 914/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Northern Ireland is primarily a small firms economy. This will be reflected in the priority given to small to medium-sized enterprises in the new agency. The agency will play a key strategic role in small business development. I envisage that a significant proportion of the agency's resources will be targeted at promoting innovation and best practice in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's answer. Will he ensure that the new development agency — through its area officers — is adequately manned, to ensure that client executives who work with SMEs are not based in Belfast only?

2.45 pm

Does he accept the merit of having client executives based in particular territories and working from area offices? Some in the SME sector feel that the client executive in the manufacturing and engineering sectors has to work out of Belfast and travel 80 miles to Tyrone or Fermanagh. People feel that they are a wee bit left out and that communication and consultation is disrupted.

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware of the point made by a number of Members about the agency. I give a commitment that the new agency will have a regional dimension; there should be no doubt about that. The regional dimension will involve something other than the current office structure of LEDU. The IDB, as Members know, does not have offices outside Belfast. Therefore, to achieve any coherence in helping a local region, the agency must provide a comprehensive service to potential customers in the different areas within that region. While the detail has not been worked out, the commitment to have a regional dimension is absolute. For that commitment to be meaningful the agency, through its regional offices, must be capable of delivering a holistic service to the community.

Mr Hussey: I welcome the Minister's comment that the focus of the new agency will be to help with innovation. I also welcome his remarks regarding the regional representation of the new agency. I am sure he will accept that the greatest potential for innovation is in our small and medium-sized businesses. These businesses need assistance to turn a dream or a workable idea into a reality, thus generating employment.

Can the Minister assure me that established and emerging local firms will receive at least the same attention as the large multinationals he hopes to attract?

Sir Reg Empey: "Team West Tyrone" is very obvious. Mr Gibson is not here, but he may emerge at any moment.

Northern Ireland is primarily a small and medium-sized enterprise economy, as the Member knows. Well over 90% of our employers are small to medium-size businesses.

It follows that unless we have a strategy to address their specific needs, we will fail to deal with the potential for growth. In other developing economies — and, indeed, in the United States — the growth in employment has not been in Fortune 500 companies; it has been in small to medium-size enterprises.

I assure the Member that, despite a lot of publicity inward investment gets, indigenous or small companies create the vast majority of new jobs. In an economy, you need inward investment to ensure that you bring in new ideas, new scales and international connections.

I assure the Member that the emphasis is on ensuring that small to medium-sized enterprises have the capabilities, are competitive, are provided with the capacity to function and the tools to do so. We are trying to do that through rolling out broad-band technology, the creation of a new agency, training and through a whole range of technical assistance, which is currently given by the Industrial Research and Technology Unit.

Therefore the Member can be assured that the emphasis will not be largely or exclusively on the attraction of inward investment. It will be across the board because that is where new jobs will be created.

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

I am very encouraged by the Minister's answers. Will he consider that the Foyle constituency merits the location of a regional office to service the growth of the SME sector? I am sure he is aware that that sector in Foyle suffered as a result of the closure of the IDB offices.

Sir Reg Empey: I have repeatedly made the commitment to the House — and I reiterated it a short time ago — that the new agency will have a regional focus. I am reluctant to say exactly where those offices might be. A range of considerations must be taken into account when making those decisions. I do not propose to tell the hon Member today what the specific situation will be in the Foyle area. All I will say is that the agency will have a strong regional focus.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Given the catastrophe that the agriculture industry is facing, I am sure that the Minister will agree that the only possible and viable strength that communities in rural districts have will lie largely with tourism. That being so, can he assure me that those small and medium-sized businesses linked to tourism will be given the utmost consideration when they put their plans forward?

Sir Reg Empey: I agree with the hon Member that the industry currently faces a catastrophe. No doubt he will be aware that areas over which I have responsibility — namely, the processing sector — are also facing a serious situation. While we sit, many people are idle, and companies have been effectively suspended, unable to send products out of Northern Ireland or to process

them. Therefore I appreciate acutely the significance of the Member's point.

With regard to tourism, the Assembly treats it as a business. That is why it falls under my Department and not under the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, as on the mainland. The Member will also be aware that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's business support services will be transferred into the new agency which is being established to deal with all economic matters. That is being done to ensure high quality and consistency in service.

I give the Member the assurance that he seeks: we regard tourism businesses as a very viable alternative. Rural development, as he is aware, is one of the key themes emerging throughout the European Community, and it applies significantly to his constituency. Subject to market conditions, we will deal with those companies and provide them with the best possible assistance available.

'Best of Northern Ireland' Exhibition

6. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm that he intends to be present at the 'Best of Northern Ireland' exhibition at the Houses of Parliament; and to make a statement. (AQO 938/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I understand why the hon Member might have some interest in this question. I wish to thank Mr Roy Beggs Snr for securing the opportunity to host the exhibition and confirm that it is my intention to attend. The exhibition will provide an excellent opportunity to promote Northern Ireland and, in particular, to emphasise examples of innovation and excellence drawn from all aspects of the Province's life. I look forward to the exhibition later this week.

Mr Beggs: On the basis of previous exhibitions, what practical benefits does the Minister foresee coming from it?

Sir Reg Empey: Mr Deputy Speaker, you may be aware that a ballot is periodically held in the House of Commons to provide Members with the opportunity to host exhibitions in the House. Mr Roy Beggs Snr was successful in that regard. We will use this as a major opportunity to market a range of activities in Northern Ireland. It will be held from 26 February to 2 March in the Upper Waiting Room, and I hope that the Prime Minister will formally open it.

Our objective is to give a positive and forward-looking image of Northern Ireland to a wide variety of Members of Parliament and invited guests including potential investors, key influencers, existing investors and trade contacts.

Also, IDB will be helping Mr Beggs host a number of events alongside the exhibition in which we will network with people whom we consider to be potential investors and with people who are interested in doing business. It is important that we present a positive and constructive

image to the business community at every opportunity that arises, and I believe that this exhibition provides such a platform.

North/South Gas Pipeline

8. **Mr Close** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline proposals to build a North/South natural gas pipeline. (AQO 905/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The position regarding a South/North natural gas pipeline remains as stated in my reply to question AQO 473/00. I have recently received an initial proposal for a South/North pipeline flowing from the Republic to Northern Ireland which is currently being assessed by my Department and the gas regulator.

Mr Close: I thank the Minister for his reply, but does he not agree that it would have been more in Northern Ireland's interest to have this pipe and the commencement of the work running North/South rather than the reverse?

Sir Reg Empey: I am inclined to agree. However, one has to understand that the gas industry in Northern Ireland is privatised, and the function of my Department is to regulate along with the gas regulator. We can only react and give licences if a specific proposal is put to us. So far, Bord Gais in the Republic has put forward a proposal, which we are currently evaluating. It is the only proposal that has formally been put before us, and we will have to deal with that as best we can.

The Republic's decision about where it is going to get its new gas supplies has been delayed on a number of occasions in the last six weeks, and that has slowed things down. There is also the question of the levy and various other matters. All I can say is that a firm proposal which has been put to us is currently being evaluated, and the hon Member knows only too well that we are very keen to see a positive resolution with regard to both North/South and north-west.

Mr McGrady: In view of the Minister's remarks to Mr Close, can he indicate what progress has been made in negotiations between the director general of the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas (OFREG) and Premier Transmissions on the granting of a gas licence for the south-eastern region of Northern Ireland? What steps will the Department take to encourage potential developers to expand this much needed energy into other areas of the distribution networks? Are there any applications or negotiations ongoing to provide natural gas to the south-east of Northern Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: The answer to the last part of the Member's question is "Yes". Regarding the negotiations, I personally have had two meetings with representatives of Bord Gais in the last six weeks. Discussions are ongoing. So far as Premier Transmissions is concerned, I have no proposal from that company before me at present. The

only one we have is from Bord Gais, and we can only deal with the proposal that we have.

Of course, I have met Premier and other private companies on a number of occasions, and it is no secret that I personally — and it is the Department's preferential choice — would prefer a North/South pipeline which would supply power stations in the Greater Dublin area and a north-west power station which would supply Coolkeeragh and allow us to feed the towns en route, both south-east and north-west. However, I repeat that we are only able to deal with an application if it is in front of us, and only one is currently being evaluated.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister believe that it is feasible to have both a north-west pipeline and a pipeline that goes to the south-east with a North/South interconnector? If he does not believe that that is feasible, what is his preference? With regard to the value to the economy and the numbers of people using it, the south-east pipeline would be perceived by people living in that area as being of equal or greater value than that of the north-west pipeline.

3.00 pm

Sir Reg Empey: A meaningful energy market and a competitive gas market are both necessary. I want to see an integrated market because one power station consumes 20 times more gas than all the domestic consumption en route to it. Without the base load, the economics of any pipeline are severely restricted. To use an analogy, it is like having a shopping centre with no anchor tenant.

There is a scheme available. However, no formal application has been made to provide a north-west pipeline to feed Coolkeeragh, which would allow the towns en route to access natural gas. Similarly, the departmental view is that a North/South pipeline should run from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland to feed new power station developments in the Greater Dublin area, thereby having base loads at each end of the two pipes.

That would also create a unified network across the island because the Corrib gas field, which is to come on-stream, would be able to sell into Northern Ireland's market and we would be able to sell into the Republic of Ireland's. There would then be two pipelines — one to Ballylumford from Scotland, and the existing one from Scotland to the Republic of Ireland. That is the ideal solution, but the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is not in control of matters because it is up to the private companies to make their applications. The Department can only respond on receipt of those applications.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1, 6, 12 and 20, standing in the names of Mr Dallat, Mrs Courtney, Dr McDonnell and Mr Neeson, will receive written answers.

Question 13, standing in the name of Mr Roger Hutchinson, has been withdrawn.

Executive Programme Funds

2. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the bids made by his Department for Executive programme funds. (AQO 900/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): The Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment has submitted seven bids for Executive programme funds. They are bids for: increasing provision for adult basic education; improving physical access to further education and higher education institutions for disabled people; improving links between business and education; a new major further education building project; developing on-line service delivery and job centres (there are two separate bids for that); and developing childminding networks. Those bids amount to £23.48 million over three years.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for that information. Which of those bids does he consider to be a priority?

Dr Farren: All the bids are of considerable importance; and none would have been made had it not been so. None of them can be regarded lightly. However, my priority is adult basic education, and I am sure that many Members, if not all, appreciate the urgent need to address deficits in basic literacy and numeracy. Those have been highlighted by international and domestic reports in recent years. Improved physical access for the disabled at further and higher education institutions and the improvement of links between Northern Ireland business and education partnerships also deserve priority.

One in four adults in Northern Ireland has some literacy or numeracy difficulty.

If we are serious about promoting social inclusion and developing a fairer society, this problem must be addressed effectively. It is a major barrier to social and economic inclusion, which is not always acknowledged. We also need to have regard to developments in Great Britain and the Republic in which substantial investments have been made. I trust that this bid will be successful and that we will not only avoid falling behind our neighbours in terms of their provision but will advance quite rapidly towards eliminating the deficits among so many in our adult population.

Further Education Colleges: Enrolment

3. **Mr Berry** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to give his assessment of current enrolment at further education colleges. (AQO 884/00)

Dr Farren: I am pleased to inform the Member and the House that enrolments in further education colleges have risen to 89,379 in 1999-2000. That is an increase of 3,000 on the previous year.

Information on the current academic year is not yet available, as students are still enrolling in some courses. However, we can regard the increases that have been taking place as significant and very satisfactory. They indicate the desire and determination of school leavers and those of maturer years to avail of the training and educational opportunities available in further education colleges.

Mr Berry: I thank Minister Farren for his announcement. Is he aware of the tension in higher and further education colleges over the underfunding of students? Does he have any plans to review that situation?

Dr Farren: In recent months we have frequently addressed, in one way or another, the questions associated with student financial support. Members will be aware that I have gone to considerable lengths to emphasise the importance I place on the further education sector, in the House and elsewhere. I have also voiced my concern to ensure that students in the sector are as adequately supported as possible.

Before Christmas, I announced new arrangements for student financial support. These include significant improvements and are now the subject of detailed analysis and determination by my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel. I trust that they will be seen as significant improvements for students in the further education sector.

Mr McGrady: Is the Minister aware that the current enrolment for full-time HND courses in the East Down Institute of Further and Higher Education is restricted to building engineering? Does he agree that with the developments in commerce courses must be provided in computing, information technology and software engineering if the local community is to sustain itself economically? Will the Minister reconsider the restriction on full-time courses and allow the East Down Institute of Further and Higher Education to expand its curriculum and, therefore, its enrolment?

Dr Farren: Over recent years, additional places have been made available in the further education sector to enable colleges to provide higher education courses such as HNDs.

The allocation of additional places to particular colleges must take account of the criteria set down to enable colleges to indicate clearly that they are in a position to deliver on particular courses. In 1999 the then Department of Education awarded the East Down Institute 32 full-time higher education places over the next two years in the vocational area of construction.

That was the first year in which the Department was able to allocate full-time higher education places to the

institute. All colleges approved to deliver full-time higher education must operate within an allocated number of places known as the maximum student number — MaSN, as it is generally called. It has been noted that the institute has so far used 16 of the 32 places over the two-year period. The institute's allocation formed part of the additional 600 places allocated to the further education sector following the comprehensive spending review. In addition, a further cohort of up to 100 HND places in the vocational areas of software engineering and electronics have been introduced in the current year. Any further increase will be dependent on additional resources becoming available and being distributed in the light of existing priorities. It will also be dependent on the colleges meeting the criteria that have been set down, thus demonstrating that they have the capacity to provide courses in any particular area.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answers. I notice that he has placed top priority on the basic skills element of further and higher education. Will the Minister assure the House that his Department will focus its efforts upon colleges such as the East Antrim Institute for Further and Higher Education, to enable them to expand the numbers on programmes such as LEAF? That initiative is targeted at clients in marginalised estates in Newtownabbey, who are currently unable to access the main college campus, so that they may benefit from any economic expansion at the Global Point site in Newtownabbey.

Dr Farren: In all the further education colleges that I have had the privilege of visiting so far — I am trying to include a visit to every college in the current academic year — I have been impressed by the extent to which they are involved in outreach of the kind referred to by Mr Robinson. In particular, I have been impressed with the outreach aimed at providing courses in basic skills and, beyond that, in providing opportunities to access further and higher education — particularly for those who have not had these opportunities before.

The Department is committed to encouraging all the colleges to maintain and expand upon this provision. Obviously — as in all these respects — resources are critical in determining the extent to which the provision can be made. However, it is provision that is being made very effectively by many colleges, and — I am pleased to say — many people are benefiting from the very determined outreach approach that colleges in all parts of Northern Ireland are making in this important matter.

Skill Shortages

5. **Mr Carrick** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the steps he is taking to address the external skills shortages identified in the Northern Ireland skills monitoring survey 2000. (AQO 886/00)

9. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail what areas of skill shortage he has identified and to outline the steps he is taking to address them. (AQO 880/00)

15. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail discussions he has undertaken with specific employment sectors on the issue of skills shortages. (AQO 903/00)

Dr Farren: With your agreement, Mr Deputy Speaker, I intend to answer questions 5, 9 and 15 together, as they all touch on similar issues.

The recent skills monitoring report provides essential information that will assist in targeting resources on specific industry sectors and occupations where skills needs exist. It is one of a number of sources of information brought together by the skills task force.

3.15 pm

In addressing skills needs, I meet regularly with industry representatives on a sectoral, cross-sectoral and individual basis. As a consequence, a range of initiatives has been put in place, including additional targeted higher and further education places and additional modern apprenticeships. I shall remind Members of a response that I made on one occasion regarding the 'Back to your Future' initiative which my Department launched before Christmas. This initiative was designed to put current job opportunities before expatriates in the IT and telecom sectors — particularly for those with a number of years of experience. We are experiencing a considerable shortage of experienced personnel in a number of our enterprises and are anxious to encourage our own people who have these skills to come back and avail of these opportunities. Perhaps Members could play a role by bringing news of new opportunities to the attention of acquaintances who possess such skills. These openings are available on an unprecedented level, offering worthwhile career opportunities and quality of life.

Mr Carrick: The Minister has referred to the Northern Ireland Skills Monitoring Survey, 2000. Of all "difficult to fill" vacancies, 43% are based on either a lack of practical skills, a lack of technical skills, a lack of qualifications or a lack of work experience. What immediate steps can the Minister take to address the more prevalent skill shortages? For example, the construction industry has a shortage of 60%; business services suffer a shortage of 56%; and the manufacturing sector is crippled by a shortage of 47%. In addition, the most prevalent external skill shortages in the associated professional and technical occupations amount to 72%. There is a shortage of 52% among managerial and administrative occupations.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Dr Farren: I compliment the Member for his familiarity with the report. Lest percentages deceive us, the report identifies the fact that only approximately 20% to 21%

of surveyed employers reported difficulties in recruiting for their vacancies. Therefore, a significant majority are not encountering levels of difficulty of the kind that the Member has drawn to our attention. Of those employers who are encountering difficulties in filling vacancies, some have experienced acute levels of difficulty.

With regard to the immediate steps we are taking, we are in constant contact with the various sectoral training councils, and we work closely with them on all of the training programs. We are also in regular contact with the further education colleges and the universities. Therefore numbers are increased in accordance with the information available to us in respect of training at all levels. We must view our difficulties in the context of the pressures that arise on the labour market — not just internally in Northern Ireland, but also those created by the situations that have emerged in the South.

The need for specific skills in the construction industry has obliged businesses to seek workers from far beyond the shores of Ireland and Britain. The pressures and the associated levels of remuneration cannot be ignored, given the effect that they have on our internal labour market. We should not be complacent; rather we should continue to monitor and address the matter and work with the training providers to ensure that we are meeting the needs of all sectors of the economy to the best of our ability.

Mr Poots: I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education Committee for answering the first part of my question.

Does he recognise that the greatest barrier to eradicating unemployment in Northern Ireland is not an unwillingness among investors to come into the Province? Rather, it is the fact that they cannot get people who are skilled to do the job. What does he intend to do to get unemployed people into a position in which they are able to begin active employment?

Dr Farren: We have to be careful about how we describe the scale of the difficulties. The difficulties relate specifically to several expanding sectors of the economy. We need to provide these sectors with the skills of experienced people. That is what motivates Attract Back-style programmes. In a few weeks' time I hope to be in New York at a major jobs fair, where companies from Northern Ireland and the Republic will draw the attention of our expatriates in that part of the world to the opportunities now available, particularly in the IT sector.

Members should examine the range of training programmes which we provide, directly and indirectly, through our colleges and universities, at basic NVQ level and above. A considerable amount of effort is being made to ensure that we have skilled workers available. There are tailor-made programmes which can be put together under the Bridge to Employment initiative. Employers who identify particular needs can be assisted

by the Training and Employment Agency to recruit, and have trained for them, workers who can have a very good opportunity to obtain employment in those enterprises associated with the Bridge to Employment initiative programmes.

We have taken further initiatives by holding discussions with some of the most recent investors, during which we asked them to identify their skills needs and provide in-service courses. When workers are recruited they are guaranteed opportunities on training programmes — with the support of their employers — to acquire certain skills. Such initiatives, and many others, demonstrate a very clear determination on the part of my Department to meet the skills needs of all investors, indigenous or foreign.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that quality training, particularly in craft and practical skills, can only be provided over a longer term? The current short-term training schemes do not meet the needs of young unemployed people or of the long-term unemployed.

Will the Minister consider increasing resources for modern apprenticeships to provide more worthwhile, value-added training, especially for young people? I am aware that Shorts Bombardier has an excellent training scheme in engineering and technical skills. Perhaps this could be replicated across Northern Ireland.

Dr Farren: The Member and others in the House should be assured that the formal training programmes available are accessible within an agreed national framework — one which involves the employers through the various sector training councils. The Member mentioned the case of Shorts Bombardier. These courses are designed from the outset to make sure that they meet the needs of the sectors or enterprises.

I hesitate to suggest that any of the courses are inadequate in terms of the needs of the particular sectors or industries. Where there are inadequacies, they tend to be revealed in the course of ongoing monitoring of the achievements and skills levels of those who acquire their NVQ awards and those who complete modern apprenticeships. Any shortcomings will, I trust, be quickly identified and addressed, so that we can guarantee to existing and future employers a workforce trained and skilled to the highest standards of the sectors they are preparing to enter.

Mr Speaker: We are not making particularly good progress through the questions, so I ask Members to be as concise as possible in the last five minutes or so.

Dr Birnie: I note the Minister's comments about shortages of experienced workers. Does he agree that on occasions employers are their own worst enemies because they impose arbitrary restrictions with respect to age, practising a form of ageism? They exclude applicants who are aged over 25, 35 or 45. Other employers demand graduates when a sub-degree level qualification would be adequate for the job in hand.

Dr Farren: I agree up to a point with the Member's comments with respect to the approaches adopted by certain employers. In the course of recent surveys it has been identified that some employers, when seeking to recruit, demand a higher level of qualification than is necessary. Many graduates have had to emigrate because they could not obtain employment here. The oversupply of graduates may well have conditioned employers to seek graduates rather than workers with other levels of skills. That is a matter which employers need to address.

With respect to the issue of ageism, employers are encouraged to follow the guidance in the voluntary code of practice on age diversity in employment which was circulated in June 1999 by the then Department of Economic Development. My Department also helps older workers back into employment through New Deal 50+. Members are probably aware that there is currently no legislation on discrimination in employment on grounds of age, although we could expect this to be considered in the context of the proposed single Equality Bill.

Disabled People: Employment

7. **Rev Dr William McCrea** asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the steps he is taking to help people who become disabled whilst in employment to keep their jobs.

(AQO 916/00)

3.30 pm

Dr Farren: My Department's disablement advisory service provides a range of help to people in these circumstances. Financial and practical support is available through the access to work and employment support programmes. Advice is also provided by disablement employment advisers based in jobcentres and supported by occupational psychologists.

Rev Dr William McCrea: The Programme for Government states that the disabled are to be given special consideration. Does the Minister not understand that many of the disabled — and I am speaking about those who become disabled while in employment — feel disadvantaged and therefore need and deserve more positive protection?

Dr Farren: I have to confess that I am not aware of cases in which those who became disabled in the course of employment were not able to avail of support. As I indicated in my response, there are forms of support available to them, and I trust that these are being drawn to their attention and that employers themselves are aware of the kind of support that can be made available. Certainly if there were any failure to provide that kind of support, I would be very concerned. If the Member has particular cases in mind, I would be only too pleased to receive the details and follow them up in correspondence or more directly with him.

Mr McMenamin: Is the Department in a position to meet all demands for disabled access?

Dr Farren: I take it that the Member refers to the bid for Executive programme funds, which I mentioned earlier when I said that the Department was making a special bid for additional funds in order to ensure that our further and higher education institutions have effective and adequate access for the disabled. Obviously the fact that we are making such a bid indicates that the situation is not yet a completely satisfactory one. We trust that, in a very short period, we will be able to remove the current backlogs. I am aware that many institutions are already taking steps on their own initiative to ensure that disabled access is available.

Mr Speaker: Order. Will the Minister please bring his remarks to a close. We are now beyond the time allotted for questions to him.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Speaker: Questions 4, 11 and 14, standing in the names of Dr McDonnell, Mr Neeson and Mr Dallat, will receive written answers. Question 8, standing in the name of Mr Roger Hutchinson, has been withdrawn.

Urban Renewal (Rathfriland)

1. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his commitment towards the urban renewal of Rathfriland.

(AQO 892/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow):

While my Department has no immediate proposals for the urban renewal of Rathfriland, I point out that, in partnership with the International Fund for Ireland, over £800,000 was provided for the community regeneration project in Rathfriland which was opened in 1998. My Department's input was £350,775.

Mr Bradley: I thank the Minister for the figures. In the past, Rathfriland was one of south Down's most buoyant towns, and a wide section of the community sold its produce and purchased what it needed there. Unfortunately this is no longer the case. Commercial properties are closing weekly, and fears are being expressed about violent undercurrents that are posing a threat to an element of society in the area. Does the Minister agree that Rathfriland and other such deprived areas would benefit socially from a more buoyant local economy?

Mr Morrow: The quick answer to that is yes. In Rathfriland, as in other towns across the Province, grant aid of up to 30% is available to owners for the refurbishment of derelict private property under the International Fund for Ireland's urban development programme, which is administered by the Department.

Antisocial Behaviour (Antrim Area): Action against Tenants

2. **Mr Clyde** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of actions that have been taken against tenants in relation to antisocial behaviour in the Antrim area in the last 12 months. (AQO 909/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, whose chief executive has advised that, in the Antrim district during the period from 1 April 2000 to 9 February 2001, one notice seeking possession arising from the tenants' antisocial behaviour has been served and that a further 31 cases are at different stages of investigation. While the Housing Executive has limited scope for action in some cases of antisocial behaviour, such as noise and pet nuisance, 38 such cases have been referred to Antrim Borough Council's environmental health department for action.

Mr Clyde: What action does the Housing Executive take in cases of antisocial behaviour?

Mr Morrow: The Housing Executive usually tries to deal with antisocial behaviour through mediation, using its neighbourhood disputes system. However, when mediation does not produce the desired result, the Housing Executive has a range of available options. The Housing Executive has also set up a central antisocial behaviour unit, which includes an officer seconded from the RUC, who will help district offices to deal with the worst cases.

Dr Hendron: When paramilitaries put drug pushers out of their homes, these unconvicted drug pushers can go to the top of Housing Executive lists. Does the Minister agree that the correct way to deal with such people is through a Housing Executive antisocial order, so that if these people leave their homes, they do not go to the top of a Housing Executive list in a nearby area?

Mr Morrow: I thank Dr Hendron for his question, which has also been raised by a number of other Members, both orally and in writing. We propose to bring forward new housing legislation which we hope will address this issue adequately. The present housing legislation is not only inadequate for dealing with this situation; it is also intolerable and unacceptable.

Mr C Murphy: A Cheann Comhairle, the Minister will be aware that problems with troublesome tenants who cause difficulties for their neighbours is not confined to the Antrim area; it is widespread throughout all constituencies. Will he encourage the Housing Executive's mediation facility that he has mentioned to deal constructively with community restorative justice groups in areas that are trying to tackle the problem of antisocial behaviour?

Mr Morrow: The Housing Executive deals actively with different groups and organisations on antisocial behaviour, which is like a cancer running through our whole system. I have had direct representation from tenants who

approached me as the Minister with responsibility. I know that it is of little comfort to them when I say that I have sympathy with their plight. They do not want sympathy; they want action. I reiterate what I said to Dr Hendron: that I hope that the new Housing Bill will deal effectively with this problem. I had hoped that the Bill would be at a more advanced stage. The fault does not lie with me or with my Department; it lies elsewhere. However, I trust that the Bill will come before the House in the near future.

Disability Living Allowance: Appeals

3. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how long it takes to process appeal papers in respect of disability living allowance; and to make a statement. (AQO 882/00)

Mr Morrow: There are currently delays of six to eight months in the resolution of disability living allowance appeals. Owing to the introduction of new legislation in October 1999, there was an unprecedented increase in the number of disability living allowance appeals being received by the Department, and there is a backlog of work. In response to that, the Department implemented a recovery plan and recruited additional staff to deal with the extra work. Those plans are beginning to result in a reduction in the backlog, but it will be some time before service returns to normal. It is prudent that I apologise to all customers affected by those problems.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his positive reply. I know that he shares — as do most Assembly Members — our concern about the six to eight months' delay with appeals for disability living allowance. Those who suffer from that delay are disabled people and people with family problems who are without that money for a lengthy period and find it extremely difficult. The Minister has indicated that he has put additional personnel on the job. Can he mirror the social services unit that is specifically dedicated — not seconded to do a part-time job — to eradicating this unacceptable delay for those sensitive people whose welfare, literally, is dependent on receiving their benefits when they are due? He is sympathetic, but we must take more specific action.

Mr Morrow: The Member is right. I am more than sympathetic. We have taken decisive action to address the problem, and we hope that we are making a definite impact. I have some figures that might interest the Member and the House. There are currently 857 appeals to be dealt with by the Disability Living Allowance Branch. The number is decreasing steadily, and it is estimated that it will be reduced to normal levels by mid-summer. There are almost 1,400 to be listed for hearing at a formal appeal; that makes a total of 2,257 outstanding appeals. I trust that that will, in some way, convey to the Member and the House the volume of the workload which we are dealing with effectively. Better days lie ahead. I hope that for the Member, for the House and for me.

Mr Close: In relation to problems over disability living allowance, what steps is the Minister taking to eradicate what have been referred to as “clerical errors” in the processing of the forms? Does he agree that perhaps a simplification of the form given to those seeking that benefit would go a long way towards eradicating the errors, and thus the appeal process, which he currently has to deal with?

Mr Morrow: That is not as simple as the Member makes out. It would be much easier for me to stand here and say that we had a system that was so simple that everyone’s case would be dealt with overnight. I wish that that was the case, but many situations must be taken into account. Let me reassure the Member that extensive overtime is being worked by the appeals tribunal. Moreover, the number of appeal writers has been increased by over 100% — from 15 to 35. Following a training period for the last group of 10, additional staff will start to write appeals from this month.

The action taken to manage the build-up in the appeals process centres is as follows: six additional staff are being recruited; overtime working has been approved; cross-training of medical panel members has taken place; the average number of weekly sessions for all benefit-related appeals has increased from 79 to 93; and additional, legally-qualified and medical, panel members will be recruited through the Northern Ireland Court Service. There can be only one impact, and that is that the situation will get better.

Mr Speaker: The House will note that Members who take the trouble to get their names on the list often find that we do not reach them. Therefore I am trying to adhere to the list as much as possible and move on. Mr Ervine is not able to be here for question 5.

Hawthorn Grove, Carrickfergus: Housing Executive Redevelopment

6. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Social Development to advise (a) of any proposals by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to redevelop Hawthorn Grove, Carrickfergus and (b) when redevelopment plans can be expected to be made public. (AQO 935/00)

3.45 pm

Mr Morrow: There are at present no plans to redevelop Hawthorn Grove, Carrickfergus. The Housing Executive’s chief executive has advised that the bungalows at Hawthorn Grove are proposed for demolition. This decision was based on the extensive vandalism that has taken place, the fact that the dwellings have been subject to severe oil pollution and absence of demand in the area for that specific type of accommodation. This line of action will ensure that the site can be thoroughly decontaminated, leaving it available for future development.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister accept that two years of disrepair is an unacceptable length of time before consideration is given? There must be a more streamlined system for addressing smaller schemes. This facility has not generated possible rent income for that time. Secondly, does he accept that there is a need for disabled pensioners’ two-bedroomed bungalows in Carrickfergus, and will consideration be given to allowing such development on this site?

Mr Morrow: The Member is correct in saying that there is a high demand for accommodation with two bedrooms or more, but not for these single-bedroomed bungalows. I agree that the consideration time is too long and that it is unacceptable. I want to look at that very carefully with the Housing Executive to ensure that the situation there is speeded up. I will certainly take it on board.

Unfit Housing

7. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Social Development to state the current level of unfit housing in (a) Northern Ireland and (b) County Fermanagh. (AQO 890/00)

Mr Morrow: The latest available figures from the 1996 Northern Ireland house conditions survey show that there were 43,970 unfit dwellings — representing 7.3 % of the total housing stock. In the Fermanagh District Council area the figure for unfit dwellings was 3,510 — representing 17.5% of the total housing stock.

Mr Gallagher: It is a serious and unfortunate situation that unfit housing is worse in Fermanagh than in anywhere else in Ireland, England, Scotland or Wales. The Minister, I am sure, is aware that many of those who occupy unfit housing in County Fermanagh do so because they made minor mistakes when they were filling in their application forms. This resulted in the issue of closing orders on those properties. The closing orders, as we know, are now preventing some needy cases from making fresh applications for replacement dwellings. Does the Minister agree that in order to tackle the issue of unfit housing effectively in Fermanagh, there is a compelling case for a review of all the closing orders that have been issued? Will he direct the Housing Executive to get that review underway now?

Mr Morrow: By coincidence, I represent the same constituency as Mr Gallagher, and I am acutely aware of the situation that prevails in County Fermanagh. According to housing surveys, County Fermanagh is the worst area for housing. The most recent house conditions survey, from 1996, shows that Fermanagh has the highest percentage of unfit houses in any district council area. However, the same survey shows that that situation is being remedied in Fermanagh at a faster rate than in any other area. Surveys are carried out on a five-yearly basis, and I expect that when the next survey is published in

2001 it will show a considerable reduction in the unfit housing situation there.

Mrs Carson: Chapter 2 of the Programme for Government, to which the Minister's Department has signed up, recognises that poor housing contributes to social exclusion, and it commits the Executive Committee to better co-ordination in the fields of housing, social security, education, training programmes and social services. Can the Minister tell me what contribution he is making to that improved co-ordination?

Mr Morrow: The Member may well remember that I am on record as saying that I believe that a good home is not a privilege but a basic right. That is the position that I take. My Department is not shy about making bids for funding for housing. We have in fact produced considerable sums of money to enable the Housing Executive to carry out its repairs and maintenance programme for the incoming year.

We also put in place the smallest percentage rent increases for over a decade. I believe that those are the real ways to treat people who are marginalised and socially deprived. As a result of the actions that I and my Department have taken, housing will get better, not only in Fermanagh, but across the whole of Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Social Development Committee (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I accept that the Minister made bids for funding. Does he agree that we need to eradicate, not reduce, the intolerable level of unfitness? Were his bids successful?

Mr Morrow: The Member is a member of the Social Development Committee, and she is very well aware of what our bids were and whether they were successful or unsuccessful. She knows perfectly well that they were successful. If any Members think that I can eradicate house unfitness in seven months, they are not living in the real world. I have inherited a housing situation that has been developing over the past 30 years. Those who want to be realistic know that that matter can not be solved overnight. For some 27 years I have been championing the case for Housing Executive tenants in Dungannon District Council. As an estate agent, I have also been working for 30 years in housing. Therefore, as I have said before on the Floor, I do have a little knowledge of housing. I know the complexities and difficulties, and I am quite determined that my Department will be at the cutting edge in tackling the housing situation.

Housing Executive Structure

10. **Sir John Gorman** asked the Minister for Social Development to give his assessment of the future structure of the Housing Executive. (AQO 930/00)

Mr Morrow: At this time I do not envisage any significant changes to the role and functions of the Housing Executive. It will remain as the single comprehensive housing authority in Northern Ireland. I am, however, continually looking at ways to be innovative in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation.

Sir John Gorman: The Minister is aware that when the Minister of Finance and Personnel was speaking on the Budget, he described a study that was going on in the Department for Social Development. May I recommend that the Minister accelerate that and produce its results, having confirmed that it exists.

Can he consider how it was that in the 1980s and 1990s the Housing Executive was able to attract very considerable sums from the private sector, which it is prevented from doing now in the case of house building?

Mr Morrow: I can only repeat that we are always looking at ways and means of being as innovative and imaginative as possible with regard to the Housing Executive. That is something that we will keep in the forefront, and, in consultation with the Social Development Committee, we will report on it from time to time. I can only reiterate that we will look continually at the situation and that we envisage the Housing Executive as the single, comprehensive housing authority in Northern Ireland for the foreseeable future.

Mr Shannon: What role does the Housing Executive see for the community groups in the different council areas? Can he confirm that the Housing Executive is considering giving them a bigger say in the estates that they represent, even to the level of considering funding for community groups to look after some of the tenders for work in those estates? Has the Housing Executive considered that matter, is it considering the matter currently, and what are its intentions?

Mr Morrow: Members should wait to see the new Housing Bill. The Housing Executive continually consults with community groups, housing organisations and associations. We can have a meaningful debate about housing in Northern Ireland when the Bill is published. It is not helpful to speculate, and Members should not speculate on speculation.

Mr O'Connor: The Minister has mentioned the new Housing Bill several times today. Can he indicate when he intends to bring the Bill before the House?

Mr Morrow: I had hoped to put the Bill before the House before the summer recess, but that is unlikely now. We have lost four months, and, as I have said, the fault is not my Department's or mine. I regret that four precious and important months have been lost because others could not give direct answers to direct questions. Therefore it is highly unlikely that the Bill will come before the House before the summer recess.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

12. **Mr Berry** asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm if he has made an application for extra funding to extend the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme; and to make a statement. (AQO 921/00)

Mr Morrow: The first year's budget for the new domestic energy efficiency scheme has been increased from £2.88 million to £4 million. If additional funding is required because uptake is greater than anticipated — and if work can be undertaken by installers — a bid for extra funds will be made during the financial year.

Last Friday, simultaneously with England, Scotland and Wales, I launched the United Kingdom fuel poverty strategy. This consultation document outlines the commitment of the Government and the devolved administrations to the eradication of fuel poverty as far as is practical by 2010. The domestic energy efficiency scheme will be the main mechanism by which Northern Ireland hopes to reach that target.

Mr Berry: How long will it take to implement the changes?

Mr Morrow: We hope to launch the scheme in the spring. This period is difficult to gauge because we are not sure what the level of uptake will be. We will be in a better position to ascertain that once the domestic energy efficiency scheme has been launched.

We are trying to eradicate fuel poverty as far as possible by 2010. I accept that it is guesswork, but it is the best guess that we can make. It will be an ongoing process, and we will be better able to gauge the size of the problem when the scheme is up and running. We do have statistics and figures, but those could change as the situation develops.

13. **Mr Carrick** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail plans he has to extend the proposals under the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme to those under 60 years of age who are in receipt of incapacity and/or disability benefits. (AQO 887/00)

Mr Morrow: The purpose of the new domestic energy efficiency scheme is to focus on the most vulnerable groups living in cold homes. Pensioners on low income are deemed to be particularly at risk. That is why the scheme provides greater benefits for them. However, I accept that the disabled, and those in poor health who are under 60 years of age and on low income, are in need of support. Such people may be helped by the Housing Executive adaptation scheme if they qualify for a disabled facilities grant. Whilst there are delays with the process, the Housing Executive has been working hard with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reduce waiting times and improve the overall service.

4.00 pm

A report on the adaptation process should be available for consultation in April 2001. There is scope for the new domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES) to complete other grant programmes and vice versa. It will be the responsibility of the new scheme manager, when visiting homes, to determine whether a householder under the age of 60 with a disability merits improved heating standards. Contact will then be made with the relevant authorities in order to initiate the application for adaptation. That is the best approach for the householder; their circumstances can be fully assessed by an occupational therapist. The individual's medical condition may require other adaptations to areas such as the bathroom or kitchen. Officials will discuss arrangements with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to allow such cases to be fast tracked.

Mr Carrick: I welcome the Minister's comments about people who suffer from disability. He spoke about the adaptation programme, which has experienced considerable delays. Under the Programme for Government, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has responsibility for ensuring that special emphasis be given to the needs not only of the elderly but of the disabled and other special groups in the provision of social housing. Linked to the Minister's target of reducing fuel poverty in vulnerable households by improving energy efficiency in 20,000 private sector homes between 2001 and 2004 —

Mr Speaker: The Member should ask a question.

Mr Carrick: Does the Minister agree that it is imperative that we find the resources to achieve that objective soon?

Mr Morrow: The question was in that last line. Resources are finite. A line must be drawn to prevent the scheme from becoming unwieldy and difficult to manage. Resources would become diluted and priority groups would suffer. I wish that there were a scheme with sufficient finance and resources to support all groups. Unfortunately, in the real world that is not the case.

Ms Lewsley: I shall return to the original question. I have raised the issue of discrimination between applicants for help under the scheme. Disabled people under 60 will gain £750 towards heating costs; in comparison, people over 60 who receive benefit will gain £2,000.

Mr Morrow: The Member will recall my acceptance that a disabled person or a person in poor health under 60 on low income was in need of support. Such a person — if he or she qualifies — may be helped by the Housing Executive's adaptation scheme with a disabled facilities grant. Such people could have access to that grant and should pursue it.

I hope that that addresses the concerns that the Member has raised, and I encourage her to direct her constituents accordingly.

Adjourned at 4.03 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 27 February 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

CARE FOR THE ELDERLY

Mr Speaker: Before the motion is moved, I will advise the House how I intend to conduct the debate. Given that the first two motions on the Order Paper refer to the same fields of endeavour, I propose to take both in the context of one debate. The first motion will be moved, and when the proposers of the second motion are here, it will be moved. When it comes to the vote, each will be taken seriatim — the Minister having had an opportunity to respond.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle. Can you give us some guidance on the second motion, which notes the decision of the Scottish Parliament to provide the elderly with free nursing and personal care? Technically that is not correct. We have since been informed that, while Scotland has agreed to pay for the nursing aspect, it has decided to set up a working group to consider the personal care element. We are in favour of debating the motion, but, technically, the second part is not correct.

Mr Speaker: That sounds like excellent content for a speech in the debate. While motions may be competent, some of their content may not, in fact, be correct. That may be what the Member is suggesting in this case. I will leave it to be decided in the debate and for the Minister to respond to.

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement in full in Northern Ireland the recommendations contained in the report by the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care published in March 1999.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly notes the decision of the Scottish Parliament to provide the elderly with free nursing and personal care and calls on the Executive Committee to make similar provision for the elderly in Northern Ireland and to promote the greater well-being of the elderly in this part of the United Kingdom. — [Mr Dodds]

Mr McCarthy: I am sure that we are all grateful to be here this morning given the traffic conditions — I certainly had difficulty in getting here. I seek the support of the

Assembly for this motion and, indeed, for the next motion entitled 'Care for the Elderly' brought to the Assembly by our Colleague, Mr Nigel Dodds.

In relation to old age, the Royal Commission's report on long-term care is a very thorough and detailed document, with some 196 pages of very relevant information. It contains some 24 recommendations. The Commission concludes:

"we urge the Government to implement as many of our proposals as possible."

It makes it clear that the need for change is pressing, and I hope that the Assembly will give its full blessing to those sentiments today. I am grateful that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is present this morning to listen to the debate. I was encouraged by her response to my question on the Floor of this House on 15 January 2001, when she said:

"I will be looking at ways in which we can help to meet the needs and reduce the uncertainty and distress of older people." — [Vol 8, No 5, p215].

That was a very positive response by a caring and sympathetic Health Minister, which we must all welcome.

The Westminster Government have responded reasonably positively to many of the recommendations in the Royal Commission's report, including free National Health Service nursing care from October 2001. However, they have not embraced the recommendation that personal care should also be freely available, determined only by need. The report states:

"Personal care should be available after an assessment, according to need and paid for from general taxation".

This must surely be unfair, and it will lead to inequalities if the Government make this division. However, let us give some credit to the Government for what is called "Care in the Community", even though, like for so many other things, funding for it falls far short. At least "care in the community" provides care that allows elderly people to remain in their own homes and with their families for as long as is humanly possible.

Unfortunately, the time comes — for one reason or another — when care in either residential or nursing accommodation is required. At that time, the question of who will pay for the service becomes apparent. Growing old should not mean growing in fear — worried about how one will pay the cost of needing to live the rest of one's life in dignity.

For many years, elderly members of society have been afraid that, with ageing, they will be forced to sell their homes and all their possessions, and that they will have to use their savings to provide for the basic needs of old age.

The Royal Commission's report admits that many old people find the current system of provision unfair and feel that it is failing to meet their reasonable expectations. Many believe that they have paid into a system, through

the National Insurance scheme, which they were led to believe would look after them in later life, whatever their needs would be.

At a key point in their lives, people find that they are expected to pay, out of the assets that they have accumulated over a lifetime, for care that they had expected previously to be free. This must surely result in a sense of betrayal. The Assembly must therefore ask for the provision of nursing and personal care that will be provided on the basis of need and nothing else.

As I have said before, in many ways the problems that elderly people face are part of the larger problem of an inadequately-funded care in the community programme. The Treasury has not provided the resources necessary to allow people to be cared for in their homes — be that because they are disabled, mentally ill or elderly. As the money has not been provided, the Government have declared that the needs brought on by age do not entitle somebody to the basic help required to live a dignified life. This approach means that they do not have to fund it. That is wrong and immoral.

As Age Concern stated recently

“The loss of the ability to care for oneself is distressing enough without the added indignity of being means-tested and charged for services which one would rather not have to use at all.”

We should not make the lives of elderly people more difficult by denying them their basic rights to the care that they need. However, this is what we are doing. Indeed, as the Scottish health boards’ network reported in September 2000

“There is still a tendency to fit people into services rather than fitting services around people”.

That is simply not good enough. We must stop providing for the elderly on the basis of what is available or what we want to pay for, and start to provide on the basis of what the elderly need. We should stop putting people in nursing homes because there are insufficient resources to support them in their own homes. In the final analysis, if a nursing home is required it should be funded entirely from taxation.

The Government’s response to the Royal Commission’s idea of providing care on the basis of need is to argue that although the Government have the money to do this, making personal care universally free is not the best use of resources. They prefer not to spend money on ensuring that the elderly can live lives that are as independent and fulfilling as possible. This response is unfair.

Take, for example, the case of someone suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, a medical condition that leads to increasing levels of disability and the inability to care for oneself. Dementia is also one of its symptoms. Sufferers’ needs may not be assessed as being health needs. The funding system does not view a high level of nursing care as one of their requirements. Therefore

dementia sufferers might receive little or no NHS funding. The Government are refusing to fund the care needed to alleviate this symptom. This is in complete contrast to the Government’s treatment of the symptoms and consequences of any other disease. Surely something is wrong with that analysis.

The Government’s response is to say that they do not need to provide for old people’s personal care requirements because the elderly can provide that for themselves. I say to Westminster that that is wrong. I hope that our Health Minister will accept my argument and act accordingly.

We must also treat the elderly with respect, dignity and fairness as well. We must provide for their needs. Scotland reached that very conclusion after examining the problem. Its Parliament, not its Executive, decided that more resources should be spent on providing personal care, not just for the elderly, but for all those who need it. I understand that Wales would like to do the same thing. We in Northern Ireland owe our constituents the same concern and action. We must implement the Royal Commission’s report, provide free personal care, and support the elderly and those who care for them. Put simply, the essence of the commission’s many recommendations is a question of equality for everyone and privilege for none.

10.45 am

We thank the Royal Commission for its work. I hope that the Assembly will support both this morning’s motions. All elderly people will benefit. We should remember that we will all be elderly some day.

The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said before the last election that he did not want to live in a country where the only way pensioners could get long-term care was by having to sell their homes. I hope that he will ensure that that cannot happen before the next election.

The motto of the author of the report is:

“The moral test of Government is how that Government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life — the sick, the needy and the handicapped.”

I hope that the Health Minister accepts this noble motto and that we can advance the findings of the Royal Commission. I trust that Members will support the motion.

Mr Dodds: I am sorry that I was not here for the early part of Mr McCarthy’s speech. However, I endorse everything that I did hear. This is a very important debate. The long-term care of the elderly is one of the issues that should be at the top of the agenda for the Assembly and the Executive. Many people will be aware of the importance that the Scottish Parliament placed on this subject and of the fact that, to a large extent, it has dominated the politics of that region for some time.

When myself and my Colleague Mr Paisley Jnr tabled the motion, one of the issues that we wanted to address — as, I am sure, did Mr McCarthy — was the fact that,

although the Royal Commission report was published in 1999 and the United Kingdom Government responded in July 2000, it is now February 2001 and a spokeswoman for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is telling us that it is still working on "a detailed response to the Royal Commission's long-term care for the elderly." I presume that that means its report.

In the 'Belfast Telegraph' of 26 January 2001 that spokeswoman went on to say

"That response will include the introduction of free nursing care in all settings including nursing homes and changes in capital limits in assessing the ability of residents to contribute to costs of residential care."

I welcome that commitment in so far as it goes, but I hope that the Minister will give some firm proposals today or at least give us an idea when that may be expected. The elderly and those who are in need of care in Northern Ireland are entitled by now to know exactly the direction in which we intend to go as far as the Royal Commission's report is concerned. Some of the issues that were outlined have already been prominent in the debate.

A growing proportion of the Province's population is elderly, and, according to Help the Aged in Northern Ireland, the vast majority who are in need of long-term care are older people. About four per cent of those in need of long-term care are over 65, and 16% of those over 85 are likely to need some form of support. The issue for elected representatives is simple. Many, if not all, elderly people have contributed through taxes and National Insurance to what they believed would be a system that would ensure that when they were old and in need of help due to disease or disability, the state would be there to help them.

We found that in many cases where care is needed they have been asked to pay for that and, in effect, to pay twice. As an Assembly of elected representatives, we have a duty to address that. The prospect of having to use up all their savings and sell the family home to pay for what, in many cases, they rightly regard as care that should flow from their particular condition, disease or disability has caused great distress and anxiety amongst older people and their families.

Mr McCarthy has already mentioned people with Alzheimer's disease. That is a classic example. Under the proposals in the response issued by Tony Blair's Government to the Royal Commission's report, care provided by nurses in certain conditions will be given free of charge. However, the sort of care that people suffering from Alzheimer's need as a result of their condition may not be covered. That is simply unacceptable. We have to address that as a matter of urgency.

Like the Royal Commission, we recognize that there are certain costs that we can reasonably expect people to meet. The Royal Commission divided the issue of care into a number of categories. It said that living and

accommodation costs were the sort of costs that you could reasonably expect people to contribute to. However, when it came to nursing and personal care, the Royal Commission said that those costs should be met out of general taxation. There may be different views about the way to pay for this care. Should it be paid for from general taxation or through some sort of voluntary or compulsory insurance scheme? I believe that general taxation is the right approach. Whatever approach one has the fact is that elderly people in need of nursing and personal care should not be expected to pay for it.

We have seen a lengthy debate in Scotland on this issue. The Scottish Executive, having come under considerable pressure not least from within its own coalition where the Liberal Democrats exerted considerable pressure on the Labour Party, were forced into a position where they had to recognise that simply allowing free nursing care without free personal care would be running away from the recommendations of the Sutherland Report and the obligations that society has to our old people in need of care.

They have now set up a working group and have importantly, gone further by saying that they accept, in principle, the obligation to meet the cost of personal care. That is the way the Assembly should go. We should accept, in principle, that this is the right approach. We are not saying that we should set down timetables and deadlines today. We are saying to the Minister that she should accept that this is the will of the Assembly. We are saying that we as the Northern Ireland Assembly, on behalf of Northern Ireland and the people we represent, believe that people are entitled to free nursing and free personal care if they are elderly and in need of that care. It used to be a great saying in the Labour Party — I do not know whether it still believes it in England and Wales in light of the response to the Royal Commission's report — that health needs should be met from the cradle to the grave and that they should be free at the point of use to all.

It seems to me that that principle has been abandoned. We in Northern Ireland need to address the issue, and that is why I welcome the debate.

I hope that we can concentrate on the principle at issue. Some Members may trot out excuses and arguments about why we should not go down this line; that would be to let our elderly population down. We are not saying "Let us spend more, more, more", without considering the finances. We recognise that all such things have costs. We recognise, for instance, that treating people who have cancer, heart disease or other health problems costs money. Is anyone seriously suggesting that we should look at the matter in terms of people's wealth or of the cost? Of course, we must address that issue, but the health needs of the population are the most important thing, and we have a duty to meet those needs as far as possible. No Member would ever argue that, because cancer treatment was becoming more and more expensive,

we ought not to treat people. It will take time and hard work, but we must address the issues.

We could say many things about the Royal Commission's report. The report does not deal only with nursing and personal care; there are many other proposals in it that, I hope, the Minister will also address. My motion concentrates on the issue of free care because that is a matter of particular concern to many elderly people in the Province. I welcome the proposal that, for the first three months, people will not be forced into making a decision that means that they must sell the family home and that there will be a period during which they can change their minds. That is an important recommendation, although the capital limits should be increased to make the idea more realistic. In Northern Ireland, the current limit beyond which people are asked to pay in full for care is £16,000 in savings or the value of their homes. That figure is far too low and should be increased considerably if people are to avoid being forced to sell the family home.

There is also the suggestion, included in the Royal Commission's proposals, that there should be a national care commission. In other jurisdictions it has been agreed that a commission to set standards and monitor developments should be set up. That is an important proposal, and we should give priority to it in Northern Ireland.

Today's debate is, essentially, about principles. It is about whether the Assembly will set out the direction in which it wants the Department and the Minister to go. If we were to adopt a different course from that followed by the Scottish Parliament, our senior citizens would have every right to ask why they were being treated differently from their Scottish counterparts. They are entitled to receive the same, not as a handout but as a birthright.

Mr Speaker: Since the debate began, I have received a number of requests to speak. Given that the debate has a time limit, Members should restrict their comments to six minutes.

11.00 am

Even then, all Members will not get a chance to speak. However, I must restrict the time for speaking, particularly as some Members have made quite a struggle to get here this morning.

The Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee (Dr Hendron): I endorse what Kieran McCarthy and Nigel Dodds have said. My Committee hopes that the Minister — together with the support of the Executive Committee — will implement fully the findings of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly. If we cannot look after our own folk then we should not be here. I am reminded of the words of an anonymous poet as regards an elderly person living in a small cottage in a rural area:

"For age of pace comes at last to all and the lone house filled with the cricket squall."

Our senior citizens need two things above all else. One is to retain their independence, particularly because of pride and self-esteem, and the second is to remain living in their own community. The Assembly will surely support both those things.

There are some important points as regards helping elderly people remain independent. For example, how many elderly people are wearing spectacles that they have had for years? How many of them have not had eye tests? How many elderly people have defective hearing? Sometimes it can be caused by something simple such as a plug of wax, which is easily dealt with. Ill-fitting dentures can also be a major problem, and there may be a need for chiropody services.

How many elderly people live alone and do not eat proper foodstuffs? They need at least one proper meal per day. Urinary tract infections are most common in the elderly, as is incontinence. Diabetes is also a problem, and some people say that if you live long enough you will get diabetes. It is something that must be detected in elderly people.

In the home, an extra banister on the stairs would help some people, and they should not have to wait two years for an occupational therapist to make such a recommendation.

Any two of the points I have made — for example, failing eyesight and defective hearing — can lead to confusion in people. There is also the situation as regards the carer — often an unmarried son or daughter — who is trying to do their best to look after the elderly person. As situations develop we enter the stage of crisis management, in which the emphasis can lie in getting the elderly person to move into some form of institutional care. Carers must be looked after also.

The Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly reported in March 1999. It had been set up by the Government to recommend a sustainable and affordable system for funding long-term care, and it spent slightly more than one year considering the matter.

The report identified the current funding system as a source of considerable grievance among elderly people and their relatives and that there were many inequalities. There were 24 recommendations. The two major recommendations were that personal care following assessment should be free of charge and that a National Care Commission should be established to monitor trends and set standards.

The Scottish Parliament voted to accept the Commission's recommendations and has since set up a working party to consider how they can be implemented. None of the Royal Commission's 24 recommendations have been implemented in Northern Ireland. With its unique integrated health and social services, Northern Ireland has an ideal opportunity to ensure that nursing and

social care should be regarded as a seamless continuum, all free at the point of delivery.

I realise that time is running out. Concerning home care, much greater investment is needed to help elderly people to stay mobile and independent. Home care is a crucial service. It needs to be funded to a level that enables the elderly person to be comfortable and secure, and to have a decent quality of life.

My final point is that an effective primary care service is essential to promote the health, well-being and independence of older people. There is currently a major debate on the future of primary care. As an integral part of that, and in relation to the Minister's document 'Building the Way Forward In Primary Care', it is important that we have a bottom-up approach — a primary-care-led Health Service. That way we can have what we want — a first-class service for elderly people. If it can be done in Scotland, we should be able to do it in Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee (Mr Gallagher):

I support the motion and most of what has been said. I will draw attention to some of the recommendations, which should, with one possible exception, be accepted. I will come to that. The most important recommendation deals with making personal care available after an assessment. Nobody could object to that, provided that we can find the funds to cover both the medical and personal care. We have to do that in the context of a finite budget, and some consideration must be given to where the money will be found. It is still unclear how much money will be required for the personal care element.

A case can be made for the costs of medical care to be paid by the National Health Service for elderly people in residential care, because if they were in hospital the medical care would be free.

The Scottish Executive — not without reservation — have agreed to the payment of personal care for all. They have agreed from October 2001 to free National Health Service nursing care. In implementing a wider package of measures, the Scottish Executive are hoping to bring the maximum benefit to the greatest number of people. As some Members know, the Scottish Executive have decided to set up a working group to look at the implementation of the personal care proposals. That group will report in August.

I would like the Northern Ireland Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to set up a working group here to consider the details of the Scottish proposals for personal care and to look at the implications for our budget of such proposals being implemented in Northern Ireland. The Royal Commission's recommendation is that the Government should ascertain precisely how much money goes towards supporting older people in residential settings and in their homes. Undertaking that is quite a

complex task. We must give some thought to devising a community care policy that will help as many elderly people as possible to stay in their own homes. The value of an individual's home was referred to earlier, and the recommendation in the Royal Commission's report is reasonable and should be accepted here.

There can be no argument with other measures that refer to bringing about increased efficiency and improved quality in the system, including emphasis on a more client-centred approach.

The majority of the recommendations have been broadly accepted by the Government in London and by the Scottish Parliament. There is therefore no case for their not being accepted and implemented in Northern Ireland. The exception to which I referred is recommendation 7, which calls for the resources that underpin the residential allowance in income support to be transferred to local authorities. I am not sure about the implications of that for our centralised social services system. There may well be no need to implement that recommendation in Northern Ireland.

Rev Robert Coulter: I thank the Members in whose names these motions stand for giving us an opportunity to debate this important issue. We are dealing with one of the most vulnerable sections of society. We have already talked about children, now we are talking about the elderly. No one wishes to deny the elderly the care that they deserve in the twilight of their lives. Mr Dodds laid the foundation for our debate when he said that we were debating the principle. There are financial issues, but it is imperative that we consider seriously the principle of caring for the elderly.

It is an indictment of this generation that the elderly have to sell their possessions to pay for care, especially when we recall that they were given the assurance of free care when they reached the twilight of life. The Assembly should take on board the principle that our generation can do something about the problems of the elderly.

I am glad that the Care Standards Act 2000 has brought into being the National Care Standards Commission. Will all of that Act apply to Northern Ireland? If not, the Minister should give priority to such a measure for Northern Ireland. If we wanted, we could follow the establishment of the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care by putting in place a structure that would allow us to address the problems that we are debating.

The Care Standards Act 2000 will allow for the publication of statutory guidance on fairer charging arrangements for services provided at home. As we consider the care needs of the elderly, we must remember that they need two types of care, either away from home — in a hospital or in a nursing home — or in their own home. I am sure that all of us are largely happy with the way in which our elderly people are cared for in nursing homes. However, there are many

questions about the care of the elderly in the community. I am glad that Dr Hendron has introduced the idea that meeting the needs of the elderly should be enshrined not only in community care but in primary care, which is where most of the elderly first have their needs considered. Has the Department examined the financial implications of adopting the Scottish model? What areas would be deprived of finance, if we were to go ahead with the proposal that free care be given to the elderly?

I am glad that we have been given this opportunity. Those who are in charge of community care should consider ways of providing further help to old people who live at home, perhaps by increasing the amount of time during which home helps would be available. Then we should consider the establishment of a commission to examine all the needs of the elderly.

11.15 am

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Dodds and Mr McCarthy for giving us the opportunity to debate the matter. I met an old friend recently and asked him how he was. He said that he was “walking slow and going fast”. That is the plight of many of our older generation. Nigel Dodds is quite right to point out that the principle of socialism “from the cradle to the grave” has been jettisoned, by and large, by the Labour Party. However, that should not hinder us from adopting that very worthy socialist principle in the House. Care for the elderly should be the prime objective of any caring society. Indeed, it is the hallmark of a caring society.

Again, I congratulate Nigel Dodds for setting down very realistic parameters within which we can achieve a proper scheme for caring for the elderly that is financially viable and worked out. It is sad in many ways that we have to talk in such terms when we talk about care for the elderly.

Today, there will be a seminar about bonded slaves. In many ways, our old people are bonded slaves because they are expected to give up their state pension and their private pension. Their houses are put at risk — it is not just their own house but also that of their spouse — and can be taken from them to pay for the care that they are entitled to in a nursing home or in some other form of residential care.

We know that we are reaching a very high age profile in our society because of the medical care available. We should be thankful for the medical care, which is providing us with an older generation. However, that brings with it the responsibilities we owe to those who are growing old because of the medical care they have received. However, when they get older and are expecting to enjoy their retirement or old age, many are unfortunately afflicted with illnesses. A man who reaches 75 will spend seven years in illness — a woman, 11 years. We have to factor in all of that when the Assembly is considering its attitude to the care of older people.

As we have said, we accept the principle of caring for our old people. We also accept that it is going to cost money and that we have to find the money to care for those who have given so much to our society. They have contributed not just in their own way but have given children to this society. Those children have made this society and are still in their own ways trying to create a better society.

I support the motion. I again thank Kieran McCarthy and Nigel Dodds for giving us the opportunity to debate the essential issue of caring for the elderly. I ask the Minister to look sympathetically at the issue and treat it urgently within the parameters we have set down.

Mr Berry: I commend Mr Dodds and Mr McCarthy for putting down these motions. They are very important motions, and it is most important that we debate the issue of care for the elderly.

I am sure that we are all aware that the majority in need of long-term care are older people. About four per cent of those aged over 65 and 16% of those aged over 85 are likely to be in need of some form of support and care. With an ageing population, it is expected that the number of people who need support will rise substantially over the next 30 years before levelling off.

When I was researching this very important subject I noticed a presentation by the Healthy Life Expectancy programme to the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care, in which it said that it was:

“working in an international community, to establish the changes in patterns of health through the presentation and the present demographic transition, and with their consequences for health policies.”

It continued

“Many future estimates of the need for long-term care tend to be pessimistic.

They tend to assume that current age-specific rates of disability will continue.”

It further said:

“There are considerable variations between areas of the UK. The empirical evidence from the UK remains slight, though it is supported by corresponding results in other developed countries. There is an urgent need for a national survey of health and disability, particularly for elderly people, which will establish the incidence rates of ill-health and recovery, and allow us to project the future need for long-term care with much greater certainty.”

It was also very interesting to note that the National Association of British Steel Pensioners recommended changes in care for the elderly. Its view is that good health is necessary to the enjoyment of retired life and that the elderly should have equal access to high-quality health-care and freedom from the worry of having to pay for long-term health-care. Among the association’s recommendations — and this point was also made by the Chairperson of the Health and Social Services Committee — is that NHS spectacles, frames and lenses be

provided free for older people. I trust that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will take this and all the other recommendations on board. The association also called for the provision of free dental treatment for the elderly; NHS treatment according to clinical need; and the outlawing of age discrimination.

Many of the recommendations of organisations such as this should be taken on board as soon as possible. The Royal Commission on Long-Term Care has outlined three key principles, the first of which is as follows:

“Responsibility for provision now and in the future should be shared between the state and individuals — the aim is to find a division affordable for both and one which people can understand and accept as fair and logical.”

The Commission also concluded that

“doing nothing with respect to the current system is not an option.”

It is incumbent upon all Members, the Department and the Minister to take note of this very important debate. We must examine all of the issues raised and make the right decisions for the elderly here. Elderly people across Northern Ireland have been the rock and the steadfast element of this Province for many years. It is most important that we look after them. After all, they have looked after us.

I commend once again the Members who moved these motions and trust that all of these issues will be taken on board by the Department and the Executive.

Dr Adamson: There is no doubt that our elderly citizens are not getting the attention they deserve from the Health Service in Northern Ireland. We need to address their needs rather than short-change them. However, we should not underestimate the excellence of geriatric services, generally, in Northern Ireland.

The elderly care department of the Ulster Hospital is at the centre of the development of stroke services in the Province, particularly through the Northern Ireland Multi-disciplinary Association for Stroke Teams (NIMAST). The new treatment of thrombolysis for acute ischaemic stroke, if licensed, will provide a catalyst for a major change in the way that acute stroke patients are treated both in hospital and in the community.

A recent Stroke Association survey and Royal College of Physicians national stroke audit indicated that Northern Ireland has the highest percentage of organised stroke unit care in the United Kingdom and that standards of care for strokes are extremely high. The recently published Royal College of Physicians of London guidelines for strokes will further challenge both purchasers and providers in Northern Ireland and, I hope, result in further improvement in standards. NIMAST is committed to working closely with the Royal College to try to ensure regional implementation of those guidelines, so that the older people of Northern Ireland have the best possible chance not just to survive a stroke but to avoid permanent

disability and institutionalisation as a result. Furthermore, the osteoporosis unit in Belfast City Hospital's Wakehurst unit is the best in Ireland, and its personnel are world-class. Modern developments in treatment are having a significant effect on the well-being of all elderly people here.

Dementia — a serious condition which affects older people — has already been mentioned. The most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, followed by vascular dementia and Lewy body disease. There are others that I have forgotten; my memory is not what it was. Frequently patients display features of two or more of these types of dementia at the same time. The diagnosis and management of dementia has always been a priority of the Department of Geriatric Medicine at Queen's University, Belfast, and the availability of new treatments for new forms of dementia means that early diagnosis and distinction between types is now much more important.

The elderly people of Northern Ireland who have received such expert care in geriatric hospitals should receive the same standard of care in the community. We need to look closely at a more effective integration of health and social care services.

Ms McWilliams: I have some difficulty with one of the motions in particular, because I have read the report of the very contentious and heated debate on this in the Scottish Parliament. A Committee held an inquiry into how those recommendations would fit with Scotland and came up with recommendations very similar to the Royal Commission's report, yet the Executive did not accept the Committee's report. Would that ever happen here? I recall that exactly that happened here with another Committee's report, so there is a parallel to be drawn with the decision of the Scottish Executive on the Royal Commission's report. It could not budget for this particular recommendation.

Mr Dodds: I realise that, for obvious reasons, the Member was not here at the start, but I made a point then about what the Scottish Executive had done. I quote from Mr Chisholm, the Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care in Scotland:

“In the Scottish Parliament we shall draw proposals for the implementation of free personal care for all. We accept the principle of Sutherland”.

There is no doubt that the Scottish Executive have committed themselves to that principle, as the Minister said himself. That is what a lot of the earlier debate focused on.

Ms McWilliams: I apologise for coming late to the debate — I was attending the conference of the Registered Homes Confederation at the Waterfront Hall on this very issue. It is rare that the Assembly debates a motion on the same day as a major conference on a related subject. This one was on the lack of residential and nursing care and the ongoing crisis with that.

There was also contention about whether the Scottish debate was a take-note debate or an action debate. In the end Malcolm Chisholm would only accept it as a take-note debate. The Scottish Executive are going to wait another six months before making a decision on whether they will fund this aspect of the Royal Commission's report

11.30 am

I raise this here because it is fundamental to our debate that Members understand that we are not functioning in such a way as to cover the costs of nursing and personal care. My understanding is that care for the elderly is in crisis. In the independent sector in the past two years there has been a loss of 1,500 beds because current costs could not be met and because fees have been set at such a level that many independent homes have had to close.

I am concerned that statutory homes are closing. The South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust has written to the appropriate Assembly Members informing them that there is a possibility that three of its homes may close following consultation over the next few months. If both statutory and independent homes are closing, perhaps the Minister will not have a problem, because she will not have to pay for the increases demanded by the Royal Commission — there will be fewer and fewer beds for elderly people seeking residential and nursing care. Homes are unable to cover costs because they inherited costs that were set by income support rates and because the increases have depended on accommodation only. The Royal Commission's report is important because it only takes account of accommodation needs, out of which the costs of the training and development of workers who come into that sector must be paid.

I am sure that other Members have already spoken about dedication and the high levels of training that are needed to look after vulnerable people with dementia. There is no funding to cover these training costs. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that the statutory sector currently costs more than the independent sector. My understanding is that it possibly costs £100 a week per patient more than the independent sector. That clearly requires a response.

I am not suggesting that we should have one sector or the other — we need both. All our elderly cannot be cared for in independent homes, although I do support those schemes. Given the demographics of the over-75s, this sector will have to be funded in the future. The number of beds to be maintained in the independent sector is not covered in the current budget and is not, therefore, a target under public service agreements. Although there is a recommendation about fee levels, we also need to budget. Before we support this motion we need to take the current state of affairs into account.

Mr Carrick: I welcome the opportunity of contributing to the debate. Several fundamental questions underpin

the motions. What value does society place on older people? What value does the Assembly place on older people? What value do the Executive place on older people? What value do the Minister and her Department place on older people? There has been much research on the subject, but unfortunately, inside six minutes, we will not be able to refer to the various elements of care that are required for elderly people — primary care, care in the community, acute care and residential care, all of which make an important contribution to the support of the elderly.

I want to concentrate on care in the community. We have a document from the director of social services, 'Annual Assessment of Need 2000', which clearly indicates, on page 65, what the projected increase in the number of older people in the Southern Board's area will be. By the year 2013, 54,800 older people will be living in the Southern Board's area, an increase of 29% from 1998 — just two short years ago. When we think of care in the community we have to pose the question "Are we really a caring community?" I have come to the conclusion that because of the pace of modern life, the emphasis placed on secularism and achieving one's goals in this world, as well as the fragmentation of the extended family unit, more and more of our older people are falling into the vulnerable category. The director of social services identified two important facets in the document. Two of the biggest concerns for older people have been the need to ensure sufficient income to live on and the question of who will pay for residential care if it becomes necessary.

One of the problems with community care is the inordinate waiting time for occupational therapist assessments. In my area of Portadown, a 94-year-old person who lives alone has been waiting for up to two years to have an assessment carried out. In the Craigavon and Banbridge Community Health and Social Services Trust area, the current waiting list for occupational therapist assessment is 1,200, whereas last year it was 643. Waiting time has practically doubled, which is completely unacceptable as it gives older people a feeling of uncertainty and the sense that they are past their sell-by date. Uncertainty over when they will get an assessment leads to frustration, to a feeling of insecurity and to a feeling that they have been forgotten about. That is why the debate is both relevant and timely. I trust that every Member will support the motions before us.

Some £1 million was made available for care in the community recently, but half of that sum went towards staff costs — an extra 30 staff, 20 of whom are only for priority cases. The other half went towards the purchase of about 40 wheelchairs, according to the information that I have been provided with. That shows the immense problem that care in the community is facing through inadequate resources. In the various reports that have come before us in recent times, gaps in community care have been well identified and well documented. We need to address those gaps. If we are going to believe in

the concept of care in the community, we have to find the resources and the funding to make it work, otherwise our older people will continue to feel disillusioned, disappointed and forgotten about.

I started off with the question “What value does society really place on older people?”, and I will finish with the same question. I hope that Members will face up to answering that question in an open and honest way and find the necessary resources to make our older people feel valued and respected.

Dr Birnie: This debate is on a matter of great importance. As Mr Dodds put it, the elderly are a large and growing section of our population and deserve all our concern.

There are also severe inequities and injustices in the current system, and that was well put by Mr McCarthy in his proposing speech. We should take note of the Sutherland report, but alongside that there are two notes of caution.

Monica McWilliams sounded the first of these notes, which is that the Scottish Parliament’s position is not a “done deal”. A cynic might point out that the announcement was made ahead of the general election and that actual implementation — if, indeed, there is to be implementation — may follow in the autumn. We will have to wait and see if that will happen. Some Members here are familiar with the technique of adopting positions ahead of elections. *[Laughter]*. Members may well laugh.

The second note of caution is that we need to be aware of the entire Sutherland Report. I would point to the dissident note by Joffe and Lipsey. They suggest that the main body — hence the main proposals of the Sutherland Report — have seriously underestimated the implications of their recommendations in respect of the required increase in Government spending. Joffe and Lipsey put forward two reasons for that, which seem to bear some weight.

The first reason is that the rate of cost inflation in health care is several percentage points ahead of the general rate of inflation in the economy as a whole. Secondly, when the price of any service is reduced, including that of health care or personal care, the demand for that service is not likely to stay constant. It may increase precisely because it is now cheaper. We have a marked historical precedent. When the National Health Service was set up in 1948 it was predicted at the time that the amount spent on it would eventually fall as the population became more healthy. In fact, as we now know, with straining health budgets at local and national level, the budget for the NHS has multiplied many times since 1948. I would point out to some Members that at no point since 1950 have we had free-at-the-point-of-use health care in the United Kingdom. That situation is even more the case in the Republic of Ireland.

I also suggest that we take note of Joffe and Lipsey’s point that if we go down the route of universal free personal care, that will inevitably mean that the limited pot of money that the Government have to direct towards the care of the elderly will not all be spent on the poor elderly — some will be spent on the well-off elderly.

To sum up, in the consideration of this matter it will be inevitable that hard choices will have to be made. It may be that we will decide that some of the burden for long-term care should be borne by the private sector through the use of private insurance. Therefore it is important not make premature decisions that would knock the development of such private insurance on the head. In the end this care will have to be paid for by all individuals in society either by general taxation or through private insurance, and we need to strike a judicious balance. Therefore I support the motion, subject to adequate considerations being given to the Sutherland Report in its entirety, including the crucial issue of the costings of the recommendations.

Mr Gibson: What we are discussing this morning has often been described by other civilisations as the venerable state of the elderly. We could look at those other civilisations and see how they care for the elderly.

11.45 am

What we are talking about this morning is, to some extent, restoring dignity and independence to people who have reached that age and giving them the ability to enjoy an active and healthy life.

In the 1990s many expectations were raised. We had hospital charters, community charters and charters for health. All of those have had to be stripped from the hospital notice boards and from community services walls. There has been a failure to deliver and respect those who have served society.

This debate is welcome in that it is an opportunity for the Assembly to view the Sutherland Report and to listen to the concerns expressed by various agencies: the Chest, Heart and Stroke Association, Alzheimer’s Disease Society in Northern Ireland and Age Concern. All those groups have been progressively enunciating one factor, which embodied in Nigel Dodds’s proposal: you cannot distinguish effectively between nursing care and personal care.

It is an exercise that will be carried out by those who seem to hold some form of esoteric information, but I think that the two forms of care are indistinguishable. The principle that Mr Dodds enunciated is the important one to take on board as an Assembly and we say, to ourselves and to the people that we represent, that we wish to establish the principle of free care — both nursing and personal. That is the principle under discussion this morning.

We are all too aware of how community care has become a devalued phrase in our society. It was once hailed as the means of retaining people in the community

and restoring to the very group of people we are discussing a better quality of life in their own homes where they would prefer to live. We have discovered, and every one of us knows, that many elderly people receive only 15 minutes care in the morning and 15 minutes in the afternoon, and after that they have to fend for themselves.

The very points mentioned earlier by Dr Hendron were crucial. The routines of care that we so freely give to the under-16s — immunisations, weekly, monthly or yearly checks — should be available at the other end of the age range. Eyesight and hearing examinations and all the normal facilities should be on an annual routine check to prevent many of the ailments that are ignored because the elderly cannot get to the doctor or do the things that the more able-bodied can do. The principle of care has got to be established, and I strongly support that.

Many people, who have a great affection for their parents, give up their jobs or take a sabbatical from their careers to care for them. However, it does not pay carers to love their parents or an elderly person. They lose whatever salary they had, and the maximum that they can get for 24 hours of tender loving care of a loved one is £66 and some odd pence. We are not a caring society. If we were we would manage our resources. There will be difficulties with resources. However, we accept the principle of free nursing and personal care.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Uasal McCarthy, leis an Uasal Dodds agus leis an Uasal Paisley as na saincheisteanna tábhachtacha seo a thabhairt go hUrlárz an Tí. D'éist mé go cúramach leis na pointí luachmhara a rinne Comhaltaí le linn na díospóireachta, agus, cosúil leo féin, is cúram domh gur chóir go mbeadh seandaoine, ag céim an-leochaileach ina saol, saor ó bhuaireamh breise agus iad ag déanamh cinntí faoina sláinte agus faoina gcúram sóisialta.

Rachaidh cinntí a rinneadh ar chúram na sean i bhfeidhm ar shaoil na líon nach beag dár muintir agus a dteaghlach. Tá thart ar 14,500 duine i gcúram cónaitheach agus i gcúram tí altranaís anseo. Shocraigh an RSSSP cúram do thart ar 9,500 acu agus riartar ar úsáideoirí eile faoi sholáthar leasa shóisialaigh; sin nó rinne siad a socrúithe féin.

Beidh Comhaltaí eolach ar roinnt mórtionscnamh ar thug mé fúthu maidir le cúram pobail le bliain anuas. Feicim go raibh Comhaltaí inniu ag rá gur leithne an cheist í seo ná an ceann a dtugann an rún aghaidh uirthi.

D'fhógair mé aithbhreithniú ar chur i bhfeidhm polasáí cúram phobail. Tabharfaidh feidhmeannaigh, i gcomhar le boird agus iontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta agus i gcomhar le réimse leathan páirtithe leasmhara sna hearnálacha deonacha agus príobháideacha, faoi aithbhreithniú forleathan ar chúram pobail. Rachaidh seo i ngleic le maoiniú, le pleanáil agus le soláthar seirbhísí

cúram phobail agus breathnóidh sé ar chomhéadain idir an cúram príomhúil, an cúram tánaisteach agus an cúram pobail. Déanfaidh siad moltaí le haghaidh leasuithe i soláthar seirbhísí cúram phobail. Mar mhórusáideoirí na seirbhísí seo bheinn ag dúil go mbainfeadh ár seandaoine sochar as feabhsúcháin ar bith a d'aimseofaí agus a chuirfí i bhfeidhm.

Dáilead airgead breise ar chúram pobail. I mbliana dháil mé £11 mhilliún sa bhreis go saineiúil ar sholáthar cúram phobail. Sa bhliain 2001/02 tá £2 mhilliún faighte agam le corradh agus 230 beart cúram thar an soláthar beartaithe. Arís, is mór a rachas seo chun tairbhe dár seandaoine ós rud é go mbeidh tuilleadh daoine faoi chúram sa bhaile agus i dtimpeallachtaí eile pobail agus beidh laghdú ar scaoilte moillithe ón ospidéal ar ais chuig an phobal.

Tá feidhmeannaigh ag obair ar fhorbairt straitéise do chúramóirí i ndlúthchomhairle le móreagraíochtaí cúramóirí. Tuairisceoidh an grúpa sin faoi dheireadh na bliana seo le moltaí do sheirbhísí a thacóidh le cúramóirí san obair an-luachmhara a dhéanann siad ar son na sochaí seo. D'fhaomh mé cheana doiciméad comhairliúcháin ar ábhar an Carers' and Disabled Children's Bill arb é a chuspóir cearta cúramóirí ar réimse feabhsaithe seirbhísí tacaíochta a chur sa dlí.

Rinneadh cuid mhór cheana le seirbhísí sláinte agus cúram shóisialta a fheabhsú, ach tá cuid mhór eile le déanamh go fóill. Thug tuairisc an Choimisiúin ar Chúram Fadtéarmach na Sean anailís chuimsitheach ar na dúshláin atá fúinn. Tugann sí deis dúinn díriú ar na saincheisteanna a bhaineas le cúram na sean, agus is mór mo mheas ar an obair atá déanta ag an choimisiún.

I thank Mr McCarthy, Mr Dodds and Mr Paisley Jnr for bringing those important issues to the Floor of the House. I have listened carefully to valuable points made by Members in the debate, and I share their concern that the elderly, at a very vulnerable stage of their lives, should be spared from additional worry when making decisions about their health and social care.

Decisions taken on care for the elderly will impact on the lives of many people and their families. There are about 14,500 people in residential and nursing home care here, and health and personal social services has arranged the care for about 9,500 of those people. The others are provided for by social security or have made their own arrangements.

During the debate, Members stressed the point that the question goes beyond the specifics of the issues raised in today's motions and have mentioned care of the elderly and, in a wider context, care in the community. I have taken several significant initiatives in the area of community care over the past year.

I have announced a review of the implementation of community care policy. That means that a wide-ranging

review of community care will be carried out by officials in association with the health and social services boards and trusts and in consultation with a range of interested parties in the voluntary and private sectors. I am sure that Members will welcome it. The review will address the funding, planning and delivery of community care services. It will study the interfaces between primary and secondary community care. The review will make recommendations for improvements in the delivery of community care services. I expect that the elderly — as major users of the services — will benefit from the improvements identified and implemented.

Members referred to the financing of community care. Additional moneys have been allocated to community care. In the current year, I have allocated an additional £11 million to community care provision. In the year 2001–02 an additional £2 million has been secured to facilitate the delivery of an additional 230 care packages. The elderly will gain substantially from the extra money. More people will be cared for at home and in other community settings, and there will be reductions in the number of delayed discharges from hospital.

Members have stressed the importance of carers. I also pay tribute to the work of carers. Officials are working in close consultation with a major carer's organisation on the development of a strategy for carers. This group will report to me by the end of the calendar year with recommendations for services to support carers in the valuable work that they carry out in society. I have approved a consultation document on the content of the Carer's and Disabled Children Bill. The intention is to enshrine in law the rights of carers to an enhanced range of support services. A lot has already been done to improve health and social care services; but much more needs to be done.

The Royal Commission's report has provided us with a comprehensive analysis of the challenges we face. It presents us with an opportunity to focus on the issues around care for the elderly, and I appreciate the Royal Commission's work.

The Commission has brought forward a number of recommendations. There are two main recommendations. A National Care Commission should be established to monitor trends — including demography and spending — and ensure transparency and accountability in the system, represent the interests of consumers and set national benchmarks now and in the future. Secondly, the costs of long-term care should be split between living costs, housing costs and personal care. Personal care should be available after assessment, according to need and paid for from general taxation. The rest should be subject to a co-payment according to means.

I will clarify the responses elsewhere to the recommendations and outline the actions that I will take. The recommendation to establish a Care Standards Commission

has been accepted by the British Labour Government and implemented by the establishment of the National Care Standards Commission. I will bring proposals to the Executive to set, monitor and enforce standards here.

The responses by England, Wales and the Scottish Executive to the recommendation on the costs of long-term care are similar in a number of the less controversial areas. Therefore I will deal with those first. In England, Wales and Scotland, changes will be made to three aspects of the charging regulations. People will be less pressurised to sell their homes when entering care. From April 2001 the capital limits used in means testing will increase from £10,000 and £16,000 to £11,500 and £18,500 respectively. The rates will be kept under review. From April 2001 the value of a resident's home will be disregarded in means testing for the first three months of their stay. From October 2001, local authorities will be given a ring-fenced grant to help with schemes to defer some of the costs of care for people who would otherwise have to sell their homes at an earlier stage.

12.00

In line with England, Wales and Scotland, I am taking steps to introduce amending regulations to increase the capital limits from April this year. The Budget has made provision for this in 2001–02. This will mean that, where a care home resident has capital — including, in certain circumstances, the value of his home — of between £11,500 and £18,500, he will be required to meet a proportion of his care costs. Capital and assets valued at less than £11,500 will not be taken into account in the assessment of needs. Those with assets of over £18,500 will be required to meet the full costs of their care.

I am also considering making proposals to exclude the value of a resident's home from the means assessment test during his first three months in a care home, whether his stay is temporary or permanent. This will depend on the provision of additional resources.

On the subject of the ring-fenced grant proposal that was referred to, a different funding structure exists between my Department and the health and social service's boards and trusts, but I will consider the need for a similar scheme here.

There will also be legislation to end both the preserved rights of residents and the residential allowance for new residents in independent homes. One Member queried if that was necessary here. Those in residential care or nursing homes prior to the introduction of the community care changes in 1993 were given preserved rights to the special rates of income support to meet the costs of their care. However, they were not brought into the new health and social services care management arrangements at that time. The decision to bring those residents into the care management arrangements, along with the transfer of related funding from the Social Security Agency, is intended to help and reassure former preserved-rights residents.

The payment of the residential allowance to those in independent accommodation who received state assistance with their costs creates a perverse incentive to place people in care rather than keep them at home. This allowance will no longer apply to new residents, but present recipients will continue to benefit from it, and it will also involve a funding transfer from the Social Security Agency. The consultation on both these issues, which was carried out by my Department last year, revealed strong general support for this change.

The ending of this perverse incentive and the transfer of Social Security Agency funds to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should give boards greater flexibility in meeting people's care needs. Therefore, I expect to see the provision of more domiciliary care packages through these changes in the funding arrangements.

The Royal Commission on Long-Term Care for the Elderly made many recommendations, the most difficult and sensitive of which is the provision of free personal care. The Royal Commission recommended that personal care be free of charge in residential and nursing-home settings, but the response by the NHS in England and Wales was to limit free provision to nursing care only.

Therefore, from October 2001, the NHS in England and Wales will meet the cost of registered nurses' time spent on providing, supervising or delegating care in a nursing-home setting. Those who are assessed to need such care will no longer have to meet either the costs of the registered nursing staff involved in their care or the cost of any specialist equipment used by staff.

The Departments of Health in England and Scotland are developing standard assessment procedures to determine the level of nursing care needed in individual cases. This will ensure that the cost of this care can be calculated and paid for by health authorities, giving people a realistic assessment of the level of care needed. Members raised that issue this morning.

As some Members have pointed out, the Scottish Executive are establishing an expert development group, chaired by their Minister for Health and Community Care. It will consider the practicalities, the costs and the implications of providing free personal care. The group will report by August 2001 with proposals that will inform Executive expenditure decisions for 2002-03 and beyond.

They are piloting a nationwide single needs assessment for the care of older people — a move that will support the extension of free nursing care to many more people. They are also examining the current sources of public funding for long-term care in Scotland, making it a top priority for additional resources and bringing forward a long-term care Bill to make the necessary legislative changes. Significantly diverging from the planned timetable in England, where free nursing care will be introduced by 1 October 2001, free nursing care will be introduced

in Scotland in April 2002 — at the same time as the implementation of a new system of assessment.

Members asked if costing has been undertaken here. Any decision to extend free care for the elderly will bring major budgetary considerations for the Executive as a whole — not merely for my Department. Early estimates indicate that the provision of free personal care could add at least £25 million extra to the annual costs of the health and social services boards. The provision of free personal care is a sensitive and emotive issue, and we are all committed to providing the best we possibly can for those in our society who face these needs.

There are concerns about how care is defined and how the level of care can be assessed in a fair, open and transparent manner. Both England and Scotland are presently developing a standardised method of assessing the level of nursing care needed by an individual. During the debate Members reminded us that we should try to make the most of our integrated service. I intend to establish a working group, chaired by the chief nursing officer, to examine how the need for nursing care can be assessed professionally, in a manner clearly understood by the general public and adding minimum additional bureaucracy. The group will report to me with recommendations in sufficient time to allow the necessary consultation and allow me to introduce legislation to implement the agreed recommendations by April 2002.

The proposals I have outlined will bring about important changes in the care system. There will be changes in legislation to pave the way for free nursing care in all settings: the development of a new system of care needs assessment, improvements in the charging system for care; an end to the income support preserved rights and residential allowance schemes, and additional funding to meet people's care needs better in old age. These proposals are already underpinned by an appropriate funding allocation for 2001-02.

As Members have stated in the debate, we all want to provide the best we can for those who need it in our society. That is how we have approached this question. Any decision to go further than has been allowed for to date in the provision of free care will require the Executive to secure significant additional resources. I am sure that we will return to this point in the future.

Mr McCarthy: First, I want to thank everyone for their contribution, particularly Nigel Dodds, who, as usual, made his case concisely. He brought out the principles of both motions together, which is very important. He made the point that many elderly people are now paying twice for the service they are entitled to. I hope that we can agree and go along with what we are both saying on this.

I welcome Dr Hendron's and the Health Committee's support. The Deputy Chairperson, Mr Gallagher, had some queries, and he suggested a working group. The Minister suggested that that is what she is now going to do in

order to look into the Scottish methods and what they propose by way of funding.

I thank and welcome the support of Rev Robert Coulter, Mr John Kelly, Mr Berry and Dr Adamson. I welcome Ms McWilliams's support, although I am slightly worried about her concerns. She told us that in her constituency, there are possible home closures. I am not so sure what the main reason for that is. Questions obviously have to be asked, but I accept Ms McWilliams's concern about training for this work as being a very important aspect of care for the elderly.

I agree entirely with Mr Carrick as regards care in the community. It is currently grossly underfunded. If there were more funding for care in the community — and I think that the Minister mentioned this — there would be less concern at the other end.

I accept Mr Birnie's concern. He mentioned private insurance, and that is probably fair enough. However, there may well be people out there who might not be able to afford private insurance, and we would be left with an inequality. Some people could afford it; others could not. That is a very important issue, for we are trying to avoid inequality.

I thank Mr Gibson for his support and his contribution. The Minister started very well and shared the concerns raised — indeed, the review of the community care policy is very welcome. However, I was somewhat disappointed when she spoke of a means-testing system for some of the elderly. That would cause them concern.

The Minister also talked about what we all know is a big problem. Elderly people come to a point in their lives when they need care, but they do not have to make a decision, since the decision is already made for them. They have to sell their home, their only asset — something that they have worked and lived for or that has been in the family for generations. There is something wrong with a system that expects people at that point in their life to dispose of their assets to pay for care. I am disappointed with the Minister's response.

She mentioned the budgetary Estimates and adding an extra £25 million. That would be nice, although a report produced not so long ago mentioned £65 million that had got lost in the system somewhere — and that is in respect of one Department only. There needs to be efficiency right across all Departments. The Assembly is here to ensure that there is efficiency and that money can be spent on providing what we have been talking about this morning.

I thank all the Members for their support and, indeed, the Minister, who is doing a very difficult job with limited resources.

I want to make one final point. I think we should all pay tribute to the carers, the people who are involved. Everyone

in the Assembly knows people who are involved in looking after the elderly. I am sure that they are out this morning, despite the atrocious weather, trying to get to those whom they look after.

Members of the Assembly and other groups outside will be coming to the Minister's door and looking for further improvements.

Mr Dodds: Would the Member care to comment on the statement that the Minister made in relation to setting up a working group? There may be some misapprehension or some argument that somehow this working group will be looking at the issue of whether free personal care should be made available.

It seems to me — and some clarification may be necessary — that this working group is going to be very limited in its scope as regards dealing with nursing care and the definition thereof. Would it not have been better to have a working group set up to look at the issue that is the crux of the motion before the House today — the provision of free personal care?

Mr McCarthy: I thank Mr Dodds; he is spot on. I hope that the Minister will take note of what he said. The working group should investigate that; it is exactly what we need.

12.15 pm

I hope that the Assembly will support both motions and take these matters seriously. It would be a shame if people who required residential or other forms of care were denied such help unless they paid for essential care. Equality is top of our agenda. It was said that we value elderly people, and that is paramount. The Assembly can make a difference. Let us do it now.

Question put and agreed.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement in full in Northern Ireland the recommendations contained in the report by the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care published in March 1999.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the decision of the Scottish Parliament to provide the elderly with free nursing and personal care and calls on the Executive Committee to make similar provision for the elderly in Northern Ireland and to promote greater well-being of the elderly in this part of the United Kingdom. — [*Mr Dodds*]

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to pay attention to the annunciators as some private-notice questions may be coming before the House.

The sitting was suspended at 12.16 pm.

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

Private Notice Question

ELECTRICITY SUPPLY

2.00 pm

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of today's failure of the electricity supply of 50,000 people in Northern Ireland, to explain what steps are in place to avoid a recurrence of this situation; and to make a statement.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I have spoken to Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) this morning. The company has implemented its emergency procedures and is taking steps to communicate with and restore part power to all consumers as soon as possible. The worst affected areas include Holywood, Lisburn, Downpatrick, Carryduff, Ballyclare, Larne and Ballymena.

NIE has advised that its engineers and linesmen have worked through the night restoring power to thousands of customers throughout Northern Ireland, and the incident management centre at Craigavon has been open since Monday evening. Hundreds of engineers, call handlers and administrative staff have been mobilised to deal with the situation. However, the treacherous driving conditions are hampering staff, particularly call handlers, from getting to where they are needed.

The statutory responsibility for the protection of the interests of electricity consumers in respect of the continuity of supply and quality of supply services provided rests with the independent director general of the electricity supply. Following the December 1998 storms, he sought a full report on the December supply problems from NIE. Subsequently NIE put in place a comprehensive range of measures aimed at dealing with these situations.

The company advises that it has managed to reduce the number of persons off supply from some 70,000 to currently around 60,000, and it advises us that it anticipates that by the end of the evening, most consumers will be back on supply. As a matter of interest, some 30,000 consumers are currently off supply in the Irish Republic. Notwithstanding, I hope that the vast majority of people who are currently in difficulty will find themselves back on supply later this evening.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for coming in to answer the question. When I tabled it this morning there were 50,000 people off supply; then there were 70,000, and I understand that the figure is now 60,000.

I raised the question because of the anger, frustration and disappointment that people feel with NIE. We all

remember what happened when we had the storms three years ago and that NIE's response at that time was that it would not happen again.

The employees visited Magherafelt District Council on a charm offensive this month and told us that these things would not happen again. They assured us that in the event of a emergency breakdown, people would have someone at the end of a phone line to answer their queries and questions.

There is also the question of the 9% increase — three times above the rate of inflation — at a time when NIE was making £80 to £90 million in that year. We were told that the money was going back into the infrastructure and into replacing old capital equipment like poles and lines that were susceptible to high winds and to storms. We have to ask how much money has been put back into the infrastructure, and, if it has, why do we still have a system that cannot cope with adverse weather conditions, particularly in the case of a storm that was comparatively mild? Why do we have a system that puts 70,000 people off supply?

We had a debate this morning about the care of the elderly, and the people who are most affected by this situation are the elderly, the young, mothers who are looking after young families, newborn children — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The question has been put.

Sir Reg Empey: I understand the Member's frustration at the situation — all sympathise with that. We are all in remote areas — particularly elderly people, who are left in a very vulnerable position. Against the background of today's debate, that is entirely understandable.

We were all deeply upset about the 1998 situation. Since then NIE has embarked upon an investment campaign. Last year over £80 million was spent on refurbishing 3,500 miles, or approximately 10%, of the electricity network. However, with a rurally-based network there are some difficulties, such as fallen trees. I spoke to the chief executive this morning and, as I understand it, a combination of strong winds and driving wet snow froze on the insulators on the pylons thus turning the insulators into conductors. That resulted in flashovers which caused the fuses to trip out in substations. Many engineers were unable to get to these stations because of the road conditions. When they reached the stations and restored the supply, many of the fuses tripped out again due to the continuing winds and wet snow.

Since 1998, some £10 million was invested in telephone call handling systems and information management technology to improve response times. However, some operatives have been unable to reach the incident centers, which has resulted in longer delays than expected. When this emergency is over, we need to sit down with the company and examine the situation because there is a statutory obligation on the company to ensure effective

supplies of electricity, and we need to be satisfied that an appropriate and acceptable response has been made.

Regardless of the criticisms that may be made about the interruption to supply, no criticism is being aimed at the engineers who are driving through the snow and the rain to repair the system. They are operating under great stress, over great distances and, in some cases, in not inconsiderable danger. I am sure that the Member will accept and acknowledge that. We must have a post-mortem on this event, just as we had after 1998. It is fair to say that, just as there is no such thing as an unsinkable ship, there is no such thing as a supply system of electricity in rural areas that does not break down from time to time.

SECURITY FORCES: ALLEGED COLLUSION WITH LOYALIST PARAMILITARIES

Mrs Nelis: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Secretary of State to initiate an independent public inquiry into allegations of collusion between the Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch, British Military Intelligence and Loyalist paramilitaries in the planning and murder of Catholics.

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is my interpretation that the amendment to the motion is a direct negative of the motion itself. Is it a competent amendment?

Madam Deputy Speaker: It is a competent amendment.

Mr Maskey: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will you explain the rationale of that decision?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The amendment deals with the same issue, but it moves on to congratulate the security forces. That is the difference.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat a LeasCheann Comhairle. For more than 30 years the British Government have been at the centre of allegations of collusion in what has been variously described as state killings, political murders, shoot to kill and sectarian assassinations.

Regardless of the terminology, the motion seeks to put the allegations to rest. It seeks to establish the truth about Britain's dirty war in Ireland; that is what has been going on in the past thirty years. Members on the Benches opposite would know all about that; they were involved heavily in it.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Before she really got into her speech, the Member started to make wild allegations against other Members that are untrue and have no foundation whatsoever. Can you use your powers to get her to rein in her wild allegations? As a supporter of IRA/Sinn Féin, she is prepared to turn a blind eye to the murders that they have carried out but continues to make wild, unsubstantiated and untrue allegations against other Members, some of whom have borne the brunt of IRA attacks. I appeal to you to take action.

Mr McLaughlin: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I remind the Member of the role that his party leadership played in setting up Ulster Resistance, a group that imported —

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. I shall respond to the original point of order. No specific allegation was made about any Member of the House, but I would remind all participants in the debate to exercise caution and respect the dignity of the House at all times.

Mrs Nelis: Britain's dirty war involved people in the highest echelons of Government, the British Army, the intelligence services and the RUC — in effect, the state. The guilt or innocence of that state in the planning and execution of the murder of 400 Nationalists — and some members of the Protestant and Unionist community, if that community would only acknowledge it — must be established. To establish the truth of the allegations, the Government should grasp the nettle and initiate the inquiry that the motion calls for.

There have been inquiries before. There was Stalker, whose inquiry was instructed by the RUC; there was the Sampson report, which was watered down and then suppressed by Paddy Mayhew for reasons of national security. Then there was Stevens. All those reports were about allegations of state murder.

The allegations of collusion and state involvement go back as far as the 1970s, when British Army intelligence, under the name "Military Reaction Force", recruited gangs — the UDA — to assassinate Republicans. The UDA gangs' tactics were predicated on the idea that any Catholic would do. They benefited from a policy of disinformation euphemistically named 'Clockwork Orange', in which military intelligence provided them with the information that they needed to assassinate Catholics and Nationalists.

There is a widespread belief that those involved in the Miami Showband killings, the killings at Silver Bridge in south Armagh, the Dublin and Monaghan bombings in 1974 and many more atrocities were working directly for RUC Special Branch and British military intelligence. It has taken the Dublin Government 26 years to set up an inquiry into the circumstances of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings; perhaps, the British should take a leaf out of the Dublin Government's book.

It is also widely believed that people in the British Government, through MI5 and MI6, their secret intelligence networks, must have known what was going on then and must know what is going on now.

2.15 pm

I believe that there are those in the British Government who know who murdered Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson and continue to cover the activities of Loyalist death squads. The British Government have consistently refused to answer questions on the role of the intelligence services and the activities of the death squads. What have they got to hide?

Questions have been put to them over the years by eminently renowned organisations such as Amnesty International — whose report criticising the British Government is widely available — the Helsinki Watch, United Nations rapporteurs, the United States Government's Human Rights Committee, the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ), Relatives for Justice

and the Pat Finucane Centre. All these creditable organisations are convinced that there is direct or indirect involvement of the British Government — through the intelligence services — with Loyalist death squads in the murder of Nationalists.

There is also mounting evidence that members of the British Government have, over the years, not only protected death squad operators but collaborated with high-ranking officials in the Northern Ireland Office, with the Chief Constable and with prominent Unionist politicians in the extensive cover-up of such activities. The deadly hand of collusion reaches far into the establishment. The assassins are protected by cosmetic investigations, non-prosecutions and curbing of inquests while the families and friends of those murdered have been subjected to harassment and intimidation by the RUC and the British Army. The victims of the death squads, even in death, are treated as less than equal.

The public face of the death squads, Brian Nelson, and his involvement with the British Force Research Unit — or "FRU", as it has become known — is well recorded by eminent journalists at the 'Daily Telegraph' and has been the subject of many documentaries. Nelson was involved in the South African arms shipment in 1988, which netted a huge haul of weapons including rifles, grenades and rocket launchers. The weapons were divided between the UDA, the UVF and Ulster Resistance — the organisation set up by the DUP.

In the six years prior to the arrival of the weapons, Loyalist paramilitaries murdered 71 Nationalists. In the six years following that delivery — from January 1988 until September 1994 — Loyalists murdered 229 Catholics, most of whom were innocent. Those killings were carried out in a brutal and sectarian manner.

Nelson was arrested by the Stevens inquiry — another cosmetic exercise by the British Government to quieten public outrage. Stevens "mark 1" was a spectacular failure, leaving Amnesty International to conclude in 1990 that

"it is obvious from all the evidence available that collusion remains a fact of life and the [British] Government is not prepared to confront it."

Stevens "mark II", which is inquiring into the assassination of Rosemary Nelson for doing her job as a lawyer and defending her clients, does not promise to deliver results either. It is clear that those who subverted Stalker and Sampson and all the other inquiries set up by the British Government to prevent the truth from emerging have a vested interest in subverting Stevens. The role of the death squads, the agencies behind them and the vested interests of the "securicrats" behind them must be made known.

According to the 'Irish News' today, 500 Republicans have been informed by the RUC that their lives are under threat after their personal details were found in the hands of Loyalists.

These documents, along with a quantity of firearms and ammunition, were recovered in searches in Loyalist areas. The documents could have come only from the same source that Nelson and the UDA got their documents from — namely, the intelligence services. It does not matter what name they use — whether it be the Force Research Unit (FRU) or the pseudo-gangs — these intelligence services are providing for and colluding with Loyalist paramilitaries in the assassinations of innocent people. There is further evidence of collusion and further evidence that Britain's dirty war in Ireland continues unabated. Collusion is not abstract; it is real. It has filled the graveyards with our young and our old, with our mothers and our children. The British Government must speak the truth. They must tell us what the relationship is between the British Government and the FRU — *[Interruption]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: What is the relationship between the FRU and the RUC? What is the relationship between the FRU and the British Army? What is the relationship between the FRU and some Members in this Chamber?

Mr S Wilson: I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after "Assembly" and add

"rejects allegations of collusion between the RUC Special Branch, British Military Intelligence and Loyalist Paramilitaries and congratulates the security forces, who have striven to uphold law and order in Northern Ireland in the face of a sectarian campaign of murder directed by IRA/Sinn Féin in collusion with others."

I put down the amendment to ensure that the wild imaginations of Sinn Féin — in their attempts to blacken the security forces in Northern Ireland — do not go unanswered. Furthermore, I want to ensure that it is put on public record that if a party in Northern Ireland can be rightfully accused of collusion in sectarian murders, it is the party opposite.

By tabling the motion, Sinn Féin has to a certain extent, shot itself in the foot — although some people may prefer it politically shot itself in other ways.

At the beginning of the debate, Sinn Féin tried to have the amendment ruled out of order — out of embarrassment obviously, as it knew what would come after Mary Nelis's speech. Sinn Féin knew that putting the motion down was a mistake, because it would give both a platform and an opportunity to put the spotlight on the real guilty parties in Northern Ireland — those who really have been involved in colluding in murder across the Province, those who, unfortunately, because of present political circumstances, have now been elevated to a situation in which they are allowed to sit in the Assembly.

Anybody who listens to the imaginative outpourings of Mary Nelis — who makes Walter Mitty sound rather dull — can only be astounded at her degree of ingenuity. In her usual bitter and twisted way, she spits out the words like machine-gun bullets. She uses phrases like

"the British Government's collusion in sectarian murder" and "the British Government's dirty war in Ireland". Unfortunately, that is an almost weekly diet of poison that is put into the system in Northern Ireland by the Member opposite and her party.

It is little wonder that in Nationalist areas in Northern Ireland the job of policing is made more difficult when that kind of poison is injected into our society. That poison is based on nothing other than the vivid imagination of members of IRA/Sinn Féin, backed up by the pseudo-legal groups that they gather around them. Then they talk about credible witnesses.

I want to deal today with the question of collusion in sectarian murder. I want to ensure that the finger of accusation is properly pointed at those who sit in the Assembly and who have been guilty of a bitter sectarian campaign over the last 30 years. I am not going to rely on my own views, or even on the views of Unionist commentators, but on the admissions of their fellow travellers and on the admissions of some people who are sitting in the House today. Their own people have pointed the finger of accusation at the sectarian nature of the organisation that IRA/ Sinn Féin so proudly represent. Indeed, Members of the House have served prison sentences for their activities in that organisation.

We often hear that the campaign of murder waged by the IRA over the last 30 years is not directed at their Protestant neighbours. We get the nauseating outpourings from members of Sinn Féin. I remember one occasion when the leader of Sinn Féin looked across to this side of the House and said "I want to be your friend." That is the way in which they try to hide their sordid sectarian past. Yet some of their own activists, sickened by the way that their organisation behaved, have pulled the lid off the kind of picture of themselves that they like to present — that they were fighting a war against British imperialism, but they never really meant to hurt Protestants. They were never really engaging in a campaign against other people who were their neighbours on this island. Let me quote from one who served on the Army Council of the IRA, and who was for a long time active along the Tyrone border. He was engaged in acts of terrorism, including murder, and he talks about his experience with those who carried out those acts. He said

"Inevitably the conversations I had with local IRA men and sympathisers 'the Prods' or 'the Orangies' centred around and it was becoming clear to me that Provisional IRA were in reality representatives of the Catholic 'defender' tradition. Irish Nationalism and Irish Catholicism was deep and complex. There was a deep and ugly hatred, centuries old, behind it all. The local IRA men would rather shoot a Protestant neighbour who was in the UDR or the police reserve."

He went on to say that when he went to the camp to be trained as a terrorist he was driven to a hotel called Carrigart

"Where we were awaited by Pat Doherty".

He nicknamed him “Smiler”. We have seen the smiling face of Pat Doherty on many occasions in the House.

2.30 pm

He says

“The darker side of the character can be judged from his other nickname, ‘Papa Doc’, after Papa Doc Duvalier, the infamous Haitian dictator”.

What was his role in that training camp? According to Sean O’Callaghan, at that stage he was the quartermaster for the IRA in Donegal where he was responsible for training camps and bomb factories. What were the bombs used for? Were they used for fireworks displays or for making bangs to scare people? These bombs were planted around towns, houses and roads in Northern Ireland to do what? To murder Protestants.

Yet we have the audacity of IRA/Sinn Féin today pointing the finger of accusation at the British Government, when in reality their own “smiling” members were involved in a campaign that led to hundreds of Protestants being killed along the border. That is not according to the view of Sammy Wilson, or even the RUC, but one of their own colleagues. We will always hear the argument that those who were killed, even if they were Protestants, were only killed because they were policemen or UDR men.

An interesting book on the involvement of the IRA in south Armagh is called “Bandit Country: The IRA and South Armagh” by Toby Harnden. I will refer to some of the people who sit in the House and who were involved with people in south Armagh. Unfortunately one of them has fled — gone on the run from the debate — and I would like to have quoted a few words to him.

In that book, commentary is made on the Tullyvallen and Kingsmills massacres, which were an embarrassment to those who claimed that their motives were not sectarian. They claimed that the massacres were the action of a splinter group — the Catholic Reaction Force. How often have we heard that since 1998? Let us look at the evidence. Eleven people were killed at Kingsmills and five at Tullyvallen. An IRA man from Cullyhanna was caught for the Tullyvallen massacre and he admitted his involvement. It was not the South Armagh Republican Action Force, but the Provisional IRA. One of their own people was caught and convicted.

The forensic analysis of the ballistics showed that several of the weapons used at Kingsmills had also been used at Tullyvallen, in a series of previous IRA operations, and in IRA operations for two decades afterwards. They may try to say that it was the work of a splinter group and nothing to with them because they do not involve themselves and collude in sectarian campaigns. However, the act was authorised by Séamus Twomey and was carried out by Provisional IRA activists.

Here is an odd thing. One would think that those in IRA/Sinn Féin would love to distance themselves from

that incident. What do we find when there was some dissatisfaction among the very people in Cullyhanna who were unhappy about IRA/Sinn Féin’s involvement in the so-called peace process?

None other than Mr Molloy went down to reassure them. What was his message to them? Do not forget that these are people who had been involved in a sordid, murdering sectarian campaign in south Armagh. What was his assurance to them?

“This phase of negotiations may fall apart, it may not succeed. And whenever that does happen —”

Did they distance themselves from all the acts in Kingsmills, Tullyvallen and Mountain Lodge? No.

“And whenever that does happen, then we simply go back to what we know best.”

There is not even embarrassment about what they did in their sordid campaign. The collusion goes beyond the collusion between members of the party opposite and those who carried out these sordid acts. We find that they also had the help of the gardaí in the Irish Republic. The most notorious example of that was the murder of Ch Supt Breen. Members of the gardaí admitted that they were ashamed because he had been set up by one of their own people in Dundalk.

Lest we think that only individual members of the authorities in the Irish Republic were involved in that, I will show that the collusion went even deeper.

I am glad to see Mr John Kelly —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Will the Member consider bringing his remarks to a close?

Mr S Wilson: I am finishing. I am glad to see Mr Kelly here. He could not return to Northern Ireland for 15 years. Why? He could not return because he was involved in importing arms. According to ‘Magill’ magazine, Mr Kelly freely acknowledged his involvement in the attempted gunrunning. His defence was that he believed that the operation had been officially sanctioned. Again we find that there was collusion in the killing of Protestants not just at the lower reaches of the gardaí but at the highest echelons of the Irish Government. The importing of arms was not so that people could walk about Northern Ireland being macho men. Those guns were brought into Northern Ireland to carry out the sectarian killings to which I referred.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am going to finish now. It is little wonder that Alex Maskey tried to have the amendment stopped today, because IRA/Sinn Féin does not like the spotlight of scrutiny to be placed upon the collusion between terrorists, gardaí and the Irish Government in a campaign that led to thousands of Protestants being killed in Northern Ireland. The police force, over those 30 years, has done a sterling job in seeking to protect the community. It is a scandal that we now have

people elevated to the House — elevated to the Government — who can spew out that kind of vile propaganda.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Given the number of Members who have indicated that they wish to speak in the debate, which has been allocated two hours, I advise Members to restrict their contributions to five minutes.

Mr McGimpsey: It is fair to say, having listened to Mrs Nelis — and not for the first time — that Sinn Féin continues to be a keen practitioner of the art of black propaganda. As the old proverb goes, “Truth is the first casualty in war.” That has certainly been clear over the past 25 years as we have listened to Sinn Féin excusing the actions of the Republican organisation, the Provisional IRA.

This is a mischievous motion. It is deliberately misleading propaganda. The evidence being given is based on hearsay and is made up of a series of allegations masquerading as fact. I totally reject Mrs Nelis’s contention. I have heard nothing from Mrs Nelis to alter my opinion that we are dealing with a series of inventions from an organisation that has a shameful responsibility for the deaths of over 2,000 people in the past 25 years.

Two thirds of those who have died over the past 25 years were killed at the hands of the Provisional movement; and among those were some 500 Catholics. Over the past 25 years, more Catholics died at the hands of the IRA than at the hands of any other organisation. Although the motion appears to have been moved out of concern for the Catholic community, innocent Catholics also died at the hands of Republicans. The so-called protectors of the Catholic community have been among its greatest tormentors.

The motion alleges collusion. I will not pretend that I can answer for every individual in the security forces over the past 25 years. I know, for example, that there was collusion between the IRA and the gardaí in the murder of two senior RUC officers, Breen and Buchanan, as they returned back across the border from Dundalk. I also know that collusion between the IRA and a prison officer resulted in the murder of a prison governor.

The suggestion that, over the past 30 years, there was collusion on a stronger scale than that, or that there was official collusion, is simply nonsense, demonstrable nonsense. I completely reject that suggestion. If that is the case, how is it, for example, that the number of Loyalists convicted of serious crimes, including murder, far outstripped the number of Republicans who faced the judicial process. The number of Loyalists who have gone to prison as a result of that process was many times greater than the number of Republicans who paid the price in the courts.

If official collusion had taken place, how does one explain these facts? If there was collusion, why were Loyalists terrorists made accountable at all? If there was collusion, why, when they were made accountable, did

Loyalists not spill the beans in response to an arrest that they would have seen as a double-cross? It is clear that there were no such incidences of collusion, in spite of the allegations.

These are easy allegations to make, but if the state organisations had decided to practise collusion or to take direct action, they had the skills and capacity simply to eradicate all terrorists. Republicans fail to appreciate that individuals in organisations, such as the RUC, are personally bound by the rule of law. The rule of law is paramount to them, and Republicans seem to fail to appreciate that there are people in this society who will not step over that line. Unlike the IRA and such organisations in many other countries, individuals in state organisations — for example, the RUC — are bound by law. If it had been otherwise, many Members of the House, who have been at the top of the IRA at various times, would not have survived.

Mrs Nelis stated that the RUC has today issued 500 warnings to people who are on a Loyalist death list — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Five minutes.

2.45 pm

Mr McGimpsey: I will finish in two seconds. This is an important point.

The Member suggests that that information came from a usual source and that it is evidence of collusion.

That list of people was downloaded from a Republican prisoners organisation by the Loyalist organisation concerned. I have seen the list. The Republican prisoner’s organisation listed their prisoners’ names, dates of birth, towns of origin and dates of release and asked Americans to give them support. Now, that is an example of the fallacy and fictitious nature of the so-called evidence of collusion.

Mr A Maginness: Listening to some of these comments, I am reminded of these words from the gospel:

“And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?”

We should bear that in mind when debating the motion and the amendment today.

The motion and the amendment are symptomatic of the selective view of our recent history that prevails in society and indeed in the Assembly. Both motion and amendment are selective in nature and partisan, and both are concerned with shaping one version of our history. Our history is in fact complex, and no one side in our conflict is without blame. Both traditions share the blame for the conflict that has caused so much death and injury in such a small part of western Europe. Of course, there are good grounds for suspecting that there was collusion between the security forces and Loyalist paramilitaries in a number of incidents. The murder of

solicitor Pat Finucane is one example, and we as a party have striven hard to try to find a public forum for an inquiry into the circumstances of his murder. The public good would be served by a public inquiry to establish the truth, to establish whether there was collusion, and that would be a service to all.

The motion is not concerned with the truth, but with establishing a version of the truth. The truth is that 3,600 people lost their lives in the troubles. The truth is that 1,065 Protestants and 1,548 Catholics died, and 1,000 of unknown religious affiliation died as well. Republican paramilitaries were responsible for 2,000 of those deaths. Loyalist paramilitaries were responsible for about 1,000 deaths. The British Army was responsible for 318 deaths, and the RUC for 53 deaths. Loyalist paramilitaries were responsible for the deaths of 735 Catholics. The British Army was responsible for the death of 266 Catholics. The RUC was responsible for the deaths of 43 Catholics, and Republican paramilitaries were responsible for the deaths of 381 Catholics. Tell me: who is to blame? Is it the RUC? Is it the UDA? Is it the IRA? Who is to blame?

What is required is that we abandon our subjective versions of our common history and attempt to create a wider understanding of what befell our long suffering community. We must learn the lessons of our bloody history. We must learn the lesson that violence cannot achieve anything positive and that violence must be firmly placed in the past by both traditions, not just by one. Both traditions in our society must share the blame.

We should examine our history, both individually as citizens and legislators and collectively as a society. Perhaps in the future when our politics have matured we can find some way of establishing the objective truth of our history and use that to heal the divisions and to bind the wounds in our society rather than use history to create more divisions and more wounds.

Mr Shannon: I support the DUP amendment and reject the allegation of collusion made by IRA/Sinn Féin. Instead, I wish to throw the focus back on IRA/Sinn Féin and its campaign of sectarian hatred that has resulted in the death of over 3,000 people in the Province. Mr Maginness gave a breakdown of who killed whom. The fact of the matter is that the IRA campaign led to the killing of more than 3,000 people. Lay the blame where it should lie: with the perpetrators of a murder campaign that has resulted in heartache and sorrow for so many families.

One must also record, as other Members have, that the IRA was responsible for the murder of some of its co-religionists. Indeed, it was responsible for the murder of most of them. That speaks volumes, given today's motion. Moreover, IRA/Sinn Féin has expelled people from the Province. The families asked if they could return, and when they come back, IRA/Sinn Féin became involved in their demise. As a result of standing up to the godfathers they were murdered. Roman Catholics who

have served in the security forces have also been murdered. The campaign that the IRA has been involved in has been very direct.

We must salute the sacrifice made by the RUC, the most maligned police force in Europe. It was thrust into the forefront of a terrorist campaign orchestrated by the IRA who murdered its officers, both male and female, of both religions. The RUC's Special Branch played an important and significant role against terrorism from both sides in the Province. That IRA/Sinn Féin is so intent on its removal speaks volumes about the success that it had against IRA terrorism.

A story in 'The Observer' at the weekend referred to MI5's taking over the special role that Special Branch once had. If that is the case we would welcome it, so long as the Government do not interfere in the strategy or overall policy pursued by MI5.

Can we also recognise the excellent work that those in the UDR and the RIR have done as well, whether in a part-time or full-time role? The British Army — our army — has been involved in policing the Province. Little or no evidence has been given today to show that any collusion occurred. Many inside and outside the Chamber who have served in the British Army were proud to wear that uniform, and they feel especially aggrieved that such an allegation should be made.

Other investigations into collusion have taken place and have never at any stage been able to prove the allegations. They have been very costly. We should also deny the slur and the innuendo that have been made and fermented by IRA/Sinn Féin. We must consider the sectarian campaign that IRA/Sinn Féin carried out along the border. It targeted the eldest sons of Protestant families, shot the fathers, burned the farms, bombed the houses and intimidated them to leave. That was a direct sectarian campaign, and many of us who lost loved ones know all about it.

Yes, the IRA has colluded with others to carry out the campaign and has specifically targeted Protestants and their families. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, the IRA has killed so many of its fellow religionists. The motion that Danny Kennedy moved a short time ago related to the collusion between the gardaí and some Republicans. We should commit that to our memory because it is important. It has been well documented, and we are still demanding and waiting for the investigation, which will show that there was collusion at the highest level.

IRA/Sinn Féin has been involved in a most horrific campaign of murder. It has been blatantly sectarian, as the facts and figures, all the evidence, all the history and all the heartache and pain of all those families testify.

The security forces — the RUC, Special Branch, British military intelligence — deserve our sincere gratitude. They have been a bulwark between law-abiding

citizens and the anarchy that Sinn Féin/IRA thrives on and relishes. The security forces deserve our thanks, and we reject totally any spurious allegations of collusion that have not been, and cannot be, proven. There is no substance whatsoever to the motion put forward by Sinn Féin today.

I urge Members to support the DUP amendment.

Mr McLaughlin: A LeasCheann Comhairle, two issues face us today. I remind the Assembly that a few weeks ago we debated a motion that was proposed by the Ulster Unionist Party, which called for an inquiry into alleged collusion between the Garda Síochána and the IRA. The Assembly decided to support that motion. Unless Members are openly approaching this issue from the perspective of partisan and sectarian logic, the Assembly must support the motion proposed by my Colleague Mrs Nelis for the sake of consistency alone.

There is a second issue. The amendment cannot be supported simply on the basis of the volume of evidence, some of it emanating from the British Government and British Government operatives, that there was collusion, that it was institutionalised, and that it resulted in members of this society's being murdered by Loyalist sectarian gangs.

That may not matter to some people in the Assembly. We listened to the titters of the DUP/Ulster Resistance when Mary Nelis outlined some of the horrendous consequences of that collusion. They thought that it was funny, but the murder of Nationalists is not funny, and it is certainly not for the DUP to belittle it and to humiliate the relatives of those who were cruelly murdered by Loyalist sectarian murder gangs, over whom, given court testimony, they have had considerable influence over the years. Do not just take my word for it; listen to those who have ended up in court, regretting that they listened to the words of DUP leaders.

Logically, the amendment cannot be supported, and I regret Michael McGimpsey's comments; I expected more of him. He knows that the information that sustains the demands for inquiries into the formal involvement of British Army regiments and units in the murder of people in this society is irrefutable. It cannot be denied. Evidence of collusion will emerge eventually. It cannot be suppressed.

However, Mr McGimpsey knows that the British Government have been forced to resort to Public Immunity Certificates. He knows that because Loyalist paramilitaries confessed that the RUC Special Branch concealed the evidence in the case of William Stobie for ten years. When the evidence finally emerged, what did they do? They immediately arrested William Stobie in an attempt to intimidate him. Those people have much evidence to share with us about the role of the RUC Special Branch and the role of British military intelligence. Fair-minded people in the Assembly listening to the debate know that you cannot deny what is undeniable. The collusion happened. It was in an institutionalised form —

Mr McGimpsey: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Member appears to be directing many of his comments to me. He is alleging that I know something that he cannot prove, which I deny. For him to stand here and say that I know is nonsense, and I ask him to use a different form of rhetoric. Perhaps he will revert to — *[Interruption]*.

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

Mr McLaughlin: Perhaps Michael McGimpsey should have chosen his words more carefully and with more certainty because he did, in fact, deny the undeniable. I regret that, and I prefaced my comments on that basis. I expected more from you, some even-handedness. We know that the information that has emerged about collusion is simply —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr McLaughlin: I thought that I was doing that.

Members of the Assembly know that the information that has surfaced on collusion is simply the tip of the iceberg. When the full story comes to light — and it most certainly will — I urge people to choose their comments very carefully.

The information cannot be suppressed indefinitely, and when it emerges it will be a huge story.

3.00 pm

We know that the then British Attorney-General, Sir Patrick Mayhew, who later became the Secretary of State here, secured a deal with Brian Nelson so that Nelson did not have to take the witness stand during his trial. Why? It was because Nelson would have testified about his recruitment by British Intelligence while he was a member of the British Army. He was recruited to become a member of the Loyalist paramilitaries. He would have then testified about his role — under the direction of British Intelligence — in directing murder.

Colonel J, or, to give him his correct name and title, Col Gordon Kerr — who has been recognised and rewarded by the British Government — was noticeably silent, when he gave evidence at that trial, about Nelson's direct involvement in many murders. Nelson had originally been charged with 10 murders and involvement in 16 attempted murders. All of those charges were mysteriously dropped.

Ulster Resistance was founded by the DUP. We all remember the red berets. Ian Paisley, Peter Robinson, and Gregory Campbell — a Minister in the Assembly — were associated with that. No one disputes that Ulster Resistance imported weapons from South Africa that were subsequently used to murder innocent Catholics in the community. Those are the facts. That evidence is there — like it or not.

There are people in the Assembly who have had roles in the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and who could tell us many stories. They could perhaps tell us who murdered Patrick Kelly in County Tyrone. Which UDR patrol was it? There are people here who know that information, and they should share it with us.

All that has fanned the flames of insurrection, violence and conflict. That selective approach will not work — the truth will come out. I urge the Assembly to support the motion and to reject the lie that the amendment will perpetuate.

Mr Roche: I oppose the motion and support the amendment. One of the things that the debate has clearly established on behalf of those who have proposed the motion, is that the demand for independent inquiries is based on nothing more than empty allegations and unsubstantiated claims. In the short time available, I want to substantiate the point that I have just made, in relation to the demand for an independent inquiry into the murder of Rosemary Nelson.

That demand was based on two fundamental claims about the RUC. First, that the RUC lacks the professional competence to properly investigate that crime. However, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) legal attaché and Colin Port, who is the person responsible for the overall investigation, went to the trouble, on 12 April 1999, of making a public statement to categorically refute any possibility that there should be an independent inquiry based on the professional incompetence of the RUC. They said that without the involvement of the RUC there was no hope of the investigation being successfully pursued.

Also, when the FBI legal attaché, with his team of FBI experts, became involved with the members of the RUC who were undertaking the investigation, he said that the FBI had no expertise that it could offer to the RUC. The statement by those two leading experts was, of course, met with an hysterical outburst from the SDLP, which claimed that it was appalled by that declaration.

A second, even more serious, consideration is that there should be an independent inquiry into the death of Rosemary Nelson because the RUC has, in some way, colluded in her murder. That claim of collusion is based on allegations that RUC officers made threats against Rosemary Nelson. Those allegations were made by clients of Rosemary Nelson who were being investigated by the RUC.

The UN rapporteur, Param Cumaraswamy, gave unqualified credibility to those claims. He said, in his report of 5 March 1998, that he was satisfied that there had been harassment and intimidation of defence lawyers by RUC officers, as had been described. He was also satisfied that the harassment and intimidation were consistent and systematic.

There are two fundamental problems with that claim by the UN rapporteur. The first is that Sir Louis Blom-Cooper, the Independent Commissioner for the holding centres, in a report on 31 March 1999, categorically rejected the claim. Sir Louis Blom-Cooper is a human rights lawyer of international repute.

Sir Louis Blom-Cooper said

“We note that the Special Rapporteur has concluded that there has been police harassment of the few members of the legal profession who provide their services at the Holding Centres; but we know, and have recorded one instance in our Fifth Annual Report, where an allegation of harassment was positively not substantiated. We cannot, therefore, endorse the Special Rapporteur’s conclusion”.

Blom-Cooper was saying that that claim and endorsement by the UN rapporteur contained allegations that were known to be untrue and, therefore, he could not endorse the report. These allegations were also a matter of investigation by Cdr Mulvihill of the Metropolitan Police.

The details of the report and the investigation by Mulvihill were made public on 30 March 1999. The conclusion of the Mulvihill inquiry was

“ I am confident that the facts of the case(s) ” —

cases about allegations of threats to Rosemary Nelson —

“have not only now been established ... but were established during the original inquiry(ies)”

by the RUC.

Mulvihill was conducting an inquiry into the way in which the RUC had originally held inquiries on these cases and into the credibility of the threats. He said that the original inquiry had established the facts of the case.

On the basis of the Mulvihill inquiry, there was nothing that the DPP could do to proceed against the officers against whom the claims had been made. There are absolutely no grounds for an independent inquiry into the case on the basis of either professional incompetence or collusion.

Mr B Hutchinson: There has been a great deal of discussion, and I will try not to go over old ground. Sinn Féin must be realistic when it talks about these issues. I heard Mr McLaughlin say that there was institutionalised collusion. I think that he actually meant that all the security forces colluded with Loyalists.

I worry when I hear Sinn Féin members talk about loyalist death squads. They speak as if the IRA had never planted 13 bombs in the Shankhill and killed over 30 Protestants, and as if the people who did that could not be described as Republican death squads. Sometimes we wonder how they were able to do that and not get caught.

Mr Roche: Will the Member give way?

Mr B Hutchinson: No. I have only five minutes — I do not have time.

Anyone who believes that paramilitary organisations did not infiltrate security forces is living in cloud cuckoo land. I speak from experience — I have been about for a long time. In the paramilitary organisations that I know of, everybody was told to join the security forces to learn what they could.

The IRA had men in the French Foreign Legion, the United States Army, the gardaí, and in the army in the Irish Republic, who brought back what they had learned. They even had men involved in a training camp in Libya. It is a nonsense that the paramilitary organisations do not use whatever they can to get information and training.

Anyone who tells me that the members of the prison service who worked for Republicans did not give them information about Brian Armour at the time that he was blown up, or that Billy Wright was killed in prison without there being collusion, is also living in cloud cuckoo land. I spent 16 years in a prison and in all that time — even in the roughest weather — I never saw a watchtower without an officer in it.

Stephen Larkin, an IRA man from Ardoyne, who tried to kill Billy Wright in a packed Shankill street in 1993, was a member of the French Foreign Legion. What did he do with his skills and the information that he gained there from British soldiers and others? He used it for the IRA. People were encouraged to do that in all paramilitary organisations, and people should be realistic about that.

I spent 16 years in prison. I was sent there by the RUC. I was beaten by the British Army. I was in a British jail, and I was tried by a British court. There was no collusion in my case. However, 13,000 Loyalist prisoners have been through the jails — there has been some collusion.

An IRA ring of British Telecom technicians was recently uncovered. Does that mean that all British Telecom employees collude with the IRA? Can we presume that every Nationalist teacher in every school colludes with the IRA? A Natural Law Party staff member, who worked in north Down, gathered information for the IRA, some of which related to Mr Ervine, a member of my party. That man was convicted, because, along with many others, he was working for the IRA. Of course there has been collusion.

The difficulty is that Republicans do not realise that Loyalists can gather information in the same way, as the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure pointed out. Loyalists are not thick, despite what some like to think. Loyalist paramilitaries have various means of gathering information; they do not always need to rely on the help of the security forces.

I do not dispute that a British intelligence unit did set up an organisation in the UDA in the cases of Brian Nelson and others. That was evident, over the last few

weeks, from some of its activity. The aim was to get at Loyalists as much as at anyone else. We have seen how it has poisoned the Loyalist community. We recognise that, but that is an isolated incident — neither the whole of the RUC nor the whole of the British Army is involved, and that must be recognised.

There is no doubt that information gained as a result of collusion between the Garda Síochána and the IRA was used in the killings of Judge Gibson and RUC officers, Buchanan and Breen. Mr Sammy Wilson has said that that embarrassed the gardaí. It is a waste of time to discuss systematic institutionalisation, because that did not happen. We must recognise that people on both sides were involved in murder, and they used any information that they could get.

Ms McWilliams: The debate reflects what a dirty, rotten war there was. It reflects the desperate hunger for the truth about the murders that took place here over the past 30 years. Mr Billy Hutchinson said that infiltration took place on both sides, and there is no doubt that that was the case. When war comes through the door, human rights go out the window.

In response to Mr Hutchinson, I stress that both men and women were involved in paramilitary infiltration, be they from the Prison Service, the British Army, the RUC or the gardaí. These facts are now emerging, because after ceasefires are declared, that frozen watchfulness that prevents people from speaking often begins to melt. That happens either through the judicial process or when people find a safe space to say what they need to say, a space that they could not find before. That needs to happen much more.

We must move towards the stage where people begin to say sorry. People who ring me, and who feel pain daily because of their experiences, need to hear an apology. They also need to hear more than an admission that “It was wrong.” They need to hear the voice of those who were responsible saying that things will be done differently in the future. Unfortunately, until some of the mess that we have created is cleared up, there will be neither remorse nor an acceptance of responsibility. We will not hear the words “We will make a difference.”

Pain is caused by both sides. I was heartened when, finally, some of the truth about what happened to the families of “the disappeared” emerged. I was heartened when the list of names was published, and I believe that the families were too. There was, of course, terrible pain felt when the bodies were not recovered.

Burying people and not telling their families where they could be found was a terrible human rights disaster. Much still needs to be done for those who were never on the list. Many families are hurting to this day and simply want to know where the bodies are buried. That is the kind of truth that I am talking about.

I remember when two of my friends were murdered during the troubles. I wanted to know three things: what happened to them; how did it happen; and who did it. In the case of one of them I still do not know. Many of us have had to pick up the pieces and get on with our lives. There are others who simply beg for a little drop of truth.

3.15 pm

Maura Babbington from north Belfast recently contacted me. If anyone here were to meet that woman, I am sure that he would also understand the pain of being told that her husband had been shot by mistake because he happened to be wearing the overalls of the intended target. She says that she is now worried about the hierarchy of inquiries. Where is she ever going to get her truth? The IRA did admit shooting her husband. To be told that he was shot by mistake did not lessen her pain. It may have helped her to know that she could at least survive without the neighbours whispering and wondering “Was he an informer?”, as often happens. She still talks about the day on which the life went out of her when they murdered him. She still waits to hear what his last words were and who was there when he lay dying on the pavement. We will never know. There have been 3,500 people murdered and, as Alban Maginness said, from both sides and all sides.

There are times when it is important to have inquiries as well as criminal investigations. I know that it is possible — the Stephen Lawrence inquiry set the precedent. It said that there was a need for a criminal investigation and that at the same time there could be a judicial inquiry. We can all learn from the mistakes made when Stephen Lawrence was murdered, given the aftermath and the fantastic recommendations that came out of that inquiry. It is in the public interest, where possible, to hold inquiries — and they do not have to hurt anyone.

Let people start talking with a little bit of remorse in their voices and start accepting some responsibility for how things will be done differently in the future.

Mr Foster: I oppose the motion because it is rich coming from Mrs Nelis after what we have heard from Mr Brian Keenan in the last couple of days.

I served in the security forces for 28 years, and never once was I sent out to kill. I was sent out to protect society from the rape of terrorism. For many years now Sinn Féin/IRA and the SDLP have made allegations that security force elements were colluding with Loyalist paramilitary groups to target Catholics. I will place on record at the outset that I completely reject all forms of terrorism. Suffice it to say that it is unrealistic for Sinn Féin/IRA, the SDLP and the Irish Government to call for inquiries into allegations made against our security services, while at the same time imagining that the gardaí did not have its rotten apples.

I would like to address one specific issue. Mrs Nelis made a glaring omission in her motion. She referred to several organisations which, she says, have conspired in planning the murder of Catholics, but she has omitted one. That organisation, which according to figures quoted from the book ‘Lost Lives’ has shown itself to be to the forefront when it comes to being responsible for the deaths of Catholics, is the IRA. A total of 3,636 people are listed as having lost their lives in the troubles. Of those 2,139 — 59 % — were murdered by Republican terrorists, with the IRA responsible for 1,771 of them. That is 49% of all those killed in the troubles.

It may come as a surprise to Mrs Nelis to learn that the IRA has been responsible for the murder of 402 Catholics, including 198 described as civilians. In fact the IRA, the so-called defenders of the Catholic people, was responsible for more Catholic deaths than our Army and the RUC combined.

During the troubles, the security forces were responsible for 367 deaths — fewer than a quarter of the total number murdered by Republican terrorists. Of these 367 deaths, 138 were Catholics killed by the Army and 26 by the RUC.

However, let us not leave matters here, because the misery inflicted upon the Catholic community does not begin and end with dead Catholic civilians. To that sorry toll, we must add those Catholics who answered their country’s call by wearing the uniforms of the RUC and the UDR. These figures are conclusive proof of one thing: the IRA, far from being the defender of the Catholic community, has been the organisation that delivered the greatest misery to it. That misery is ever present in the graves and through the disappeared, the broken bodies and the exiled.

Catholic members of the security forces, Catholic civilian staff members of the RUC and UDR, the disappeared, the informers, the expelled, the victims of punishment beatings and shootings, rival drug dealers and criminal elements have all felt the force of the IRA at some time.

They, their families and thousands of others trapped in the ghettos created by the IRA’s godfathers have had to live through a nightmare. There used to be a good deal of talk about the Nationalist nightmare. The figures that I quoted prove that the nightmare was created and sustained, in no small part, by those who still like to portray themselves as the defenders of the Nationalist community.

I have a question for those who call for an inquiry into the deaths of Pat Finucane, Robert Hamill and Rosemary Nelson: why be so selective? Why are these campaigners not equally vociferous in a call for an inquiry into the deaths of the many Catholic police officers, members of the judiciary or civilians who were murdered by the IRA itself?

I am loath to name individual Catholics who were murdered by the IRA, because I do not wish to reopen the

old wounds of victims' families, but Jean McConville, Judge William Doyle, Mary Travers and many who were killed at Omagh were all Catholics. Their deaths do not, however, appear to trouble the consciences of Mrs Nelis and her party colleagues, nor indeed, I am sorry to say, the consciences of some of those on the SDLP Benches.

If Mrs Nelis and her party are really serious about finding out who was responsible for the murder and misery visited upon sections of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland, she should look for the perpetrators a little closer to home. I can guarantee that many in her party, perhaps even some on her own Benches, may not appreciate the media spotlight.

As Mrs Nelis said only yesterday, if we are to have confidence in the future, we must know the truth. I want to hear the truth throughout.

Mr Attwood: I will return to Mr Foster's question, but I will begin by discussing a matter with the same theme. Mr McLaughlin, in his last remarks, criticised the selective approach taken and said that the truth will come out. I have never heard a more telling indictment of a Sinn Féin motion on the Floor of the Assembly by a Sinn Féin Member than that comment from Mr McLaughlin. His words indict the motion — it is selective in its approach, and Mr McLaughlin's contribution and comments, did not add much to the debate. Arguably, they fuelled the conflict.

Secondly, Mrs Nelis said that there was a "dirty war" in Ireland. She blamed the state alone for the "dirty war" in Ireland. Yes, there was a dirty war in Ireland. There were elements in the British Army who were involved in that dirty war and that, latterly, became known as the work of the force research unit.

Any democratic citizen of any democratic state should be concerned when the Army of that state becomes involved in a policy of murder of innocent people to bring about a desired security outcome. All of us, regardless of our backgrounds, should acknowledge that that is not the role of any element in the British Army.

The dirty war in Ireland was not conducted by the RUC as an institution, but rather by individuals in the RUC over a long period. There was also a dirty war visited upon our community against its wishes by paramilitary organisations.

I acknowledge that in the paramilitary organisations there were people who demonstrated enormous growth, were highly motivated and who might even have been well intentioned. None the less, they were involved in a dirty war, and we should call it what it was.

I want to move on from that issue because every week, if not every day, we have a debate that is characterised by differences of opinion about the past.

It is about collusion by one side or the other, the truth of one death or another and our experience of conflict. We are defensive, divisive, adversarial and exclusive in what we say. I do not apply that to any one party in the Chamber. It is understandable, because we are trying to express our grief, pain and anger. It is necessary to talk through these things and even begin listening to each other. We will not overcome the legacy of the conflict over the past 30 years until we move away from talking at each other and start talking to each other.

Sooner or later we must move away from what I have referred to as the concept of "choosing victories and chosen victims". In Yugoslavia, the experience of the second world war was suppressed after Tito's rise to power. People suppressed their emotions and anger about what one family and community did to another. If we suppress what we did to each other — citizen to citizen and community to community — we will not evolve and move away from conflict in a creative way. Somehow, the Assembly and the community must devise a global and inclusive mechanism to deal with the past.

We have begun to deal with the past: the Bloody Sunday inquiry; the returning of the bodies of "the disappeared"; these debates, the victims' commissions, and many other initiatives. However, we need a broader mechanism so that instead of talking about what has happened we will begin to interpret and understand the past. That time will come sooner rather than later. Despite the divisive and adversarial nature of the debates in the Chamber, I sense that our communities are further down that road than we are. Why I believe that is captured in an ancient Greek phrase that Robert Kennedy often quoted:

"They have learned more than we have learned. In our sleep, pain, which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

They had wisdom, and we should begin to share it.

Mr Poots: I support the amendment. The motion brought forward by Sinn Féin/IRA is ludicrous, because if the level of collusion that is alleged to have happened had really taken place, the whole lot of them would have been wiped out years ago. That is the reality. If what these people told us was true they would have been cleared of years ago. They would not be about. The fact of life is that the level of collusion that they allege took place between the RUC, the British Army and Loyalist paramilitaries did not happen.

Yes, there were rotten apples in the barrel. Yes, there were individuals who might have been involved. However, no large-scale collusion took place between the British Army, the police and Loyalist paramilitaries. It was mentioned that 13,000 individuals from the Loyalist community were jailed. Who put them there? It was not the gardaí. It was not the French Foreign Legion. It was

the RUC; they were the prosecuting officers in each of those cases. Why did they send them to jail if they were such good buddies?

A lot is being said about Pat Finucane, Rosemary Nelson and Robert Hamill. I always find the stench of hypocrisy that comes from the SDLP especially surprising. Remember years ago when Mr Hume told us that we should draw a line under the past; put everything behind us; break sweat not tears; and let us go forward together. What do they say when the opportunity to do that presents itself with the new police force? They say "We will not go into the new police force until we get an inquiry into Finucane, Hamill and all those other inquiries that happened in the past."

Of course, the Bloody Sunday inquiry is ongoing as well. How much has that cost — £30 million, £40 million, £50 million? I have not heard the latest tally, but it is believed that it will cost well in excess of £100 million. How many jobs, hospital beds and schools could be provided for by the money being buried in the Bloody Sunday inquiry?

In an effort to outdo Sinn Féin, the SDLP is insisting on more inquiries, but it told the Unionist community to draw a line under the past. It cannot go unsaid that collusion took place with the IRA by members of the RUC, by members of the British Army, by members of the Prison Service and by members of the gardaí. Equally, they were rotten apples, as were those involved in giving information to Loyalist paramilitaries.

3.30 pm

The notion that there was widespread collusion between security forces and Loyalist paramilitaries in the Province is simply that — a notion. It has no basis in reality. We have heard nothing today from IRA/Sinn Féin to give us any serious basis for supporting the motion or for making us believe that there was widespread collusion. In the past few weeks, IRA/Sinn Féin Members threatened members of the public and members of organisations. In the last few days there has been a very high profile resignation — people know what I am talking about. A Member of the Assembly was involved in that. It is IRA/Sinn Féin who are making threats, carrying out murders and destroying our community. The motion is spurious in nature, and the allegations are spurious. I support the amendment.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, Madam Deputy Speaker. I endorse the call from Mary Nelis for an inquiry into allegations of collusion. I do not want to repeat any of the comments made earlier, but suffice it to say that I want to be consistent.

A few weeks ago I spoke on a motion tabled by Danny Kennedy of the UUP. During that debate I said that we should have inquiries into all these allegations. If people say that these things did not happen, we should

have an inquiry to clear the air. They cannot have it both ways — they cannot say that this did happen or did not happen. People have been quoting selectively from one book or another. However, the evidence is clear that there is a need for an inquiry.

I oppose the DUP's amendment, not because I am in the least bit concerned about it, contrary to some of Sammy Wilson's comments. I am not in the least bit interested in having the matter aired or attacks on my party aired. That happens here every day of the week anyway so it is like water off a duck's back. Sammy Wilson referred to some Sinn Féin Members being on the run from the debate. Despite the DUP's lengthy campaign to smash Sinn Féin, we are still here, we are still very strong, and we will never be on the run from people like the DUP. Ultimately they will do more talking than anything else. The need for an inquiry is crucial.

I want to take issue with Sammy Wilson's comments that our party surrounds itself with a lot of pseudo-legal organisations. I presume he means Amnesty International, Helsinki Watch, the US Congress Committee, the United Nations special rapporteur, Mr Cumaraswamy — to name a few of the world renowned legal organisations and human rights organisations that have laid the finger of blame, or have at least said that there is a clear case to be answered in respect of collusion in this state.

Billy Hutchinson missed the point when he talked about organisations wanting to infiltrate police or whatever else from any state. That may well be true, but I am not interested in going into that. That is a totally and utterly separate thing from a state infiltrating those organisations to pursue an agenda which involves a violation of human rights and murder.

Sammy Wilson quoted at length from a number of books. I stand here as probably the only official victim of collusion. Brian Nelson was convicted of conspiring to murder several people, including me. I do not know of anyone else here in that category.

I know that Brian Nelson and others have targeted Republicans and many of my colleagues, including those in the Chamber today. However, I am probably one of the few in the official annals because Brian Nelson was convicted of conspiring to kill me, and I was injured in one of those attacks.

Fortunately, I do not take these things personally. Nevertheless, there is a need for an inquiry. If Billy Hutchinson's argument is logical and all these things happen despite the police's being against them and with so many people being arrested, let us have an inquiry. Let us detail and examine the extent to which Loyalist paramilitary organisations were infiltrated and directed by the state forces here, and not only the RUC but also by the Force Research Unit (FRU) — because that happened. I know that Mr Hutchinson does not like to acknowledge that Loyalist organisations through the

years have been heavily infiltrated. There have been rare occasions when there were not several agents running at one time in all the Loyalist paramilitary organisations. I have no doubt that that continues to this day. That is something that Loyalist organisations find difficult to come to terms with. What it suggests is that without the help of the RUC they could not have killed as many Catholics as they did, because they did not, unfortunately for their own reckoning, kill that many Republicans anyway — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Will the Member address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Maskey: Of course, the IRA killed people over the years. Colleagues and I have acknowledged that in this Chamber and other public forums in the past. The motion is deals with the allegation of state collusion, and I stress that one of the members of the FRU has given an affidavit to the courts, which will see the light of day in the not-too-distant future.

In respect of my own case, the FRU handlers of Brian Nelson provided him with a plan from which I can quote. The plan put to Brian Nelson was no less than a detailed plot that they were convinced,

“if carried out properly, would end in the cold-blooded murder of Mr Alex Maskey, a democratic-elected councillor representing West Belfast.”

That is only one example. That account may or may not be true. There is a clear need for an inquiry, and people are quoting all sorts of sources. Let us have the inquiry and get the facts out.

Mr McFarland: This is the latest in a long line of Sinn Féin demands for investigations.

If we want a truth commission, then let us have a truth commission. Let us examine the role on Bloody Friday of the member of the Belfast brigade who sits in the Chamber. Let us examine the role of the IRA Chief of Staff in IRA atrocities throughout the 1980s. If we learnt anything from South Africa, we learnt that we should stay well away from truth commissions.

Agents are a part of any country's defences. Human intelligence in an organisation is far superior to any other source. We can recall the recent case of an FBI deep penetration agent working for Russia for years and years. It is part of the infrastructure of defence.

We can go back to Elizabethan times; we can look at the wall-to-wall informers throughout the 1798 rebellion; we can look at the so-called war of independence, during which Michael Collins was running agents in Dublin Castle and the Special Branch in Dublin — a key part of the IRA's campaign between 1918-21.

Agents are a vital part of the security forces in countering terrorism. We can think of the stories of Raymond Gilmour, Martin McGartland and Sean O'Callaghan who have written in some detail about their operations inside the

IRA and the effect they had on people still alive today. If you talk to the security forces, they will tell you that agent penetration had a large part to play in the ending of the IRA campaign, when 80% of IRA operations were either called off or interdicted by 1994.

The IRA treatment of its own informers is appalling. Eamonn Collins described his time on the “nutting squad” when he was involved in the death of some of the hundreds of informers in the IRA, who were tortured, shot and dumped along the border. Mr Collins himself ended up in the same condition.

There has certainly been collusion in the gardaí, and the cases which individuals in the security forces have been involved with that in Northern Ireland are well-documented. Some are still subject to investigation, and no doubt that investigation will take its due course.

Agents, sources and informers are part of any anti-terrorist campaign.

What evidence exists of collusion between the security forces and Loyalist paramilitaries? In 30 years, 26 Republicans have been killed by Loyalist paramilitaries. That displays an amazing degree of incompetence on behalf of the Loyalist paramilitaries, who have murdered hundreds of innocent Nationalists and never had a problem killing the nearest Catholic. My argument is that if there was all that collusion, how come only 26 Republicans were killed during the entire 30 years? That clearly refutes the allegation.

Sinn Féin talks a great deal about our shared identity, and the need — and I think we have a need — to put the past behind us. I must say that stirring up divisions through spurious motions like this is most mischievous and extremely unhelpful.

Mr J Kelly: A Cheann Comhairle. I want to reiterate what Mr Maskey said. Doubt is being expressed in the Chamber as to whether there was collusion. The only way to put that doubt to rest is to have a public inquiry, whatever the fallout. If it has to be a truth commission, then let us have one. Let us put to rest the hurts and sores that lack of inquiries have led to.

Allegations of collusion are not just coming from the Republican side. Sergeant Campbell was murdered in Cushendall, and his family is asking for an inquiry into his murder. He was a member of the RUC and his family alleges there was collusion in the security forces in his murder. He was murdered in Cushendall by a serving member of the RUC. He was not a Republican.

In the murder triangle in the greater Portadown area, Monsignor Denis Faul — who is the darling of many people on the Unionist side — was at the forefront in saying and writing that there was collusion between the security forces and Loyalist paramilitaries.

Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson are two high profile cases but there are others — anecdotal and local

cases — that the Nationalist community points to in which men and women were murdered as a result of collusion with security forces — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: Billy Hutchinson asked whether there was collusion in Billy Wright's murder. There quite possibly was collusion in his murder. But who colluded in his murder if it was not the security forces? Billy Wright was becoming too hot to handle — he knew too much, and he was about to expose his relationship with the security forces. Sinn Féin does not have a problem about having an inquiry into the murder of Billy Wright. All we are saying is let us have these inquiries and let us put to rest the reasons we are asking for them. Who should fear to speak in inquiries if there is no collusion?

The Nationalist community believes that British security forces thought that the only way to put a damper on Nationalism was to find some way of murdering Nationalists — other than their own way — and, therefore, they sought collusion with Loyalist paramilitaries.

3.45 pm

They colluded with Loyalist paramilitaries to target Republicans and Nationalists and to “win the war” in that fashion. It is these things that are left to rankle deep in the Nationalist community. It is essential that we bring these matters to the Assembly and ask for an inquiry into them. Take the UDR, a battalion of the British Army that became an embarrassment to the British Government because many of its members behaved in a manner contrary and contradictory to any notion of law and order. Many of its members held dual membership with Loyalist paramilitary groups and stole weapons from their own barracks and brigades. Some members of the UDR went to prison for what they had done and then later served in the UDR. They became an embarrassment to the British Government, and the regiment was disbanded.

Mr C Wilson: What is the driving force behind the Sinn Féin motion this afternoon? Undoubtedly, it is not driven by a mass call from the decent law-abiding Catholic citizens of Northern Ireland. Alban Maginness attempted to distance the SDLP from Sinn Féin and the motion today. However, neither the SDLP leadership nor Mr Maginness can wash their hands of their failure over the last 30 odd years to support the forces of law and order and the RUC in their attempts to bring those terrorising this community to justice. That has prolonged the agony of our community for both Catholics and Protestants. Let there be no misapprehension that either Sinn Féin or the SDLP is making this call on behalf of the decent law-abiding Catholic citizen in Northern Ireland. On the contrary, those in the Catholic community who have the courage and the bravery to speak up when they are interviewed on television would be calling for inquiries into the missing bodies of the disappeared. That subject has disappeared from the media — they are no longer

interested in it. Many people throughout Northern Ireland have now forgotten the plight of people like Helen McKendry, whose mother, Jean McConville, remains one of those shot dead and lost by the cohorts of Sinn Féin members, who have the effrontery to come before the Assembly today with the motion.

Almost everyone in Northern Ireland who supports democracy and law and order agrees that if there is a need for an inquiry, it would certainly be appropriate to investigate the connection between senior figures of the Sinn Féin movement and that of the IRA. The Member from North Down referred to that pressing matter and to the fact that Mr Adams was the commanding officer of the Belfast brigade of the IRA and Mr McGuinness was the commanding officer of the Derry brigade of the IRA during the activities following Bloody Sunday. When we look at the issue mooted today, we must look at the activities of Sinn Féin/IRA.

It is nothing short of a disgrace that we have a system of Government in Northern Ireland that has been so polluted by the representatives of armed terror. Within the ranks of the Sinn Féin/IRA leadership are those who are still serving members of the IRA Army Council. Mr Doherty, Mr McGuinness and Mr Adams are all serving members of the Army Council.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member is sailing very close to the wind. I ask him to keep to the motion.

Mr C Wilson: I am merely stating things that are well documented by people who are in authority in such matters, including the Chief Constable.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to speak to the motion.

Mr C Wilson: Turning to current events, we should note Mr Brian Keenan's comments at the weekend when he declared, as a senior Sinn Féin/IRA officer in both of those organisations, that the war was not over.

I finish my short address by simply appealing to all Unionists in the Chamber to unite in the coming weeks to support a motion, which should be debated, on a matter that is urgently pressing. There is nothing more important that could be debated by the House. The motion resolves that Sinn Féin does not enjoy the confidence of the Assembly because it is not committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means and — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to address his remarks to the motion.

Mr C Wilson: Therefore, consistent with the Northern Ireland Act 1998, determines that Ministers of Sinn Féin shall be excluded —

Madam Deputy Speaker: You are out of order, Mr Wilson. I call Dr McCrea.

Mr C Wilson: I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I must ask you to clarify. This is very much part of the motion that I am addressing, and I ask to be allowed to finish my comments.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That was not specific to the motion.

Mr C Wilson: I am sorry, but I have to challenge that. What I am saying is, I believe, relevant to the motion, and I am simply asking to be allowed to — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. You were reading the text of a different motion into the record, and that is why I said that that was out of order.

Mr C Wilson: I accept your ruling, Madam Deputy Speaker. I simply wanted to say that I need only six members of the Ulster Unionist Party to sign the motion that I mentioned so that we can have a debate —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Out of order.

Rev Dr William McCrea: We had, on one side, an interesting debate, because the gross hypocrisy of IRA/Sinn Féin was exposed. They had the brass neck to come and talk about what, in their motion, they claim is collusion between the security forces — that is, the Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch and British Army intelligence — and the Loyalist paramilitaries in the “planning and murder of Catholics”. That is utter hypocrisy. In her opening remarks, the Member who introduced the debate said that its purpose was to seek to lay to rest those allegations. The truth is that if any motion were accepted today or any inquiry into any allegation were to be initiated, nothing would be laid to rest unless the relevant tribunal gave the statement that IRA/Sinn Féin or the SDLP wanted it to give. An example is the Bloody Sunday inquiry. After £100 million has been wasted, if that tribunal does not state what the SDLP and Sinn Féin want it to state, they will dismiss it completely and demand another inquiry. Nothing will satisfy the insatiable demands of Republicanism. All that Republicanism wants is for the people of Northern Ireland and the British Government to lie down and let themselves be trampled into the gutter.

Let us look at some remarks which were made in today’s debate. Mrs Nelis stated that 500 Republicans were informed by the RUC today that they were under threat. Why did she want to bring that up? Sinn Féin has never believed anything else the RUC has said, so why do they believe that this is accurate information? They reject everything the RUC says; they throw the baby out with the bath water, and then they bring this up — that she has solid evidence from the RUC that 500 Republicans are under threat. That shows you the brazen hypocrisy of that party, because it does not believe anything stated by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. They have done everything to blacken that gallant organisation, which has

defended the rights and privileges of all the people of Northern Ireland.

I agree with what Mr McGimpsey said about Mrs Nelis coming out with the usual black propaganda. That is exactly what she and John Kelly were doing. Sinn Féin were coming out with their black propaganda.

The sad fact is that the party that is coming out with the black propaganda against the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the other security forces — Sinn Féin/IRA — has been put into the Government of Northern Ireland by the Ulster Unionist Party. That is why I agree with Mr Wilson that we should ensure as a matter of urgency that Sinn Féin/IRA is put out of its Executive positions. It is destroying democracy — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should address the motion.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I will not waste time challenging that ruling. I am simply stating that Sinn Féin/IRA have colluded with the gardaí and others to murder Protestants and Roman Catholics in this country. The spotlight ought to be upon Sinn Féin/IRA.

We should remember the gross hypocrisy of Sinn Féin about the intimidation of Roman Catholics who wanted to join the RUC. Those people were intimidated and could not go back to their homes. Some Members are smirking about that. It is despicable and disgraceful that people should be intimidated for wanting to join the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Now, we see the same intimidation of Roman Catholics who dare to put in an application form for the new police force. Sinn Féin refuses to condemn, saying that it is not into the politics of condemnation. However, Sinn Féin is not against condemnation of the RUC, the army, or the Loyalists. It is not into the politics of condemnation when it comes to IRA activity against law-abiding people, whether they be Roman Catholics or Protestants. As Alban Maginness said, although the RUC killed 43 Roman Catholics, the IRA murdered 381. Those figures speak for themselves.

Our Government have demoralised the RUC and left the IRA intact, although that organisation ought to be dismantled and destroyed. The tragedy for the RUC is not collusion; it is that our Government never allowed our security forces to fight the IRA and put them where they belong. Tragically, the Government tied the security forces’ hands behind their back and did not allow them to destroy the terrorist scourge that threatened the whole community.

We have been promised more terror. At the weekend, Sinn Féin/IRA’s Mr Keenan said that he did not know what those who said the war was over were talking about. He said

“The revolution can never be over ... until we have British imperialism where it belongs — in the dustbin of history.”

That is the heart of the motion. They would remove, destroy and demoralise the security forces and the forces

of law and order in the Province. That was said just last weekend, but, of course, Sinn Féin/IRA is not into the politics of condemnation.

Mr “Wash his hands” Pilate McLaughlin said that they did not really intend to threaten anyone. When that same person was asked whether Martin McGuinness was a member of the IRA, he replied that it had been his practice throughout his political career not to involve himself in issues that were outside his field. He seemed to have a great deal of information for us today, despite his claims that he knows nothing about the organisation of which he and his colleagues form a part. Sinn Féin and the IRA are two sides of the same coin; even the Irish Government have told us that. Yet, Mr McLaughlin wants us to believe that he knows nothing about Martin McGuinness, Gerry Adams or anything about the IRA.

The IRA has colluded with the Gardaí.

4.00 pm

They have colluded with heads of Government in the Irish Republic. Remember when the old Stickies stood aside and the Provisionals came into existence? Who armed the Provisionals? It was the Southern Irish Government — the Fianna Fáil Government — that armed the Provos to carry out their dastardly deeds upon the people of Northern Ireland. They talk about inquiries. Let us have a few honest inquiries. Let us have an inquiry into why Sinn Féin/IRA is in the Government of this country. People want to know why those who are committed to the paths of terrorism are allowed to sit in government over the people whom they have destroyed, murdered and slaughtered for the past 30 years.

Enough money has been wasted on inquiries such as the Bloody Sunday inquiry. The RUC officers are the heroes, not the villains. They ought to be commended. I certainly commend the security forces for their defence of freedom in this beloved Province.

No one stands here to say that he or she agrees with every action of every member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. No one would say that of his or her Colleagues in the Chamber. Nevertheless, the truth is that the Royal Ulster Constabulary has gallantly defended the rights and freedoms of this country against one of the most bloodthirsty campaigns of terror and violence that any group of people has ever had to endure in the history of our beloved country.

We are faced with a motion today that never had any intention of getting to the heart of the problems of Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin was trying to cover its own guilt over the slaughter of the people here.

Monica McWilliams said that we must reflect on what a dirty war it was. What does she mean by “it was”?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Rev Dr William McCrea: A dirty war is still going on in this country, and that is the war of the Provos who use the ballot box in one hand and the Armalite in the other.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Rev Dr William McCrea: They are using their Executive position over the people of Northern Ireland — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Rev Dr William McCrea: — while at the same time scheming the destruction, murder and slaughter of the innocent people of this country. We need an inquiry to expose that rottenness in the system.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will do my best in the time allotted to respond to all the Members who spoke. I remind Members that the motion

“calls on the Secretary of State to initiate an independent public inquiry into allegations of collusion between the Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch, British Military Intelligence and Loyalist paramilitaries in the planning and murder of Catholics.”

I say to Sammy Wilson and Willie McCrea that they protest too much. I notice how uncomfortable people on the Unionist Benches are when the issue of collusion involving members of the security forces is raised. It was not Walter Mitty who murdered Patsy Kelly in Tyrone. Perhaps we should ask, as Mitchell McLaughlin has done, which element of the security forces was involved in that murder.

Sammy Wilson likes to quote from books. I can also quote from a few. I could direct the attention of the Unionist Members to a book by Kennedy Lindsay, ‘Ambush at Tully-West: The British Intelligence Services in Action’. It told the story of Ian Black, a member of the UDR, who used to put his car into the barracks at night when he went out on patrol in a jeep. He discovered that his car was being used by the British intelligence forces to go into west Belfast to murder Catholics. I did not say that. Nor did Amnesty International. Kennedy Lindsay said it, and it is in a book as a recorded fact. Members should get the book and read it.

On the issue of the IRA’s being involved in —

Rev Dr William McCrea: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it right that a Member should castigate members of the Ulster Defence Regiment when her husband was a member of that organisation?

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

Mrs Nelis: I will ignore that remark. But I am glad that he saw the light.

If members of the IRA were involved in murders, as the DUP states, they were caught and convicted. The issue here is not the role of the IRA, but the allegations that murder was carried out in the name of the state. For example, Brian Nelson’s handler Gordon Kerr, known

as Colonel “J”, who provided testimony at Nelson’s trial on charges of murder and conspiracy, did not go to prison. He got an OBE and a top job in Beijing. Sammy Wilson talked about a spotlight. The spotlight of scrutiny fell on Ulster Resistance — we all saw the rally in the Ulster Hall on television — when Gregory Campbell, Ian Paisley and Peter Robinson wore their red berets. We saw them, up on the top of a mountain somewhere, carrying firearms certificates.

Michael McGimpsey said that I did not bring forth any evidence to support the motion. He should read — as should everyone — articles by Amnesty International and the ‘Sunday Telegraph’, which is no friend of Sinn Féin’s. Look at the ‘Insight’ programme.

I said that there are allegations that Loyalist paramilitaries were killed in collusion that involved British military intelligence. I said that the handing out of personal details of Nationalists and Republicans was recorded on a UTV programme by Brian Black.

Alban McGuinness did not address the motion either. Is he saying that the British are neutral? Is he saying that they were not involved in collusion? Was Brian Nelson a figment of everyone’s imagination? Did Stobie, who was an agent of the RUC and who was charged with the murder of Pat Finucane, not exist? He ignores the response, and attempts to ignore the issue of the British state violence, while attempting to elevate other organisations to the position of being responsible for every death that has happened.

Jim Shannon gave us a tirade on how innocent the security forces are. If everyone in the security forces were as innocent as he suggests, one wonders why the British Government have steadfastly rejected calls by the United Nations and by Amnesty International to deny the allegations made before them.

As regards the allegations, which we heard from several Members, that the IRA killed more Catholics. That is what I would call the numbers game. The French Resistance killed more French people than Germans during World War II. Members should read history.

Mitchel McLaughlan referred to Stobie, who was a member of the UDA — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: Stobie, when charged — and I quote directly — replied

“I am not guilty to the charge. I was a police informer for the Special Branch.”

The truth, indeed, hits hard.

Paddy Roche talks about the inquiry into the murder of Rosemary Nelson. It is well documented that Rosemary Nelson was threatened by members of the RUC, who were identified by Commander Mulvihill. Evidence to support that was put forward by Louis Blom-Cooper, who

stated that Rosemary Nelson was threatened. Mulvihill’s inquiry into the death of Rosemary Nelson is a sham, because it is being conducted from the very RUC station where those who threatened her are now located. Param Cumaraswamy said that as well.

Mr Roche: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Are we expected to listen to absolute nonsense? Louis Blom-Cooper spelt out clearly the basis on which he rejected those allegations.

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

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Billy Hutchinson made the most pointed response to the motion. I want to reply to him by stating that they did not argue that everyone involved in Loyalist paramilitaries was involved in collusion. I welcome Billy Hutchinson’s acknowledgement that there was collusion. That is contained in the spirit of the motion, and he was the only Member in the Chamber, apart from my own comrades, who tried to address that. I have not argued that every member of the RUC was a sectarian monster, but some were.

Monica McWilliams did not address the motion either. She talks about pain — *[Interruption]*

Yes, I know — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The point is — and it is contained in the motion — that either there was collusion or there was not — *[Interruption]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Mrs Nelis: It is a humbling experience to listen to the relatives of those who were murdered in collusion with the state. They want to get on with their lives, but they cannot face the future until they establish the truth about the past.

The motion highlights the need for healing. It is not about remorse; it is about the role of the British state in many of the deaths that caused the pain about which Monica McWilliams talked.

Sam Foster, along with many others, gave us the numbers game. Inquiries into specific killings are necessary, because the questions of collusion by the state in those deaths have not been answered.

I say to Alex Attwood that the motion is clear — in fact the SDLP have indirectly supported it by using the calls for inquiries into the murders of Pat Finucane, Rosemary Nelson and Robert Hamill to enable them to move to the new Police Service Board. They did acknowledge that there was a dirty war, but then Alex Attwood went on to say that only selected members of the British forces were involved. If that is the case, then

the British Government should tell us. They should acknowledge that they knew of the activities of the Forces Research Unit (FRU) and that they knew of the South African arms.

Edwin Poots raised the age-old argument — I think that it was RUC Chief Constable Hermon who used it years ago to try to put to rest the allegations of collusion then — of the few rotten apples in the barrel. Nobody believed him, and nobody believes Edwin Poots now either.

Mr Poots: Nobody believes you.

Mrs Nelis: Then we had the cost of collusion. Let me point out to some of the Members on the opposite Benches — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: Brian Nelson, of whom we have heard a great deal today, was paid £28,000 a week for his labours as an informer for the British military services. On whose orders was he operating? FRU — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. This is the third or fourth time during this contribution that I have had to stand. I remind Members that there is dignity in the House and that the Member is entitled to be heard — *[Interruption]*. I have called for order — *[Interruption]*.

I have called for order.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too am appalled at the disrespect shown to the Chair — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: FRU soldiers and officials, including the former Secretary of State, Tom King, have tried to suppress documents that are now in the public domain.

In fact, the whistle-blower, under the pseudonym Martin Ingram, wrote in a Belfast newspaper recently about the “right” people who were allowed to live and the “wrong” people who were not. Members should get hold of that and read it. Alan McFarland said that Sinn Féin was not making a demand. No, we are not making a demand; we are not calling for public inquiries — we are supporting the relatives who have called for them — *[Interruption]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Because of the disruption, I shall give Mrs Nelis 30 seconds to finish.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Previously when there were periods of disruption and you called for order, the clock stopped. Surely the Member’s time is up — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The clock stopped during points of order — not during the time when I was calling for order and I was standing and waiting for order. I am giving Mrs Nelis 30 seconds to conclude her remarks.

Mr Dodds: Madam Deputy Speaker, can you tell us how often you have given the same opportunity to Members on this side of the House? Or are you especially fond of doing that for Sinn Féin/IRA?

4.15 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Deputy Speaker rejects any such accusation. Order. I will give Mrs Nelis 30 seconds to conclude her remarks.

Mrs Nelis: Yes, agents are a part of the apparatus of the State. The motion clearly calls for the issue of collusion in the planning and carrying out of the murders of over 100 Catholics to be addressed by the British Government.

Question, That the amendment be, made put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly rejects allegations of collusion between the RUC Special Branch, British Military Intelligence and Loyalist Paramilitaries and congratulates the security forces, who have striven to uphold law and order in Northern Ireland in the face of a sectarian campaign of murder directed by IRA/Sinn Féin in collusion with others.

Private Notice Question

PUBLIC TRANSPORT (WEATHER CONDITIONS)

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his statement on 15 January 2001 on the salting of roads, what measures are being taken to ensure that road, rail and other public transport networks remain in use and, in particular, what steps are being taken to support the needs of emergency services in the light of the current adverse weather conditions.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): There was widespread disruption to roads across Northern Ireland both last night and this morning due to a combination of drifting snow, fallen trees and power lines that were brought down by 70 miles-per-hour winds. Jackknifed lorries and abandoned vehicles have caused blockages in some areas. The Roads Service has deployed all of its resources to try to keep the main traffic routes passable. All Roads Service divisions were put on a high state of readiness at 10 am yesterday. In the northern division, snowplough blades were mounted on some vehicles, and gritting started at lunchtime yesterday. Similar measures were implemented at 6.45 pm in eastern and southern divisions.

All main routes on the salted network were treated prior to the snowfall. A band of rain preceded the snow; therefore some was washed off. Main routes were salted continuously through the night. Despite that, many roads have been affected especially in Counties Antrim and Down and in the Belfast area.

Translink advises that if roads remain passable it will continue to offer as many of its scheduled bus services as is practicable. Translink must ensure that passenger safety — and that of its own staff — takes precedence. Operational decisions to withdraw services will be made on that basis. Translink has also advised that disruption to rail services has been minimal. Northern Ireland Railways operates an on-call system that enables signal points to be kept clear of ice. Its staff have been implementing those measures across the network since early this morning. Translink advises that if bus or rail services are further disrupted due to the weather, it will endeavour to keep passengers informed through the media and its dedicated call centre.

Mr Fee: I thank the Minister for making the time to be available today. I am not going to rehearse the weather problems that people across the entire community have been experiencing over past days. They affect everyone in Northern Ireland.

Can the Minister give us an update on the commitment that he gave on 15 January 2001, when he made a

statement to the House following the bad weather over the Christmas and New Year period? He specifically referred to ensuring “access to key public services in snow conditions”. Can he give us some commitment that those key public services or facilities will include schools, hospitals, churches, health centres, cemeteries, and the local shop or post office — the places people need to get to? That is especially important for people in rural areas, so that they can survive these bad weather conditions with some reasonable comfort. They need to be in a position to access the local facilities, services and outlets.

In particular, will the Minister consider what needs to be done to ensure that the emergency services — the Ambulance Service, the police and the Fire Service — can actually do their job and perform their functions during the type of weather that we have seen in the past couple of days?

Mr Campbell: The Member refers to a statement that I made in the House on 15 January 2001. I assume that he is referring to the winter service review that I undertook to have carried out by the Roads Service. The review is currently under way, and I will report to the House when its conclusions are known.

The Member asked specifically about a number of areas involving the emergency services. Hospitals, for the most part, are located on the salted network, so immediate access to and from hospitals is normally covered. He raised — both today and previously — other points relating to matters such as GP out-of-hours services, nursing homes and health centres. It is difficult to establish every single access to and from every one of those — and to ensure that they are free at all times — when the entire Roads Service staff is working flat out to ensure that the salted network, primarily, is kept free.

The main roads have been affected this morning by the horrendous weather, and we have seen the problems that afflict the electricity supply in Northern Ireland — and which afflict some of those emergency services. I can inform the Member that the emergency services will form part of the review.

I would like to be able to say that every road and every access to every emergency service will be kept open at all times. It is not practicable for me to say that, especially with the budget limitation of £5 million per year for the winter salting programme. I will, however, ensure that the elements referred to by Mr Fee will become part of the review and will be closely examined.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Assembly is grateful to the Minister for taking the time to come and answer this question.

FOOT-AND-MOUTH DISEASE

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yesterday I raised a point of order, relating to the fact that, with the Minister of Agriculture being engaged in meetings in Brussels, there was no Minister available to make a statement on the foot-and-mouth disease crisis throughout the UK and on its implications for Northern Ireland. I understood that the Minister of Agriculture hoped to be here this afternoon, and a private notice question was tabled. She is again detained — this time in London. It is utterly unacceptable that there is no Minister to speak on a matter that is of great importance to the agriculture community.

Also, can you inform me how it is possible to ask for a statement to be made in the House by another Minister on behalf of the Executive?

4.30 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is a matter for the Executive — not for the House. It is appropriate that the Executive should be asked whether another Minister could replace the Minister. You have made the point that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is in London attending a very important meeting on this issue. The question you raise is a matter for the Executive.

Mr Poots: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you clarify whether the Member is correct when he says that foot-and-mouth disease is now present throughout the United Kingdom? So far as I am aware, it is only in Great Britain and has not reached this part of the United Kingdom yet.

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

Adjourned at 4.30 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 5 March 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

FOOT-AND-MOUTH DISEASE

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I am grateful for this opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly about the present foot-and-mouth disease situation.

Before doing so, I want to express my sympathy to the agriculture industry here, especially to farmers, for the fact that they are once again the victims of circumstances outside their control. Once more they face disruption, cost and uncertainty arising out of an animal disease that, although it originated elsewhere, impacts on their livelihoods. I want to reassure farmers that my staff and I are doing everything humanly possible to limit the problems that this latest disaster will cause for them.

I also express my regret to the Assembly for my absence last Tuesday, 27 February, when I was due to respond to a private notice question from Mr George Savage, Member for Upper Bann. I had to attend a meeting with the Prime Minister in Downing Street at very short notice on my way back from the Council of Agriculture Ministers in Brussels. At that stage, foot-and-mouth disease had not been confirmed in Northern Ireland, and it was vital that I attend that meeting in the interests of pressing Northern Ireland's case for regionalisation. Sadly, that case has been weakened and delayed due to the confirmation that foot-and-mouth disease is present in Northern Ireland.

I first became aware of the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Britain on 20 February, when Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food officials advised that there was a suspected case of swine vesicular disease in a pig in an abattoir in Essex.

That disease is clinically very similar to foot-and-mouth disease and laboratory testing is required to distinguish

between the two. By the following morning — Wednesday 21 February — the disease had been confirmed to be foot-and-mouth disease.

Since then, it has become clear that the disease originated in Tyne and Wear some weeks before coming to light in Essex and that it has spread considerably throughout Great Britain. Unfortunately, it is now clear that the irresponsible actions of a few individuals in the illegal trade of sheep from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have introduced the disease and placed the agriculture industry across the island of Ireland in serious jeopardy. Equally importantly, the lack of co-operation from those involved caused unnecessary delay in ensuring rapid and effective action against such a contagious disease as foot-and-mouth disease.

There has been some ill-informed and, I dare say, politically-motivated criticism of my Department's response to this crisis. I resent the fact that some people choose to make mischief at a time when we should all devote our efforts to dealing with this most serious situation. However, I want to set the record absolutely straight about exactly what my Department and I have been doing.

On being advised by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Great Britain on 21 February that we were dealing with foot-and-mouth disease, I immediately banned the import from, or export to, Great Britain of live cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and other susceptible animals. I also banned the import of associated products from Great Britain. That was done by staff from my Department, in person, at the ports and airports. On that very night cargo which was already on the high seas was, turned back to Great Britain. Those measures attracted considerable criticism from Great Britain because of the trade implications, but I believed that they were the correct steps to take to protect our animal health position and to put Northern Ireland in the best possible position to make its case to be allowed to resume exports as soon as possible. Those decisions would not have been possible had we not had a devolved administration in Northern Ireland.

It is impossible to put arrangements of this complexity in place instantaneously, but my Department's approach has been risk-based. We dealt first, with the greatest threat — live animal imports — and then moved to deal with the lesser, but important, risks, such as dealing with passengers returning on flights and ferries.

It has since emerged that those steps were too late, since infected sheep had already been brought into Northern Ireland and illegally traded on 19 February — before MAFF had discovered the Essex case.

We have since had one outbreak of the disease confirmed in County Armagh and several other reports are being investigated. However, at this time, none of these is a major cause for concern.

Three-kilometre and 10-kilometre zones have been established around the farm in south Armagh. In the three-kilometre zone there is a virtual standstill on the movement of animals, except for emergency slaughter. Every road into, or out of, that zone has been sealed off. In the 10-kilometre zone very tight controls are also in place. Animals may move under authorisation in, but not outside, the 10-kilometre zone.

There have been various reports about these controls being ignored by local farmers and members of the public. My staff are doing all they can in the circumstances as regards the closure of roads, the posting of notices, provision of disinfectant and giving of advice. I have appealed to the public to stay away from these areas and to act responsibly in helping us to eradicate this disease. In the final analysis, we have to rely on their doing so.

There have also been suggestions that there should be a heavier army and RUC involvement on the border to match the activity of the Irish army and gardaí and to prevent illegal movements. My Department is in daily contact with the RUC and the Army and will call on them further if necessary.

Returning to the outbreak itself, all of the animals on the affected farm, together with those on adjacent or in-contact farms, have been slaughtered as a precautionary measure. It may also be necessary to slaughter further animals connected with this outbreak.

Members will also be aware that various lines of investigation are being pursued in relation to the sheep believed to be at the centre of the outbreak in south Armagh, and that a man was arrested recently for questioning. Several other individuals are involved in this investigation, but I am not prepared to elaborate on that at this stage, as I wish to avoid prejudicing the outcome.

So far as the smuggled sheep are concerned, we know that the vast majority of the animals in the original consignment, which was illegally traded from Scotland, where it had been in contact with infected animals at a market in Carlisle, have gone to the Irish Republic and were slaughtered in County Roscommon inside six hours. We also know now that some of the remainder of the consignment was deposited on another holding in south Armagh before being taken to the Republic of Ireland. The authorities in the Republic of Ireland have been advised.

We are also investigating reports that other illegally-traded consignments of sheep from Scotland may have been dispersed in the south Derry area. Information is incomplete, but there is evidence that some sheep from these consignments may have been sold in Swatragh market on 10 February. Veterinary staff are following this up.

All the animals that were properly certified into Northern Ireland over the relevant period and which arrived at the destination indicated on the certificate, and where the

co-operation of people was given, have been traced and are being checked daily for clinical signs of disease.

I want to make clear again to the Assembly my disgust at the irresponsible way in which a very small number of people have behaved. As a result of this behaviour, the farming industry in Northern Ireland, and indeed in Ireland as a whole, has now been imperilled.

There have been criticisms of the follow-up action that we have taken. Where people have co-operated with us and obeyed the rules, we have acted swiftly and decisively. It is more difficult, however, to take action where the presence of animals is not known or where misleading information has been given as to their whereabouts. In due course, those responsible will be subject to the full process of law.

In the meantime, we have a major job to do to stamp out this disease. I have taken several measures — apart from those referred to earlier — to help in that respect. The movement of all susceptible animals in Northern Ireland has been banned except for those going to direct slaughter; all livestock auctions and markets have been banned; and the movement of horses to, from, and within, Northern Ireland has been banned for at least three weeks. I have closed the Department's colleges until further notice. All of the Department's forest parks are also closed.

The presence on farms of Department of Agriculture staff has been reduced to the absolute minimum, and then only where absolutely essential. I have tightened the controls on the use of pigswill. I have advised the organisers of sporting events to consider whether these are really necessary, and I have also advised against gatherings of farmers or of people on farms. I am promoting the concept of fortress farms, and I have advised members of the public not to visit the countryside unnecessarily.

I have also taken steps to ensure that, in spite of livestock inspections having been postponed, farmers will still be able to receive their livestock subsidy payments. All public utilities and local authorities have been contacted, and advice has been given in relation to their work in the countryside.

I realise that many of these measures will cause great inconvenience to the farming community and to the general public. However, I know that the vast majority of people are anxious to help and will act responsibly.

I fully appreciate the impact that all of these measures will have on everyone in Northern Ireland — from the farmers, who, as I have already said, are now subject to yet another crisis not of their own making, to the shoppers, who may find that some of the product lines that they expect to find on supermarket shelves are no longer available. However, anyone who has watched the dreadful scenes on television of hundreds of animals being slaughtered and incinerated will appreciate how important

it is for the disease to be quickly controlled in Northern Ireland. I was moved by a report in one of the Sunday papers describing the distress felt by one farmer who could not bear to look at his animals knowing that they were about to be slaughtered.

10.45 am

My priority is to ensure that all suspected cases of foot-and-mouth disease are identified and that the disease does not spread beyond the area where it has already been confirmed. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development staff are doing everything possible to achieve that. As soon as the Department is sure that foot-and-mouth disease is eradicated here, I shall make the case to the European Commission for Northern Ireland to be freed from the export controls to which it is currently subject. I shall begin to ease the controls that I have put in place as soon as it is safe to do so.

The disease situation in Great Britain is likely to impact on the supplies of certain food lines available in the shops for some time, irrespective of what happens here.

Again, I pay tribute to the Northern Ireland agricultural industry that has responded so positively to its latest challenge and to the public for their understanding and co-operation. I also appreciate the important role that the media played in helping deliver the messages of how to prevent the spread of the disease. It is hoped that together we will be able to ensure that the potentially disastrous impact which foot-and-mouth disease can have on one of our most important industries will be minimised.

Mr Speaker: The House will be aware that the maximum time allowed for questions to the Minister is one hour. A substantial number of Members wish to ask questions. I ask them to be as concise as possible so that as many as possible may be accommodated in the time available.

The Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): Northern Ireland is in the midst of a catastrophe and a crisis. Every effort must be made to bring about a return to the usual situation in the farming industry. However, I appreciate what the Minister said about those people who have resisted measures put in place to try and rectify what has happened.

I was disgusted by the criticisms from her friends in the South of Ireland and from the Government of the South of Ireland. They said that they were doing everything possible to prevent the spread of the disease and that the North was doing very little. The Minister should be robust in telling her friends in the South of Ireland what she has told the House today. It is wrong to say that nothing was done. There are those who criticise the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, not because they are trying to make a political point, but because there are matters that the Minister needs to explain to the House.

Mr Speaker: May I ask the Chairperson to draw towards his question?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: At Friday's Agriculture Committee meeting I asked the Minister to tell us the number of animals that come into this country each week to be slaughtered, but which are not. Many of those animals are still not slaughtered in Northern Ireland. I was surprised by the Minister's reply, that due to European Union regulations, she was unable to stop those animals at the ports. They can be examined only at the place where they are to be slaughtered. If that is so, the European Union rules are responsible for those animals getting into the country. Surely she should take this matter up immediately. I have been in touch with the President of the European Commission, Mr Prodi, to understand the rule on this matter. If the Minister does not have the power to stop such animals coming into the country then everything else she may do is abortive.

Ms Rodgers: With regard to the EU regulations, we are in a free trade area in Europe and that will continue. However, it is not the rules that are the problem; it is the flouting of the rules. Last year, due to the vigilance of my Department, we became aware that some certified animals coming in were not reaching the destination they were purported to reach. We began to investigate the matter and, by January 2001, we had succeeded in stopping the majority of that. If we had not done so, we would be in a much more serious situation today, as we would have had a much greater influx of animals being illegally traded. As it happens, only a very few people were responsible for the influx of illegally-traded animals.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee (Mr Savage): I understand the Minister's comments that farmers could not watch their animals being burned — animals that they had been breeding for a lifetime. When were cattle and sheep last imported into Northern Ireland? Where did the animals come from, and what is their destination? Have they all been inspected by officials?

Last Monday, the livestock marts were open. The situation is very different today. Have adequate steps been taken to compensate these people? I know that this is not a day for asking about compensation, but will these people be compensated or reimbursed, as this is a situation not of their making? Manual workers and office staff are involved in the livestock marts. People are coming to Parliament Buildings today to find out about the situation. I would like some guidance on that. We will do everything we possibly can to assist the Department. Everything that can be done will be done. We cannot allow the industry to disintegrate.

Ms Rodgers: I thank Mr Savage for his remarks and support. I cannot now give him the numbers that he has asked for, however, if possible, I will provide them in writing. The last imports from Great Britain were on

20 February. We stopped all imports on 21 February 2001 and, as I have already stated, we turned them back at the port that evening.

With regard to reimbursement, the industry has already raised the question of redundancies in livestock marts and the matter will be pursued. On Saturday morning 3 March the issue was also raised at a meeting I held with officials across the Departments, and the Department responsible for that matter will look into it. A cross-departmental committee of officials was set up as a result of an emergency Executive meeting on Friday 2 March.

It is working, and there are areas which will be dealt with. I take this opportunity to thank my Colleagues in the Executive, as many of them have been taking action in relation to this in their own Departments. Consequential loss was referred to. The only compensation that is provided at the moment is 100% compensation market value for those animals that are slaughtered. However, I noted the Prime Minister's remarks last week when he referred to consequential loss, and he said that any compensation in that area would be a matter to be looked at on a national level.

Mr Fee: I thank the Minister for her very comprehensive statement this morning. I, of all people, understand the difficulties and pressures that she, her Department and her officials have had to face in the last week. I also know full well the terrible anxiety and worry across the entire agricultural community, particularly in places like south Armagh.

Will the Minister confirm that there has been a huge response from the people of that district and that there is a massive amount of co-operation and support for her efforts on the ground? Will she also confirm that there is great anger at the small number of individuals who tried to flout the rules in the early part of last week? Will she confirm that she will be resolute — as will all of us — to ensure that the interests of the wider community come first and that anybody who tries to breach the rules of this quarantine will be pursued and stopped?

Ms Rodgers: I assure Mr Fee that I share his disgust at the small number of irresponsible people who have put the whole future of the industry in jeopardy by their actions. I agree that there has been co-operation right across the country, particularly in the south Armagh area, from the people on the ground, who are extremely anxious. I have already referred to one farmer who was almost reduced to tears at the idea that his cattle herd was to be slaughtered. I fully agree, and I am pleased to say that there is co-operation. I hope that due process will take care of those who have acted irresponsibly, that they will be made amenable to law and that prosecutions will follow. As the House will know, investigations are currently proceeding with the RUC in co-operation with the Garda Síochána and the police across the water.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement this morning. I welcome the strict measures outlined in it, and I assure her that the people of the area that I live in and represent also welcome them. She may have confused genuine and reasoned criticism of some elements of her Department's response to the crisis with personal or political criticism of herself. I assure her that that is certainly not the case.

Will she ensure that maximum information is given out by her Department to the people on the ground? This is the single most vocal criticism I have heard of the Department. It is not the fault of departmental officials, as often they do not have the information about which animals are to be culled and how this process is to take place. Will she ensure that the animals culled are destroyed quickly? This does not seem to be the case at the moment. Can she confirm that no complaints have been received by her Department that any officials were obstructed, harassed or intimidated in any way during this operation in south Armagh? Will she repudiate attempts by her Colleague Mr Fee — I welcome his about-turn this morning — to introduce electoral politics into this issue? That affects all of us in this Chamber.

Ms Rodgers: First, in relation to maximum information, that is precisely what we are doing, and my officials have leafleted the areas in question. Clearly there is difficulty, but I shall not ask my officials to go around every farm, as was suggested earlier, for that would obviously be in total contravention of what we ask people to do.

11.00 am

I hope that the public will not be confused by the suggestion that officials should visit every farmer to tell him what to do. We are trying to minimise access to farms by officials and other people. However, I take the point about information, and I accept that it is important. We are doing everything in our power — via the media or by leafleting — to ensure that farmers are fully informed.

The Member referred to the incineration of animals. The most important thing is to cull animals that are a threat. A dead animal is not a threat, because it does not exude the virus. In some cases, in which small numbers of animals have been destroyed, there has been a slight delay in their incineration. There is not much point in incinerating six animals here and six animals there, so we try to have them incinerated together. The slight delay is probably a concern only because people do not understand that dead animals are no longer a threat. Incineration will take place as soon as possible; however, if there is any threat, my main concern is to make sure that the animals are dead.

I have been approached by several public representatives about intimidation and fears of intimidation in the area. I shall take intimidation seriously. I have asked my

officials to investigate the situation to reassure me that that is not the case, but I have received complaints.

Mr Ford: I too thank the Minister for making such a full statement to the House this morning. It is a pity that no other Minister was available during her justifiable absence last week to address the Chamber on the matter.

Will the Minister take back to her private office staff, to those who have manned the helplines and, especially, to Dr McCracken and his staff, our thanks for the hard work that they have done to prevent the spread of the disease?

Does she agree that some other public agencies did not move as quickly as they might have done? Is it not anomalous that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) closed its Belfast harbour nature reserve before the Department of Environment closed its countryside parks? There was also a problem in her own Department with the Forest Service, which took until Friday afternoon to get notices printed asking people to stay out of all its forests, and left it until Saturday morning before putting some of those notices up. Can the Minister assure us that everything possible is being done by all public authorities to avoid the further spread of foot-and-mouth disease in Northern Ireland?

Ms Rodgers: I have explained to Mr Savage why I was not in the House last week. I felt that it was more important to go to the Prime Minister's meeting to present Northern Ireland's case for exemption, should we have remained free of the disease. No-one in Northern Ireland would disagree with what I did. I did not act out of a lack of respect for the House but to ensure that Northern Ireland could be exempt if appropriate.

I have already stated that the most important thing was to stop the movement of live animals and the import of animals and their products from Great Britain into Northern Ireland; that is where the highest risk lay. I say again that the other Departments did take quick action in an emergency situation, in which it was difficult for people to know exactly what to do. Today, I shall have a meeting with an interdepartmental group of officials that was set up following the Executive meeting last week.

We hope to draw up a set of guidelines for Departments, all public agencies and people which will clearly indicate what is high risk, medium risk or low risk. When we have done that, everyone in Northern Ireland will understand what must be done and will be able to do it. The public agencies, insofar as they were able, did move in what was an extremely difficult emergency situation.

Ms Morrice: I should be grateful if the Minister will clear up a great deal of confusion among the public at large, and I look at this from both a consumer and a public health point of view. Can the Minister confirm that there is absolutely no risk to people from this disease? Secondly, what would happen to someone who ate a diseased

animal? Can the Minister explain the reasons for wholesale slaughter if these animals are of no risk when they are dead? Can they be eaten? I ask these questions because people do not properly understand the implications of what is happening.

Ms Rodgers: There is much concern out there. However, there is no threat to public health. It is rare for humans to contract the disease. There has been only one recorded case of foot-and-mouth disease in a human being in the UK in the last 35 years, and in that case the general effects of the disease were similar to influenza, with some blisters. It is a mild, short-lived and self-limiting disease. However, there is a human condition called hand, foot and mouth disease, which is unrelated and does not affect animals. Anyone who is concerned should contact their GP. The dead animals are of a low risk, because there is no danger of the disease being spread and, therefore, there is no risk whatsoever from eating the meat from these animals.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I too thank the Minister for her statement. In her statement, she says that a few individuals are responsible for these terrible actions. Will she take the opportunity to tell this House who those individuals are? Is she able to substantiate the claims made recently by her Colleague Mr Fee that Republicans were behind much of this smuggling trade? Can she go further and confirm the comments in a Sunday paper, which named one leading Republican in the south Armagh area as being the chief instigator of this terrible and dastardly smuggling activity? Furthermore, can she tell us what actions she will put in place to ensure that these rogues never get their hands near Northern Ireland's agriculture industry again? Finally, will she confirm to the House the level of agri-monetary compensation? Will this be made available for the entire industry? If so, when will it kick in?

The industry requires compensation at this time if it is to get over the terrible problems that have been inflicted upon it by those ruthless and rogue individuals that she has mentioned. She must be aware of the comments made by Lord Dunleath, who wrote to her at the weekend saying that he is not satisfied by certain measures that have been put in place — particularly in respect of people flying into the Province. Can the Minister go some way to assuring us that the proposals that Lord Dunleath outlined in his letter will be put in place?

Ms Rodgers: All the matters surrounding individuals who have acted irresponsibly are the subject of investigation. I hope that all will come out in due course; however it would be improper for me to begin naming names where investigations are proceeding. I do not want to do anything that may prejudice the outcome.

Secondly, I dealt with the question of monetary compensation in a previous reply. Full agrimoney compensation is being drawn down as a matter of urgency for the beef, sheep and dairy sectors. I understand that the Commission

has been very sympathetic and has agreed to expedite that. Also, the Member will be aware that the pig industry restructuring scheme will be extended because of the present situation.

I can assure the Member that all the necessary measures are in place at ports and airports. I came through the airport last week; it was announced on the plane that anyone who had been in contact with animals or farms should go immediately on arrival to the agriculture unit in the airport, and that announcement was also made in the arrivals area. I made a point of visiting officials at the airport. They had prepared all the spraying equipment, and they assured me that quite a number of people had already been in and had taken the necessary precautions.

Mr Taylor: There is a serious threat to our agriculture industry and to the general economy of Northern Ireland. I appreciate the Minister's decision to make her statement first thing this morning. We fully support the measures that she has taken to contain this terrible disease. The problem seems to have arisen because some people in south Armagh want to extend cross-border trade beyond that which is acceptable.

The public is still confused about what it is required to do; there are inconsistencies. For example, 40,000 people in Britain are allowed to see Arsenal playing football, but a few hundred cannot attend a football match in Belfast. Roman Catholics cannot go to Mass in south Armagh, but Protestants can go to their churches to pray for the farmers. We need greater clarity and guidance from the Minister. I ask her for clear guidance on the question of groups of 1,000 or more people — many of whom come from farming areas near to where the disease started — meeting in south Armagh every day. There is no control over thousands of pupils going to schools in Newry, Bessbrook and other areas of south Armagh, yet the Minister condemns city dwellers who go to ice hockey matches in Belfast.

Ms Rodgers: I am not certain what the Member means when he talks of thousands of people meeting in south Armagh. However, I take the point that the public is confused. It is a confusing situation, which is precisely the reason the Executive met last Tuesday. We shall co-ordinate our efforts, and I advise the Member that, shortly after I leave the House, I shall chair a meeting of the inter-departmental group that has been set up. Our first task is to agree a set of guidelines, and the public will be made aware of those as soon as the Executive have agreed them at their meeting tomorrow morning.

It is impossible for the Department or for anyone to give guidance in relation to any particular event, but we can identify high-risk, medium-risk and low-risk areas. For instance, a soccer match in a city centre attended by city people will not represent a high risk. However, an inter-county GAA match taking place somewhere in Northern Ireland and attended by people from rural

areas in different counties will represent a high risk. We will give guidelines, so that people can make up their own mind. However, there was a high risk associated with people coming from Wales to the Belfast Giants ice hockey match. Many of those people were from an area in which there have been many outbreaks of the disease. It was not wise, and my Department made that clear; we did not give that advice lightly.

Mr Bradley: Like every other responsible Member, I pay tribute to the Minister for her statement and her efforts to meet this latest challenge.

11.15 am

I also pay tribute to the Minister's Newry-based staff, who have worked round the clock since the discovery of foot-and-mouth disease in imported animals. I call on farmers who have recently bought in stock and who are uncertain of its origin to contact the local veterinary office. That may also be helpful.

What arrangements are in place to resolve the conflict that could arise in quarantined herds if beef animals cross the 30-month age limitation during the closure period?

Ms Rodgers: I thank the Member for his comments, especially those about the staff in the Newry office. I am aware that some of them have been working on a 24-hour basis. At least one of my vets has not even got home and has had to sleep in the office. The Newry office staff have been working round the clock because of the outbreak of the disease in that area, and I appreciate that.

In relation to quarantined herds, cattle that pass the 30-month age point while under restriction due to foot-and-mouth disease will be eligible for disposal in the over-30-month scheme. Any loss in value that results from that will be classed as consequential; in other words, the cattle will be eligible for cull only if they pass the 30-month stage. Under the present policy there will be no compensation for that loss, but I noted the Prime Minister's remarks. If there is to be any compensation in that area, it will have to be on a national basis.

Mr McHugh: A Cheann Comhairle, will the Minister dissociate herself and her party from the sweeping remarks made by the DUP against Republicans in south Armagh? Does the Banbridge Loyalist arrested for smuggling have any connections with the DUP? I have not made remarks on a basis of point-scoring. I brought real concerns to your attention this morning.

We asked many questions at the Assembly Committee meeting on Friday 23 February. It was confirmed on 21 February that foot-and-mouth disease was present in England. On Friday we had only half an hour to ask questions. Given that situation, we must examine the measures taken by the Department to ensure that farmers have had the proper communication about what they should do next to ensure that their farms become

fortresses and are protected. Given the gaps in that communication, had the disease taken hold in Armagh, it would have been right across the country by this stage. Not enough has been done in that regard. What measures have been taken and how many farmers have been contacted in relation to advice?

Ms Rodgers: I am not going to make any comment on remarks about Republicans or anyone else. I will not get into political point-scoring on either side of the community.

I refer Mr McHugh to my statement, in which I outlined in detail all the measures taken by my Department and myself in the present situation. In particular, I refer him to the very first measure we took, which I think Mr McHugh has either deliberately misunderstood or misrepresented, or perhaps is confused about. I want to make clear that because we are in a devolved situation I was in a position to stop imports and that I did. I immediately stopped imports of both live animals and products when I knew that we were under threat from foot-and-mouth disease.

I have advised people through the public media, press notices and leaflets to the farms in question. Moreover, I have had the support of the unions, particularly the very strong support of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), which has helped to get the message to its members and has offered non-members posters that they can put up on their farms. The UFU has continuously emphasised the concept of fortress farms. I cannot think of any other measure. If I should have taken other measures, perhaps Mr McHugh will let me know privately what they are. I outlined the list of measures very clearly in my statement.

Mr Speaker: I note that in their concern about this very serious matter, Members are letting procedure slip slightly. They should recall that when they say "you" they are taken as referring to the Chair. I am sure that it is not the Chair to whom they wish to refer.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is the wrong kind of chair.

Mr Speaker: I appreciate that I am the wrong kind of doctor, as the doctor says.

Mr Douglas: First, I congratulate the Department on the measures it has put in place. However, I have been assured that, at least up until last night, cars were able to drive on to the ferry at Stranraer without drivers' being asked any questions about where they had been. Disinfectant was not being used. Bearing in mind that foot-and-mouth disease has been detected in Scotland and appears to be spreading, will the Minister assure the Assembly that every effort will be made to prevent the disease from spreading further in Northern Ireland?

Ms Rodgers: Was Mr Douglas referring to lorries coming from Stranraer?

Mr Douglas: I was referring to all vehicles not being checked.

Ms Rodgers: I will have that investigated. I would be very surprised if that is the case as my officials are at the ports and are taking measures to ensure that vehicles go over the disinfected area and that there are no prohibited imports into Northern Ireland. If the Member can give me any details of a specific incident where he feels that we have been lax, I will be very keen to follow it up. To the best of my knowledge, my officials are at the ports and are ensuring that people are abiding by the ban.

Mr Berry: The Minister stated that the movement of all susceptible animals in Northern Ireland had been banned, except of those going directly to the slaughterhouse. Can she confirm that a slaughter of sheep took place yesterday? Just yesterday, sheep were being transported through the village of Augher in County Tyrone.

I would also like to know what the Minister has recommended to the RUC. Is she in favour of the security forces patrolling the Northern Ireland side of the border? There are quite clear distinctions between security measures on the two sides. People going across the border into the Republic of Ireland are having their cars searched quite rigorously — even bottles of milk are being taken from them. I would like to know what the Minister has recommended in relation to the people coming across the border into Northern Ireland.

Ms Rodgers: I do not think that Members expect me to have knowledge of every movement of animals in Northern Ireland. Authorised movement of animals is allowed from farm to slaughterhouse, and that is taking place. That is essential to maintain the food supplies.

In relation to the RUC and patrolling, I assure the Member that my Department liaises daily with the RUC and the army so that they are aware of what is required. They are taking their own operational decisions, which clearly would not be a matter for me as Minister of Agriculture. We are also co-operating fully with the Department of Agriculture and Food in the South on a daily basis, and on Tuesday of last week the RUC intercepted two illegal movements of animals in the south Armagh area. Since then, another movement of animals has been intercepted by the RUC — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Rodgers: This turned out to be a legal movement. I give this information to emphasise that it is not what you see that counts, but what is happening.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister, and I join her in paying tribute to her staff at the Newry office. Given the public statement by the Irish Republic's Defence Minister, Mr Michael Smith, and the accurate and highly commendable public comments of Mr Fee, can the Minister explain why there is still no large-scale RUC presence in south Armagh to help prevent the illegal movement of livestock, either across the border or within the area? Can she assure us that she will actively

pursue the provision of an aid package for all those affected by this crisis, including owners and employees of livestock marts?

Ms Rodgers: I have already replied to the Member's questions on RUC presence in the area and assistance to those affected by the crisis. I do not think it would be wise to repeat myself.

Obviously, I want to secure full compensation for everyone, but there are several obstacles, including restricted resources and EU rules. However, I noted the Prime Minister's comments last week with regard to this matter.

Mr McGrady: I compliment the Minister and her officials on their very strong, effective and immediate action in all quarters. As the Minister has said, such activity is progressional, and cases must be prioritised according to how serious they are.

Further to her response to Mr Kennedy's question, we are aware of the dramatic economic effect of BSE and other marketing problems on the farming industry. If compensation for those affected by this situation is not handled properly, it will almost be the nail in the coffin.

I draw the Minister's attention to the statement last Friday by the Minister of Agriculture for France, Jean Glavany, that he was contributing £168 million over and above the compensation already being given to French farmers, albeit in respect of BSE. Interestingly, he indicated that the European Commission had given its approval for these plans for compensation in France and said that that this might herald a

"major shift in the common agricultural policy."

Under pressure from the French producers, M Glavany has made this additional allocation. In view of the economic problems that our farming community and its ancillary industries are going to experience, will the Minister take on board this new dimension and pursue the national Government at Westminster and the European Commission for substantial additional funding for all aspects of the farming industry?

Ms Rodgers: I have not seen the report that Mr McGrady has referred to, but I am very anxious to know if M Glavany has EU approval for state aid in this situation. I would welcome any possibility of securing aid at national level for our hard-pressed farming community and the industry as a whole.

I sympathise with Mr McGrady's views, and I am very aware of the short-term problems that the present situation creates for many people in the industry. I hope to have a meeting with the banks and the grain people, today or tomorrow, to discuss possible measures for easing the current situation for those with cash-flow problems.

Mr P Doherty: A Cheann Comhairle, I acknowledge the Minister's statement and note that she has received no complaints about intimidation from her officials.

The British supermarket-driven cheap food policy has made a cesspool of the agriculture industry in Britain, and the Minister has been pursuing a regional agricultural opt-out policy. In view of this, is she completely satisfied that all ports and points of entry are properly inspected and are enforcing a thorough disinfecting policy? Has the Minister banned all agricultural products from entry into the North? Will the Minister consider authorising information advertisements, similar to those produced in the South, in all papers and nightly television information programmes on this horrendous foot-and-mouth disease? Will the Minister concede that there are agricultural, economic and health imperatives for total North/South co-operation on agriculture?

11.30 am

Ms Rodgers: We will look at issues such as the cheap food policy in the future. However, my whole focus at this point is, and will remain, on keeping foot-and-mouth disease out of Northern Ireland. I am not considering other issues.

The ban on agricultural products and live animals from Britain covers all cloven-hoofed animals which are susceptible to the disease. As for products, only those which have been heat-treated to a certain standard and certified by the relevant Departments both here and across the water can be brought in. All other products are banned.

Mr Doherty asked me to concede that North and South should work together on agriculture. He will be aware that I have had several North/South agricultural meetings with the Minister in the South, Joe Walsh. We have a process in place which is aimed at having joint strategies for animal disease in the North and South of the island. This is extremely important; we have already recognised that, and the process is well advanced. We are in constant liaison with the Department in the South; in fact we have been in contact on a half-hourly basis since the threat of disease came in. Clearly it is recognised on all sides of the House that there is no political implication in the co-operation which has taken place and which will continue. It is common sense because agriculture is a main industry in both North and South. We have many converging interests, and we will continue to work on that front in the confines of the North/South Ministerial Council.

Mr Boyd: I welcome the Minister's apparently belated support for the RUC. It has been reported that many people are involved in this organised activity — not just a few individuals. Given that information, will she now call unequivocally on the constituents of south Armagh to co-operate fully with the RUC and supply the information necessary to bring to justice those guilty of illegal sheep trading?

Ms Rodgers: I thank the Member for his question. Again, I regret the political point-scoring. My party's position has always been absolutely clear. We have

always supported the police service in the impartial carrying out of its duties, and we will continue to do so.

The Member asked about the illegal activities that led to the difficulties we now face. My Colleagues and I have made it very clear, and I presume that everyone in the House will concur, that co-operation with the police is essential to enable us to get to the bottom of this. We must thus ensure that those responsible are brought to justice and that this sort of activity is stamped out.

Mr Leslie: I thank the Minister for her statement. However, I regret that she was not more explicit in her support for her Colleague Mr Fee, who seems to have done more than anybody else in Northern Ireland to clarify the true nature of the problem we have in isolating this disease.

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

Will the Minister's Department take immediate steps to publicise widely the precise nature of the disinfecting procedures for vehicles and people, and particularly the type of disinfectant that is effective? Will she ensure that enough disinfectant is available in Northern Ireland? Will she also ensure that advice is given on the length of matting required to disinfect vehicles' wheels? I was pleased to see that we have such matting at the Massey Avenue entrance to this Building this morning, but the wheels of a four-wheel-drive vehicle are probably wider than some of the matting. It is important that this be dealt with precisely and in detail.

As for compensation, it is critical at this stage that measures be taken to ensure that farmers and other people can purchase the necessary disinfectant and matting.

Ms Rodgers: It is very difficult to convey information to every person in Northern Ireland. However, the information the Member refers to is available on the Department's website (www.dardni.gov.uk). Not everyone has access to a computer, and I would appreciate the help of MLAs and others who have access to the website to convey the information contained there around their areas.

Last week I was made aware that disinfectant might run out, and I took the precaution of speaking to my Chief Veterinary Officer. He assures me that ample disinfectant will be available. The list of approved disinfectants will also be available on the website, and the Department will publicise it as far as possible. Specific issues, such as the matting at the entrance to this Building, will be examined.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate the Minister and her Department on the way in which they have handled the foot-and-mouth issue since the scare first arose in Northern Ireland.

May I ask the Minister if it is proposed to hold a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council to examine the issue in detail so that she and her counterpart in the

South, Minister Joe Walsh, can co-ordinate effectively every aspect of animal protection on an all-Ireland basis?

Perhaps the Minister could give consideration to a public information video that could be broadcast on BBC and UTV, similar to the video that RTE is currently running nightly.

Ms Rodgers: As far as I remember, the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council is scheduled for 21 March 2001. Given the current situation, I intend to try to bring that meeting forward because we could usefully discuss several matters, particularly in relation to animal health. There is constant contact between my Veterinary Service and the veterinary department in Dublin on all relevant issues.

The idea of a video is an excellent suggestion and something we can consider. Today I am chairing a cross-departmental meeting; an emergency Executive meeting is scheduled for tomorrow, and that is something we could consider when co-ordinating our efforts.

Mr Kane: The belief is that the staff delayed preventing import of products from Great Britain at Northern Ireland ports and airports. How long did the Department wait after the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease on the mainland? In the light of the current crisis, can the Minister inform the House if she or her Department has considered what steps can be taken to ensure that the standards of farm produce, whether beef, lamb or pork, are identical standards to those of our Northern Ireland produce? Will there be provision for a greater inspection of imports in the immediate future?

Moreover, can the Minister confirm if the permits needed to move livestock from the UK mainland to Northern Ireland can be made foolproof? If animals are cleared by inspection and deemed fit for transport to a Northern Ireland abattoir, will that be their destination? Can the Minister confirm that they will not end up as breeding stock on a farm here? The Minister mentioned the 100% compensation for animals that have been subject to compulsory slaughter. Can she provide a breakdown of the compensation figure involved per bovine animal, sheep or pig?

Ms Rodgers: I have had some difficulty following the questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think you have answered the majority of them already.

Ms Rodgers: Mr Deputy Speaker, you are quite right.

I reiterate that there was no delay in introducing a ban on products coming in from Great Britain. On that very evening animals that were on the high seas were turned back at the port, so there was no delay.

So far as I am aware, I have dealt with all of the Member's questions. I am not sure that I quite understood one question, but the 100% compensation is for all animals

slaughtered as a result of the crisis, whether sheep, goats, cattle or pigs.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that we only have an hour for this debate and ask them please to keep their questions short.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement this morning and give credit to Ms Rodgers for leading the Department through very difficult times. I have two questions.

On the point raised by my Colleague, David Ford, does she accept that there was no criticism on our part over her absence from the Assembly last Monday and Tuesday? We accept that she was engaged in vital discussions elsewhere.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have just asked Members not to repeat questions. We have already dealt with that; please get on.

Mr McCarthy: We remain concerned that in an era of joined-up government, which was not mentioned earlier, no other Minister was available to speak on her behalf.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCarthy, I am stopping you because that has been dealt with at least twice on other occasions. Please get on with your question. If you have got a question, ask it.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister tell us why there was no Minister in the Assembly last week to speak on her behalf? Will she tell the Assembly the total number of animals slaughtered so far in the Meigh area and throughout Northern Ireland?

Ms Rodgers: On the Meigh farm that had a positive test, 21 animals were slaughtered. I do not have the exact figures in front of me for the adjoining herds, and if I did, I would have to tally them. However, I shall let the Member have the numbers as soon as possible. With regard to my unavailability to make a report to the House, I am not sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, what the procedure — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You do not need to answer that; you have already done so.

Ms Rodgers: I am not sure what other procedure there could have been. All I can say is that I could not be here.

Mr McCartney: I also thank the Minister for the strong steps that have been taken to deal with the crisis. This matter should be above political points-scoring, so will the Minister confirm that the absence of any North/South Ministerial Council meeting has not inhibited her, or her officials, from dealing with the crisis as effectively as possible? Moreover, while effective measures of the most stringent kind are necessary, does she agree that a balance has to be struck between those measures and what can only be described as ill-informed hysteria, which often undermines the attention people pay to really effective measures? Does she agree that suggestions that a ring of

disinfectant be put around Belfast City Hall are examples of hysteria?

11.45 am

Ms Rodgers: I thank the Member for his question.

In answer to the last part, I must say that I do not think that it is hysteria. Perhaps members of the public are a little over-anxious to make sure that they do everything possible. There is anxiety and recognition that this could be a very serious crisis for our agriculture industry. I do not complain if there has been over-reaction. It is understandable in the circumstances. As I have already said, we will be giving clearer guidelines so that people recognise the risks. Mr McCartney will recognise that even people from the country come into Belfast to shop, and they do go into the City Hall from time to time. There is no such thing as being absolutely certain.

On the issue of the North/South ministerial meeting, I make the point to Mr McCartney, who was not in the Chamber for my statement — I do not know how long he has been in the House —

Mr McCartney: What about the Minister's claim that this debate was not about party point-scoring? Will she answer the question asked?

Ms Rodgers: I asked Mr McCartney that because I am not sure whether he has heard these points already. The fact that we have a devolved Government has been crucial in the present situation because we have been able to take immediate action to protect Northern Ireland, which we would not have been able to do otherwise, and which we did, despite resistance from some quarters.

In relation to the North/South Ministerial Council, we have established links between the two Departments of Agriculture, which are dealing with animal health on the island as a whole, and this is very important for the long-term implications. On the issue of short-term implications, however, we have not had a meeting in the middle of this crisis for the simple reason that we have been focusing on what needs to be done immediately by both Departments in this emergency. It would have been daft for officials to have spent time dealing with the papers necessary for setting up a North/South Ministerial Council meeting at this time. We have been dealing with the situation in practical ways, and that there is now such contact between the North and the South and between Ministers has been very helpful.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The last question is from Dr McCrea. Please be brief, as there is less than half a minute left.

Rev Dr William McCrea: The Minister said that some of the remainder of the consignment of animals was deposited in the Republic of Ireland as well as the original ones. Can she tell us why it has been declared that we have foot-and-mouth disease here, while the same has not been declared of the Irish Republic? The Irish Republic

slaughters its animals, yet no such declaration has been made. Does the Minister realise that when this crisis is over, there will be major implications if that situation is permitted to last?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Hussey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given the seriousness of this matter, can the Chair not allow the exchange to be extended, by leave of the House, in the interests of the many Members who still have pertinent and serious questions to put?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I understand the problem, but the Standing Orders are quite clear. One hour is the length of time that was decided by the Standing Orders Committee. Any change would have to be made by that Committee.

Mr Hussey: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can the House not give leave to suspend Standing Orders and allow more time?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I understand that if a motion were to be made to that effect it could be considered by the House.

Rev Dr William McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is the practice in Westminster — and surely ought to be the practice here — that if a Member is permitted to ask a question, it may be answered.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Those are interesting points, but I think that they would require a motion to be put down for debate, whatever happens in Westminster.

Mr Beggs: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You said that if a motion were put down, and leave of the House were given to extend the debate, then the debate would be extended. May I verbally propose an extension of the debate for 30 minutes with leave of the House now, or must that be put down in writing in advance?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It would have to be on the Order Paper as a proper motion. There would be no point in having Standing Orders that could be voided at any time.

Mr Hussey: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can the Business Committee or the Procedures Committee consider that matter? The debate continued for an hour, there are still many questions to be put. How can this situation be dealt with?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am certain that the Business Committee will look at this and make a recommendation. But the rule is the rule. We have heard, at some length and frequently, about the necessity of observing rules, not only with regard to foot-and-mouth disease, but also concerning the conduct of the Assembly.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You said that I was making an interesting point. I put it to you that, under Standing Orders, if the Chair has permitted a question, surely it should be answered by the Minister. If that is not permitted,

or no answer will be given, why allow a question to be asked in the first place?

Mr Deputy Speaker: If the Minister, in her wisdom, decided to reply, that would be permissible. Minister, can you recall the question?

Ms Rodgers: No.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I drew the Minister's attention to the part of her statement where she pointed out that animals in contact with infected animals were transported for slaughter in County Roscommon within six hours. She also said that the remainder of the consignment was deposited in another holding in south Armagh before being taken to the Republic of Ireland. Therefore there are animals there.

Why is it that we have declared an incident of foot-and-mouth disease for that consignment of animals, and the Irish Republic has not? The Irish Republic slaughters its animals, but made no declaration. We slaughter our animals and we make a declaration. Does the Minister not realise that there are serious implications for the future of our industry if that situation remains?

Mr Deputy Speaker: This has gone on much too long. I am going to bring it to a halt. If you wish to have an answer from the Minister, perhaps she will give you a written answer.

Rev Dr William McCrea: That is ridiculous. I have asked the question twice.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In Westminster, where they have Standing Orders such as we have —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCartney, we are not in Westminster. We are at Stormont, in Northern Ireland.

Rev Dr William McCrea: It is a serious matter for my constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We are dealing with our own Stormont Government at the moment. I am suggesting — indeed, I am requiring — that we move on to the next motion. I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment —

Mr McCartney: Are you refusing to take a point of order?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have already taken the point of order.

Mr McCartney: You have not taken my point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You gave me your point of order.

Mr McCartney: No. Are you taking the point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, or not?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Give me your point of order again.

Mr McCartney: My point of order is that it is established practice, and also the practice here, that where there is no clear convention or rule here, the Standing Orders of Westminster will be followed as a precedent.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have referred, at least twice, to the fact that we have Standing Orders that I am observing. The Minister would be permitted, if she so chose, to answer the question despite that.

Rev Dr William McCrea: She was stopped — you stopped her.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Now we have moved on. A quarter of an hour has been taken out of the next important debate, and I am going to call on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr P Doherty: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have tried several times to make this point of order, but your attention was directed elsewhere. What recourse do Members have when only some parts of a multiple question are answered?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Many people have not been called to speak. Today, some people who were lucky enough to be called used the opportunity to ask four, five or six questions. That is the problem. If people were to ask the question that is important to them we could get much more into these one-hour discussions.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I trust that you and your colleagues will direct the House so that Members understand the procedures when Standing Orders are not clear. The Speaker has told Members that when Standing Orders are not clear — Mr McCartney is absolutely right — we are governed by the procedure in Westminster. If that is not so, let us — *[Interruption]*.

Members should not be shouting. The Speaker has ruled that this is the case. Are Members overruling the Speaker? The Speaker cannot be overruled. I want to know — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is time to move on. Standing Orders are clear, and I insist that they will operate today. I call the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: We will have an opportunity to table a motion against that?

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is no doubt that you will.

ENERGY

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I wish to make a statement on energy — a subject in which there is keen interest. That has been clearly demonstrated by the Assembly's debate on electricity costs and by the volume of questions and correspondence on energy issues which crosses my desk. As I said in the debate in November, I am surprised at the proportion of my time that is taken up by energy matters, considering the market is privatised.

This statement is timely. Energy issues affect each of us, our constituents and our environment. We must address problems such as continuing high electricity prices. We all have a responsibility to practice energy-efficiency. That is all the more so in Northern Ireland given the relatively high electricity prices here. There are current developments in the energy field that merit serious debate across the economic and social spectrum.

Various consultation documents on energy issues have been published over the past two years and others will appear over the next few months. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee has begun an inquiry into energy, and my Department has set a Programme for Government target of producing an energy strategy by the end of the year. In achieving the target, I intend to take full account of the Committee's inquiry report and will provide opportunities for wide participation in considering proposals that emerge to shape and finalise that strategy.

The past 10 years have seen very significant changes in the energy scene. In the early 1990s, the small Northern Ireland energy market was isolated from the main gas and electricity networks in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, and it served a population of 1.5 million. Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) was the only supplier and distributor of electricity.

Northern Ireland was almost totally dependent on imported oil and coal for its energy needs, and was fully dependent on both — but primarily on oil — for its electricity generation. There was a small liquid petroleum gas (LPG) market and environmental issues were beginning to emerge.

Unlike other parts of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland had no supply of natural gas, there was no nuclear source, and the supply of renewable sources was negligible. There were extensive lignite reserves estimated at 1000 million tonnes but those had not been developed. Those reserves constituted the only known indigenous energy resource, and hydrocarbon exploration had not identified any commercially exploitable quantities of oil or natural gas.

12.00

Electricity generation depended on imported fuels — 70% on oil and 30% on coal. Comparable statistics for the United Kingdom as a whole were 8% for oil, 70%

for coal, 20% for nuclear power, and 2% for hydro-power. Most energy usage in Northern Ireland was in the domestic sector, and solid fuels — bituminous and smokeless in more or less equal measure — served 69% of that sector, compared with 11% in the United Kingdom as a whole.

Because Northern Ireland had an isolated, primarily oil-dependent, electricity system, its costs were high. Some things never change, I hear Members say. At that time, the average cost of electricity was about 15% higher than in Great Britain and 9% higher than in the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland paid more for certain categories of smokeless fuels than other regions in the United Kingdom. As a result, over 7% of average gross weekly household income in Northern Ireland was spent on energy, compared with less than 5% in the United Kingdom as a whole.

The publicly owned NIE was privatised, with the four power stations — two oil-fired, one coal-fired, and one dual coal-fired/oil-fired — being sold to three private companies in April 1992. The remaining transmission, distribution and supply responsibilities were transferred to a new company, NIE plc, which was floated on the Stock Exchange in June 1993. The largest power station, at Ballylumford, was sold to British Gas on condition that the station would be converted from oil- to gas-fired. This conversion was completed in 1996. The power stations were sold on the basis of long-term generation contracts with NIE. The contracts guaranteed the stations' payments for being available to meet any demand as well as meeting the costs of generation. More about these contracts later. Regulation of the industry became the responsibility of the Office of Electricity Regulation (OFFER), subsequently renamed the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas (OFREG), a non-ministerial Government Department.

The pace and significance of recent changes in the energy sector have been considerable. Today's market is very different from that of 10 years ago. Northern Ireland is no longer isolated. It is part and parcel of a much larger European market with a continuing agenda for a single, liberalised energy market in electricity, gas and renewables. I recently announced a joint study of the energy markets North and South with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, Mrs Mary O'Rourke TD, and intend to use the findings of that study to ensure that we can deliver an all-island solution firmly within a European market.

We should consider what is now in place — industry restructuring and privatisation with independent regulation; gas interconnection between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom; the conversion of Ballylumford to gas firing, and — with construction of an even more efficient plant under way — the much-needed reduction of our dependence on oil-fired generation. We also have the establishment of a natural gas industry in the Greater Belfast area, with its beneficial impacts on the environment;

the continuing important contributions of the coal and oil industries in providing consumers with the widest possible fuel choice; the implementation of the Electricity Liberalisation Directive by April 2001 — two years earlier than required by the European Commission — enabling our largest consumers to get the best price for their electricity; and increased North/South interconnection, which will not only stimulate that liberalised market but also assist the progressive development of an all-island trading system.

Further to this, preliminary studies have been undertaken into the possible extension of the gas market, both North/South and to the north-west. There have been two Northern Ireland Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation, (NFFO) Orders, which have resulted in contracts for some 32 megawatts of renewables, and there has been sustained promotion of both combined heat and power (CHP) and energy efficiency. Moreover, the welcome arrival of natural gas — albeit so far only in the Greater Belfast area — has given industry a much greater opportunity than was previously possible to consider and introduce CHP. Collectively, these developments have brought substantial benefits to the consumer and to our environment.

All this has been achieved through close collaboration between the public and private sectors. I want to pay particular tribute to the degree in which the various private sector interests have co-operated together with OFREG and with the Department, in delivering a much more coherent energy framework upon which to build. The consumer has also been well represented through the General Consumer Council and the Northern Ireland Consumer Committee for Electricity.

Where do we go from here, and how do we build upon this framework? First, we should perhaps remind ourselves of the role of Government. My Department's objective is to achieve a secure, diverse, competitive and efficient energy market. We are no longer the provider; our responsibility now is to set the strategic context and framework within which industry operates in a manner that ensures benefits for the consumer and the environment. In doing this, we work closely with the regulator. Part of this year's agenda will be to look at the powers of the regulator and decide whether those are sufficient to ensure that we achieve our objective.

Secondly, the political climate has changed. Although we continue to work closely with our Westminster colleagues on the potential impact of new policies, such as those in the Utilities Act 2000 and others emerging in Brussels, there are now new drivers: this Assembly, the departmental Committees, the Executive's Programme for Government, increasing North/South co-operation and a new emphasis on equality, social inclusion, and ensuring that the consumer is represented in the most effective way. All these must help us shape future energy strategy and there is a unique opportunity for participation and

partnership to ensure that all elements of the emerging strategy are fully considered as this year progresses.

In breaking down our objective, we can take some comfort from the fact that our electricity supply is secure. We have had a recent reminder of the emergencies that can arise but, generally speaking, industry has not had to struggle with ongoing problems such as those in California. However, we are further strengthening security in the electricity market through the Moyle interconnector, which will be commissioned by the end of this year, and by reinforcing interconnection with the Republic of Ireland. Also during the course of this year, the capacity of the main Tandragee/ Louth interconnector will be doubled from 300 MW to 600 MW, and two standby links will be upgraded to full interconnector status. Further strengthening of links will assist the progressive development of an all-island, competitive electricity trading system, and the Executive have included a specific action in the Programme for Government to identify further interconnection projects.

A secure gas market can be achieved by a transmission link between Belfast and Dublin. The prospect of such a link has, at times, been frustratingly close. Whether it becomes a reality depends, first, on decisions by the Department of Public Enterprise in Dublin on the preferred infrastructure to meet gas demand in the Republic of Ireland and, secondly, on the economics of any proposed link. The former has now been clarified with the recent announcement approving a second Scotland-Dublin pipeline. With regard to the latter, I have received an initial submission for an interconnector linking the gas networks North and South. This submission also includes a project for a gas pipeline from Belfast to Londonderry. We are proceeding with a thorough appraisal of all these proposals.

The introduction of a natural gas supply and, subject to European Commission approval, the exemption proposed for gas from the climate change levy, have helped our diversity objective as well as bringing greater competition, consumer choice and environmental benefits. Those benefits will be extended if we are successful in bringing gas to the north-west and south-east, including towns along the route. However, to maintain diversity in generation, we will seek to ensure that our previous reliance on oil and coal is not replaced by an over-dependence on gas. There is a renewed interest in lignite as a generation fuel, although this has not yet reached the stage of firm proposals.

An important strand in ensuring diversity is the promotion and development of renewable energy sources. Up to now the Department has used its powers under the Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 to place a Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation (NFFO) on Northern Ireland Electricity plc (NIE), requiring the company to contract for specified amounts of electricity from renewable or non-fossil sources. Developers awarded contracts under the

NFFO Orders receive a premium price for their electricity, which is financed through the general electricity tariffs.

At the end of January 2001, 18 projects had been commissioned in Northern Ireland under these arrangements, comprising eight hydro-power schemes, eight wind schemes and two biomass schemes. In addition to its involvement in NFFO, NIE launched its Eco Energy — or “green tariff” — scheme in October 1998. An additional wind turbine at Lendrum’s Bridge wind farm in County Tyrone was commissioned in December 1999 solely for production for the scheme. To date, over 1,000 domestic and small business customers have joined the scheme, demonstrating a willingness on the part of consumers to pay a premium on top of our high electricity prices for the benefit of the environment. The eco-energy tariff is now being offered to large industrial customers, and NIE’s supply price control commits it to a tenfold increase in eco-tariff sales by 2005. With the proposed exemption for qualifying renewable-sourced electricity from the climate change levy, industrial consumers will have a much-reduced premium to pay to join the scheme.

The results of an updated assessment of Northern Ireland’s renewables potential were published in July 1999. They concluded that a contribution of 115 MW was possible by the year 2010, equivalent to 7.7% of the current electricity consumption. A separate study of the offshore wind potential around the island of Ireland was published in October 2000. The report concluded that, on the basis of certain assumptions, 7% of Northern Ireland’s predicted electricity consumption in 2005 could be met by offshore wind energy.

Overall, however, the emergence of renewable projects is patchy. I therefore propose to issue a consultation document shortly to seek views on the development of Northern Ireland’s renewable resources. Decisions on revised renewables targets, possible renewable technology priorities and the future support mechanisms to promote and develop renewable energy will be taken on the basis of the conclusions of the July 1999 report; developments in Great Britain following the introduction of a renewables obligation under the Utilities Act 2000; the recent consultation paper by the regulator; and the consultation exercise proposed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I know from the November debate that several Members have a keen interest in renewables, and I encourage them to participate fully in the consultation process.

High electricity prices have been a persistent feature in Northern Ireland and a cause for continuing concern both to industry, because of their impact on competitiveness, and to domestic customers, particularly those on low incomes. Achieving significant price reductions is a vital outcome of our objective of an increasingly competitive energy market.

There are two main reasons for our higher prices. First, production and distribution are more expensive because local power stations are smaller, the level of required back-up spinning reserve is higher and customers in our largely rural community are more dispersed. Secondly, the combination of long-term contracts between NIE and the generators put in place at privatisation and the use of relatively inefficient plant have resulted in higher generation costs, which represent 80% of industrial bills and 60% of domestic bills.

Over the past four years or so, the regulator has sought to facilitate the restructuring of long-term generator contracts to secure price reductions. Efforts to date have been partially successful. For example, NIE and Premier Power recently agreed a revised contract for Ballylumford, including the construction of the first high-efficiency combined-cycle gas turbine in Northern Ireland with accompanying generation cost reductions and environmental benefits. To complement this and any future contract restructuring, the £40 million balance of the £60 million Government support fund is being used to buy down some of the existing availability payments on the Kilroot and Ballylumford contracts, which will lead to modest price reductions. The possibility of new, state-of-the-art generation capacity at Coolkeeragh is a further positive feature for the stimulation of competition.

12.15 pm

After generation, transmission and distribution represent the largest single component in electricity costs, accounting for 35% of domestic bills and 15% of industrial bills. The regulator has embarked on a transmission and distribution price control review, which will include rigorous examination of a continuing and growing divergence in the levels of these costs between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The new price control is scheduled to come into operation in April 2002.

There are clear signals that the European Commission wishes to see the expedition of the timetable for the creation of fully open markets. This will require us to seek ways of buying out or renegotiating the existing generator contracts, and we have already started work on this process. Suggestions that this issue can be easily resolved by tearing up the contracts or going, cap in hand, to the Treasury are unrealistic. The process is complex, and it remains to be seen if an acceptable solution can be found. However, just as this Administration seeks to demonstrate to the whole community its ability to govern, it must also demonstrate that it is honourable in its dealings with those who have invested in Northern Ireland and its future.

The main thrust of policy aimed at reducing electricity prices will be the introduction of increased competition in generation and supply in an all-island and European context. My Department and the regulator have been examining further ways to address the structural problems

of the industry, along with the related issues of market opening and encouraging further competition. I have asked the regulator to prepare and publish a consultation paper by the end of this month, containing proposals aimed at achieving these objectives.

Our energy policy has always given a central role to the demand side — reducing energy use through promoting best practice in energy efficiency and green technologies. This is vital to economic competitiveness, given our relatively high electricity prices. The climate change levy will apply some pressure on companies to become more energy efficient. The Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) already provides an extensive package of measures to assist them, including free energy audits, the Northern Ireland Loan Action scheme and funding for the Energy Saving Trust and the Arena Network. It has also co-operated closely with the regulator in promoting the advantages of combined heat and power.

At the end of the day, energy can be saved only where, when and by whom it is used, so it is up to each and every industry in Northern Ireland to grip this issue. To further assist them to do so I am pleased to announce that IRTU will receive a further £0.9 million to fund the work of the Carbon Trust in Northern Ireland, which will carry out research and development into new energy efficiency technology in addition to promoting energy efficiency.

Effective consumer representation arrangements are a fundamental part of any emerging energy strategy. As I have mentioned, these arrangements currently reside in two bodies. As long ago as 1998, it was proposed that they should amalgamate under the General Consumer Council, and a decision on this matter is overdue. Before coming to a final decision I have recently asked the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, the Civic Forum and other key interests for their views.

Of much greater significance will be the role and remit of any body responsible for the new arrangements. It is my intention that there should be wide consultation during the process of drawing up legislative proposals to ensure that consumers are equally, fairly and fully represented.

I have set the goal of devising an energy strategy by the end of this year. That strategy needs to be on an all-island basis and firmly within the wider UK and European context. A joint study has already commenced, and advertisements have appeared inviting comments. I propose to hold a public seminar in early June to discuss the proposals emerging from this study.

The strategy must be capable of delivering the objective of a secure, diverse, competitive and efficient energy market. Therefore, I urge Members to participate in the consultation exercise that I have asked the regulator to undertake, so that effective competition can be stimulated

in an open market. Similarly, I look forward to practical inputs to the debate on increasing renewables. The outcome, based on a fully participative process, will be a strategy capable of meeting our energy needs in a manner which produces lasting benefits for all consumers and the environment for this and future generations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have one hour for the debate. Fifteen Members have asked to speak, so I ask them to be concise. I will stop the debate at 1.20 pm as there are three Bills to be dealt with.

The Chairperson of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee (Mr P Doherty): A LeasCheann Comhairle, I welcome this comprehensive statement from the Minister, and I thank him for recognising the Committee's work in this area.

Given that the Coolkeeragh management and the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) are pursuing their planning application for the new power station, would the Minister comment on the guarantee of a gas pipeline from Belfast to Derry and on any further plans for wind energy projects in County Tyrone? Finally, would the Minister also comment in relation to Northern Ireland Electricity and its ongoing inability to deal with storms and adverse weather conditions?

Sir Reg Empey: First, I have said on a number of occasions that we have a proposal on the table with respect to gas pipelines, both south-north and north-west. This is the first time that we have had a firm proposal in front of us and it is being evaluated.

Part of the problem has been the delay by the authorities in the Republic in reaching a decision on their longer-term strategy. Last week, they opted for the second interconnector from Scotland to Dublin. That was not our preferred option, as Members know. We would much prefer a straightforward North/South pipeline and one going to the north-west to the introduction of an additional pipeline from Scotland, because that could have knock-on effects when the Corrib field comes on-stream in the west of Ireland in 2003. However, the Republic has made its decision because of its perceived energy shortages in the winter of 2002.

I am optimistic that at least we now have on the table a firm proposal, which is being economically evaluated. Clearly, due to the time pressures, if the second pipeline is to be in place for the winter of 2002, we are anxious to respond positively. Coolkeeragh and ESBI are at an advanced stage of negotiation, and we would like to think that we will also have firm proposals there. As yet, we have not had an application for a power-generating consent by that particular company at the site, so we await that. Nevertheless, the position looks much brighter because we have never had a proposal before now.

I will have to come back to the Member with regard to the question of wind energy in County Tyrone. There

is a degree of renewable activity in that area and there is certainly greater potential.

As regards the recent storms, Members are acutely aware of the difficulties. As we have seen, they were not confined to Northern Ireland. The folk in Scotland had quite a bit of time without electricity — indeed, some may still be without it. I said last week, and I repeat, that at one stage 100,000 customers were disconnected. Whatever way one looks at that, it is a serious development. In certain cases, it can threaten health and life.

For older people in isolated locations, people who depend on electrically-operated medical equipment and families with young children who are plunged into those conditions, this has a huge social and economic impact with a life-threatening element. I have spoken to senior executives of NIE, and they have said that they will co-operate fully with the regulator and myself in examining what happened. They will learn lessons from what happened and, most importantly, try to minimise the risk of the same things happening again.

Executives from NIE accept that a gap has developed between the perceptions of what is possible and the reality. Perhaps the new handling system that was put in place by NIE was oversold, for I have received feedback that customers were not getting the information that they sought. Faults arose with the system, and many of its operators could not get in to the centres to use it because of the weather conditions. There was an unfortunate series of events, and there will have to be a prolonged post-mortem to ensure that all possible lessons are learned.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee (Mr Neeson): I thank the Minister for his report. Could the decision taken by the Department of Public Enterprise (DPE) in the Republic of Ireland delay the provision of a natural gas pipeline to the north-west? Does the Minister accept that the timescale for the Coolkeeragh power station is limited? Will he also accept that the nub of the problem has been the decision to go ahead with the long-term contracts after privatisation? Will that be considered as part of the strategy? In the options that the Minister put forward this morning, no mention was made of the use of Orimulsion. Was that deliberate?

Sir Reg Empey: The decisions taken by the DPE will not adversely impact on a pipeline to Coolkeeragh. The proposal that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has received from Bord Gáis and the American company Questar covers a South/North element and a north-west element. The Electricity Supply Board International (ESBI), the operating arm of the Electricity Supply Board (ESB), has a strict timetable, and, as has been mentioned, it has put in a planning application for the power station. It has informed the potential builders of the gas pipeline of the timescale involved and when

the gas will be required. The decision announced last week in Dublin will not affect that.

Mr Neeson is correct in saying that the long-term contracts are the nub of the problem. To cut to the chase, a bad deal was done in 1991-92. The problem is that the generating companies hold those lucrative contracts. They are being paid to be available whether they are used or not. When electricity is used, the generating companies charge the market price for it. That was the driving force behind the last major increase in fuel prices.

I have looked at that matter very closely over the past year. Unless the contracts are sorted out, no impact will be made on electricity prices. When one talks about buying out those contracts, it has to be established whether a utilities bond has to be issued to do so. Huge sums of money are involved, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is looking at the issues surrounding that. It is a major piece of work. There is the question of our relationship with the Treasury. I am working very closely with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I assure Mr Neeson that we are working very hard in the Department. The regulator is focused on it, and we are doing everything that we can to deal with this because it is the core of the problem.

12.30 pm

There was no deliberate intention to omit Orimulsion. It is an issue. I have met the people from South America who market the product. If the company at Kilroot wishes to make an application we will have to consider it. There is nothing to be read into its omission from my statement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must remind Members that we have used quite a lot of time. Please be more concise. I ask the Minister to do the same. One way of achieving that is for each questioner to confine himself or herself to one question.

Dr Birnie: I had two questions but I will confine myself to one. With regard to offshore renewables, particularly wind generation, what steps will the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment take to encourage the heavy and marine engineering sectors to get into what will surely be an expanding market? Perhaps in the future Harland & Wolff will make more windmills than ships.

Sir Reg Empey: At present, I would settle for Harland & Wolff making anything. However, the company and its owner, Mr Olsen, are very keen and have many ideas for entering into that area. They see it as a long-term growth sector, and they may well be right. As Members may know, Kirk McClure and Morton prepared a report for the Department last year on the potential of offshore generating capability. There is no doubt that there is potential for it. A pilot project is under way in the Republic, and it is possible that, by 2005, up to 7% of our electricity could be generated by renewables. In practice, that will require a significant increase in wind power, as it is one

of the quickest to bring on-stream. I am entirely of the view that the Member is correct. There is potential for wind generation and the heavy engineering sector could benefit from it. Fred. Olsen Energy ASA is very focused on it at present.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that there will be a renewable energy policy by the end of this year. Having listened very carefully to the Minister's responses, I feel that this is not only about economics but about equality; equality of opportunity to support inward investment, equality of opportunity for choice — that is gas versus electricity. If we do not get gas in the north-west we will be building disadvantage upon disadvantage. With that in mind, will the Minister assure me that the extension of a gas pipeline to the north-west is not dependent upon a South/North pipeline?

Sir Reg Empey: I said in my statement that equality is an issue. Consumer choice and access to a wide variety of alternatives is an equality issue. That said, we have to accept that not every town and hamlet will have a natural gas supply, irrespective of what happens in the north-west. There are economic practicalities that we cannot simply ignore. However, as a general rule, I agree entirely that choice is important.

With regard to Mrs Courtney's second point, the application that I have received is a joint application covering both issues: South/North and north-west. It is being dealt with on that holistic basis.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that the announcement on the possibility of a pipeline to Londonderry is extremely welcome news, which everyone will applaud? Will he accept that his Department has a very difficult circle to square, in that they are faced with the need to cut energy costs while not adding to the increasing amount of carbon emissions?

Does the Minister also accept that price reduction should be aimed at the poorest households, with perhaps the first 4,000 units being charged at the lower rate to enable people to have a basic level of energy, which they can use? Charges could increase as energy consumption rises.

Does he accept that the climate change issue could be a major boost to the Northern Ireland economy? For instance, why can Harland & Wolff not continue to expand its production of wind turbines?

Will his Department encourage all other Northern Ireland Departments to give a major boost to renewables by asking them to go on to the renewable green tariff, which would provide the most enormous stimulus to the production of renewable energy in this Province?

Sir Reg Empey: There is a certain contradiction, in that we have to make our electricity as competitive as possible to help our businesses be as competitive as possible while, at the same time, trying to reduce the

emission of carbon dioxide. The cheapest way of producing energy is not always the most environmentally friendly. Consequently, renewables are a premium supply — in other words, people are being encouraged to provide renewable energy and will receive a premium for their product.

The Member mentioned the point about the Government applying to use the renewable tariff. I will bring that to the attention of my Colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel. It is an interesting suggestion. Clearly, there would be financial implications as the Member has already stated, and those will have an impact.

In recent months, we have tried to attack fuel poverty and more resources have been brought to bear. Mr Morrow is working to ensure that as many people as possible are able to benefit from that. I hope it will be possible to help even more people, because it does not say very much for society if people are afraid to turn on an electric fire during periods of cold weather such as we are having at the moment. Indeed, many people may die, or their deaths may be hastened as a result of being afraid to turn on a fire. That is something that this community as a whole has to look at.

We have brought resources to bear in the last few months, in some of the monitoring rounds, to increase the number of dwellings receiving attention. A major impact is already being made in this area.

Ms Morrice: I declare an interest in this area as I have a family member who is involved in the industry.

I want to look at the potential for renewable forms of energy. I am fascinated by what Dr Birnie and Mr Wells said about the potential for 7% of Northern Ireland's predicted electricity consumption to be met by offshore wind energy in 2005. I know that the matter has been raised but I would like further details. What are we doing to ensure Northern Ireland will be able to produce offshore wind energy by 2005?

With regard to the potential for Harland & Wolff to create offshore wind energy turbines, would the Minister agree that while European regulations do not allow subsidies for shipbuilding, if Harland & Wolff were to diversify into marine renewable energy exploration surely Brussels could not disallow support for that industry? It would be of great benefit for Harland & Wolff and its long-term future, and for renewable energy in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister think about pursuing this matter with Brussels?

Sir Reg Empey: With regard to the second point, the position is that Harland & Wolff receives an intervention aid grant. That is a unique grant that my Department offers. It is not the normal selective financial assistance that is available to other companies, which is a discretionary function of the Department. If Harland & Wolff is doing things other than shipbuilding, it is entitled to approach the Department on the same basis as any other company,

and its case will be treated on its merits. It is because it is dealt with in a narrow, project-based grant regime for shipbuilding — which is specifically limited in its percentage — that its difficulties arise. If it comes up with an application which is for any product other than ships, then its case will be dealt with in exactly the same way as any other company's application.

With regard to offshore wind energy, the Kirk, McClure & Morton study is all that we have. As Members appreciate, this is a privatised sector, and my Department's role is to license. We can issue licences only if we get applications, and so far, we have had none. Therefore it is up to the private sector to come forward, and my Department will assess the applications on their merits.

Mr McCartney: I wish I could be more enthusiastic about the Minister's statement. The central issue — and the Minister will agree — is that electricity and energy costs in Northern Ireland are totally unacceptable when compared with those on the mainland. When one reads the Minister's statement, one does not get a great deal of comfort. Does the Minister agree that he is really saying that the electorate should reduce the amount of energy that it uses, that the present proposals offer only modest reductions and that there is no present or immediate prospect of competition to bring the price down?

The Minister suggests that it is unrealistic either to tear up contracts or go cap in hand to the Treasury. Was it not the Treasury and direct Government, however, that negotiated these lucrative contracts for the generators? Is there anything immoral or unfair in seeking to renegotiate those contracts — although the Minister says that we must demonstrate that we will be honourable in our dealings with those who have invested in Northern Ireland, even if they have invested in terms that are totally prohibitive as far as consumers are concerned?

Finally, if there is to be no variation of the generation contracts or no appeal to the Treasury to right the wrong that it did to the people of Northern Ireland in negotiating these ludicrous contracts, just what real hope does the Minister offer to those who are suffering from outrageous and inequitable energy charges?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is, of course, correct that the central issue is high charges — there is no getting away from that. Since I first became involved in this issue, it has been obvious that the starting point was the contracts — which are something that I sincerely hope we would never have negotiated here. It is quite clear that as long as those contracts remain in place under current conditions, prices can only be tackled at the margins.

However, I make the point to the Member that one of the problems is the high energy costs of producing the electricity because of the inefficiency of the plant. Investing in an efficient plant will directly impact on the charges paid by customers, because there is a fuel premium charged in every bill. The decision to spend £200 million

on a new combined cycle at Ballylumford will, therefore, have a direct impact on prices, because there will be a more efficient plant. It will be able to produce the same electricity for about 60% of the gas usage. It is now under construction, and it will probably be the end of next year before it is in operation. The same thing could apply if the Coolkeeragh scheme goes ahead; that will also be a new and more efficient system replacing an old inefficient one. The Treasury has been approached about the issue on several occasions over the years and, undoubtedly, further efforts will be made.

12.45 pm

Brussels wants to open the market to full competition as soon as possible, and we are getting some help with that. The Moyle interconnector will be in operation by this December, bringing pool price electricity from Great Britain into Northern Ireland for the first time. Three quarters of that capacity will be on the open market, only one quarter will go to NIE. Approximately 35% of our market will be open to competition by next month. That means that the larger commercial companies will be able to buy that electricity. The only way to deal with so-called stranded costs — the burdens that are placed on the shrinking number of customers who are still within the remit of NIE — is to buy out the contracts. That can be done either with the help of the Treasury or by way of a bond.

The approach is multifaceted: better fuel efficiency; more competition in the market; re-examination of the contracts; and modernising the plant and the machinery. Most of the plant dates back to the 1960s and 1970s and is well past its sell-by date. Modernising the plant will have an impact on prices.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the announcement that there will be consultation on renewable resources. There is a growing realisation that the future for our energy needs lies in the use of renewable resources, and, as legislators, we should lead the way on that. Mr Neeson asked about the decision on the Dublin- Scotland pipeline; I was going to ask about it, too. I am pleased that it will not have a detrimental impact on the timescale.

Prices are higher in the North of Ireland, and there is a problem with fuel poverty among lower income households. What contact does the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have with the Department for Social Development, with particular regard to the domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES)?

Sir Reg Empey: There will be a full consultation exercise. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee is carrying out a study into energy issues, which I welcome. We will consult all key interests. We also hope to resolve the question of the representation of consumers' interests at some stage this year. All the matters require resolution

within the year. The purpose of the statement was not to make any dramatic announcements today; it was to set an agenda for the resolution of outstanding energy issues for the rest of the year.

The decision to construct the second pipeline from Scotland has now been taken. That was not the decision that we would have preferred. There will not now be the competition on an all-island basis that there would have been, had the decision that we preferred been taken. It will take longer to integrate the systems fully with the second interconnector. Under our original proposal, we would have had a fully integrated system by 2003. If the current proposals are not amended, it will take considerably longer than that, indeed it could be 2013 before that will occur. Corrib comes on stream in the year following the introduction of the new interconnector. That means there will then be a huge oversupply in the market, which could affect the economics of the Corrib system. There are many problems which we cannot go into just now.

I am acutely aware of the fuel poverty issues. Our two Departments work closely together. The Department for Social Development has primary responsibility for running the fuel poverty system. However, we are clearly aware of it, we contribute, and we want people to take advantage on the industrial side. The climate change levy will impact on prices as well. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment offers a free energy audit to businesses if requested, and I am surprised that the take-up of that is not greater.

Mr O'Connor: The Minister stated that we are wholly dependent on coal and oil imported from abroad. To make Northern Ireland more self-sufficient, can he assure us that he is committed to looking at all forms of renewable energy — for example, hydro-electricity and solar power? Some small schemes run on such things as biomass. Can the Minister further assure us that interconnection with the UK will not mean any nuclear tariff for Northern Ireland customers?

Sir Reg Empey: The Moyle interconnector will be available in December 2001. Electricity can flow both ways — it can be exported and imported. A 500 MW capacity — slightly smaller than Ballylumford, but the equivalent of a significant power station — will come through that cable. That is pooled electricity. In other words, it is available for sale on the open market in Great Britain. We have no way of knowing where that electricity comes from. Therefore it is impossible to say with 100% certainty that some of it would not have been generated by nuclear power stations. Twenty per cent of electricity in Great Britain is generated by nuclear power. It all goes into a central pool and, just as there is no difference between orange electricity and green electricity, there is no difference between coal-fired and nuclear electricity. We have no way of knowing.

Regarding renewables, we are committed. We have targets. We have some hydro schemes, but I have to say

that a fishing enthusiast will have problems with those, and I do get some complaints. There are one or two recent proposals concerning biomass so there is interest. I have already referred to wind energy. Solar energy in Northern Ireland is not exactly a big sell at the moment because of our climatic conditions. Perhaps it is sunnier in Bangor than in other parts of the world.

We have set ambitious targets, but are people prepared to pay the premium? Renewables become more economic only when they operate on sufficient scale. That is where the potential for wind farms can play a role.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the statement by the Minister that the regulator has embarked on a transmission and distribution price control review and that the Department is reviewing the regulator's current powers. Will the Minister ensure that that review is completed before his price control review? It could have an effect on the outcome.

Secondly, in the context of the joint study of the energy markets in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland within the European market, is the Minister aware that the semi-state generators in the Republic of Ireland may not reflect actual capital or real costs in their unit electricity prices? Will the Minister ensure that there will be fair competition so that local generating jobs are not lost to unfair competition?

Sir Reg Empey: There is a transmission and distribution review under way. It is due to be operable by April 2002. It is not clear that it is going to be possible to have the regulator's powers dealt with by that stage, because the transmission and distribution price control review is already under way.

I said some time ago that I was considering introducing a Utilities Act. It may have to come in two parts. One of the issues that we will look at, without any commitment at this stage, is the power of the regulator. Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) knows that the regulator may end up with greater powers than he has at present, and that knowledge might encourage NIE as we move through this process.

After fuel, transmission and distribution are the most significant elements that contribute to the prices that people pay. These charges are 35% for households and 15% for industry and they are higher here than elsewhere. That is a problem.

We have announced a joint study with the Republic. I am aware that our industry is privatised while theirs is state or semi-state, and I have no doubt that ultimately the Republic will have to go down the same route as ourselves. That will be demanded by the European Union. In any event, it is long past the point where people recognise that private companies are better at performing certain tasks. It has not escaped my attention that the study will look at all the potential issues and, in any

case, there will be widespread consultation before any decisions are taken.

Mr Clyde: Willow biomass has already been mentioned. Electricity is being produced from biomass at Enniskillen Agricultural College and at a grain farm in the north-west of the Province. If this proves viable, will the Minister consider grant-aiding farmers to set aside land for the growing of willows and poplars for the production of electricity?

Sir Reg Empey: I know that experimental work has been carried out and that the climatic conditions in Fermanagh have proved to be the best for the production of willow biomass. The encouragement and principal incentive for people to come forward with applications is the premium offered for the unit cost of electricity generated by renewable energy sources. If the Member is suggesting taking certain lands out of current agricultural use and putting them to another use, with a double premium involved, I will have to take advice from my Colleague in the Department of Agriculture.

The principal incentive is that a premium will be paid for electricity generated by the biomass method. That is why there is a premium: to encourage people to produce electricity by non-fossil fuel means. I can assure the Member that if we are to achieve our targets, such premiums will continue to be necessary.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement in view of the complexity of the issues relating to both domestic and industrial consumers in Northern Ireland.

Are we so tied with generator contracts that we have no influence on them? It seems important that the regulator be given some real teeth so that he can tackle the pricing to the consumer in relation to transmission and distribution.

Lastly, is the Minister telling us that the only future for us with regard to lower electricity prices is to import electricity from the Republic or Scotland? Given that the Republic is at the limit of its capacity, there is a major problem.

1.00 pm

Sir Reg Empey: With regard to the latter matter, I am not saying that at all. Imported electricity merely allows trading to take place. If the means to import is there, the mechanism to export is there. If current proposals are carried forward, we will have a surplus of electricity generation in Northern Ireland. Currently the interconnector is primarily used to export electricity to the Republic. It can, of course, be used to cover for emergencies, and if we have a demand spike, then we can import. However, we are exporting most of the time because the shortage is on the other side. Part of the problem is that the distribution mechanism in the Republic is not able to take large amounts for a long period of time, but that is being looked at.

I do not see our being dependent on imported electricity, because we are trying to make generation here as efficient as possible. New plants like Ballylumford and, I hope, Coolkeeragh, and the new Moyle interconnector all bring new sources at a lower price into the equation. Sooner or later that is bound to bear down on prices, particularly as we have opened up the commercial market to the extent currently required by the European Union. However, I believe that the European Union will go for greater market opening, and we are certainly prepared for that.

The contracts are there. They are legally binding contracts in black and white, and we cannot pretend that they are not there. The regulator is working as hard as he can to try and renegotiate, but you have to ask why somebody who has a lucrative contract would simply cast it aside. I am quite sure that if the hon Member held one or two of these contracts, we would all be in difficulties. That is the situation that we have. We are trying to deal with it as best we can, but it is not going to come easy and it is not going to come cheap.

Mr Gibson: Prices here are 15% higher than in the rest of the UK and 9% higher than in the Republic of Ireland. The best prediction that you can give us is that we will get 7.7% of our electricity from renewables. We have the prospect of a climate change levy. Despite the best efforts that you can make, are we not faced, because of the original agreements and contracts that were signed, with very high energy costs that are going to be added to by the climate change levy?

Sir Reg Empey: There is a certain element of truth there. If we sit and do nothing, that is exactly what will happen. It depends at what point you measure, but our prices are anywhere up to 25% higher. It depends what you are measuring against and what you are comparing. However, if we simply add the climate change levy and the increased fuel prices and do not take any action, then that is precisely the result that will flow from that. It is precisely that outcome that I am determined to avoid. That is why it is essential to try to set down a few targets for ourselves and why I wanted to do so at an early stage in the year.

Mr A Doherty: The Minister referred to the potential of offshore wind generation. That would impact very positively on sustainable development in both environmental and economic terms. Since Mr Esmond Birnie anticipated my main question, and I suspect that the Minister's response to Ms Jane Morrice dealt substantially with my other question, I will simply ask the Minister to explain the assumptions that helped form the report's conclusions about wind energy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I congratulate you on the brevity of your question.

Sir Reg Empey: The first thing that the Member has to understand is that no assumption is firm. They have

made very interesting maps of the wind patterns and flows throughout the island. They then have to take into account the depths involved, et cetera, so it is a very intricate measurement to calculate. If Members get an opportunity to look at the report, they will find it interesting.

They make assumptions about the best physical location, consistent with wind direction, the amount of time during the year that that wind is blowing and the seabed conditions in the area. It is on the basis of these factors that they are recommending that it is physically and logistically possible to generate a given amount of electricity and that it is economically possible to do so within the suggested timescale. Theoretically, one could build wind farms ad infinitum until all our electricity was generated in this way, but if calm weather conditions were to prevail, we would be back to using batteries.

You can only go so far with each energy option if you want to have a diversified system. No firm assumption can be made about anything, but experts have looked closely at the weather patterns, the seabed situation and the economics involved, and they have made recommendations to both the Republic and ourselves. At present we are running with those, and we hope that there will be further significant development. To cover 7.7% of generation using renewable resources would mark a dramatic increase on anything that we have here at present. Given that we do not have any significant hydro schemes, there must be a significant commitment to other renewable resources.

Mr Shannon: In the light of the increase in electricity charges from 1 April 2001, will the Minister explain the role of the regulator in controlling NIE prices? How can he ensure that dividends for shareholders do not take precedence over charges to NIE customers? What grants and incentives are available to increase the use and provision of alternative types of energy, for example, hydro, wind, biomass and solar power?

Sir Reg Empey: If NIE wishes to increase its charges, it is obliged to notify the regulator. In this instance, NIE argued that, on the basis of the increase in the amount of raw materials needed to generate power, the generators were increasing the cost to the customers. They are entitled to do this because fuel costs are a part of the electricity premium that the customers pay. The regulator looked at NIE's arithmetic and concluded that the charges reflected accurately the costs that were being incurred by the generators. These costs were not being incurred by NIE because of its operations, but on the basis of the bill charged by the generators for producing the electricity. He concluded that that was accurate enough in this case.

I accept the Member's point about the dividends for the shareholders, but that is not, in itself, a matter for the regulator. However, I am reviewing the extent of the regulator's power, and I want to hear the opinions of Members and the Committee. We are looking closely at

this matter to ensure that the regulator has at his disposal the necessary tools to do his job. He is currently involved in a major review of the transmission and distribution element — a huge issue — and, if he concludes that a certain change in the pricing structure is required, this will be introduced by April 2002.

On the question of the use of renewable resources, I indicated that the incentive for the provision of renewables is the premium that is paid for electricity generated in that way. Whether or not people actually use renewable energy is down to personal choice, because the renewable premium, the eco-premium or green tariff requires a higher payment. Therefore as far as I am aware, there is no cross subsidy in the system at present, and, indeed, as people are paying a premium for it, it would not make much sense suddenly to start subsidising it because that would in many ways defeat the objective.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Poots: Can OFREG take into account the fact that oil prices have now fallen since NIE made the initial announcement of a 9% price rise? Given that the price of oil is not what it was when the initial announcement was made, can that not now be revised downwards?

When will the Minister be in a position to decide whether or not to give the go-ahead for Orimulsion for Kilroot?

Will the North/South interconnector involve the building of a power station in the south-east of the Province? I assume that that pipeline is running through the south-east of the Province. If it does not involve the building of a power station, is that scheme still viable?

Sir Reg Empey: Oil prices have fallen since the announcement was made; it is relevant for the regulator to take these matters into account. Of course, it will be pointed out to us that the oil prices rose well before the actual increase was applied for, and we will probably be told, "Well we had to take time to react to a price rise so it is only right that we take time to react to a price fall". But the answer to the Member's question is that the current market price of the raw materials for electricity generation is a legitimate area for the regulator to review. I have no doubt that he will do so.

With regard to the Orimulsion issue, there is no application before the Department at the moment to produce electricity based on Orimulsion. All that has happened is that the suppliers of the fuel have been in Northern Ireland. I have met them. They have indicated that they want to see Kilroot use this fuel. I have asked them some questions on the environmental issues which may arise. I have sought experience from other European countries but currently there is nothing on our table from any company which wants to convert and generate. As soon as I get an application, I will look at it. I am interested in what Members think of Orimulsion as a

fuel, because I would wish to take into account their views before reaching a decision. So far no application has been made.

A power station in the south-east of Northern Ireland on the route of the interconnector would be ideally located at present. For example, a power station in the greater Tandragee area would be in a perfect position. Again, that is a matter for the private sector.

With a power station the economics would be infinitely superior. The study I am having undertaken on the application is giving an early indication that without it there may still be positive possibilities, albeit more difficult ones than if we had a power station there. It is still my intention to go for the comprehensive north-west and south-east solution. That is still our objective. That application is currently on our table; it is being economically and logistically reviewed at present.

Mr Hay: I know that the Minister is aware of the very long campaign fought for natural gas in the north and north-west of the Province, by the local authorities there. The Minister and his Department have worked extremely hard to make this a reality. However, can the Minister indicate to the House the timescale he envisages as necessary for natural gas actually to get there?

Can he give the House a realistic timescale on natural gas coming to the north and north-west of the Province?

1.15 pm

Sir Reg Empey: If we are spared to see this interconnector and the north-west pipeline installed, I will be the first in Londonderry to check the Member's house to see that he has a gas cooker.

We are looking at a timescale of three years. For a power station to be operational by 2004, the go-ahead for construction will have to be given this year.

I was not joking when I said I would be up in Londonderry.

Mr Hay: For your tea?

Mr Speaker: I had better draw these offers to a close. The time for questions to the Minister is up.

BUDGET BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware, as will other Members, that I tabled 12 amendments for consideration at this stage of the Bill. In our view, the purpose of those amendments was to remove wasteful expenditure on the all-Ireland dimension of the agreement and retain that expenditure within the Northern Ireland Departments. For the benefit of Members, Mr Speaker, I should be grateful if you would say why those amendments have not been accepted.

Mr Speaker: The Member will be aware that it is not modern practice for Speakers to give reasons for the selection or non-selection of amendments. From time to time, however, it is appropriate for a Speaker to identify the principles upon which selection is made.

In this case the process under which the 12 amendments submitted were not selected identifies an important principle. I cannot draw to mind any circumstance in which it would be appropriate for me or any successor as Speaker to select amendments which, if made, would render a Bill *ultra vires*. Such a Bill would not proceed to Royal Assent, since the Secretary of State would not grant permission for that. For the propriety of the Assembly and its proper business, it seems inappropriate for amendments to be selected which, if made, would make the Bill *ultra vires*.

Mr Dodds: I do not wish to challenge your ruling, but for the purposes of clarification it appears that your ruling confirms what many of us suspect when we look at the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The North/South implementation bodies and the North/South Ministerial Council are given a special and privileged position within the legislation. While it may be possible to amend allocations and appropriations in respect of other items of expenditure, these items are specially protected. That is a lesson that will not be lost on the wider Unionist community.

Mr Speaker: The Assembly is a devolved body and is therefore subject to the legislation under which it and the other institutions consequent upon the Belfast Agreement were established. The Assembly is also subject to other pieces of legislation such as the Human Rights Act and so forth. The Member is correct in saying that the institutions set up under the Belfast Agreement are not subject to the procedures of the Assembly. They are not devolved matters which we can address.

As no amendments have been selected, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the clauses and then the schedules.

Clauses 1 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill, which now stands referred to the Speaker.

GOVERNMENT RESOURCES AND ACCOUNTS BILL

Final Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):
I beg to move

That the Government Resources and Accounts Bill [NIA 6/00] do now pass.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the various Committees that were involved in the scrutiny of the Bill. The Finance and Personnel Committee, the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee played a significant role in dealing with some very complex issues and in shaping the Bill's final form.

I am particularly grateful for their support in ensuring that the Bill can be passed in the current financial year. The primary purpose of the Bill is to enable departmental estimates and accounts to be prepared on a resource rather than a cash basis. It marks a major milestone on the way to full implementation of resource accounting and budgeting in Northern Ireland Departments and demonstrates a commitment to introducing best practice accounting methods to the public sector.

Those changes will improve the way in which the Assembly votes and scrutinises public spending with proper management of the full costs of Government activities, better treatment of capital spending and systematic reporting of allocations of resources to objectives.

The Bill also makes a number of important improvements to the Comptroller and Auditor General's powers to scrutinise public spending. As I have indicated, I am committed to securing appropriate forms of audit and accountability for Northern Ireland, and this Bill is a first in that process. Following the necessary wide-ranging consultation I intend to introduce further legislation that will deal more specifically with local audit and accountability arrangements. I therefore commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Government Resources and Accounts Bill [NIA 6/00] do now pass.

STREET TRADING BILL

Final Stage

Mr Speaker: At Further Consideration Stage of the Bill, an amendment was made to clause 17, which deals with a penalty. As that is a reserved matter under paragraph 9(b) of schedule 3 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I was required to refer the matter to the Secretary of State before the Bill could proceed to Final Stage.

The Secretary of State has given his consent, and the Bill can therefore properly have its Final Stage.

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): I beg to move

That the Street Trading Bill [NIA 2/00] do now pass.

The Street Trading Bill replaces the provisions of the Street Trading (Regulation) Act (Northern Ireland) 1929, which relates to the licensing of street trading. The Bill seeks to enable district councils to control and regulate street trading and their districts in such a way as to prevent undue nuisance, interference and inconvenience to persons and vehicles.

The 1929 Act has become outdated, which is hardly surprising since today's street traders operate in ways that were unheard of 70 years ago. The Bill introduces more effective measures for dealing with unlicensed trading and those who trade contrary to the terms of their licence. However, it also seeks to provide a more transparent system in which the rights and responsibilities of councils and traders are properly addressed.

District councils have indicated that they will need time to set up new administrative arrangements. Existing and prospective traders will also require time to familiarise themselves with the new legislation, and to that end the Bill contains a clause stating that the new provisions will come into operation on a date appointed by the Department. It is planned to make the Bill operational four months after Royal Assent.

Finally, I would like to thank Members for their interest in and contributions at the various stages of the Bill. I am particularly grateful to the Chairperson and members of the Social Development Committee for their diligence in the scrutiny of the Bill.

Mr Dodds: I congratulate the Minister and the Department for seeing the Bill through to the Final Stage. I also congratulate the Committee for its work. I had the privilege, as the then Minister, of introducing this piece of legislation to the Committee, and I am glad to see it reaching the Final Stage today. I also take the opportunity, on behalf of Members who are not present, to say a word of thanks to the Minister for taking on board the representations made to him, and the arguments put to him, on a number of amendments. These amendments,

in the view of many of us, will strengthen the legislation considerably, and they will give local councils the powers that they need to deal with the problem of illegal street trading and, at the same time, provide proper regulation.

The Minister and the Department have shown a great deal of flexibility and a willingness to listen to points that have been made. As a councillor on Belfast City Council, I know that officials in the health and environmental services department are looking forward to being able to tackle the problem of illegal street trading in the centre of Belfast with the new powers that have been given to them under this Bill. I want to put those comments on record — not only on my behalf, but on behalf of other Members, some of whom are not present.

Mr Speaker: Does the Minister wish to reply?

Mr Morrow: I have said all that I want to say.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Street Trading Bill [NIA 2/00] do now pass.

The sitting was suspended at 1.26 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair)—

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Question 10, standing in the name of Mr David Ford, has been transferred to the Department for Social Development and will receive a written response. Question 4, in the name of Mr Roy Beggs, has been withdrawn.

Commission/Strategy for Children

1. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail what contact have they had with representatives of children's groups regarding the creation of a consultation paper on a commissioner for children/strategy for children.

(AQO 1000/00)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): We recognise the need to draw on the experience and expertise of organisations who work with children and represent their needs.

The Deputy First Minister and I had a meeting with a number of such organisations on 20 February. They included Save the Children, Barnardos, Children's Law Centre, the Northern Ireland Pre-School Playgroups Association, Parents Advice Centre, Playboard, Putting Children First, Voice of Young People in Care, and Childcare International (Northern Ireland). The meeting was very positive, and we look forward to continuing to work in partnership with children's organisations in developing our proposals.

Ms Lewsley: From speaking to a number of the organisations mentioned, I know that they found the consultation exercise very positive at this stage. Can the First Minister outline how the inclusion of representatives of those children's organisations will be taken forward, considering that they will not be represented on the working group?

The First Minister: The discussion we had on 20 February was very much a preliminary discussion in which a number of general areas were raised. From our perspective, we very much welcomed the exchange. Obviously, officials will be speaking to those organisations, and to others, in greater detail as part of the consultation and as part of the development of our proposals.

The interdepartmental working group is one thing, but we do wish to engage in a very wide-ranging discussion with people who have practical expertise in this area.

Rev Robert Coulter: In again welcoming the decision to appoint a children's commissioner, may I ask the First Minister to assure me that the Assembly will have ultimate responsibility for children's matters?

The First Minister: Of course, any legislation will have to be enacted by the Assembly, and so the Assembly will have to consider its relationship with the children's commissioner. Indeed, the Assembly may wish to consider whether it wishes to have any particular procedure for that responsibility, perhaps through one of the existing Committees. Naturally, the ultimate responsibility will rest with elected representatives here.

North/South Ministerial Council and British-Irish Council

2. **Mr McGrady** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the items planned for discussion at the next North/South Ministerial Council plenary session. (AQO 997/00)

5. **Mr McClarty** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to give an assessment of the work in progress in the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council. (AQO 1815/00)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Mallon): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 2 and 5 together.

The items planned for discussion at the next North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) plenary session have not yet been agreed. However, at the last NSMC plenary meeting it was agreed that a report on the study on an independent North/South consultative forum, and one on competitiveness between the two economies, would come forward to the next plenary meeting.

Overall, there is some progress in both the NSMC and the British-Irish Council (BIC), although in some areas that progress has been slower than had been hoped. Of the NSMC's six implementation bodies that were established, some have been meeting and working well, others have not been meeting. There is substantial progress in a number of the areas, mainly at official level and in terms of co-operation. The work of BIC continues centrally at official level. Difficulties over nomination to both bodies have held back meetings in plenary session, and in some sectors.

The failure of the Minister for Regional Development to participate fully in the institutions has made progress in transport in both BIC and NSMC less easy. The first sectoral meeting of each body, led by the First Minister and myself in December 2000, commenced the work, which is much needed.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his detailed reply on the proposed agenda for the next North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting. I agree with him

that the non-participation of the DUP in certain areas is to the disadvantage of the people of Northern Ireland and I hope that that situation will be remedied very quickly.

We had a strong, emotional debate this morning about foot-and-mouth disease and the many animal health problems that face this community and, indeed, the entire island of Ireland. Will the First and Deputy First Ministers ensure that animal health is a priority on the agenda for the next NSMC meeting? Considering our experiences, many people cannot understand why an implementation body has not yet been created to give this issue a full review.

The Deputy First Minister: Despite our powers of persuasion prior to the Good Friday Agreement, it was not possible to have the type of implementation body that many of us wanted. I hope that attitudes will change and that those powers of persuasion will be used more successfully. The importance of co-operation in agriculture on a North/South basis has already been recognised by this Administration and by the NSMC. Animal health is already one of the areas of co-operation in the NSMC. At the last meeting of the NSMC agriculture sector on 17 November 2000, the council endorsed proposals to formalise liaison arrangements at official level on the full range of animal health matters.

The Council agreed that a strategic steering group should be established to replace the current arrangements. The group would co-ordinate animal health policy on the island. In support of this group, working groups would be set up to consider policy issues on animal health that affect the whole of this island. I am certain that foot-and-mouth disease will be discussed at the next agriculture sector meeting scheduled for 21 March 2001.

Mr McClarty: Will the Deputy First Minister agree that the problem with the North/South Ministerial Council lies in the failure of Republicans to fulfil their decommissioning obligations? Does he agree that Sinn Féin Ministers have a responsibility and that they cannot expect to take all the benefits and give nothing in return? Will he support the calls for decommissioning made by Archbishop Brady and the Member for West Belfast, Mr Attwood?

The Deputy First Minister: The relevance of that question to questions two and five is immediately obvious. However, I will give my views, as the Member has requested.

I have always stated that there is a requirement for decommissioning — it is in the Good Friday Agreement. It is essential that people throughout the North of Ireland are satisfied that there are no illegal weapons or explosives held in this country. I have no problem with stating that again for the record.

In relation to that, and to the question under consideration, a judgement has been made in the courts of the land, and that judgement, pending appeal, stands. There is important business to be done by the Executive, by the North/South bodies and by the British-Irish Council. We should not have any reason to impede that important work.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Does the Deputy First Minister not think that it ill becomes him to come to the House and attack a party that has been consistent in its attendance to this matter? Should he not turn to his partner sitting beside him, who has taken this matter to the courts of the land and is not even nominating his own Ministers now?

I congratulate him on finding that the DUP had set the right example. Does the Deputy First Minister not feel that it ill becomes him now to tell us about all the good things that will come? His dreadful partner — under the terms of the agreement, they act together as Prime Minister — is responsible for this election gimmick.

The Deputy First Minister: I commend the Member and his party for their consistency — they are consistently wrong. Consistency ceases to be a virtue when it is based on a false premise.

Mr McCartney: The Deputy First Minister makes a virtue of consistency. Can he tell the Chamber why, at the SDLP conference in November 1998, when talking about decommissioning — with which he is now prepared to dispense — he declared that if the Executive were formed and there was no decommissioning, he would join with his partner-in-crime in hunting the offenders from the Assembly?

The Deputy First Minister: I commend the Member for his consistency — he is consistently inaccurate. What I said at our party conference is a matter of record, and I will produce the record for the Member. There was a two-way guarantee — *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker Order. This time is for asking Ministers questions in order that they might respond. There is little parliamentary purpose in asking questions and then not listening to the answers that the Minister gives.

The Deputy First Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your guidance. Some Members are consistent in making noise.

I made a guarantee; in fact, I made two guarantees. I said with regard to the institutions that the goalposts could not and should not be moved. My offer was never recognised, and we saw what happened then — suspension and other things. In the interests of accuracy, I will ensure that the inconsistent Member receives a copy of what I said at the party conference before the end of the afternoon.

Northern Ireland Executive: Brussels Office

3. **Mr Neeson** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail when it is intended that the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister will visit the office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels.
(AQO 972/00)

The First Minister: The office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels should be completed in May. We have not, as yet, made any plans to visit the office, but

we will consider how best to launch it in order to gain maximum benefit from our presence in Brussels.

Mr Neeson: I received a written response from the First Minister today about staffing. The Executive are in the process of making two senior appointments to the office in Brussels. Can the First Minister assure me that it will not be a case of jobs for the boys and the girls? What will be the full staffing complement of the office? How widely will the jobs be advertised? What is the target date for the official opening of the office?

The First Minister: We hope that the office will open in May. The delay is regrettable, but it will not frustrate our objective. We have appointed the head of office, and that person will take up post in Brussels on 26 March. The office will be located in the United Kingdom permanent representation until our own facilities are available.

Posts will include head of the office, deputies and locally recruited support staff. The first two mentioned are members of UKRep. consequently, they have diplomatic status, so it is necessary for them to be civil servants. The post was trawled internally and filled in the normal way. There is no question of “jobs for the boys”.

2.45 pm

Mr K Robinson: Does the First Minister agree that the absence of an established, dedicated office in Brussels is not helping us to keep Europe informed about the present difficulties facing our agriculture industry? Does he also agree that the sooner we get the office opened, the sooner we will be able to arrange events such as the excellent “Best of Northern Ireland” exhibition hosted by Mr Roy Beggs MP at Westminster last week?

The First Minister: Mr Roy Beggs MP took the initiative with the support of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the IDB. It was an excellent venture, and it would be good to be in a position to replicate that in Brussels.

As I said in an earlier reply, the head of our office will be in Brussels this month. It would be nice to have our own office accommodation available immediately, but I am quite sure that he will actively represent Northern Ireland’s interests from the outset. The Member is right to refer to the agricultural problems we are facing. They are very significant. The improvement to our representative capability in Brussels will be very welcome.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Does the First Minister agree that it would be much better to have a dedicated office representing the Assembly in Brussels, rather than one for the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, occupied by the cronies of the said Ministers?

The First Minister: It is not right for the Member to refer to the civil servants who will be occupying those posts as “cronies”. Would the Member make a comment like that about officials generally in the Civil Service or about the civil servants servicing his Colleagues? We

should have a little bit more decorum in the way that questions are put.

It is clear that an office of the Executive is needed to represent the Administration. We hope to work closely with other bodies such as the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe (NICE) and, indeed, with the MEPs. I hope the Member’s Colleague, who is an MEP, will be prepared to co-operate with us in a more positive way than he is.

TSN Action Plans

6. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the departmental targeting social need action plans approved by the Executive to date. (AQO 994/00)

The First Minister: All Ministers have agreed their Department’s New TSN action plans, and those plans are now being implemented. The Executive Committee have agreed to publish a report explaining the New TSN policy and setting out departmental action plans. We expect that report to be published in March.

Mr C Murphy: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Can he advise us of the status of any of the action plans published by public bodies — subsidiaries of Departments — in advance of the Executive’s agreeing departmental action plans? Furthermore, in the light of the NISRA report published last Friday, which indicated the continuing unemployment differential between Catholics and Protestants, can he assure us that implementation plans should be more than just targeting efforts and existing resources? Resources should be focused on areas of greatest need to ensure that issues like the unemployment differential are effectively tackled in a realistic timescale.

The First Minister: New TSN was initially developed under direct rule. We have adopted it and are working it out in practice. We will be publishing the departmental programmes and plans in March and the Member will be able to see them then.

One of the things we wish to do — and we will return to this when we debate the Programme for Government later on — is develop the Northern Ireland economy in such a way as to get as close to full employment as possible. The unemployment differential, as it is called in Northern Ireland, has been remarkably stable over the course of the last 25 years. However, the differential between Protestants and Catholics is less than that which exists in the Republic of Ireland — a little-known fact, but one that is relevant and shows the intractability of the problem. We will tackle it by trying to provide as much employment as possible and eliminate unemployment generally. That is the best way to tackle the issue.

Mr O’Connor: I welcome the First Minister’s answer. Can he tell the House how progress on the implementation of the New TSN plan will be monitored?

The First Minister: There will be opportunity to monitor the implementation plans through the Assembly and its Committees, in the same way that Members can monitor the activities of Departments generally.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has its own Equality Unit. This unit will be keeping these plans and their implementation under review. The Deputy First Minister and I are very concerned to ensure that the Administration's obligations to carry out and implement policies that deal with people fairly across the board and to promote equality of opportunity are met.

We will be looking very carefully at the operation across the Administration to ensure that equality of opportunity is genuinely promoted and that plans, proposals and policies that are unfair are not adopted.

Dr Birnie: Does the First Minister agree that the unemployment statistics published last Friday illustrate that all sections of the Northern Ireland community are moving much closer to full employment?

The First Minister: That is certainly true. Unemployment is now down to 5·8%, which is close to the lowest record historically. The lowest figure in the twentieth century, so far as I am aware, was 4%, so 5·8% is very encouraging indeed.

There will be significant problems, however, in tackling long-term unemployment and ensuring that people have appropriate skills to enter the labour market. That is why — as we will see when we debate the Programme for Government — that one of the chief emphases of this Administration will be on developing skills in order to enable people to move into the labour market and to take up the benefits of employment opportunities we hope to create.

Victims: Bloomfield Report

7. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail discussions the Victims Unit has had with the Victims Liaison Unit in the Northern Ireland Office regarding the implementation of the Bloomfield Report. (AQO 957/00)

The Deputy First Minister: I first want to pay tribute to the Member for her interest in this issue and her efforts, long before it became fashionable.

The Junior Ministers, Mr Haughey and Mr Nesbitt, regularly meet Mr Ingram, the Northern Ireland Office Minister for Victims, to discuss the matter. The next meeting will take place in the very near future. In addition, officials from the Victims Unit meet their counterparts in the Northern Ireland Office on a regular basis to discuss a range of issues relating to the needs of victims, including the Bloomfield Report.

Mrs E Bell: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his personal comments. As I have been working in respect of this issue for over 15 years, I do not think that it was a backhanded compliment, but rather a reflection of the work that I have done.

Does the Minister agree that it is vitally important that the relationship and work programmes of both units are clear and obvious to all victims — individuals and those in organisations? Can they be assured that they will all be treated equally? Will they also be entitled to apply for the moneys that were announced by the Minister, Adam Ingram, some time ago?

The Deputy First Minister: I very much take the point that the Member has made. We are, as are the junior Ministers, keenly aware of the need to work closely with our counterparts in the Northern Ireland Office and to have regular meetings to ensure that gaps in service provision do not appear and that key areas are being addressed by the relevant parties.

In addition, an information leaflet outlining the split of responsibilities between the two units was sent recently to individual victims' groups and political parties' spokespersons. This exercise has received a very positive feedback.

On the last point, I can assure the Member that the Northern Ireland Office will distribute the money that was recently announced. We will be having discussions about that to ensure that we have a very substantial input and that that money is used to the best advantage.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Deputy First Minister for what he said in relation to victims. Does he accept that the word "victim" is bandied around a great deal and that there are many people in Northern Ireland, whose family members were killed or banished, that suffer and are victims too? Can the Deputy First Minister tell the House how his Department defines a victim?

The Deputy First Minister: I take the broad point. Over the years we have often heard about lace-curtain poverty throughout Northern Ireland and elsewhere. A similar factor applies to this issue. We should be aware that the entire community has been a victim of the ongoing violence and counter-violence of the past 30 years.

To respond to the Member's immediate question, I do not think that it is possible to have a totally definitive position on it. Let me try this for size — Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's definition in his report is

"the surviving injured of violent conflict-related incidents and those close relatives or partners who care for them along with close relatives and partners who mourn their dead".

Unfortunately, there are far too many in each category in the North of Ireland. However we define the term "victim", we must realise that there is a need for individuals, groupings, and the entire community, to feel their way out of that terrible period.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister assure the House that much needed funding for victims' and survivors' groups will not be syphoned off by Government Departments through bureaucratic administration costs?

The Deputy First Minister: I again put it on record that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister was allocated £420,000 in the current financial year to assist victims. Final decisions on the allocation of these resources have not yet been made. However, the emphasis will be on providing practical help and support by contributing to the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, supporting the four trauma advisory panels, assisting with specific projects undertaken in the health and trauma fields, developing capacity building and by commissioning research on service provision for victims. Of course, the European Peace II programme will include a specific measure for victims, with funding of approximately £6.67 million. This money will become available in the next financial year.

Finally, no one in this society should ever fall into the trap of considering that there are good victims and less worthy victims. All victims need help, and they require the total support of the community. So far as we are concerned, they will get it.

Departments' Replies to Assembly Members

8. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the average time taken by each Department to reply to written representations by Members of the Assembly and to give an assessment as to how this has changed since devolution. (AQO 943/00)

The First Minister: Departments aim to issue ministerial replies to correspondence from Members within 10 working days of receipt. However, depending on the nature of the information sought, some replies may take longer. In such cases, interim replies may be issued to keep Members informed. The position pre-devolution was similar.

We think that to calculate the average time for replies to Members' correspondence would incur disproportionate costs for all Departments.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Is the First Minister aware of the fact that it has taken over 20 working days for the Minister of Health to reply to me on the issue of time worked by junior doctors? That does not meet the aim that he has just outlined. Does he not accept that the arrangements that he and his Colleague put in place — consisting of 10 ministerial Departments, 2 junior ministerial Departments and all the "North/Southerly" accoutrement — are expensive and excessive and involve duplication? Furthermore, does he not agree that we have too many

Ministers but too little democracy? Does he accept that now is the time to review and reduce these arrangements so that Northern Ireland can have the democracy that it is entitled to?

The First Minister: I note the Member's use of the words "expensive" and "excessive". I must congratulate him in one respect — he has asked more questions than any other Member. Many people will think that his efforts, at a cost of nearly £100 for each question, have been excessive and expensive in themselves.

Mr O'Neill: This issue is of great importance to many Members, not just in terms of the number of written questions sent directly to Departments but also for the number of questions tabled for oral and written replies here. Can the First Minister quantify the actual value of this pile of questions, which he indicated Mr Paisley Jnr has asked?

3.00 pm

Mr Speaker: I am afraid that the First Minister will have to respond in writing since the time for his questions is up.

The Deputy First Minister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During an interjection, which I suppose could be interpreted as a question, Mr McCartney made an allegation which was incomplete. In the interests of accuracy — and with your tolerance — may I put the matter right? This is what he omitted:

"Similarly, there is a fear among Sinn Féin supporters that whatever they do Unionists will up the ante by contriving new demands and conditions to exclude them from executive office. Again, I believe that this is an unfounded" — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. Will Members please resume their seats. I will have to make a comment about matters of order in response to a question earlier today, but I hope that those who raise points of order will remain in order. The Deputy First Minister is responding to something that was said earlier, and I have to say that this does not seem to be a point of order. However, on a number of occasions Members have sought to refute something that was said about them personally. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander — not that that expression is any reflection on the Deputy First Minister.

The Deputy First Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. This gander will conclude on this note. I quote exactly:

"If, however, it was misguidedly attempted, neither our party nor I as Deputy First Minister would confer any compliance, support or credibility on such a blatant contravention of the Agreement."

Mr McCartney, over to you.

Mr McCartney: Oh no. I have it here.

Mr Speaker: Members will know very well that aids and accompaniments are not acceptable in the Chamber. I hope that all Members, however distinguished, will observe that.

Mr McCartney: Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. A matter was raised earlier today with regard to what recourse would be taken when Standing Orders were not sufficient. There seemed to be some uncertainty. Therefore I refer the House to the ruling I made on Monday 14 December 1998:

“I intend to use Erskine May for guidance on matters which arise during business in the Assembly or other matters where I am asked to give a ruling and where the Initial Standing Orders and the draft Standing Orders are not clear or are insufficient.”

I had assumed that Members would understand that the same would apply when we moved to our own Standing Orders. When Standing Orders are not clear, or are insufficient, I will have recourse to Erskine May, except in the very exceptional circumstances where Erskine May would be in conflict with our Standing Orders. When Standing Orders are inadequate, or when they are entirely silent, I will use Erskine May, as I said on 14 December 1998.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: SDLP take note.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: My accuracy was called into question by the Deputy First Minister. I obtained a proof copy of what he said, which was entirely consistent with the remarks I had made in the House. I have it here. I was aware that it would not be a point of order to do exactly what you permitted the Deputy First Minister to do. You acknowledged that it was not a point of order, but you let him make it. Knowing you to be a person of probity and equity, I have to say that the same right to breach — if that is what it was — a point of order, or question, should be extended to me briefly as was extended to the Deputy First Minister.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is clearly not a time for an exposé of the rightness or otherwise — *[Interruption]*.

Mr McCartney: But you permitted it.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: You permitted it.

Mr Speaker: Order. The matter was raised by the Member in question. He chose to make a remark about what another Member had said. He made his remark from certain proofs — so be it. The Member has asked for an opportunity to respond. Other Members have, at times, asked for opportunities to respond when their integrity has been called into question by a particular reference. The Deputy First Minister took such an opportunity. It is inappropriate now to engage in a toing and froing, but if the Members wish to exchange papers which demonstrate something, that is another matter. If the substance of this question is a matter of earnest debate, it should properly be debated in the form of a motion.

Mr McCartney: Mr Speaker, I endorse what you have said. However, you yourself indicated that the Deputy First Minister's response was not a point of order — and

he did rise on a point of order; in fact that was his opening gambit — yet you chose to allow it. You justified your decision on the basis that the Deputy First Minister was responding to something that had called his accuracy into question, yet you deny me the same opportunity to respond.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member does not seem to be aware —

McCartney: I am very aware.

Mr Speaker: —that he is running perilously close to questioning the integrity of the Speaker, in which case he would be wholly out of order. The Deputy First Minister asked for an opportunity to respond in the form of a point of order, but, as I indicated, that was an incorrect term to use. His was a statement in response to the question that had been asked, and I permitted it. That is for the Speaker to do, as the Member knows very well.

Mr McCartney: With equity and fairness.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful for your kind remarks in that regard.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Dr Paisley, you have already had one point of order. My generosity knows no bounds, so I will allow you to make one further point. This must be the last one.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I view with seriousness, Mr Speaker, your challenge to a Member that he was moving into very serious territory just because he tried to defend himself. He was not moving so, and he did pay tribute to your integrity. He is entitled to respond to the Member's comment that he did not say something which he did, in fact, say.

Mr Speaker: Order. A Member is not entitled to question a ruling from the Speaker, as Dr Paisley, who is probably the most experienced parliamentarian in this Chamber, knows well. I hold by the ruling that I have given. *[Interruption]*.

Order. If Members wish to have a conversation, they are entirely entitled to do so, but they should have it in the Lobby so that others, who want to observe the conversation, will know where it is taking place.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Urban Clearways: Control Zones

1. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to alter the timings attributed to control zones on urban clearways. (AQO 960/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): I have no plans at present to alter the operation times of urban clearways that are designated under road traffic legislation. My Department's Roads Service, in conjunction with the police, carries out periodic reviews of these times to ensure that they are consistent with traffic management requirements.

Mrs E Bell: Is the Minister aware that serious traffic congestion occurs in urban clearways outside the current timings, particularly on Friday afternoons before 4.30 pm? That seriously impedes the journey home for many commuters. Will the Minister consider extending the timings to relieve that situation?

Mr Campbell: There has to be a balance between the benefits that waiting restrictions bring to traffic movement and the inconvenience for those who wish to park for access to shops, and so on. That is an operational decision for the Roads Service. Officials periodically review clearway times with the RUC, which has responsibility for enforcement. If any Member has a query about a particular location he may take the matter up with the divisional roads manager in the relevant division. In Mrs Bell's case that is the eastern division. If subsequent to that there is still dissatisfaction I will look at the individual case.

Public Transport (Rural Areas)

2. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister for Regional Development to review public transport services in rural areas; and to make a statement. (AQO 989/00)

Mr Campbell: Public transport services in rural areas will be considered during the development of the 10-year regional transportation strategy. In addition, and as part of my Department's obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, an equality impact assessment of the strategic planning and operational management of the bus and rail network — including that in rural areas — is planned for 2001-02.

There have already been recent substantial improvements to public transport facilities serving district towns and their rural hinterlands. New bus stations have opened in Newry and Armagh, and combined bus and rail centres will open soon in Bangor and Coleraine. Construction of a new bus station in Magherafelt is underway, and work on a new bus station in Antrim is expected to begin in the next financial year. Translink is also keen to construct a new bus station in Downpatrick.

The Department for Regional Development also administers the rural transport fund for Northern Ireland which provides around £1.3 million annually to support community-based transport schemes, additional rural bus services and research into rural transport needs.

Mr Fee: I thank the Minister for his answer, and may I ask him to thank his officials for consulting me on my

question during the week. He will not be surprised by my asking him to consider a number of other imaginative schemes that will apply existing resources to supporting transport services in rural areas. Specifically, I am asking about the pilot projects that have been undertaken in Britain and parts of Northern Ireland to use the postal services to help provide transport for the elderly and vulnerable in particular. Will the Minister look at the possibility of utilising the fleet of education and library board buses that are all over Northern Ireland and which have qualified drivers? Those buses lie redundant for most of the summer and every evening.

Mr Campbell: The post buses to which the hon Member refers are minibus-type vehicles that are owned and operated by the Post Office. Not only do they deliver mail, but they also provide transport for fare-paying passengers in local areas. They are more prevalent in Scotland. However, the Post Office currently operates extremely limited services in Fermanagh. Officials from the Department for Regional Development have had discussions with the Post Office about extending post-bus services in Northern Ireland with funding from the rural transport fund. The Post Office has not yet taken up the offer of support. I would be prepared to re-examine the possible extension of post-bus services.

3.15 pm

The issue of education and library board buses is one that I will need to discuss with other Departments. Rural bus services are frequently — almost invariably — uneconomic and are subsidised by profit from urban services. Unfortunately, the Department for Regional Development does not have the resources to subsidise rural bus services, whether provided by Translink or by education and library boards. However, I am prepared to have discussions about the possibility of extension.

Mr Shannon: There are already some public transport schemes in the Province, including one in my constituency of Strangford. Will these schemes, which were in the past partially funded by Europe and by Government Departments, continue in the future? Will similar schemes be initiated to provide public transport in areas of the Province which at present do not have adequate coverage?

Mr Campbell: As I have not had notice of the supplementary question, I am unable to respond immediately to it. However, I will undertake research to find out whether I can give an assurance that those services can continue. These issues will be considered under the regional transportation strategy. The consultation period for that strategy began in January 2001 and will end in the middle of this month. The strategy will be brought before the Assembly in the autumn. All these matters will be up for consideration as part of that strategy, but I will undertake to obtain the information that the Member has asked for and to respond to him in writing.

Mr Close: I thank the Minister for his warm and generous consideration of those living in rural areas and their need for transport services. I ask him to give the same consideration to my constituents in Glenavy and Ballinderry, and also my neighbouring constituents in Crumlin, when he considers the possible “mothballing” — I think that that is the term that has been used — of the railway line. With his generosity and his recognition for those living in rural areas, it would be incomprehensible if the Minister were to consider mothballing this facility, in view of the hardship that those people would suffer.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for the supplementary question and the ingenuity with which he brought it to bear on the Floor of the House. I have met four separate delegations on this matter. The consultation period for the Antrim-Knockmore line closed at the weekend. Last weekend there was a considerable response to the advertising of the possible mothballing of the line.

I was acutely aware before the advertising of the consultation period closed, and am even more so now, that I am in receipt of a considerable volume of objections to the closure of the line. I will give sympathetic consideration to everyone who comes to see me about the line. I hope and expect — and this is without prejudice to whatever the final outcome may be — that, if the points made by all those objectors and by the hon Member are of such validity that I decide to retain the line, I will get the funding from the Assembly to allow me to keep it open.

Housing Schemes: Roads and Services

3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the time taken by developers to complete housing schemes in bringing roads and services up to the required standard, thus enabling them to be adopted by his Department.

(AQO 1019/00)

Mr Campbell: In the case of private streets which have been determined through the planning process, it is the responsibility of developers to bring roads and sewers up to the required standard for adoption by the Department for Regional Development. Where such roads and sewers are provided to the prescribed standards, they are adopted promptly. Progress of developments in general is related to many varied factors and, regrettably, can sometimes be much slower than is desirable.

Where satisfactory completion of roads is not effected within a reasonable period from the date of completion of dwellings, my Department has powers under the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980, as amended, to enable it to complete the necessary work at the developer's expense. Such action is normally only initiated after efforts to persuade developers to meet their obligations have not been successful, with each case carefully considered on its merits.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister accept that almost 20 years is an unacceptably long period to wait before roads and services are brought up to standard and adopted in a new development, such as Prospect in Carrickfergus? Will the Minister ensure that, in future, developers' bonds are accessed, using the article 11 procedure, at a much earlier stage in order to ensure that roads and sewerage in a private development are brought up to standard? Does he agree that there are unacceptably large numbers of unadopted roads in the Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey areas?

Mr Campbell: The Member referred to Carrickfergus and the East Antrim area. Roads Service informs me that there are approximately 60 developments, representing an estimated 130 bonded sites, around Carrickfergus. Roads Service is working with the developers to bring these sites to adoption standards as quickly as possible.

The hon Member referred to Carrickfergus in particular, and I should inform him that notices under article 11 of the 1980 Order were issued on 15 February, giving a particular developer 28 days — the minimum allowed under the Order — to commence necessary remedial work.

Road Defects: Public Liability Claims

4. **Mr Davis** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his Department's expenditure during the last financial year on public liability claims arising out of defects on public roads.

(AQO 1008/00)

Mr Campbell: Expenditure on public liability claims peaked in the mid-1980s at £6 million. Claims arising out of defects on public roads in 1999-2000 were in the region of £3.4 million. The reduction has been brought about by the introduction of the Central Claims Unit and the improvement in road maintenance systems. Obviously, one of the difficulties is the current level of expenditure on road maintenance, which I have continually said is half of what is required.

Mr Davis: Following the recent publication of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on Roads Service management of street works in Northern Ireland, the Minister announced measures to ensure that utilities reinstated roads properly after digging them up. We all have experience of roads needing repairs just days or weeks after works are completed. Can the Minister assure me that roads are inspected immediately after work is completed and that appropriate action will be taken?

Mr Campbell: I share the Member's concern over issues arising out of the Audit Office report. I have written to all the utilities concerned and I hope to meet with senior representatives of those utilities in the near future in order to establish the exact point that he raised. People have a right to expect that these utilities — which by law are able to enter the road surface to lay cables —

ensure that the maintenance and relaying of a road's surface is to the same standard as it would have been if they were not there. I am determined that that will be the case.

Mr Dallat: My question is rather similar. Does the Minister agree that when his Department complies with the report's recommendations, public liability claims should be substantially reduced?

Mr Campbell: I hope that that will be the case. It is certainly my intention that it should be. The more we can encourage utilities to do what is both their moral obligation and their legal obligation, the more likely we are to see a reduction in the number of claims. The forthcoming meeting that I intend to have with the utilities will maintain that specific objective in mind.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There have been recent allegations in the Foyle constituency of surplus maintenance that has been nothing short of archaeological digs. Owing to the lack of co-operation between the Roads Service and the Water Service, some streets and roads have been dug up no less than five or six times during one programme of surface maintenance. Can the Minister tell us how the management of those programmes could be better directed?

Mr Campbell: I want to ensure that any difficulties arising out of an alleged lack of co-operation are not repeated. The indications in recent months have been that co-operation has improved considerably. Nonetheless, if there are signs that a lack of co-operation is at the core of a difficulty in terms of surface maintenance, I will endeavour to ensure that it does not happen again and will have the necessary officials investigate the matter and respond to the questioner.

Roads (Moyle District) and Frosses Road (A26)

5. **Mr Kane** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans for upgrading the road infrastructure in the Moyle Council area and, in particular, the fourth phase of dual carriageway on the A26 Frosses Road from Glarryford to Ballymoney.

(AQO 980/00)

Mr Campbell: The Roads Service is considering proposals to dual the section of the A26 between Glarryford and the Ballycastle junction. The proposed scheme, which is estimated to cost some £16 million, is currently being assessed for possible inclusion in the 10-year forward planning schedule. However, there are many schemes competing for inclusion, and the size of the schedule will depend on the overall funding that is available. I hope to announce details of the forward planning schedule later this year. In the Moyle Council area, there is also a continuing programme of minor works schemes.

Mr Kane: I welcome the Minister's response in relation to the A26. Does he accept the imperative for an adequate access route into the Moyle and Causeway coast area? The present thoroughfare is not conducive to desperately needed economic development in that area.

Mr Campbell: The short answer is "Yes". If the question were posed by any one of a number of Members, the answer would be the same. There are a number of schemes under way in relation to the Moyle area that should be of some benefit. For example, a one-mile southbound climbing lane on the section of the road between Newbuildings junction at the southern end of the Ballymoney bypass and Glenlough Road. That is estimated to cost £500,000 and is currently under way. Improvements at the Portrush Road roundabout at Ballymoney, involving the construction of differential acceleration lanes on both main road exits from the roundabout to allow the safe overtaking of slow-moving vehicles away from the roundabout, will be carried out shortly at an estimated cost of £180,000. These are indications of the importance that Roads Service attaches to the road network in the north coast area.

Antrim-Knockmore Railway

6. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the level of subsidy provided by his Department to operate the Antrim-Knockmore railway line.

(AQO 953/00)

Mr Campbell: The Department for Regional Development provides Translink with an annual subsidy to meet the deficit it incurs in operating railway services in Northern Ireland. The Department expects to pay about £12 million to Translink in the current financial year. However, the subsidy is not route-specific. Therefore there is no information available as to the level of subsidy that is required to operate the Antrim-Knockmore section of the Londonderry-Belfast route.

3.30 pm

In the light of the proposal to close the Antrim to Knockmore line, I accept that we must obtain the best estimate of how much subsidy would be required to continue to operate services on this line in addition to providing a service from Antrim to Belfast via Bleach Green. My Department has asked Translink to provide this information.

Mr Poots: When will the Minister be in a position to tell us how much money the Department believes may be allocated in subsidy for this line? Will the Department, in arriving at its conclusion, take into account the subsidy for the replacement bus service, together with the fact that fewer people would use that service?

Mr Campbell: On 23 February my Department received an economic appraisal for the retention of the Antrim to Knockmore line. That contains a considerable amount

of useful information, but it does not tell us how much it would cost to keep the line open until major work is required. We have asked Translink for that additional information. The economic appraisal says that major work on the track will be required in about three years' time. The estimated cost is approximately £12 million.

At this point, I will repeat what I have said in response to the many representations which have been made to me about the line: I want the line to remain open, and I know that many Members share my view. However, we must face up to the fact that it will cost money to keep it operational, even in the three years before the major work is required. The net running costs of the bus substitution service to which the Member referred are likely to be much lower than the cost of maintaining the train service. My Department has asked Translink for its best estimate of the net running cost of the train service.

Mr B Bell: Has the Minister considered the implications for the Belfast Area Plan of this proposal to close the Antrim to Knockmore line, particularly in the light of the proposed location of 20,000 new houses along this public transport route? As an interim measure, is he prepared to consider the provision of a light railway shuttle service on that line instead of the proposed bus service?

Mr Campbell: Unfortunately, there is no short, simple and obvious answer to the Member's question nor to the analysis underlying it. I am prepared to look at any option that will assist in keeping the line open. Several options have been placed before me, and I am examining each one. We were told that Irish Rail had spare rolling stock. Approaches were made about this, but it emerged that no such stock is available. There have been indications that Translink might be able to get rolling stock from Great Britain, which might be suitable after modification for our gauge. So far, however, that venture has proved unsuccessful. It is likely to be towards the end of 2003 before Translink can acquire new trains.

I am prepared to examine all options to try to keep the line open.

Saintfield Road (Belfast): Traffic Congestion

7. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to relieve traffic congestion on the Saintfield Road approach to Belfast.

(AQO 983/00)

Mr Campbell: As I explained during the Adjournment debate on 3 October 2000, my Department is endeavouring to tackle this problem by several means.

First, we introduced Belfast's first quality bus corridor in late June 2000. Secondly, we intend providing a park-and-ride facility at Cairnshill. This is dependent on planning approval and the availability of the necessary

land and resources. Finally, we are giving due consideration to the provision of a dedicated busway, a "superroute" between Cairnshill and the city centre. This is a potential long-term project and Translink, in conjunction with my Department, has commissioned consultants to evaluate the merits and environmental impacts of alternative alignments for the busway.

The thrust of each of these measures is towards developing alternative modes of transport. In this context consultants are due to be appointed shortly to carry out a study and help produce a Belfast metropolitan transport plan. This study will include proposals for the city centre and transport corridors, including the southern approaches, and it will be carried out in conjunction with the preparation of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, which has recently commenced.

Mr M Robinson: I thank the Minister for his response. Can he comment further on the likely time frame involved in alleviating the situation on the ground, given the fact that there are already more than 30,000 cars using this route on a weekly basis?

Mr Campbell: I assure the Member and the House that Roads Service is continuing to monitor and review traffic conditions on the Saintfield Road and to identify the nature and location of additional safety measures that might be employed along that important arterial route. Roads Service is also investigating other measures that can assist in dealing with the increasing level and volume of traffic on what is, I accept, a very busy and important arterial route into Belfast city centre. We are looking at a number of options and would be prepared to consider in the foreseeable future other choices that would materialise once the bus corridors and the other aspects that I have outlined have been operational for a time.

Roads (Hannahstown and Glenavy)

8. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans to upgrade the roads in the Hannahstown and Glenavy areas.

(AQO 961/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service has no current plans to upgrade roads in the Hannahstown and Glenavy areas, although consideration is being given to resurfacing the Upper Springfield Road and the A26 Moira Road between Glenavy and Ballinderry Upper within the next two years.

Ms Lewsley: I thank the Minister for his reply. I want to draw attention to the Hannahstown area, particularly the hairpin bend down to the top of Hannahstown Hill and the repairs that are needed there due to the horrendous state of the road. Since last October I have been asking the Minister's Department for an answer to a letter I sent

about this matter, and, despite numerous reminders, I have still had no reply.

How does the Minister's Department prioritise the resurfacing or upgrading of roads in the first place, and what consultation, if any, is there between you or your Department and the local community in considering their needs or priorities?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Minister, I advise you that you have only some 20 seconds to respond.

Mr Campbell: I will write to the hon Member, but I am aware of a recent protest in relation to the surface of the road. I will undertake to establish why there has not been a response to the Member's letter, if that is the case, and will write to the hon Member accordingly.

Mr B Hutchinson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I refer to Standing Order 19(7). Why does Ms Lewsley have to wait for a written answer? There were two questions earlier — one was a supplementary to John Fee's, and it definitely was not a supplementary question under that Standing Order.

The other was by Mrs Nelis in relation to question 4. Both were additional questions. If we continue to use this practice, other Members who are waiting will not have their questions answered. People have taken time to submit written questions for oral answer. We should respect that and not allow others to ask irrelevant questions.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for that point of order. Some Members use very imaginative methods to ask supplementary questions in order to get their point across. That point is noted.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, surely if Members are asking questions, which, to use your own word, are "imaginative" to get their points across, it is your responsibility to decide whether the question is in order. By your own admission, it seems that you noticed a couple of questions that were not in order yet you permitted them.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The questions were in order. When I said "imaginative ways" I was describing the means by which Members link their supplementary questions to the main question that has been asked. That is why the supplementaries were not out of order.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Planning: Multiple-Occupation Housing

1. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail planning restrictions on the approval of houses of multiple occupation to avoid causing destruction to local communities. (AQO 942/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): That is a complex area of planning law. Multiple occupancy is regarded as a house that is occupied by persons who do not form a single household. Permitted development currently allows up to six people, who may not be related, to share accommodation without having to submit a planning application. Student and nursing accommodation typically falls into that category, as do households in which groups of people in need of care live together. It is regarded as a material change of use when accommodation is subdivided into discrete living units, and in those circumstances planning permission is required. The main criterion against which such applications are judged is the existing amenity of the area.

Mr O'Neill: It is not just the amenity of the area that concerns me. Is the Minister aware of the character change to a community that can occur when an overabundance of houses of multiple occupation is allowed? Does he agree that his Department has a responsibility to preserve a community's character? Whatever happened in the past, what plans does he have to ensure that it does not happen in the future?

Mr Foster: I am aware of the problems that seem to be arising around the coastline insofar as apartment development is concerned, especially in seaside towns such as Newcastle. My Department is addressing the issue in two ways. The Department is finalising, after public consultation, a planning policy statement titled 'Quality Residential Developments'. That will provide a policy context against which proposals for housing development on greenfield lands and in existing urban areas can be considered, including the relationship with existing development.

The Department is also preparing for consultation supplementary planning guidance in the form of a development control advice note. That will give guidance specifically related to proposals for small-unit housing in existing residential areas. I hope to publish both documents in the spring. I understand that the Department for Regional Development will also prepare a regional planning policy statement titled 'Housing In Settlements', which will also provide guidance on the matter. I am aware of the problems that have arisen. We are sensitive to the issue and shall look at it where we can.

Buildings of Architectural or Historic Importance

2. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his policy on the preservation of buildings of architectural merit and historic interest that are not listed. (AQO 958/00)

Mr Foster: Policy on the preservation of unlisted buildings of architectural merit and historic interest is set out in my Department's planning policy statement 6, 'Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage', which was

published in March 1999. A copy of that statement is available in the Assembly Library. It refers to buildings of architectural merit and historic interest situated in conservation areas, in areas of townscape or village character and in local landscape policy areas.

3.45 pm

It also sets out policies for the control of new developments, demolition or advertisements in a conservation area. In particular, in conservation areas, the Department favours the retention of any building that positively contributes to the character or appearance of the area. The statement also includes a policy that encourages the sympathetic reuse and renovation of non-listed vernacular buildings in recognition of the importance of such buildings to our heritage and regional identity.

We are also considering proposals to strengthen enforcement powers in that area. Those proposals are being considered for inclusion in a Bill to amend planning legislation, which I hope to introduce in the Assembly in the next session. The Member will also be aware that my Department recently declared five new conservation areas in Belfast to protect existing buildings of character from unregulated demolition. Those were previously declared areas of townscape character in the 1990s.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his response, but does he not agree that there is a need to look at the whole question of listing buildings of historic and architectural merit? That applies not only to those buildings in the conservation areas but to those outside, bearing in mind the issues of the previous question, and to the number of large houses that are being demolished to make way for new apartment blocks.

Mr Foster: The second survey of all historic buildings in Northern Ireland has been under way for almost four years. That comprehensive survey considers the interior, exterior and history of each building and evaluates it against the criteria for listing. We are aware of the situation that prevails at this time. My Department and I recognise that the demolition and redevelopment of some houses that are not listed can have a detrimental effect on the character and quality of existing residential environments. That is especially the case when large detached residences are demolished to make way for town houses and apartment blocks, and the housing density is significantly increased. The use of conservation areas to protect buildings is a developing policy. If that approach is successful in Belfast it could be used in other parts of Northern Ireland. Demolition is also one of the areas that is being considered for the forthcoming Bill.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that it is a matter of extreme urgency that townscapes be extended beyond the Belfast metropolitan area to take in places such as Carrickfergus where historic buildings are in danger of immediate demolition? Does the Minister also agree that the appearance of apartments and town houses in

the Newtownabbey area represents a serious threat to the townscape character already there and that stronger provisions are needed urgently?

Mr Foster: My officials in the Planning Service and in the Environment and Heritage Service work together to identify and delineate those areas. I am aware of the issues, and I encourage those who are concerned about their local built environment to take advantage of the opportunities being provided to comment on local plans. They can do that by writing to the relevant planning teams about locally treasured buildings and places. I am aware of the problems in the Newtownabbey area — Mr Robinson has referred them to me before. We take those concerns seriously and are looking into the issues. I am also aware of an application for development and listed building consent to demolish Governor's Place in Carrickfergus. Those applications were received on 22 December 2000, and they are at an early stage of consideration.

Mr Dallat: The Minister has dealt with part of my question, and several other Members have asked about similar concerns. Is the Minister aware that, as we speak, buildings of architectural merit in Portrush are being demolished systematically by speculators that need the ground for apartments? Does he agree that the policies that exist are totally inadequate to deal with the problem?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I advise the Member that, as he suggested, that question has already been put to the Minister and he has responded to those issues. The only difference is in the location. Does the Minister wish to respond or does he wish to move on?

Mr Foster: I am aware of the situation to which the Member refers. We are concerned when such things happen, and we shall take it into consideration when we try to do something about it. I assure the Member that those matters do not go unnoticed.

Taxis

3. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail when he expects to introduce legislation governing the use of public and private hire taxis.

(AQO 982/00)

Mr Foster: At present, I have no plans to amend the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, which governs the licensing of drivers of public and private hire taxis and their vehicles in Northern Ireland. In the longer term it would be valuable to bring the legislation up to date.

However, my bid for additional resources to do so in the 2001-02 Budget was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, I shall continue to consider how the situation might be addressed within my Department's existing resources and priorities.

I recently met representatives of the Belfast Public Hire Taxi Association, together with the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly's Environment

Committee. Although I am unable to hold out the prospect of early legislation on taxi licensing, I have asked my officials to do all that they can to address the taxi drivers' concerns under existing legislation.

My Department also sets the fares to be charged by public hire taxis in Belfast under by-laws. Shortly, I intend to propose amendments to the by-laws to increase those fares, which were last increased in 1996.

Mr M Robinson: As the Minister will be aware, the existing legislation is some 50 years old and, as a result, is totally inadequate. What does the Minister intend to do about the legislation, as he will, I am sure, be aware that there have been instances in which individual taxi drivers have been persecuted, victimised and demonised? Does he agree that that is a totally inadequate situation?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask Members and the Minister to be concise in their questions and answers.

Mr Foster: After devolution, regulation of the taxi industry, including any proposals for fundamental changes, is now my Department's responsibility, as we are all aware. As I stated in my earlier answer, a wider review of the current legislation governing the taxi industry would be valuable.

However, my Department is also required to ensure that members of the public can travel without unnecessary risk. It must therefore be satisfied that licences are granted only to persons who meet the requirements of repute.

In determining repute, the Department takes account of convictions, as confirmed by the RUC Criminal Records Office, against a set of guidelines that categorise convictions as serious or minor. That is an important issue that we are looking into, and we must ensure that we safeguard the public.

Mrs Courtney: In many ways, the Minister has responded to my question. We are all aware of the number of people who use their cars illegally, and the amount of distress that that causes. It causes much distress in my area.

Perhaps part of the problem is that people who should not be driving are being allowed to do so. I hope that when the Minister amends the legislation it addresses all criminal activity in the taxi industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I shall move on because the Member has admitted that her question has been answered.

Dr Birnie: Can the Minister give an assurance that people with criminal convictions will not be eligible for taxi licences in the future?

Mr Foster: I would be failing in my duty to protect the public if I were to allow those convicted of murder or serious sexual offences to be granted taxi licences. The criteria do not attempt to take account of the motives of ex-offenders, and I do not propose to change

that policy. It is open to the courts, on appeal, to take into account all the circumstances of a case.

Animal Waste: Environmental Damage

4. **Mr Kane** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the steps he is taking to reduce the risk of damage to the environment caused by animal waste.

(AQO 985/00)

Mr Foster: I refer the Member to AQO 719/00, which I answered on 5 February 2001, as is recorded in the Official Report for that day. That answer set out in detail the arrangements to prevent and police pollution incidents, including those caused by farms.

My answer also set out the significant increase in the number of staff devoted to that work over recent years. It also described the further increases in staff planned from the additional resources that I obtained in the Budget for next year, together with additional regulatory receipts. Headquarters staff on pollution prevention and response will increase from three to nine, and the number of staff in the water quality unit of the Environment and Heritage Service will increase from 44 to 77.

I also plan to strengthen the statutory regime for controlling animal waste. The Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 enables my Department to make regulations to control the storage of slurry, silage and fuel oils on farms. The Order also gives my Department increased powers to serve works notices that require farmers to take remedial action to stop or prevent pollution. That is detailed because I have been asked to give detail.

The Environment and Heritage Service takes vigorous action against polluters, including the instigation of prosecution proceedings when the circumstances warrant it. For serious pollution incidents, including fish kills, prosecutions will be expected to follow if the perpetrators can be identified.

However, the 1999 Order cannot come into operation until a commencement Order has been made. That in turn must wait for other enabling Regulations that were the subject of recent public consultation. My Department expects to be able to bring the 1999 Order into operation in the next two months and to have the new Regulations in place later this year.

Agricultural waste, which generally includes animal waste, is not controlled waste under the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. It is not, therefore, covered by the Northern Ireland waste management strategy that my Department published last March. However, we intend to bring agricultural waste under the controlled regime. My Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are working together to develop an agricultural waste strategy to be

incorporated into the overall Northern Ireland waste management strategy at its first review in 2002.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Kane, there was a great deal of detail in that response. Do you require a supplementary question?

Mr Kane: I accept some of the Minister's response, but I was speaking about the disposal of animal by-product waste at landfill sites and his Department's responsibility for possible human infection from material at those sites. The risk of BSE infection to humans from specified waste materials that are put into landfill sites — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Was there a question?

Mr Kane: No.

Mr Leslie: I thank the Minister for his wide-ranging answer. Do his proposals to increase, in particular, the policing and regulation of farm sewage place greater pressure on farms while we ourselves do not revise our thinking on how we should deal with the problem?

Does the Minister agree that if he acted in concert with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who expressed an interest this morning in renewable energy resources, the matter could be approached proactively? They could do that by encouraging the building of anaerobic digesters, which would both recycle farm sewage in an environmentally friendly way and produce energy from a renewable resource.

Mr Foster: The Environment and Heritage Service is actively engaged in pollution prevention measures. Through co-operation with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Countryside Management Division, it helps to target farm assessments and assists in the preparation of codes of good agricultural practice. All farmers who are prosecuted for causing pollution are offered a free advisory visit by staff from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

My Department has no direct responsibility for the disposal of fallen animals or incinerated carcasses. However, my officials will stay in touch with their counterparts in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to ensure that the arrangements for the burial of carcasses or incinerated remains pose no risk of pollution to rivers or ground waters.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Animal by-products from slaughter, such as stomach and gut contents and blood, can be spread on land where that practice is considered beneficial to the soil. Regulations require landowners to notify district councils where "land spreading" takes place. To prevent environment contamination and animal health risks, that practice is subject to control under the animal by-products Regulations

enforced by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Blood certified as being free from disease by veterinary officers at the time of slaughter poses no risk and is therefore exempt under the Regulations. All waste from abattoirs has been directed to suitable licensed and risk-assessed landfill sites because of foot-and-mouth disease, and advice has been issued to district councils.

Area Plans

5. **Mr Hay** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the current situation in implementing area plans across Northern Ireland.

(AQO 990/00)

Mr Foster: The Department's development plan programme, which is reviewed and rolled forward annually, is published in Planning Service's corporate and business plans.

4.00 pm

The objective of the programme is to provide development plan coverage for all district council areas in Northern Ireland by 2005. The current position is as follows: area plans for the districts of Antrim, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne, Armagh, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Moyle, Derry, Limavady, Omagh, Strabane and Fermanagh were adopted and are being implemented; the Lisburn area plan is scheduled for adoption before the summer; the Cookstown area plan has been the subject of a public inquiry, and the report and recommendations of the Planning Appeals Commission are awaited, and draft development plans have been published for the Craigavon and Dungannon districts, and public inquiries will be held during 2001-02.

As the programme progresses, several plans, including some of those referred to, will need to be replaced. Therefore, a replacement programme is also under way. Replacement area plans are in preparation for the Newry and Mourne and Banbridge districts, the Ards and Down districts and the Magherafelt district. They are also being prepared for the six districts — Belfast, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Lisburn, Newtownabbey and north Down — that comprise the Belfast metropolitan area plan. Work is scheduled to begin during 2001-02 on replacement plans for the Coleraine, Ballymoney, Limavady, Moyle, Antrim, Ballymena and Larne districts. Work on the three remaining districts of Armagh, Omagh and Strabane to complete up-to-date area plan coverage is scheduled to begin in 2002-03.

Mr Speaker: The Member may now understand the danger of putting terms such as "detail the current situation" into his questions. Sometimes one gets what one asks for.

Mr Hay: Does the Department of the Environment have adequate resources to ensure that area plans are properly implemented in Northern Ireland? Can the

Minister tell the House the number of article 31 applications that are before planners in Northern Ireland at present? What impact will those applications have on the implementation of area plans across the Province?

Mr Foster: I cannot tell the Member the number of article 31 applications that are with planners at present, but I shall provide him with a written reply. I am generally satisfied that the resources are available — so far as one can be absolute about anything — to my Department to meet the target date of 2005, subject to the normal consultation process. Although I recognise the pressures of statutory consultees, I expect that they will recognise the importance of area plans and allocate resources as necessary.

Mr A Doherty: Does the Minister agree that the implementation of area plans across Northern Ireland may be complicated, if not compromised, by the uncertainty regarding future structures of local government and that that uncertainty should be removed as soon as possible?

Mr Foster: That is an imponderable question. The area plans can run concurrently with whatever is decided in future under the public administration review. I cannot give the Member an answer to that. I cannot be absolute about it, but I can assure him that there is nothing wrong with working on the strategy at the moment.

Mr J Wilson: Is the Minister satisfied that progress towards the goal of having all areas covered by 2005 is achievable?

Mr Foster: I refer my Colleague to my earlier answer.

I am generally satisfied that the resources that my Department will need to meet the target date of 2005 — subject to the normal consultation process — are available. I cannot be absolute about it. We are working towards 2005.

Planning Applications (Kircubbin Area)

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of the Environment to explain how two planning applications have been approved by the Planning Service while other applications have been deferred until the new Kircubbin sewage treatment works has been provided.

(AQO 978/00)

Mr Foster: Several planning applications have been held pending a decision on the future development of the Kircubbin sewage treatment works. On 13 February 2001, Planning Service consulted Ards Borough Council with a preliminary opinion to approve two related applications. One of those related to the refurbishment of an existing building. Water Service had no objection to that development on the grounds that there would be no additional discharge.

The second proposal concerned apartment development, and the recommendation to approve was made in

error. This error was discovered by Planning Service and did not result in a formal approval's being issued.

Water Service has recently advised that the design of the new sewage works for Kircubbin is at an advanced stage, and work is programmed to commence on site in autumn 2001, subject to planning permission. Although Water Service's position remains that no additional discharge can be accepted because of overloading of the existing works, it has stated that it will not oppose planning applications, provided developers are prepared to phase construction to coincide with the completion of the sewage works. In light of that information, planning applications that currently stand deferred by Ards Borough Council until the new Kircubbin sewage treatment works has been provided will now be considered.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister acknowledge the very bitter concern of local applicants who have consistently been refused planning permission? There is currently a wait of up to five years until the new sewage treatment facility is provided. Along comes an application for apartments, which has just been mentioned, and — hey presto! — the decision from the planning people is “OK”. There is no problem and no mention of sewerage. The local community is furious.

Will the Minister assure the Assembly that his Department will fulfil its obligations in relation to planning applications throughout Northern Ireland on a consistent, fair and equitable basis, and one that would not give rise to any kind of suspicions?

Mr Foster: The Member used the word “suspicions”. I do not accept that the planning people are inconsistent. I know that there are problems and difficulties, but I can assure the House that no planning application goes through without deep thought and rigorous assessment. I cannot accept what the Member has just said. I assure him that we view the situation in a pedantic and consistent way. We look at the infrastructures surrounding all applications, and each application is taken on its own particular merits.

Mr Speaker: I am curious to hear to which part of Kircubbin sewage treatment works Mr Roy Beggs wishes to refer.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister agree that it would be environmentally irresponsible for Planning Service to continue to grant planning approval for all new developments, knowing that pollution of the environment would result if the sewage treatment works is already overloaded, as it is in parts of my constituency? Will he take into consideration the views of the Environment and Heritage Service on the ability of the local sewage treatment works to cope when he considers new planning applications that would potentially further overload the local capacity?

Mr Foster: I can assure Mr Beggs that we take all those issues into consideration. We must ensure that the

works are not overloaded and that the infrastructure is in place to take the development. I assure him that we shall not take the matter lightly.

Mr Shannon: Is the Minister aware that the planning schedule for Tuesday week will confirm that all four outstanding applications for Kircubbin will be lodged with Ards Borough Council and will all be coming forward for approval? Can he state why that has happened? Is it because of the controversy made known to Ards Borough Council by the people of the area, or is it because the Department has not been doing its job correctly?

Mr Foster: I understand that four applications have been deferred by Ards Borough Council. My Department will now consider those as a matter of urgency. I wish to emphasise again that we do not take those matters lightly. I would not accept that in my Planning Service. It is not inconsistent; it does not operate in a willy-nilly way.

My Department is not able to review applications that have already been refused on the grounds that the sewage works was overloaded. However, there is nothing to prevent someone submitting a new application for consideration, where people may feel aggrieved. I assure the Member, and this House, that my Planning Service does not take issues lightly.

EU Landfill Directive

7. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans to introduce legislation for the implementation of the European Union Landfill Directive.

(AQO 959/00)

Mr Foster: The Landfill Directive aims to prevent or reduce as far as possible the negative effects on the environment, as well as any risk to human health, from the landfilling of wastes. A key feature of the Directive is the reduction of methane emissions from landfill sites. It imposes progressive targets to reduce the amount of biodegradable municipal waste landfilled, eventually reducing to 35% of the 1995 baseline levels.

The target for achieving that reduction is 2020, provided that advantage is taken of the four-year derogation available under the Directive. The percentage reductions required by the Directive are built into the Northern Ireland waste management strategy that was published by the Department of the Environment in March 2000.

In consultation with other parts of the United Kingdom, my Department is considering options for ensuring that those targets are met in Northern Ireland. I hope to consult widely on those issues later this year.

The remainder of the Directive is concerned with achieving common standards for the design, operation and aftercare of landfill sites. I shall be consulting on the proposal for implementing those aspects of the Directive

as soon as possible after the consultation on biodegradable municipal waste.

Plans to introduce legislation to implement the Directive must await the outcome of those consultations. The additional resources that I have obtained in the Budget for 2001-02 will, however, help progress. Those resources will enable me to meet the commitment in the Programme for Government to progressively eliminate the backlog in transposing and implementing EU Directives.

Mr Speaker: Mr Ford, you have 20 seconds to put your question, and the Minister will then be likely to have to write to you.

Mr Ford: I am disappointed, Mr Speaker, to hear that there is no definite timescale for the legislation. I had hoped that the Minister could have been a little more specific. Is he satisfied with the current movement on targets towards recycling and reuse? Is he also aware of the major public concern over the incineration question, which also needs to be addressed?

Mr Speaker: I am afraid that the time for questions to the Ministers is up. I have not been in the Chair, but I observe that we have barely reached question 7. Without attributing that to anything in particular, I do feel that on productivity grounds, no particularly good use has been made of that time. I appeal to Members who have to take the Floor to be as concise as possible.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Are you referring to the responses by Ministers? That is what stretches out the time; that is where the problem lies.

Mr Speaker: As I said, I attribute my remarks to no one in particular. My remarks were meant as a caution to all Members who take the Floor.

PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

Mr Speaker: We now come to the motion on the Programme for Government. As Members will know from the Order Paper, this debate will start today and continue tomorrow.

No time limit has been set at this point for the debate, nor for contributions that Members will make. However, in view of what I have already said as regards questions and responses, perhaps some element of self-control will be of value, since this is a wide-ranging debate — and I suspect that many Members will wish to participate and to contribute. We shall debate until 6.00pm today and then adjourn. The debate will be resumed and completed tomorrow.

Motion made:

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government agreed by the Executive. [*The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister*]

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): On 24 October 2000 the Deputy First Minister and I presented the Programme for Government in draft form to the Assembly and invited the Assembly's views. We stressed the fact that the draft Programme for Government marked an important milestone in the development of our institutions and of a devolved, locally accountable Government here.

It represents our commitment as an Executive to effective and accountable Government that makes a real and positive difference to the lives of people here. The draft Programme for Government has been debated by the Assembly and scrutinised by its Committees, and we are grateful for the positive and constructive feedback.

We believe that this process has signalled a maturing of the new politics that the agreement has achieved for Northern Ireland. The Programme for Government demonstrates that the four different parties that make up the Executive can reach agreement on priorities for Government and work constructively for the benefit of Northern Ireland.

Let there be no doubt about it: this programme is the work of all four parties in the Administration. The DUP may have the wrong particular way of communicating with the rest of the Administration, but they do participate, and their contribution is contained in this collective programme.

4.15 pm

That process has shown that the Assembly and the Executive can work together effectively in a corporate manner to serve the people who elected us. The programme in draft form has been considered by the Civic Forum and by a wide range of organisations across the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. More than 150 bodies and individuals responded with detailed comments and suggestions.

This process has made it clear to us that there is strong endorsement, within the Assembly and without, of the priorities that we have identified for Government and of the actions that we plan to take. We, along with our Executive colleagues, greatly welcome this endorsement. However, the process also made it clear that there are many things that we could do to improve the content and presentation of the programme. We have listened to suggestions and have reflected many of them in the version of the programme that is being debated today. We shall consider many others as we refine the process of developing, consulting on and agreeing the Programme for Government in future years.

Our objective is to deliver a new beginning for Government in Northern Ireland in which the Government are responsive to the people that they serve. After so many years of direct rule and of decisions being taken by Ministers who had one eye on distant constituencies and the other on Westminster, we may be forgiven for noting that the observation that every country has the Government that it deserves is not always correct. However, it is clear, after 28 years of direct rule, that the people of Northern Ireland certainly deserve good Government by those whom they elect themselves.

More than that, they deserve a modern, open, efficient and locally accountable Government that meet their need. That is what the Programme for Government delivers. It is comprehensive and precise. It makes the detail of government more accessible to the public than ever before and goes further in this respect than similar documents in Scotland and Wales.

It clearly states what we want to achieve and the steps that we shall take. It is in effect the Executive's manifesto — a set of pledges and commitments that underlines our desire to make a difference for the good of all. The largest addition to the document since the draft was presented to the Assembly in October reflects the inclusion of public service agreements — setting out the commitments made by each Department. Again, that is done in unprecedented detail.

The public service agreements represent a most important step in meeting our aim of bringing open and accountable government to the people of Northern Ireland. For the first time, Departments have been challenged to set out what will be achieved with the resources voted to them by the Assembly. It is vital for the Assembly and the public to have an opportunity to see exactly what the Executive Committee plans to provide across its spending programme in support of the overall Programme for Government.

The public service agreements are designed to do precisely this — to identify what Departments aim to achieve over the life of the Programme for Government. They do that by listing their detailed aims and the

targets that they intend to achieve. They are designed to ensure a proper focus on outputs and outcomes. For too long, the focus in Departments, the media and among the public has been on inputs and resources — on how much we spend or how much it costs.

We want to change that focus and put the spotlight on outputs — on the results and on precisely what has been achieved. It is not only a question of how much it costs, but of what we get for our money, when it will be delivered and how good it is.

That is why we have set our plans out in some detail. By way of example, I shall highlight the public service agreement for the Department of Education to indicate what it includes. There are targets for increasing the percentage of children at age 11 who reach or exceed expected standards of literacy and numeracy for their age. The current targets, set out on page 103, are that 77% of pupils should achieve at least level 4 in Key Stage 2 in English, and 80% should achieve that level in maths by 2004. Those targets represent a 12% improvement in English since 1999 and an 8% improvement in maths.

Those are precise targets and commitments, and the Assembly and the public will be able to assess precisely what degree of success there is in achieving them. If they are achieved — fine. If there are difficulties in achieving them, we can focus on the question of what the problems are. That process, replicated throughout the Administration, should drive standards up and deliver more to the entire community.

The public service agreements also set out the steps that will be taken to ensure that targets will be achieved in the case of education. Those steps include the universal provision of pre-school education, support for under-achieving schools and the provision of properly maintained classrooms with modern technology. Pledging to improve the education of our children is much more meaningful than simply promising to spend more money on education.

We could take the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment as another example. Its public service agreement contains targets to achieve increases in export sales growth and net employment among our larger companies. It sets out the actions that the Department will take to achieve those targets — actions that include promoting Northern Ireland as an inward investment location.

Where once our focus might have been on the numbers of companies setting up here and the costs of supporting them, it is now being switched to ensuring that those companies that are located in Northern Ireland contribute to the creation of wealth and jobs and to the strengthening of our economy.

Although there is much to do in the economy, there is also much that we can be proud of. Since 1995, we have created more than 60,000 additional jobs. That is a growth rate of 11%, which is faster than that in Great Britain.

Our manufacturing output continues to forge ahead of the rate of increase in the rest of the United Kingdom. Manufacturing output here has increased by 31% since 1995. That is the case despite the high level of the pound and other difficulties. By comparison, in the rest of the United Kingdom the increase over the same period was 4% — a fraction of that we had achieved.

Of course, there remain many challenges — some are old, and some are new. We need to overcome them if we are to secure a competitive economy. We need to continue to work to reposition our economic base, and that means moving away from an over-dependence on the public sector and on slow growing or, indeed, declining, areas. In fact we need to switch from public to private and from low added value to higher added value areas.

That does not mean that we shrug off our important industrial heritage. Rather, it means making the most of opportunities that we are well placed to exploit. The real promise for the future comes in the newer sectors — whether making goods or producing services — and for businesses that can successfully supply those new sectors.

We need also to promote enterprise, innovation and creativity, as we strive to achieve a knowledge-based economy. That is why the programme commits us to promoting Northern Ireland as a world-class centre for e-commerce.

The programme also sets out specific actions in areas of support of our priority of — as the heading is — “Securing a Competitive Economy”. Those actions include: promoting research and development in local companies; providing the facilities to sustain high technology and high value-added new start-up companies; and ensuring co-ordination and effectiveness of local enterprise support. It recognises the importance of instilling business awareness into our young people and commits us to developing an action plan to promote greater integration of enterprise into the curriculum in schools and colleges.

We still need to maintain a focus on unemployment. Unemployment here has fallen by half since its peak in 1993. It currently stands below 6% and is lower now than at any time since the 1970s. Over the same period, earnings increased by 17.6% in real terms, although, unfortunately, they remain below the UK average in private industry. Our unemployment rate is also still higher than the UK average, and we continue to face the problem of long-term unemployment.

Securing a competitive economy is one way to help ensure that unemployment continues on a downward path, but such progress is reliant on progress in other areas. Our actions to strengthen our economy and to create wealth and jobs cannot be divorced from other priorities. They are linked to our commitments under the heading of “Growing as a Community” to tackle poverty and social exclusion. They are also linked under the heading of “Investing in Education and Skills” to our

plans to improve our education standards and skill levels, and to help the unemployed find work.

Providing jobs is the surest way to create a more inclusive and equal society. Providing high quality skilled jobs is even better. To achieve this, we must ensure that the skills and qualifications of our people continue to rise towards a level that matches the best in the world.

Already we have seen that companies will move here to tap available skills. Shortages of key skills in rapidly expanding sectors are the most important factor in holding back growth.

For those reasons, economic development, skills training and education must go hand in hand. That is one example, albeit an important one, where cross-cutting themes and joined-up government are essential. That is why those themes are heavily emphasised in the Programme for Government.

I am disappointed by the Alliance Party's amendment, which gives that party's reasons for rejecting the Programme for Government. Alliance has had more than five months to consider the Programme for Government, and I am surprised that it has arrived at that conclusion. In October, the Alliance Party put forward its proposals for the Programme for Government, but in many areas its ideas were close to those of the parties that were involved in the drafting.

We have also heard from other Members, particularly through the Committees, and the overwhelming consensus was that the Programme for Government provides an excellent basis for the work of the Government and for the long and difficult process of developing good government for Northern Ireland. Of course, there were ideas for changes, differences of opinion regarding priorities, and instances where Members would like to see more being done. However, those who were consulted in the Assembly recognised that the Programme for Government was a realistic, organised and costed programme based on the reality that budgets are finite.

People can say that more could be done, but there are no simple, facile answers. In the Programme for Government, the Executive have mapped out a wide-ranging approach and demonstrated the linkages between programmes and policies by setting out their details, actions and timetables. Detailed equality schemes and new TSN action plans have also been set out.

Why has there been silence from the Alliance Party? It has not given costed proposals. Where are its solutions? It is easy to criticise, but now is the time for a debate and for working together.

The Programme for Government represents the Executive's prospectus for a new Northern Ireland — a region that is moving towards a new and inclusive stability where all can realise their full potential. It also represents our determination to deliver that in an open and

accountable way. The Programme for Government and the public service agreements set out in detail what the Executive will do, at what cost and by when. They represent our commitment to open and accountable government, to addressing the challenges that Northern Ireland faces and to moving forward for the good of the whole community.

Mr Neeson: I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after "Assembly" and add

"declines to approve the Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government because it does not properly address the deep divisions and inequalities in this society and therefore does not deliver the new beginning envisioned by the Good Friday Agreement."

I am surprised that the First Minister is surprised that the Alliance Party has tabled an amendment. The First Minister knows that the Alliance Party has raised many issues of inclusion in the House over the months, and it is my intention to raise those issues today.

There has never been a greater need for reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Sectarianism has never been more openly rampant than it is now, and the need to deal with those problems has never been greater. Although there are those who try to put forward the idea of Northern Ireland being two communities and who try to perpetuate the idea of the two communities, we have to recognise that Northern Ireland has moved forward from that. It is now a much more complex matter, and it is not just a question of Catholics and Protestants or Unionists and Nationalists. There are those who believe and those who do not believe. There is a growing increase in ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland. All those issues have to be taken on board.

4.30 pm

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

Never has such a great hurt been felt by many sections of the community than at present. The feeling exists that some are more equal than others. I refer to the Programme for Government. On page 14 it states:

"It will take generations for much of the pain and hurt of our history to be handled. However that should not lessen our commitment to work together to find reconciliation."

On page 26 it says

"We will place renewed emphasis on the need for all our people to work together. We will examine the impact of existing patterns of housing and services such as education and seek to respond positively where people wish to live and learn closer together. We are also aware that prejudice is not confined to religious sectarianism and that ethnic and other minority groups are often the victims of intolerance. We will work to reduce all forms of prejudice."

Those are fine words indeed, but words are one thing and commitment is another. The reality is that the Programme for Government has only seven measures to deal with the division in our community and four of those deal with language rights. However, what is of greater importance, human rights or language rights? I pose that question to the Executive today.

The First Minister knows well that over the past year the Alliance Party has been working on the major problem of hate crimes in Northern Ireland — he has answered questions in the House on the matter. What will the First Minister and the Executive do about the extension of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to Northern Ireland, which will deal specifically with racially motivated crimes?

The extension of the Football (Offences and Disorder) Act 1999 specifically prohibits sectarian chanting. Last Wednesday there were disgraceful scenes at Windsor Park when Neil Lennon was picked on because of the football club for which he plays. That cannot be tolerated in a decent society. What are the Executive going to do about that? The problem of sectarianism in sport is not mentioned anywhere in the Programme for Government.

Many Members are committed to the principle of integrated education. The First Minister quite rightly spoke about the targets for education and the provision of facilities and resources. However, targets for creating integrated education, whether through the building of new schools or through developing integrated schools through transformation, are absent in the Programme for Government.

There is nothing significant in the Programme for Government on the need for cross-departmental action to deal with paramilitary flags and graffiti. A private Member's motion is currently before the Business Committee on that matter, yet the First Minister should know that one Department is passing the problem to another. They are simply passing the buck, yet, year after year communities, cities and towns are blighted by the erection of paramilitary flags and by intimidation. That, in turn, creates a hostile environment for many people who are being intimidated by Republican or Loyalist graffiti. The Assembly should be dealing with those issues.

The Alliance Party also supports demands from the Mixed Marriage Association to try and develop more programmes for integrated housing. I take on board the First Minister's earlier remarks. It is not a question of waving a magic wand.

I realise that there are problems, but I ask the Committee of the Centre to investigate the barriers faced by people in mixed marriages in Northern Ireland and to consider how we might bring about greater housing integration in Northern Ireland. Not only do we have working-class ghettos, we have middle-class ghettos; we even have upper-class ghettos. The Assembly should address such a serious issue.

The core of our argument is that all Executive policies should be proofed on the extent to which they promote sharing rather than separation. That should be at the heart of what the Assembly does. We need neutral symbols — as an Assembly, we successfully developed the flax flower as our symbol. We must get away from the sectarian slogans that have created so much division

in our society. I have spoken about the problem of sectarianism in sport; we can bring about change. Although I disagreed with the decision of the Belfast Giants to go ahead with their matches last Friday and Saturday night, ice hockey is an example of how the communities in Northern Ireland can be brought together to celebrate and cheer on one sporting event.

People in Northern Ireland have been accused of being inward-looking, but the development of the Assembly has created new opportunities. I welcome the establishment of the Northern Ireland Office in Brussels, but we need to establish not only bilateral, but multilateral relationships with other parts of the European Union. On the whole, the Programme for Government looks at east-west and North/South issues, but there are opportunities to look beyond Northern Ireland. I also hope that our relationship with the United States can be further developed. It might be just an oversight, but some of the North/South projects that appeared in the original document, such as lecturer exchanges and research collaboration for business, are no longer there. Ministers should let us know whether there have been changes.

I shall not be totally negative; there are many good things in the Programme for Government. I have already mentioned the establishment of the office in Brussels. I welcome the Executive's strong commitment to e-government, which is now the subject of a major Bill. I also welcome many of the economic policies. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee hopes to publish a response to 'Strategy 2010', and there is much in that to be welcomed. The increase in job opportunities is also to be welcomed.

Much more attention and resources should be devoted to improving community relations in Northern Ireland. The Programme for Government states that the Executive are committed to improving community relations, but there are few actual policy proposals. Northern Ireland is a divided society. It is, therefore, vital that the Assembly take the lead in trying to end those divisions: that outlook should be at the core of all Government policies. That is a challenge that we all must face up to.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): The Programme for Government is a much-needed document for the public service. It sets out the key issues that we must address so as to improve life for all people in Northern Ireland. I fully endorse it.

I shall focus on the significance that is being placed on environmental issues. When the Assembly previously debated the draft document, I emphasised the crucial importance of the environment, especially for a healthy community and for a competitive economy. That aspect was, and still is, reflected. If we are all to take ownership of the Programme for Government, it must reflect the views of elected representatives and the wider community.

Therefore, I have carefully considered the responses given by consultees.

I have also had constructive contact with the Environment Committee. I thank its members for the helpful way in which that business was conducted. When I began to look at the comments from the Environment Committee and the wider public, it was interesting that there was a significant degree of similarity in the issues that were raised. That reflects the concerns that people have about environmental issues.

The need for sustainability to be a key cross-cutting theme in the Programme for Government was a major concern to both the Committee and to the wider public. Many felt that that important issue needed to run through all the documents, thus integrating social, economic and environmental objectives so as to maximise gains in both the quality of life and in its well-being. Furthermore, references to sustainability in the final version of the Programme for Government have been revised to reflect its importance as a major cross-cutting theme. The funding increase for environmental services in the Budget is testimony to the priority that the Executive have given to that area.

Concerns were also raised about the need to protect the built heritage. That is of vital importance. During this year I have been able to secure additional funding towards the payment of historic building grants.

The need to examine the planning process was also an issue. Northern Ireland needs an effective Planning Service, and for that reason the Programme for Government clearly says that my Department will carry out a review of the systems for operational planning policy, development planning and development control by the end of December 2001. It is also our aim to eliminate the backlog of planning applications by December 2002.

Those are some of the targets included in my Department's public service agreement. Those agreements are a new feature of the Programme for Government. They will enable a more open approach to departmental business and enable both Members of this Assembly and the general public to see the specific actions that are proposed.

The Department of the Environment's public service agreement includes other actions and targets. I cannot mention all of them, but I shall refer to a few. I intend to proceed with steps to eliminate the backlog in the transposition of EU environmental Directives. That is necessary not only to meet European standards and requirements, but, more importantly, to protect the environment. There is also much work to be done in assisting district councils and implementing their plans for waste management.

Another area in which I take a close interest is road safety. The continuing high level of deaths and injuries on the roads is of great concern. I shall launch a new road

safety strategy shortly, but road safety is not just a matter for my Department. I look forward to receiving assistance from Roads Service, the RUC and the Department for Regional Development. We all have a responsibility to reduce the number of accidents on the road.

The Programme for Government gives us the best opportunity that we have had for many years to introduce policies and take actions that accurately reflect the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. I assure Members that my Department will play an active part in that process and that I shall work closely with all other relevant Departments to drive forward the key cross-cutting aims identified in the document.

Mr McGrady: I speak on behalf of my party and myself.

4.45 pm

In introducing the debate, the First Minister spoke of a new beginning. He also said that there was much to do to improve the programme. I hope that the great detail in the document will be followed very closely in respect of its intended delivery. However, I would also like to think that, in view of experiences gained, new emergencies and new matters arising, it would be flexible enough to take on board such new dimensions as may crop up in future.

Although the document is a *vade mecum* of politics in Northern Ireland, I would like to think that it will be subject to proper adjustment as experience is gained, and as new problems and new issues come to our notice. It is very much an excellent basis from which a new process is emerging.

It covers all possible aspects of life in Northern Ireland — economic, social and environmental — with the exception of the question of the security situation. Our communities suffer as a result of paramilitary activities, drug rings and other protection rackets. That is why I am slightly surprised by the amendment tabled by the Alliance Party, and all its references to deep divisions and inequalities. Many of the remedies suggested as being required to address those issues are security-orientated, and security matters are neither in the Assembly's remit nor in this form of devolution. However, it is to be hoped that, matters improving, they will be in future.

In response to many of the comments made by the leader of the Alliance Party, those deep divisions and inequalities in our society are best addressed by the example that we in this House, as representatives across the total spectrum of political life, give society? Our example would be the best guarantee and the best security that the divisions are healed sooner rather than later, and that the inequalities are addressed.

This society's inequalities concerning social class, gender and disabilities, among others, are very much addressed in the Programme for Government. New issues have been brought to light, examined and programmed

for. I am, therefore, a wee bit surprised. One could be forgiven for thinking that there was an element of opportunism in the tabling of such an amendment. It is a direct negative, in that it calls for the Assembly to decline the document. Perhaps its main purpose was that members of that party would have the opportunity to get in early to make speeches on the matter.

Leaving that aside for the moment, it would be very tempting to take on, as it were, all 10 Departments. However, that would be ludicrous and detrimental to other Members who wish to speak.

I would, however, like to address an issue that is mainly the concern of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I do not wish to talk about it in detail, but I do wish to talk about the theme that should come through. We have had, quite correctly, debate after debate on the whole problem of sustaining the farmer in the rural community. I have said time and time again in the House that that applies to the whole of Northern Ireland, outside one or two major conurbations. We are a rural community with a basis in the rural society. Farmers do not just produce an income. They also sustain that environment for all of us now and for posterity. We must adopt an entirely new approach to that. Although the Department in question — with all the pride we derive in that respect — is headed “Agriculture and Rural Development”, its emphasis has always been mainly on agriculture, and “Rural Development” was added on later.

I would like to think that the Department is sustaining the entire rural community. There needs to be a cross-departmental commitment, to driving forward a new concept of rural sustainability as part of our overall handling of the rural community. That would contribute to sustainable improvements in economic, environmental and social conditions, while creating new ways in which to address the shortfall in farming activity and profitability. Over the past number of years, that shortfall has been dramatic and has reduced farming activity and profitability to 75% of what it was. That profit will be further reduced as a result of the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease.

Local regeneration programmes are good and valid, and they have accomplished a great deal. It is important that the funding that was distributed last January be sustained until the delivery of the new tranche of funding if local regeneration, and the creation of jobs, is to continue. There needs to be a better concept of how to package a complete cross-departmental deal to renew and revitalise the rural communities. Rural people are less inclined to be skilled, and re-employed, than anyone else. Rural women, in particular, are less likely to find employment outside their farming communities. We have to address that problem.

New businesses are often set up, but there is a narrow-mindedness about their potential. They are directed towards local niche markets or, at best, something with a general

Northern Irish identity. Not enough is given to encourage new rural industries and innovations to look outwards to international markets, to get access to existing distribution channels and to create new ones.

On the question of sustaining the income of farmers, in particular small farmers, I have long advocated that dependence on profitability based on the food-price structure is neither the right approach nor the only one. We must embrace the concept of creating a separate income to supplement the profit gained from farming, if it is inadequate, so that the farming community can be sustained. If that is regarded as a social benefit, then so be it, but the cash provided to those people should be seen as a special form of social commitment.

The Minister dealt with the matter of rural transport in the many questions that he received and in his address on the issue. Let it suffice to say that a very limited number of areas in Northern Ireland have access to railways and very few areas have access to dual carriageways. In my constituency, there is not one single foot of dual carriageway. We need to make a major input into infrastructural improvements in the entire south-east of Ulster, west of the Bann and other areas.

It is important that the impact of the shortfall in departmental assessments over the past 30 years be studied in depth, not only in the context of the environmental and regional development issues of transport and railways, which are very obvious, but in the context of health, education and other areas.

We have an enormous deficit to make up, and we cannot afford to make up such a deficit in the near future. It will not be made up unless something dramatic is done now. It is therefore incumbent upon the Executive to pressurise the central funding authorities, which have so much largesse it is flowing over. They have so many billions in surplus that they will not be able to give it all away. They cannot give it away in this week's Budget because there is so much of it.

However, part of the reasons for that surplus is our deficit. A tremendous effort should now be made — I am sure that it is already being made. We should all support our getting a special modernisation fund that will enable roads, water, sewerage, education, health and all other services to be updated in an effort to reduce that deficit. If that does not happen, we shall be looking at Programmes for Government yearly and seeing the same shortfalls that we are starting off with today. Unless we address that huge deficit, we shall make life very difficult for ourselves.

In his introduction, the First Minister gave substantive and encouraging statistics on a range of matters, such as the fall in unemployment to almost record levels, the 31% increase in productivity and the overall economic uplift. That is all well and good, but in order to sustain it in the new competitive world we must be at the forefront of modernisation. Unless we have additional funding, we shall not be able to do that.

I jump tracks, Mr Deputy Speaker, to touch on the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. I used to criticise severely the peripatetic Education Ministers on one of my hobby horses — museums and regional strategy. Some people think that museums do not reflect our culture. Museums are the protectors of our culture, its expression and display. I hope that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will soon give us a policy that will have some funding. So far as I can see, there is not one mention of the word “museum” in the booklet. Nevertheless, museums are a fundamental cultural facility. It is not an issue that excites people and causes high blood pressure in debate, but there is a fundamental requirement for display. I have seen how exhibits, set side by side with historical facts, can overcome and explain some of the divisions referred to in the amendment. A new interpretation can heal and help divisions to diminish, if not disappear.

On education, I was disappointed that the Programme for Government uses the words “to sustain current levels”. That should not be our objective. Our objective should be to improve current levels because we keep criticising them. We may not always be able to achieve our goal, but at least let us target those levels and try to improve them. One commitment is to reduce the number of temporary classrooms in post-primary schools. However, the programme that was announced last Thursday did not materially reduce the number of temporary classrooms in post-primary schools — in fact, it hardly touched on them. In my constituency established schools are being starved of funds. However, that is a subject for detailed debate and should not be addressed today.

Where the Department of the Environment is concerned, I wish to address the issue of school buses. Surely to God, it should be Government policy that every child who pays for his or her transport can have a seat; otherwise there will be a tragic accident from which we shall have to try to learn some lessons. If we have such a tragedy, we know what the lessons will be. I ask the Minister to consider that as a matter of urgency.

Right across Northern Ireland there are gross inconsistencies in planning decisions and, indeed, within divisions of Planning Service. If the Minister is in any doubt about that — and I am sure that he is not — I could take him around any given area and show him gross inconsistencies that are not evident to the public.

For the promotion of tourism, I would like to think that at last there will be joined-up government among the rural development programme, Planning Service and the Tourist Board.

5.00 pm

At the moment, they are frustrating one another and, therefore, obstructing those who are trying to provide, albeit in a small way, the infrastructure of guest houses and other facilities. We are trying to revitalise the rural

community through alternative outlets, and one of the best ways to do that is through sustainable, new, tourist-orientated developments, which can also be enjoyed by local people.

On the subject of health, many questions are hanging and many hopes are placed on the Hayes review. Everything is predicated upon Dr Maurice Hayes’s report on acute services, so it is almost a barrier to receiving information. I hope that, in creating the Programme for Government, someone has considered the possible outcomes of the Hayes review, the review of ambulance services and — and this is away behind — the review of maternity services. We need to see how much those changes are going to cost; I do not think that the costs are taken into account in the Programme for Government. If the costs are not included, the developments will not happen, and if those do not happen, there is no point in having a review in the first place. I hope that the Department of Health will take that on board as a weighty issue.

Another area of health that gravely concerns me that has been getting more difficult over the years is the care of the elderly. Regardless of statistics from trusts and boards, the facts speak for themselves. The amount of care we provide for the elderly is grossly inadequate. We should be ashamed of ourselves, as a society, that we cannot return some measure of care. It is not very much to ask for help for perhaps an extra hour a day with lighting a fire, washing the dishes or making a bed. Given all the affluence that is coming upon us, can this society not do more to give those people more peace and stability in their declining years?

On the issue of regional development, I have already mentioned that we must calculate our infrastructure funding properly. We do not have enough money to do that. We should not pretend to ourselves that we have enough money — we do not, so we need to get it from some other source. Usually we look to Europe, but I think that that is a “well-milked cow”, if Members will forgive the expression. The obvious source of the money, which we paid for and were denied over the years, is the Treasury in London. That should be our primary target.

I am aware that I have taken more time than I should have done to address the issue, but with such a broad canvas to fill, matters must be skipped through. We have a new beginning here, as the First Minister said in his introduction. It is exciting to have this *vade mecum* of politics, which we can finger through to see where we are at any given time, in any given year. I hope that it is not only reactive to our current problems, but that it will be proactive in anticipating problems, and will be amenable and changeable enough to take on board any issues that circumstances may throw up — not least in the farming and rural communities. I support the Programme for Government, and I reject the unwarranted criticism in the amendment.

The Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I shall make a few remarks, first as Chairperson of the Committee and then as leader of my party. The main point in this draft Programme for Government which concerned my Committee, when it was committed to us for our approval, was the commitment to rural proofing all Government policy.

The Committee welcomed the principle of rural proofing, but questioned how that could work in practice. At many Committee meetings, we pressed the departmental officials to define rural proofing and to define how Departments, other than the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, would be able to conform to rural proofing.

At a meeting last Friday, officials offered us what they called a working definition of rural proofing. It contained very little indeed — it was a two-page presentation. We were as far forward, after reading the two pages, as we had ever been. At this stage, less than four weeks before the proposed start date for rural proofing, the Department of Agriculture has no real blueprint for it. That is what we have concluded. There was general information, but it did not discuss how the job was to be done.

The main proposal that the Committee saw in that piece of paper was that Departments were to be self-regulatory. There was to be no person or Committee to regulate them. I say to members of other Committees that the Agriculture Committee can only deal with matters relevant to the Department of Agriculture. We shall certainly scrutinise — as we have done heretofore — the actions of the Department of Agriculture. Other departmental Committees may not be committed to rural proofing, but if they are, they will have to play a unique role in ensuring that their respective Departments conform to rural proofing requirements.

There is little change from the draft as it first appeared. However, there were two new actions mentioned to the Committee. Members saw that the draft programme contained no action points aimed at addressing farm structure or size. Members specifically asked for a scheme to encourage our young people onto the farms. Although additional action — provided by looking into the future, and at the Department's expectations — falls well short of what the farming community needs, we at least have a sort of nod in the right direction that there may be a pension or retirement scheme.

I urge upon the Minister, and the vision group that she has set up, the need to keep young people on the farms. To do that, those who have given their lives to farming should be adequately provided for in relation to the rainy and stormy day that has indeed come to them.

The second addition is the commitment to introduce — and I know that this lies near to the heart of Mr

McGrady, who spoke immediately before me — the decommissioning scheme for fishing vessels.

There is a serious crisis in agriculture, and we pray God that it will not continue and spread as it has done in the rest of the United Kingdom, but we should also recognise the serious plight of our fishing fleet. It is as near to catastrophe as it can be. It is in grave danger of being wrecked on the rocks for ever. That is not my language; it is the language across the board of all who know anything about the fishing industry.

We entered the Common Market, as it was then called, with the highest strength that any Government or nation ever entered the Common Market. We controlled 75% of all the fishing waters around Europe. We do not control any of them today. We do not even have part of a dam that we can sail across and say belongs to us.

Our fishermen have been shut out of fishing waters and have therefore had to change their employment. They now fish for prawns instead of white fish. We are told that that will save the industry, but when our fishermen fish for prawns they scoop up the juvenile white fish, which are thrown back into the waters, dead. The very programme that was supposed to save fishing is destroying it. We have a plight and I do not see any attempt to remedy it. The fishing community is in a very sad state today.

We need to make it known that, under the decommissioning scheme, a person who has kept his boat up to standard and received grants for doing so will have to pay back every grant that he has ever received. When he pays that back, he will have nothing. Therefore, we should not say that there should be a decommissioning scheme. Those are not my words; they are the words spoken by two organisations that represent the whole fishing industry when they addressed the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on Friday.

I note that Mr McGrady is nodding his head in agreement. He knows this story better than anyone else in this House. We are in a very serious position and we need to face up to it. There is no use telling people that we have sympathy for them — we have to be practical. There is a simple remedy that could start now. That remedy is a tie-up scheme whereby boats that cannot fish now are tied up for a season and the fishermen are paid full wages so that they can keep their trained sailors or fishermen and start again when the season changes.

That seems to be the right thing to do. The European Union has a scheme — all the work is done — so why do we not have that scheme? The Scots have greater clout with the UK Government in political matters than we have, and they are now calling for the same scheme. Our only hope is that we can get in on that scheme on their skirts. If we do not, it will be curtains for the fishing community.

There is nothing else that those men can do. They cannot quit and get a job where they are. All that they will be offered in Kilkeel is breaking stones. Many of them are now doing that. They are convicts in the sad arena of their unemployment through no fault of their own. Those are matters to which we need to attend.

I want to take off my hat as Chairperson of the Committee and make some other comments. No country can achieve reasonable stability until its people trust that stability can be achieved.

5.15 pm

I am not like the leader of the Alliance Party — I have a mandate from the people. I have submitted myself repeatedly to the electorate. The House must recognise, whether it likes it or not, that the majority of the Unionist population are very unhappy — and that is a very mild term — about what is happening in our country. They do not have faith in what is going on.

There was an argument here today between Mr McCartney and Mr Mallon about what they had said. I keep abreast of what people say — any politician who does not have a good filing cabinet of what his opponents say is not fit to be a politician. The Deputy First Minister is recorded in 'The Irish Times' of 16 November 1998 as having said that

"If, by the agreed deadline of April 2000, Sinn Féin's allies in the IRA have not completed the decommissioning of their arsenals, the SDLP will remove from office those who would have so blatantly dishonoured their obligations."

I find that strange, having heard today's exchange. Unionists in Northern Ireland are not fools. They have been described as bigots and worse, but the majority of Unionists understand what is happening in this country. The First Minister made a very pleasing statement today — *[Interruption]*

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are discussing the Programme for Government. The Member is discussing matters far removed from that. Should he not be brought to order and told to discuss the Programme for Government?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that Dr Paisley will come to the main burden of his speech immediately.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is strange that the learned Gentleman should take me to task for what I am saying, when I am commenting on a speech that was made by the First Minister. He must not have heard the First Minister's speech, and there are many — *[Interruption]*

Mr A Maginness: I raise again my point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley should move to the Programme for Government.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I am talking about the Programme for Government. I am doing so in a way that it goes to the quick of the questioner. He is sore about it. I can assure

him that he will be sorer before I finish. I am sticking to the point — I am sticking to it so well that it is sticking in the Member's gullet. That is his trouble.

The Programme for Government should establish the basis for good government. The First Minister made a long speech today that had nothing to do with the programme for future Government, but he praised what he said he had already done. Mr Maginness did not get up off his backside to call the First Minister to order then, because it was well pleasing to him to hear such things.

I shall deal with the Programme for Government. The programme must rest on certain bases. First, it must rest on a basis of stability. Of course, the hon Gentleman believes that his allies in IRA/Sinn Féin can hold on to their weaponry and that we shall still have a good basis for stability. He believes that the RUC needs to be denuded and destroyed, and that then we shall have a good basis for stability. He believes many other things that I, and the people who sent me here, do not believe. He can make his own speech and defend what he believes.

Unless we have stability we cannot have a prosperous country in which our people can earn their livelihood, take their children to school, and live and grow up in a place where there is real peace. Northern Ireland is labelled peaceful, but is in fact in internecine war. The events of the past days surely send out a warning to what we may have in the future. We are now on the tomorrow of a bombing in London. Before the end of the week there may be many more acts of atrocity, and every one of them will lead to instability in the Province.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been giving you quite a lot of rope. You must realise that we are debating the Programme for Government. Please address that now.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I am setting the scene for what should be available if we are to have any government at all. If one does not have the right basis, one cannot move forward. Some people do not want to talk about those matters because they are unpleasant to them, but we had better face them. The man in the street knows that.

I shall give the House an illustration. The First Minister told us about all those things, but he missed out education completely. I wonder why. If we are going to have proper government in this country, and a role for government, we must have proper education for our children. *[Interruption]*

Ms Morrice: Integrated education.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Integrated education or whatever education you like — that is not my issue today.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley, please address your remarks through the Chair.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish you would direct Members not to talk from a

sedentary position. They should address their comments through the Chair after rising to speak in the proper way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I fully agree with what the Member says, and I ask Members to adhere to that.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Surely we should all agree that every section of the community should have the benefits of education, and that education should be fairly administered. It is not so in the Province. There are independent Christian schools, to which the Department of Education refuses to give one penny piece. That is a fact — and I happen to know the facts.

The Sinn Féin/IRA Minister recently announced how he was going to package the money for the good government that we are told we have. Every day I come to the House I pass Strandtown Primary School. I know that school well — three of my children and my good wife received their primary education there. The Minister speaks of good education and a role for the Government, but let us hear what Dr Desmond Hamilton, the principal of that school, had to say when he saw the money that is to be handed out to other schools but not to the state schools:

“We are the closest primary school to Stormont but out of our eight mobile classrooms, five are not fit for rearing chickens. They are in a deplorable condition and in urgent need of replacement.”

The state sector of education is no longer a Protestant sector. There is as much integration in state schools as there is in the so-called integrated schools.

The Minister is going to hand out £25.5 million to the Roman Catholic schools and £14.3 million to the integrated schools. The hon Lady has been crying here about integrated education. It represents only 4% of the children, yet it is going to get £14.3 million.

The state schools, which have mobile classrooms not fit for chickens, are going to get the miserable sum of £12.7 million, although they have 45% of the entire school population. Then we are told that this Government is a good Government. We are told that this is the Government that we should sponsor and help.

However, when we look at the figures, we also discover that the Member who has some connections in his previous offices with the city of Londonderry hands the vast amount of money to Roman Catholic schools in that city. Those are the facts. Even some of the Official Unionists were worried about those facts; even they got disturbed. Surely those are matters that have to do with government and with the good government of this country.

Where are the people who are all for fair play to others? I have not heard a squeak from the SDLP or the Women's Coalition about that. I have not heard a squeak from anybody but those on the Unionist side of the House about this. Why? Because an attempt is being made to paint a picture that is not one of reality.

I trust that if we get good government it will be fair government that will give to each section of the community what it deserves and is entitled to have. If things had gone the other way and a Minister had got up and given that large percentage to state education and not given as much to integrated education which got more than its fair share, there would have been an uproar in the House. However, that it is not so today. The First Minister wanted to sweep that matter under the carpet so that it might all be forgotten.

No, things are not happy in this Province. The ordinary Unionist voter understands that, and I am thankful that some day at the polls — whether in April or May or after the marching season matters not — a stop will be put to surrender concessions. The Ulster people are not going to change. They have made up their minds that the time has come for those who say they should be in Government to carry responsibility. They are not fit to be in Government if they do not.

We are reaping the sad sowing of what people hailed in this House as liberation day — a day of jubilee — but this has been a day of the forging of chains, of the breaking of oaths and of dishonesty. There has already been a sad reaping, and there will be an even sadder reaping.

5.30 pm

I wish to discuss hospitals for a moment. All Members should take a day off and visit some hospitals. If they did, they would see what the doctors, nurses, patients and the general public must cope with. They would see what distracted families must endure when they take their sick relatives to hospital for admission. They are sent away, because operations cannot be done. Some people have been sent away three times. How do they feel? Some have gone through the motions of preparing for an operation three times. On each occasion a doctor suddenly appeared and told them that the operation could not be done and that they would be called again. That has been repeated again and again.

Members should sit in waiting rooms and listen to the general public's complaints. We should listen to what the doctors say. We should speak to those hard worked nurses and attendants. Then we would realise that all is not well in the hospital system and Health Service. When doctors and specialists tell us that they leave Northern Ireland, it is time for us to abandon the programme that we think is going to save our Health Service and adopt one that really can.

We live in days in which we have large problems. Those problems will not go away unless there is dedication, hard work and a plan that at least has some hope of success. To keep pursuing a plan that has not produced the goods is folly. At the very least we must have a plan that gives us some hope at the end of a hard, rocky and mountainous road.

The First Minister was very hard on my son today when he asked questions. I have the Civic Forum's report. It is an elaborate book printed on the finest art paper, which must have cost thousands of pounds to produce. I have not seen printing like it before.

The Assembly — the elected body — cannot print its reports on solid art paper. However, the Civic Forum can. It was not dealing with a Programme for Government; it was dealing only with a response to a draft programme, and yet it requires all this expense.

At the end of the report — and I am sure the Women's Coalition will welcome it — the Civic Forum includes many lovely pages on which to make notes. Therefore, one only gets the content, but pages for your notes — all on the finest art paper. Yet the First Minister complains when a Member of the House asks questions.

Ms Morrice: I thank the Member for his point about the notes at the back of the report being handy for the Women's Coalition. We appreciate the opportunity to write, learn and tell as much as we can.

Is the Civic Forum document not proof of the valuable work that that body is doing, in that the amount of detail it went into helped our deliberations on the Programme for Government?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I have never listened to such rubbish. I was not talking about the report's contents; I was talking about the printer's work. Does the Forum's report have to be printed on the finest art paper?

I wonder whether the Member, if she is a candidate at the next election, will tell of the day she fought a lonely battle for art paper for the report of the Civic Forum.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We are getting a little far away from the Programme for Government.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: You allowed her to do it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley, we have only until 6.00 pm this evening, which is another 25 minutes or so. Will you — I am not by any means saying that you must stop — bring your remarks to a close fairly soon and allow at least one other person to speak.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I asked earlier what the time limit was for speaking and was told that there was no limit. Therefore, I can do what we do in the British House of Commons in a similar debate. We travel from Beer-sheba to Dan and from Dan to Beer-sheba, and I intend to do that. I intend to make my remarks on this Government. After all, this Government should be prepared to stand up to scrutiny.

Surely we should be allowed to debate and discuss this wonderful blueprint for future blessings on a land flowing with milk and honey. Why do you, Mr Deputy Speaker, want to stop me? You once stopped me when you wore a certain uniform — you stopped me dead in my tracks. However, I am not going to be stopped tonight; I

am going to go on. I digressed to give Ms Morrice an opportunity to defend fine art paper for the report of the Forum, but that is past and gone.

Ms Morrice: I referred to its contents.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I can assure the Member that there is no art in its contents. She should read it. She must have a poor view of art. I may not have a very high view of art, but I have some view of it, for my daughter is an artist, as the Member well knows. I say to the Member that I see no art in this document — *[Interruption]*.

I am going to go on, and I am not going to be distracted by the Women's Coalition. I have given that party enough publicity, and I want to go on.

Mr Deputy Speaker: So long as you go on, Dr Paisley, on the Programme for Government.

A Member: Which page is the Member on?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I am on pages 1 to 205. I do not know what stupidity this House can have in its membership when it actually asks me what page I am on — I have not even completed my introduction. I have no intention of saying, "Finally, brethren". The people who sit here are not my brethren, so I could not address them as such.

I was referring to the fact that you did once stop me in my tracks, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I got going again, and I am going to get going again now on this matter.

Mr McGrady said that we have one shortage, which is money, and he was absolutely right. Those things cannot be retrieved without finance. Unfortunately for us, those people who negotiated with Europe were never able to extend to us the benefits that came from Europe to the other part of this island, which got £5 million every day from European coffers. That, of course, has ceased. Anybody could work a good economy if they had £5 million put into their pocket every day. If we had had £5 million put into our pocket every day, and if that money had been well spent and invested, Ulster would be a different place to live in today.

We have to look at where we can get the money. First, charity begins at home, so there could be a pruning of over-government in Northern Ireland. There is far too much government in Northern Ireland. For instance, there are 10 Departments in the Assembly, and we need only five. We have a superabundance of Ministers, and yet when there is an agricultural crisis not one can be spared to deputise for the Minister of Agriculture when she is away.

I do not know why another Minister cannot stand in for an absent Colleague, as is done in other places. Here, Ministers cannot even cover for a Colleague who has to attend to something of vital importance. I am not criticising the Agriculture Minister for wanting to go to a meeting with the Prime Minister about the crisis; I am sure that she needed to go. However, there was no

reason why Mr Nesbitt who is, I understand, a very capable man — he thinks he is, anyway, and he seems quite happy with my eulogy — could not have made a statement. Mr Nesbitt and Mr Haughey serve in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, so why could one of them not have made a statement on agriculture? After all, they have very little to do; they do not have a portfolio.

Northern Ireland is over-governed and the time has come when the Executive need to cut out the nonsense of printing reports on art paper and reduce the amount of money that is spent. Today, I learned that the Assembly is going to enlarge its camp. It is going to lengthen its cords and strengthen its stakes. Another property will be taken over because, it is said, the Assembly does not have enough room. Where will it end?

Northern Ireland needs money. There are untapped benefits in Europe, including agrimoney that we should have had long ago. The money was not drawn down from Europe, because the Government were so ham-fisted. However, because of the foot-and-mouth plague, the Government are going to draw it down now. There are opportunities to get large sums of money from Europe that could be used in the agriculture industry if the United Kingdom Government were prepared to bring in match funding.

I met a group of men today from the abattoir and meat-processing industries. Their plants are closed down; their rate bill is £500 per day. They do not want to sack every member of staff, because, if they do so, they will put families in jeopardy. If they reopen, their whole business would be in jeopardy.

There is an opportunity to get money in Europe to help such people to stay in business until they are able to do business. Where is the compensation that we hear talked about? Others have lost out and others still will lose out. If the machinery of agriculture — Northern Ireland's largest industry — is destroyed, how will the story end? The Assembly should demand that the Government show the will to ensure that the industry is not destroyed. That responsibility rests with those in the Departments who know the story and know how much money is needed.

I agree with Mr McGrady. It is vital that the necessary money be made available to keep the industry ticking over. We hope that the industry will get back into gear, although we cannot be sure that it will. The fishing industry has the same requirements. Every possible European subsidy should be investigated. Northern Ireland deserves to have them, and they should be exploited to the hilt.

5.45 pm

Matters such as planning concern all of us. I do not know how other Members feel but I felt very sore when

I walked up a farm laneway with a man who had borne the burden and heat of the day in the farming life of our Province and he told me that he was not allowed to build a house for his daughter on any part of his land. His wife had doctors' certificates that stated that she needed her daughter to live beside her, but still they were turned down. I could spend hours bringing records to the House to show that that scenario is repeated over and over again.

That was on land near Slemish, and the planner had the cheek to tell me that there was no room for gates on the property, so a house could not be built there. I asked him where it stated in his remit that a house had to have a gate and a wall on which to hang a gate. There was a tree beside the opening and I said that the owner would attach a gate to the tree. The planner said that he would not accept that. However, he was eventually overruled and the man was able to build a house for his daughter who needed to be near her mother.

I disagree with planning like that. The people who live on the land should have the gains of the land. Planning must be in proportion to need. Where there is need in a rural district, a farmer should be entitled to planning permission. He should also be allowed to develop his land. I attended a planning appeal at which a man was told that he could build five houses on his property but that he would not get planning permission if he intended to put them up for sale. I said that it was his land and asked why, since he was in difficulty, he could not build houses and sell them. The Housing Executive then came along and built 25 houses one field away.

Mr McCarthy: Is the Member talking about Kircubbin?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: No. It was in north Antrim: dear, lovely north Antrim, far better than County Down.

That man was prohibited from building. It would have given him something for his retirement, a house for a member of his family, and he could have sold the rest. However, the Housing Executive came along and built 25 houses one field away. There is something wrong with the planning laws. I am not in favour of building houses where they ought not to be, but many houses are built in such places. Before I became a Member of Parliament I was not bothered about that, but now when I drive along the road I look at every house and I wonder how some people ever got planning permission. Members would be amazed where permissions have been granted. We produced a report that said that that matter needs to be addressed and that there must be a realistic view of planning.

If the farmers are in difficulty and if, all things being equal, they can build property and sell it, they should be encouraged to do that and get some money back from their heritage. Who could refuse that particular proposition?

Then, of course, roads need a great injection of cash — even the roads in beautiful south Down. I used to spend my holidays there, in a place called Killowen. It is a lovely place, and I go along that way whenever I am in the area, just for old times sake. However, the roads have deteriorated. If roads are not maintained they reach a state where they need a very large injection of money. There is no way that one can build a road, say that it will do, and then use it continuously. When the time comes to upgrade it there is a tremendous amount of work to do. Rural roads need to be attended to, and attended to speedily. We must have an infrastructure that is safe and that is continually being improved. That is another part of the trouble with which we need to concern ourselves.

That might bring me to page 67 of the document, but I am glad that I made a moving speech, and that I talked my opposition away. I always like to make a moving speech and get people away who will not listen to sense.

What about this whole programme? What about the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety? What about social services? Mr McGrady talked about the elderly. We need to think about the elderly. I visited a home, and the lady who lives there said to me, “I have lost my home help, I do not have her any more.” What did the home help do? She lit a fire, made a cup of tea and enquired about the lady’s health. That was all the home help did, but she was the anchor of that elderly woman’s life, and now that anchor has been removed. When I meet and talk to old people they tell me about the terrible events that are happening — burglaries, old people being raped and other tragedies. Some of them live in desperate, terrible fear.

I have been a minister of religion for more than 54 years. I have visited thousands of homes. I know what I

am talking about. The elderly deserve our best, but they are not getting it. We have a responsibility towards them.

I could go on and talk about many matters that are crying out for help, but we come back to the fact that unless we create stability, unless we create trust, unless our families can be educated in peace, unless we can get rid of those who harbour arms and use them, unless we get rid of those who cause explosions and maim and kill and destroy society we shall not be able to. We have a colossal task. Sometimes we shall despair. However, we must remember that it is not to despair that we are called into this world; it is to triumph. We can do the job if we are prepared to pay the price. I hope that this Province of ours has people who are prepared to pay that price so that we can get the job done for the better future of us all.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Dr Paisley. We have listened with great attention to your quite lengthy discourse. Unless there is Member who is prepared to speak for five minutes only, we should adjourn until tomorrow.

Dr Hendron: I wholly defend Dr Paisley in the time he took to make that fine speech, which covered many topics. Shall I, as the Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee, and other Members be allowed a similar length of time tomorrow?

Mr Deputy Speaker: We shall spend tomorrow morning debating the Programme for Government. We must wait and see how much ground we can cover in that time. Undoubtedly, you will be called to speak tomorrow. However, the next person on my list is Mr Maskey. I hope to see all of you tomorrow after prayers.

The debate stood suspended.

Adjourned at 5.57 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 6 March 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the Assembly that I am to travel tomorrow to Washington with the members of the Business Committee, who have been invited to meet with some members of the new Bush Administration, with business managers in the Congress and with others. I will therefore not be available when the Assembly sits next week.

PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government agreed by the Executive. — [*The First and Deputy First Ministers.*]

Which amendment was: Delete all after "Assembly" and add

"declines to approve the Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government because it does not properly address the deep divisions and inequalities in this society and therefore does not deliver the new beginning envisioned by the Good Friday Agreement". — [*Mr Neeson.*]

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Mallon): Mr Speaker, first of all, I wish the Business Committee and yourself a pleasant and constructive visit to Washington.

Yesterday the First Minister introduced the motion to endorse the Programme for Government agreed by the Executive and outlined its significance in relation to the new politics of the agreement. He also spoke about the valuable interaction between the Executive and the Assembly and its Committees in debating and scrutinising the programme. I want to join with him in thanking the Assembly for the very positive and constructive way in which it undertook this task and is continuing to do so in this debate.

I also add my thanks to the Civic Forum and to more than 150 outside bodies and individuals who provided comment during that consultation on the draft programme.

Finally, I wish to pay tribute to the talented and committed officials who have helped us to construct a Programme for Government from scratch, at the same time as we put our first Budget together. As a result, we now have a stronger programme, capable of making a real difference to all the people in Northern Ireland.

It will be a significant moment when the Assembly endorses the Programme for Government and takes co-ownership and co-responsibility for it. Here lies the importance of the public service agreements which are now annexed to the main programme for they are the means by which we will give a detailed account of ourselves, the means to allow the Assembly effective monitoring of the implementation of the programme.

The poet W B Yeats wrote

"In dreams begins responsibility".

The Programme for Government sets out the policies and objectives we have identified as our main priorities for the years ahead. It does so in a way links vision to practicality, setting out not just that of what we aspire to but the steps we need to take to get there.

Our vision is of a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society, firmly founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust, and the protection and vindication of human rights for all. It is a vision also based on partnership, equality and mutual respect as the

basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands. To achieve that vision requires a commitment to the prosaic but necessary pursuit of effectiveness, efficiency and economy in each Department.

After the long years of direct rule there is a new democratic energy in the Executive and the Assembly. We will take that energy and commitment into our work with individuals, communities and organisations across Northern Ireland and into discussions with our partners, be they in Dublin, London, Brussels or Washington.

The Programme for Government recognises as a starting point that, in working together to create a new future, we have to deal with the deep and painful divisions in our society. After decades of division and 30 years of conflict there is a high level of distrust between the two main traditions within our community. We must continue to develop a capacity for compromise and respect, seeking to resolve conflict and build trust. This is not an easy or short-term task, and in undertaking it, we have to give particular attention to developing a cross-departmental strategy to promote community relations.

We have decided that growing as a community should be our first priority and in the first chapter of the Programme for Government we have mapped out a wide-ranging approach, linking our policies on equality and human rights, victims, poverty, communities and housing, and community relations. There are no easy, or facile answers. We have created a wide vision. We have demonstrated the link between different programmes and policies. Members will have noted that this chapter has been carefully revised in the light of comments and further work. For example, it incorporates the proposal to establish a children's commissioner and introduces measures to ensure proper take-up of social security benefits. It adds new targets for the homeless and for grants to improve housing conditions and to promote conversion to more efficient heating.

I noted yesterday that the Alliance party seemed to disregard the fact that we have taken the theme of growing together as our starting point and that we have substantially strengthened this chapter. With regard to the Alliance Party's, recent amendment, I take a fairly sanguine view of it. In an Assembly we need parties to push us, to put us to the test, and as on this occasion, to give an airing to views that they may feel have been omitted.

I took careful note of Mr Neeson's remarks in the debate last night and appreciate the sincerity of his commitment to promoting better community relations. I also noted the seven priorities that he put to the Assembly. All of those are inherent in the Programme for Government.

I think you will find that those points are catered for, if not specifically, then generally throughout the Programme for Government. I will address one of the points he made

about hate and racism, and he cited recent events at Windsor Park. I agree with him and I know everybody in this Assembly agrees with him. I want to go on record as saying that the type of behaviour that was directed at Neil Lennon is simply intolerable. I know that I speak for the entire Assembly.

Many years ago I went to Windsor Park to see Peter McParland, who happened to be from where I live, play on the left wing for Northern Ireland. It was my first and last visit to Windsor Park. I stood on Spion Kop, and I would ask simply — what has changed? Peter McParland received exactly the same type of sectarian abuse as Neil Lennon.

Mr Boyd: Several times yesterday the Deputy Speaker referred to the hon Member for North Antrim and said that he was going wide of the mark. Is it entirely in line with the Programme for Government to talk about Windsor Park and football?

Mr Speaker: It is quite clear that the Member was referring to the reasoned amendment. I wonder if the Member heard that part of the debate, but it is clear that the Deputy First Minister referred to the reasoned amendment.

The Deputy First Minister: I thank the Member for his intervention. I simply wanted to put on the record again that all of the Assembly deplores the racial abuse of anybody within our society.

Mr Neeson also called for proofing that promotes sharing over separation. I point out to him page 195 of the Programme for Government, which deals with the obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. That includes not only obligations of equality of opportunity but also the requirement to have a regard for the desirability of better community relations.

On that basis I would ask the Alliance Party to look at their seven points again and to go back to the Programme for Government and measure them against what is included there. The Programme for Government makes clear our commitment to reducing the significant levels of deprivation, long-term unemployment and benefit dependency that exist here. We recognise the inequalities that exist in terms of poverty, health, housing, education and economic opportunity and we are determined to tackle them. We have listened carefully to responses to the Programme for Government and have made a number of improvements on equality matters. These include — and I specify a few — making further progress on implementing the disability rights task force report in order to ensure comprehensive civil rights for disabled people; committing ourselves to publishing a strategic response to the Promoting Social Inclusion report on travellers and in particular recognising the need to provide appropriate accommodation; working with the Equality Commission on community differentials and long-term unemployment; clarifying that the Single Equality Bill will, as far as practicable, harmonise our equality

laws and reflect best practise, and ensuring that New TSN action plans and departmental Equality Schemes will be implemented by ensuring that they are incorporated as integral parts of the public service agreements.

The Programme for Government now sets out more than 250 specific actions that will help us achieve our vision. The Assembly and the public wanted to see these actions more tightly specified, and we have responded by making clear what is to be achieved and by when. We have also listened and responded to many other comments. We have set out, in considerably more detail than before, the steps we will take to tackle poverty and social disadvantage.

Throughout the programme, we have highlighted the recurrent theme of commitment to sustainable development. We have responded to calls for a stronger focus on children and have made a public commitment to introduce a comprehensive strategy to address their needs.

10.45 am

We have also listened to other requests. For example, the draft Programme for Government included a commitment to tackle social security fraud, but we were reminded during the consultation that many people — especially older people — do not take up the benefits to which they are entitled. We have therefore included a commitment to carry out an assessment of the uptake of benefits, highlight potential problem areas and produce a strategy to encourage uptake. However, a strategy is not enough; we must target people who, for whatever reason, have not taken up their benefits, so that the elderly, in particular, can take advantage of what is available to them.

We have also responded to the concerns of the rural community, by making specific commitments to meet the requirements for EU recognition of our low incidence of BSE and to consider the feasibility of new entrant and retirement schemes for farmers. However, we must now give absolute priority to the difficulties facing not just farmers and the agrifood industry, but Northern Ireland as a whole, in the light of the spread of foot-and-mouth disease. As Members know, the Executive have set up a special interdepartmental committee to co-ordinate the response by Departments. The Executive will hold a series of emergency meetings until such times as the situation has been brought under control. We will also take account of the foot-and-mouth threat when we examine the budgetary situation later in the month.

Above all, however, we must ensure that there is no wide gap in Northern Ireland for illicit trading in livestock. We must get to the heart of that problem in such a way that we protect the farming community, especially from the type of activity that has contributed substantially to the introduction of foot-and-mouth to Northern Ireland. We must be utterly ruthless about that; there is no option. We must ensure that all the regulations and all the primary legislation are sufficient to give that protection.

Investing in education and skills is another priority. We have responded to calls to strengthen this section and have set out further actions, including regional targets for literacy and numeracy and for examination performance. We have also made specific commitments to improve school buildings. We have responded to calls for the removal of some of the barriers that prevent young people from staying on in education and training. We will make the curriculum more relevant and enjoyable for those over 16. We will abolish further education fees for full-time students aged 19 and over on vocational courses. In addition, we will promote greater parity between all vocational, occupational and academic qualifications.

At this stage, I will speak personally and make again the plea that the vocational element of our secondary school system be developed in such a way that the young people coming out of it — 75% of our school population — are given the vocational training that will equip them for life. There are remarkable opportunities in agriculture; many young people go straight from secondary school to run, or help run, farms. Where in our curriculum is the vocational training for them? With regard to another personal hobby horse, I would like to know where in our education system is the training that will help develop horticulture as part of our agriculture industry.

Given the potential that we have in this small area of land, it is a crying shame that 75% of our young people, many of whom come from farming communities, do not get that type of intensive vocational training, especially in horticulture, which would be of great benefit to us.

Back to the script: one of the key themes of the programme is inclusivity. Our desire to make a difference, as an Executive and an Assembly, applies universally. We want to see an improved quality of life and greater equality of opportunity for all. We know from experience that prejudice is not confined to religious sectarianism, and that ethnic and other minority groups are often victims of intolerance. That is why the Programme for Government commits us to working to reduce all forms of intolerance and to building relations within, and between, communities.

We believe that this Programme for Government demonstrates that we are a listening Executive, but we are also a prudent Executive. The Programme for Government may be visionary, but it must also be practical. All of the actions it contains have been costed. They have also been provided for in the Budget that the Assembly approved in December and in the Minister of Finance and Personnel's statement of 12 February.

We have started to work to improve our ability to assess budget priorities by reviewing the level of need and the effectiveness of current expenditure across a wide range of policies. The results of this will be fed into the framing of next year's programme and Budget. At the same time we will continue to work to improve

the public service arrangements, clarifying and developing the targets, specifying performance indicators and benchmarks and strictly monitoring progress throughout the year.

I will now turn to the importance of working together. We will achieve very little if we work individually, whether as Ministers, Departments or institutions. We will achieve much more if we can work together — across parties and Departments, with other organisations and Administrations. I would take as the theme for such an approach the four words of an insurance company's advertising slogan: "Together we are strong." The reality of our political arrangements is that together we can be even stronger than we are at present. I hope that people are not afraid of that strength, which can help to develop what we are trying to do for the people we represent.

The actions in this Programme for Government are designed to help us to make progress in the priority areas that we have identified. But we will only succeed if, in each priority area, Departments work closely together to deliver results. The old silo mentality whereby Departments concentrated on their own narrow responsibilities and did not feel that they needed to co-operate with one another, or with other bodies, is unacceptable. The public will not accept it because it does not work and because that failure means poor services and wasted resources.

Let me take the example of health: 70% of the factors that influence our health lie outside the control of the Health Service. Taking action to tackle poverty, improve housing conditions, reduce unemployment, improve the quality of our air and water and raise standards in education will together have almost as great an effect on the health of our people as the combined skills of our doctors and nurses. This highlights the importance of our plans for a cross-cutting strategy to improve public health. This is a key commitment under our priority of "Working for a Healthier People."

We will therefore develop a joined-up approach to government within the Executive's own work, with Ministers working together to develop cross-cutting policies in a much more coherent way.

The new Executive programmes are a practical means of enabling us to carry out more effective cross-cutting work. We are pleased that the concept of cross-cutting funding received strong endorsement during the consultation on the draft Programme for Government. We are currently considering the first bids from Departments and expect to take decisions on the first tranche of allocations in the coming weeks. The advice again is that if you think separately as a Department you will not fully realise those funds' potential.

I would like to refer to inclusivity in relation to the Executive rather than the community. It is a shame, and I say this with great sincerity, that one of the parties to the Executive still feels it necessary for some arcane reason to work outside the Executive's collective approach.

Mr McCartney: Does the Deputy First Minister consider it an arcane principle to refuse to work with the political representatives of terrorists determined to remain armed?

The Deputy First Minister: The term "principle" is bandied about here. I will put it very bluntly — as bluntly in the vernacular as I possibly can. Who do people believe are making the greatest contribution to the well-being and the lives of Northern Irish people as elected representatives? Those who sit in the Executive with reservations, such as the First Minister and his Colleagues? Those who sit in the Executive representing Sinn Féin who also have reservations? Those in our party who sit in the Executive and have to put up with some of the things we have to put up with? Who is making the greatest contribution? Those people or the people who exclude themselves?

Rev Dr William McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Deputy First Minister to throw down that challenge? Surely in a matter of weeks the electorate will give him his answer.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member knows well that that is not a point of order.

The Deputy First Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for clarifying what is and what is not a point of order.

I will try again to touch consciences here. *[Laughter]* The guffaws would indicate that consciences are a scarce commodity in that part of the Chamber.

I again state that the contribution made by people in the Ulster Unionist Party, with reservations, by Sinn Féin Members, who have reservations, and by ourselves, who have to live with everybody else's reservations — *[Interruption]* — will be remembered and appreciated long after the stunts of the parties making noise opposite have been forgotten.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Can you assure the House that those participating in the debate can wander as far as they wish from the subject? The learned Gentleman sitting beside the Deputy First Minister, Mr Alban Maginness, tried to limit me. It did not work, and it still sticks in his gullet.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member spoke for some 52 minutes yesterday.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I was entitled to.

Mr Speaker: Order.

I hope that in that time he was able to cover as much ground as he wished within the confines of the debate. From what I hear, the Deputy First Minister is referring to the Government. It does not seem irrelevant to the Programme for Government, which is the purpose of the debate.

The Deputy First Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your ruling.

On the Programme for Government, let me answer Dr McCrea's point. He referred to an upcoming event — and I am talking not about the Giants' next ice hockey match in the Odyssey, which is against the wishes of the Executive and the people of the North of Ireland, but about an election. *[Interruption]*.

The Member raised it. People will look at the Programme for Government as the manifesto of the Executive and the parties in it. They will measure it against the churlishness of those who refused to take part and they will make their decision.

11.00 am

We have listened and responded to the points made by the Assembly and others in finalising this Programme for Government. I have outlined some of the changes that we made. Other areas have been suggested, but it will take some time for us to consider and develop them before we can incorporate them into the programme.

We will also be looking at the lessons to be learned from this year's exercise and considering how best to engage the Assembly and external organisations in the process of rolling forward the Programme for Government. We recognise the need for a major communications exercise to inform the public about the Programme for Government, and what they can expect from it, in straight forward non-bureaucratic language.

With devolution we have an opportunity to make a real and positive difference to the lives of people here. By working together in the priority areas, we have identified the means whereby we can deliver the commitments set out in the Programme for Government — and we can achieve that goal. I commend this motion to the Assembly.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the proposed Programme for Government. However, I would like to put on record that it is ridiculous that the Programme for Government was put forward yesterday in a motion by the First Minister, whose actions have undermined one of the key priorities of the Programme — that of developing North/South relationships.

Having said that, I support the Programme for Government because it is a very important document. It is not a radical document. It is not necessarily a visionary document, but it is important nevertheless. As the Deputy First Minister said, it will be a testament to the good and important work conducted by many of the parties here. The main issue of the Programme for Government is open, effective and accountable Government. One of the headlines in the introduction of this Programme was about making a difference.

I want to talk about the public service agreements (PSAs) in general. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister have already talked about joined-up Government. These agreements are statements of the aims and objectives of the various parts of Government, together with a

statement of the resources available and the performance targets expected of Departments. Many PSAs fall far short of delivering on what they promise. It is important to remember that they are supposedly contracts with the people but, unfortunately, they often do not contain clear and measurable targets.

I accept that a great deal of work has been done in the past year, not least by the parties in the Executive who are working together, not just in running the various Departments, but in developing the Programme for Government, the setting up of the Budget, the Targeting Social Need action plans, the equality schemes, and these PSAs. However, much more work needs to be done, otherwise many of these PSAs will be long on rhetoric but short on substance.

These agreements are a vital ingredient, not only in the delivery of the Programme for Government commitments, but also in the delivery of commitments made in the Good Friday Agreement.

In the final analysis, without those types of public service agreements, we do not have any measurable outcomes by which we can judge how effective this Executive will be in the new dispensation.

I was particularly concerned yesterday — and I think that it underlined my view on this matter — by the First Minister's response to a question from Conor Murphy on the unemployment differential between Catholics and Protestants. The First Minister replied that he hoped to deal with that by creating full employment.

We all want to work towards and achieve full employment as soon as possible, but that is not the only way to resolve the problem of differentials that has plagued our society for many years. If that is the best that Mr Trimble can offer to deal with this problem, it proves that we need public service agreements, and many other provisions, tied down very tightly.

A brief example is the Department of Finance and Personnel's public service agreement. I am a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee. That public service agreement, while it includes the broad principles contained in the "Growing from the Community" section of the Programme for Government, does not link its Department's objectives to that section of the Programme for Government, so it falls short there.

Few of the public service agreements, and this has been borne out by other commentators, actually satisfy the SMART criteria, that is those targets that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound.

I support the Programme for Government, but I want to hear commitments from the Executive and the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that much more work will be done on those public service agreements. They are operational plans and the measurement by

which we will determine how effective the Programme for Government is.

The Programme for Government is a modest document, and it should not therefore be too difficult to ensure that, given the modest demands and objectives that we have set ourselves, these measures are properly tied down and time bound in a much more specific way. If this does not happen, those public service agreements will remain long on rhetoric and short on substance.

Mr Roche: I want to make some general points on the so-called Programme for Government that seem to me to be a matter of concern.

First, it is very difficult to understand how the document can contain a Programme for Government for the simple reason that, in general terms, there is no concrete analysis of the problems facing the various Departments. There is certainly no concrete assessment of the policy options that are proposed for action.

Secondly, anyone supporting this programme cannot possibly know what he or she is voting for. Let us take, for example, the crucial section on the promotion of economic growth on pages 56 and 57. Under the heading of "Actions", it refers to the achievement of annual export growth sales of manufacturing companies in Northern Ireland of 8.5% in real terms over the three-year period to 31 March 2004.

The programme also states that by March 2002 a Northern Ireland innovation strategy will be published. From 2001-02, it is proposed to stimulate an annual increase of 8% in the level of applications under the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's main research and development programmes. During that same period, the programme intends to facilitate the provision, by the private sector, of venture capital.

The programme goes on in much the same way, but what is clear from those references is that the reference to strategies is not even a reference to some thinking that is already in concrete form. In other words, those are entirely empty references to strategies that are absolutely non-existent at present. Anyone voting for this so-called Programme for Government cannot possibly know what he or she is voting for.

Thirdly, the programme is full of references, and this was reinforced by the Deputy First Minister's introduction this morning, to the jargon of human rights, social inclusion, anti-discrimination, equality and social disadvantage.

Those are laudable objectives — no one wants to live in a society where there is social disadvantage and discrimination. However, the unavoidable impression that I have is that the terminology is used to package a fundamental imbalance in the report. There is imbalance between redistribution and economic growth — wealth creation. The stress is on the redistribution aspect of economics instead of wealth creation.

If the First Minister made the point yesterday that the way to deal with the problems of inequality and social disadvantage in society is through wealth creation then I agree with him. What we have here is a stress on redistribution at the expense of wealth creation. That is exactly the same stress that existed in the United Kingdom for about fifteen years from the late 1960s to the end of the 1970s and it brought the UK economy to the point of ruin.

I have no doubt that the concrete effect of this programme will be to burden the business sector, especially the small business sector, with heavy administrative overheads and extensive anti-business monitoring by the Equality Commission.

There is a role for Government in economic development. The school of economics that I come from tends to suggest that the less involvement that the Government have in an economy the better.

However, there is a role for the Government in developing an economic infrastructure and political infrastructure. The key aspect of the economic infrastructure is transport. In Northern Ireland we have a combination of growing congestion on the roads — that is costing business an increasing amount of money in terms of time lost — with an enormous backlog of required investment in something such as the rail transport. I do not see a concrete engagement with those problems in this Programme for Government.

The other infrastructure relates to politics and law. On a global level, one of the things that is now holding back the economic development of countries such as Russia is the absence of a proper framework of law in which market based economic activity can take place.

On a local level, the town centre manager at Lisburn says that the development of a night economy is being held back because people who go out to enjoy themselves in the evening will not go near the town centre because of hooliganism and thuggery. The Executive may not be responsible for the overall security situation in Northern Ireland but law, and the upholding of law, should be central to any comprehensive Programme for Government.

Foot-and-mouth disease is currently spreading through Northern Ireland — I hope I that I do not digress, Mr Speaker. The spread of that disease is not, contrary to the Minister's statement yesterday, the responsibility of a few individuals. The problem was caused by an extensive network of smuggling that involves a deep-rooted element of criminality in this society that is organised by paramilitaries — in this case, by Republican paramilitaries.

An infrastructural issue was raised yesterday by the leader of the DUP that is crucial to the success of any Programme for Government, and it is not even mentioned in this programme. What we do have in this programme is the substitution of rhetoric for any real economic policies or engagement with the economic situation in

Northern Ireland. The feasibility of anything that could be called a programme in this document is brought into question when rhetoric is substituted for reality.

The issue of feasibility has already surfaced because there has been a climb down on proposals to impose an 8% increase in rates on businesses in Northern Ireland over a three-year period. The proposal was so economically and politically unacceptable that it had to be withdrawn. That was the first casualty of the programme.

11.15 am

The programme will hit the buffers of economic reality in Northern Ireland at a time when major sectors of our economy are facing a crisis due to the imbalance between redistribution and wealth creation and the lack of any real strategies. We have a simple verbal reference to strategies, which are at this moment non-existent.

Mr McCartney: I noted with interest that after what proved to be a bogus point of order during the Deputy First Minister's speech you ruled that references to "Government" were relevant to the process of government. It is largely to the process of government that I wish to address my remarks.

There is little point in having a Programme for Government that can only be described as aspirational. Members from both sides of the political divide have referred to it as being long on rhetoric and short on substance.

The institutions, or vehicles of government, that will deliver the programme are totally defective, devoid of democratic substance, and will in many cases encourage the lawlessness that arises from violations of the rule of law in the interests of political expediency. The Executive that will carry out this Programme for Government is fatally flawed in democratic terms.

Everyone claiming to be a democrat would accept that the fundamental principle of any democratic Government is the electorate's power, at an election, to remove a Government from office. That principle governs devolution in Scotland and Wales, where a majority, either a single party or a coalition, has the responsibility for government. If those Governments' records are inadequate or inefficient the electorate can remove them from office in an election. That basic principle is absent from the vehicle of government here — the Executive — that proposes to deliver the Programme for Government. In that fact lies the relevance of what I have to say.

If there is an election at the end of the present term, the same parties across the Nationalist/Unionist divide will be returned. Under the d'Hondt principle, the parties will appoint the same Ministers, or perhaps Ministers from the same party, regardless of how inefficiently or undemocratically their predecessors have performed. There will be an election but the electorate will be denied the fundamental right to change the Government.

What we have here posing as a democratic Executive is a monster — a political Caliban. I am not aware of any Government that claims to be democratic but which includes the political representatives of terrorists who are determined to remain armed.

I return to a matter that was raised yesterday. The Deputy First Minister referred to it today when he talked about Sinn Féin — the laudable and democratic Sinn Féin party that is participating so well in the process of government. The Deputy First Minister contrasted that participation unfavourably with the activities of the Democratic Unionist Party. He forgot, however, that in November 1998 at his party conference he quite clearly and unequivocally stated that he would give a guarantee.

That guarantee was that if, by 22 May 2000, Sinn Féin had not succeeded in ensuring that the IRA had decommissioned, he would join with others in seeing that it was excluded from any Executive. In fairness to him, I have to say that it is true that there was a corollary to that guarantee — that he would also ensure that if Unionists continued to obstruct or block the entry of Sinn Féin into the Executive he would support that party. The truth is that one half of that guarantee has been met. The Ulster Unionists, lemming like, jumped over the cliff. They jumped first and permitted Sinn Féin to be in the Executive.

Do we find that this democratic arrangement worked? Do we find that there was any honouring of the guarantee that he gave? It was a guarantee that could not be removed from the democratic table. If it was right in November 1998 to say that the representatives of a political party fronting an armed terrorist organisation should not participate in the Government unless they disarmed, it must be valid today. But what do we find? We find that this Programme for Government before us today is based on the participation of parties in the Executive who are still advocating that violence and the democratic process are equal weapons in securing their objectives. Fundamentally, a house that is built on sand — a Programme for Government that is based upon an Executive that is inherently flawed and undemocratic — cannot stand. An Executive proposing a Programme for Government, which itself offers no prospect to the electorate of judging in a subsequent election the record and stewardship of that Executive, is not democracy.

I now turn to the next aspect of this undemocratic and unprincipled arrangement to deliver this programme. Each Minister of the 10 Departments is not appointed collectively by a First Minister. If they are inefficient or negligent, there is no question of the First Minister, or even the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, being able to dismiss them. They are not his appointees. Under the d'Hondt system they are the appointees of the party that placed them there. Their first duty is not to any sense of collective responsibility in the Executive — their first duty is to deliver the objectives of the party that placed

them there and which can remove them from office or replace them with others.

Some people would say — rightly, I believe — that, far from having a Government who are subject to collective responsibility, we have 10 Departments, each governed by an independent political warlord owing no collective responsibility to the Assembly or, indeed, to the Executive. Members who spoke earlier have drawn attention to this. The Member for North Antrim, in a lengthy speech yesterday, made reference to the activities of the Minister of Education in relation to the allocation of funds. No fair-minded person looking at the apportionment of those funds among state, maintained and integrated schools could conceivably come to the conclusion that there was anything other than a heavy bias — an extraordinary bias — in favour of that section of the community which is notionally believed to be supportive of a Nationalist political philosophy or, indeed, a Republican one.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Is it not amazing that there is only one Junior Government Minister in the House today? The SDLP has on its Front Bench people who are not in the Executive. We get lectures in this House about another place. In another place the Minister would be here. The First Minister and the Second Minister come and insult the Assembly by telling us that they have a programme to get us into the land of milk and honey. Then they do not even listen to the debate.

Mr McCartney: I am grateful to the Member for his remarks. *[Interruption]*. The inane guffaws indicate the absence of any real attention to the central theme of what has been said. However, let us return to this issue of the independent warlords.

In the Department of Health there was, at a very early stage of this Executive's life, an issue relating to the paediatric unit and where it would be placed — at the City Hospital or the Royal Victoria Hospital. The Health Committee met, and I believe that a decision was made based on cross-community support. Certainly Members of the SDLP on that Committee voted in favour of the paediatric unit being placed at the City Hospital.

The matter was brought before the Assembly, and its view was similar to that of the Committee. However, because there is no collective responsibility and because Ministers can do whatever they want, the decision of the Minister was to ignore the Assembly and the Committee. She made the decision that it would be placed, surprisingly enough, in an area where she could claim it was of some benefit to the people who support her party.

We have heard much great talk from both the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister about Departments working together — all departmental rivalries must be abolished because they contribute to poor service and wasted resources. At least in those circumstances there was one central political directive, with a degree of collective responsibility, making the decision. The rivalries

— if rivalries they were — were essentially confined to officials.

There was no question of the relevant Ministers not being able to tick off their Departments. They were the people with political power. That is not so under the present arrangement. If there were inter-departmental differences and rivalries at an administrative level in the Civil Service, what have we substituted them with? We have substituted them with rivalries with much greater power and much greater decision-making capacity at the political level. Who is going to suggest that the Departments are working in harness?

Almost every day on every issue brought before the Assembly — if it is an agricultural issue, the Minister from the SDLP gives her account of the measures she is taking in relation to the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease — statements are being made by other parts of the House. The Minister, rightly or wrongly, says that they are party point-scoring activities.

The same thing happens when a Minister appointed by the DUP a statement about matters within his control, such as clearing roads after a snowstorm. We get exactly the same at a political level — attacks from Members of the SDLP and Sinn Féin.

The truth is that each of the warlords and their supporting groups, far from getting together to work together and to abolish the old rivalries, are now, at this higher level of political power, attacking each other.

11.30 am

I attribute no specific blame, for this happens on both sides of the House. It happens because there is no democracy, no collective responsibility, and no single Minister belonging to a majority party, or a coalition consisting of a majority of parties, who is responsible for sacking them.

The matter spreads even further. For example, there are Ministers who are literally doing what they want. Of course, in the interests of the communal, happy, "touchy-feely" spirit, from time to time we are given emollient doses of political ecumenism as the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister nod, wink and smile at each other across the House. Apart from the capacity of the electorate to change its Government, the second fundamental principle of government is to have a Government and a responsible Opposition — an Opposition that hopes one day to inherit the reins of government. Can that happen in this posturing Assembly or Executive? Of course it cannot happen. There is no effective Opposition in this House.

There are 91 Members holding seats for the four parties that form the Executive. In a sense, those 91 Members form the Government. They may participate to a greater or lesser degree, but they are the Government. Therefore the Opposition is notionally reduced — if my arithmetic is correct — to 17 Members. One of those is the Speaker. The Alliance Party, the PUP and the Women's

Coalition — numbering, I think, nine — are notionally in favour of the Executive and the agreement. The effective opposition consists of those who believe that they are not part of the Executive in any shape or form and who question the entire basis upon which this Assembly and its Executive — the Executive that is to deliver this Programme for Government — are established. They constitute what passes for a position. However, they will never be in a position, under the democratic principles of Government, to replace it.

The truth — if people would only acknowledge it — is that this largely aspirational Programme for Government, even though it contains many aspirations that are worthy and that any civilised democrat would hope to see discharged, has, as the hon Member for Lagan Valley pointed out, no substance. It talks about putting strategies in place for specific dates, but there is absolutely no concrete basis upon which such strategies can be justified, because they have yet to be formulated and published.

When we look at what this Executive and Assembly can do, it must be acknowledged that real powers are extremely limited. Politically, the British Government have been very skilful. They have put the Executive in the position — in truth — of having a purely administrative role. Yes, they have certain legislative powers. They can legislate for street trading, dogs and a few other things, just as the old Stormont Government could. However, what they can do in real terms, particularly on the economic front, is entirely limited by the size of the cake that is allotted. The Executive have only the job of carving up a cake — the size of which they have no control over — among a host of competing interests. And when it is not carved up very well, guess what? Central Government have interposed a buffer. The Executive and the Assembly will take all the flak for the inefficiencies and difficulties of education and housing because “It is your baby.”

Let us look at agriculture. Within the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland had the best record both for incidence of BSE and for a computerised tracing system of cattle from birth to the abattoir. It also had the largest percentage of its produce earmarked for export. It was, therefore, more acutely vulnerable to the ban on beef export to Europe than any other part of the United Kingdom. Yet the truth is that the Assembly could do absolutely nothing about it.

We have an energy problem. The cost of energy in Northern Ireland is exorbitant compared to other parts of the United Kingdom. Why is that so? It is because central Government negotiated the contracts with Northern Ireland Electricity and wanted that company to look as profitable as it could when they floated it. Therefore they had to place in the arrangement the best possible terms for the private company to make money in order to attract shareholders. As a result they entered into contracts that crucified the consumers of electricity in Northern Ireland.

However, we had an anodyne report from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment yesterday, and what did he tell us? He told us that there is no point in going to beg to the Treasury of central Government. If the Executive are worth their salt, why have they not spelt out in clear and specific terms the fact that consumers in Northern Ireland are paying well over the odds because of the incompetence, negligence and self-interest of central Government when they negotiated these contracts? Why? It is because the truth would be revealed and the Executive would be sent off with a flea in their ear and told “Get on with it. You are the Government now; you are running the place. You make whatever fist you can of the energy problem within the limits of the authority that we have devolved to you.”

Those are only some aspects that make the whole business of this Executive false and empty. Members of Sinn Féin and of the Northern Ireland Unionist Party have used the same language to describe this Programme for Government. It is big on rhetoric and small on substance. It is big on aspiration and weak on any clearly defined plan for delivering the fulfilment of those aspirations.

That is so because inherently this whole Assembly and the Executive that it forms did not arise from a political settlement that would enable a devolved Executive to govern this place in the interests of Nationalists and Unionists, and Catholics and Protestants. It was created to answer the problem of conflict resolution between the British state and armed Republicanism that threatened the economy and well-being of the British mainland.

I return to the fundamental issue of democracy. The Deputy First Minister said in November 1998 that if decommissioning did not take place he would join in removing Sinn Féin from this body.

If that is how the Deputy First Minister understood the terms of the agreement, then as Sinn Féin entered the Executive, and the second leg of that guarantee was removed — and the Unionists delivered — that still holds good today.

However, what did Members hear? They heard the Deputy First Minister laud Sinn Féin for its democratic participation and castigate the DUP for adhering to the principle of not participating with the political representatives of armed terrorists.

However, the matter goes further because the fundamental causes that may make all of those high-sounding aspirations and the Programme for Government fail are the increasing lawlessness, disregard for the rule of law and disrespect for authority that the necessity of placating and appeasing terrorism injects into the process.

All Members know — because it has been the subject of debate — that one third of motor fuel used in Northern Ireland is being smuggled through south Armagh.

However, nobody cared very much about that. So long as bombs were not going off on the United Kingdom mainland and members of the security forces were not being shot that was the price one had to pay.

An academic report from the University of Ulster — a non-party body — stated that the Government, in aid of political objectives, had violated the Mitchell principles. The report accused the Government of adopting a “Hear no evil, see no evil” attitude to paramilitary crime. It stated that if the Government had interfered and come down strongly on paramilitary crime they might have offended not only Sinn Féin but those other worthies who, though not in office, do inhabit this place — the PUP. I draw no distinction between political parties that use violence, murder and mayhem to secure their political objectives be they Irish unity or the Union.

My attention is largely directed towards Sinn Féin because its electorate entitles its representatives to places in the Government as Ministers. I have never fully understood why the major parties decided to leave the education and health ministries — which account for 70% of the annual budget — in the hands of Sinn Féin, but they did. No reason has ever been given for that except that they were difficult ministries and would give rise to problems. Neither the SDLP nor the Ulster Unionist Party laid claim to those ministries that are fundamental to the good governance of any modern state.

If the great Programme for Government is to be delivered the time has come — and it has been echoed from the most curious quarters — for the SDLP to decide if it belongs in the loop of democracy and democrats even though it disagrees with the objectives of the opposing democratic parties. It will have to decide if it is going to continue, as seems to be the case, in the loop of pan-Nationalism that includes a party not only dedicated to violence but which publicly declares its ongoing use of violence if necessary.

11.45 am

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

Much has been made of the dissident IRA. I listened to Jack Straw saying that the bomb outside the BBC would not be allowed to upset the peace process. It is intended not so much to upset the peace process as to ensure that the increasing and future demands of its alter ego — Sinn Féin/IRA — are given in to.

Until the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party decide whether they are to be the parties of the Centre, and if they are, to democratically deliver this much vaunted Programme for Government, the Executive and the Assembly will continue to be under threat from the increasing mass of ordinary democrats out there among the electorate who say that it cannot continue. If they do not, they may declare in this Programme for Government all the aspirations they seek to obtain and they may

aspire to all sorts of good things for Northern Ireland. But for as long as the basic social infrastructure is being rotted away and corrupted by violations of the rule of law in aid of political objectives, all these grandiose schemes and programmes will come to nought.

Sir Reg Empey: I want to deal in part with chapter 5 of the Programme for Government — “Securing a Competitive Economy” — but I am unable to resist the temptation to make some observations on one or two of the remarks made by the last two Members who spoke. This is an aspirational document. The word “aspirational” is almost being treated as abusive, but it is aspirational because it covers a period of time in the future. It sets out objectives and targets, but as it deals with the future it is, by definition, aspirational. There is nothing wrong with that. It is essential that one aspires to some objective and has a target to aim for, but it is not an empty programme because it has targets, and a significant effort has been made by all Departments to match resources to those targets.

The most comprehensive effort ever has been mounted in Northern Ireland with the Civil Service to put the programme together. A lot of work went into it. There is no doubt that we will not reach all our targets and that we may have difficulties. Who could have predicted with great accuracy the devastation of the potential crisis that we are facing today? That will have implications for the programme. It will have implications for targets in my Department and for targets in other Departments. Nevertheless, that does not in any sense remove the legitimacy of an Administration’s putting forward a programme to the Assembly which has an aspirational dimension.

I listened to the hon Member for North Down Mr McCartney describe, in his terms, how he considered the Administration functioned or did not function. He referred to independent warlords. It is true to say that there is no shortage of independent warlords in this country, and it may be true to say that some people would like their Departments to be freer to do their own thing. That is only a natural human reaction. But what he describes in his remarks is so far removed from reality that it is a breathtaking lack of appreciation of how an Administration actually functions. It does not function and it cannot function in the way that he describes.

Most actions that Departments take involve expenditure. By definition the sums of money that are allocated, ultimately decided here, go through a filtering process. There is the role of the Department of Finance and Personnel, which is not inconsiderable, and the idea that people just come along with programmes and put them on the table without any reference to the Executive, other parties, Committees or other Members is simply nonsense. It does not work like that.

The hon Member must be simply desperate when he gets up in the morning because he has two choices.

Does he come here to this undemocratic and hopeless organisation, which cannot do this, that or the other, or does he go to London, sit there and attempt to legislate for the whole of the United Kingdom. What does he do in the mornings? It must be a terrible dilemma.

The interesting thing is that he and lots of other people end up here. They do not end up over there. If this place is so terrible, corrupt and corrupting, how is it that people cannot keep away from it? They love it, and they love to be here. They love to be heard here, and they love to be seen to be here. They love to be on Committees, and they love to chair them. They love to influence events. Nobody forces them to be here. Nobody is arm-locking them to be in here. You could not keep them out because they love it, and they are comfortable here. They have alternatives to being here, but the fact is that they are here. *[Interruption]*.

Mr McCartney: Did you ever stand for Westminster, Reg?

Sir Reg Empey: Yes. OK, there is nothing wrong. They can look smart.

Some people say that this place is so terrible and that the agreement under which the Assembly was established is so awful. Why then do people go to so much trouble to be here and participate? Surely, if this is the case, the place to be is in the Mother of Parliaments where the power and the money come from. The reality is that people know that what makes things work are the administrative aspects of activities.

The Member for North Down Mr McCartney indicated that the bulk of what is done here is administrative. It is, but that is what government is primarily about within a legislative framework. That is what people want, by and large. While they may differ dramatically over the internal structures of what is here and why it is here, there is an overwhelming desire among the population for a greater ability to administer themselves. That is happening throughout the United Kingdom, and it is also a Europe-wide phenomenon. The Europe of the regions is growing and is not a new thing. Most successful European economies and countries have federal structures, and administrative power is devolved to the regions.

Similarly, we were once unique in the United Kingdom, but we are no longer unique. Indeed, we are fitting in more appropriately with the pattern of events. I readily accept that anybody can see why this Administration is constructed totally differently.

The implication was that events could not influence or change this Government. Remember where we have come from. Were we able to change the Government over the past 30 years? The major parties did not even organise here, and one can only be part of changing a Government when one can vote for the parties that can make it up. We have not had that opportunity during

direct rule, so it is an academic argument to say that you cannot change the Government.

What influences events is how people are able to administer laws, how they allocate and administer the Budget, and how things are actually done at ground level. Until now, the criticism has always been that we needed accountable democracy — we could not leave everything to the civil servants. Now we are being told that they have even greater power than they ever had. That is rubbish. Anyone with any experience of dealing with it would know that.

So far as the economic side is concerned, I listened to the hon Member for Lagan Valley when he was making his remarks, and I know he has many years' experience in this field. He referred to the issue of redistribution versus economic growth, and I understand his argument. However, the ability to redistribute wealth is primarily done through the mechanisms of taxation and at the points at which taxpayers' money is allocated. The Member knows that we are administering and distributing taxpayers' money as a result of votes in Parliament.

He is correct in that the primary function must be to encourage the creation of wealth, because from that will flow the resources and revenues that will improve the economic activity of our community and ensure our companies can trade in a business-friendly environment. I ask the Member to consider whether it is true to say that expenditure incurred trying to influence companies by decision-making is wrong in itself. I shall give the Member an example.

You may recall the announcement made last year by an American corporation that it was going to establish a major facility in North Belfast. I refer to TeleTech in Duncairn Gardens. It would not have been possible for that decision to have been made if we had not, in the first place, erected —

Mr McCartney: Bribery.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member can be smug and smart about this matter, but we are trying to have a positive impact on people's lives.

I make no secret about it — and I will tell the Member that so long as I have anything to do with it, I will try to do more of it. Had we had not anticipated the needs of companies such as TeleTech and erected, at risk, the plant now being occupied by this corporation, it clearly would not have been in that area of significant deprivation. It would not have provided an anchor in an area that has seen some of the worst atrocities in this community, and it is my belief that it is a constructive part of what we can do here; to influence these decisions and ensure that there is a regeneration of economic activity in areas that have been blighted hitherto —

Mr A Maginness: I endorse what the Minister said about North Belfast and the siting of TeleTech in

Duncairn Gardens. It is an area where both communities have suffered from tremendous unemployment. I want to pay tribute to the Minister for bringing that particular firm to North Belfast and providing employment opportunities for people who, hitherto, have been deprived of them. It is deplorable that Mr McCartney seeks to criticise the Minister about doing something very positive for the people of North Belfast.

12.00

Sir Reg Empey: The reality is that Members will ask for my help. Although there is a degree to which I can help, by providing incentives in some cases, I cannot direct. Companies will make their own decisions at the end of the day, and that is right and proper. Nowadays, companies will not invest at the point of a gun — in the sense that a state organisation could force a private company, particularly an international corporation, to establish its facility in any particular area. That does not work.

Mr McCartney: Does the Minister agree that many companies attracted to Northern Ireland by incentives — under the Assembly and during direct rule — came here for a short time and then departed? Was De Lorean, which operated on that principle, not the classic example of disastrous state intervention?

Sir Reg Empey: With the greatest respect to the hon Member, De Lorean was as he called it, “a classic case.” There are not too many cases like De Lorean. The fact was that the shadow of De Lorean —

Mr McCartney: What about Enkalon and Goodyear?

Sir Reg Empey: They were different. They were here for many years. *[Interruption]*. If I may be given an opportunity to speak without interruption, Mr Speaker. I never interrupted the Member —

Mr McCartney: You have nothing to say.

Sir Reg Empey: If I have nothing to say, why do you ask me questions?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is quite impossible for someone to make a speech when they are constantly being interrupted by a Member from a sedentary position.

Sir Reg Empey: He can interrupt if he likes. However, he has asked a question and I am attempting to respond to it. I did not have to give way in the first place.

I am saying to the Member that De Lorean was used as a type of weapon. It cast a shadow over the Northern Ireland Civil Service for over 20 years. However, it was a project that almost succeeded. I visited the factory and saw what was achieved in 18 months. They began with a greenfield site and ended up by manufacturing one of the most sophisticated vehicles of its time — with a workforce that had no previous experience of such activity. It was an enormous achievement by the people involved. However, a number of crooks got in on the

act, and, coinciding as it did with huge interest rate rises in the United States, a downturn resulted — *[Interruption]*.

I did not interrupt anybody. I was asked the question on an intervention. Either Members want to listen or they do not. That is a matter for Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If people wish to make points, would they please ask to make an intervention, rather than having this attempt at a dialogue between the Minister and the Member in the sedentary position.

Sir Reg Empey: De Lorean was a risk that many Members would have been prepared to take based on the information available at the time.

Members will urge public resources to be invested in other projects — even current projects — and not only in industrial development. Such projects may appear on paper to be much riskier than the De Lorean project did at the time, yet people will still look for support for them. Members must be careful. If we adopt the hard line, laissez-faire attitude across the board, there will be some squealing in this Chamber.

We all want to do the best for our areas. We could apply the same slide rule to some of the aforementioned projects across the board, or we could simply say that it is tough if factories in Newtownards or North Down want to close. Do we want to adopt that policy? Of course not. However, we have perhaps lived under that policy for many years before devolution.

I readily accept that there are enormous deficiencies in this institution, but I believe that most Members are committed to improving the life and the lot of the people whom they represent. However difficult things might be, Members will use this mechanism to achieve that. That is why there is such a high level of participation in the Assembly. That is why everybody, with the exception of a handful of people, is represented on Committees and why those entitled to be in the Executive are in it. Basically, everyone accepts and acknowledges that they can do more for their constituents in the institution — all parts of it — than they can out of it. They are right: prior to devolution, only 2.5% of public expenditure in Northern Ireland was under the control of locally elected representatives, namely the local authorities. That was a negligible amount. Now, we can redirect our resources to make a difference.

The Member for Lagan Valley Mr Roche made the correct point that the creation of wealth is the key to the economic future of any society. He was therefore right to say that there was a limit to what any Government could do and that that limit must be understood. We must make this an attractive place for investment. I am conscious of problems with red tape and of the fact that we should not impose a greater burden than is absolutely necessary on any company that establishes itself here. Such a burden takes up time, and time is money.

Companies do not want more form-filling than they can handle. We have examined closely every piece of paper issued to establish whether it is necessary, why it is being issued and, if it must be issued, that the information in it is as succinct and as simple as possible. Every section of my Department is doing that, checking out the need for every piece of paper and seeing whether the issues can be dealt with in some other way. We are dealing with the build-up of primary and secondary legislation over many decades in some cases.

Mr Roche was right to draw attention to that point, in the context of the commitments on rights and other issues in the Programme for Government. However, the matter must be put in the European context; the European Convention is now part of national law. That in itself will have implications — indeed, it has already. I understand the substance of Mr Roche's argument, and, from my limited resources, I will attempt to do something practical about it.

It is essential that we ensure, as far as any Administration can, that we create circumstances in which businesses can grow. That means putting in the necessary infrastructures, including telecoms and broadband technology. We must ensure that the issues relating to our energy market are settled as well as possible. Yesterday, in response to my statement, the Member for North Down Mr McCartney suggested that the only solution was to ask the Treasury for the money and that if the Treasury did not give it to us, that would be our tough luck. Regardless of whether we have devolution or not, if the Treasury is not going to give us the money, it is not going to give us the money. That does not mean, however, that nothing can be done about it. We can do nothing without devolution, but with devolution we can do something about it, and I intend to.

Yesterday, we set out a plan to address the issues. Those are exceptionally difficult, but what is the alternative? There is a counsel of despair that we should simply accept fate and do nothing. I do not accept at all that there is nothing that we can do.

I do not accept that we have to agree to the status quo and say that we can do nothing about the situation, claiming that it is our fate. We have to make our own living in the world and create circumstances where we, as a community, can put our resources into those matters that we believe should be prioritised. Therefore, on the economic side, we need to have the right infrastructure and as competitive a situation as possible for our companies. Energy is one aspect of that, but we need to put it into context. For many companies, energy consumption can be as little as 1% of total turnover. It varies from place to place. It is not necessarily a knock-out blow, but in some industries energy consumption is much higher.

Of course, we can have a direct impact on the plight of the domestic consumer, and it is my intention to try to

do so. We set out a plan with targets yesterday in the Programme for Government. We cannot say for certain that we are going to meet these targets, but if we do not have them and are not genuinely attempting to improve the lot of the people whom we represent, then what are we here for? I realise the huge problems that we face, but I do not understand how people can be so depressing. Having that depressing attitude does not provide any solution or idea of how to improve the situation — it just tells one how awful things are.

Reference was made to lawlessness and disrespect for authority. Those matters are not confined to Northern Ireland. If one were to walk through the backstreets of Manchester or any of the big cities in England or some of the major estates in Scotland, Dublin or anywhere else in western Europe, one would know something about disrespect for authority. There were pictures on television last night of French farms being barricaded by the gendarmerie to stop people getting onto them. Even under those circumstances the citizens were pushing past to try to get lambs for their religious festival.

The death rates in some of the cities in the rest of the UK are infinitely higher than anything we face here. While the situation here is far from perfect, we must look at the circumstances that we have come from. Can no one see the graph? Members will recall vividly that, in the past, when we turned on the television we would see the latest bomb and bits of people being swept into bags. No one wants to see that again. We are not in that situation now, thank God. There are still some people out there who want us to be in that position.

We have experienced the best period of economic growth in the Province for many years. This is happening because investors have greater confidence. For instance, we have seen huge increases in house prices. That is a double-edged sword for many people, but it is symptomatic of the fact that people have greater confidence in the economic situation.

There are many shortcomings and shortfalls, but I still believe that it is necessary to examine the past and establish the trends. Instead of focusing exclusively on what is wrong, let us try to fix what we have and improve the situation to get to where we want to be. That is not something that can be done quickly, especially after the past 30 years. But we have an opportunity now. Look at the unemployment rates. Fifteen years ago — a relatively short time — unemployment rates were 16%, 17% and 18% on average. In many areas, the rates were well above that — 25%, and nearly 30%, in one or two difficult cases. In some estates, one would have been looking at 60%, 70% and 80%. We have not totally escaped from all of that, but we are now in the mid-range of unemployment in the UK. That is unprecedented — Northern Ireland always had the highest rate. We are 2.5 points below the European Union average in unemployment.

We are going out and trying to attract back people who left this Province because we need them to work. While business people make up their own minds about investment and so on, they do listen and make their judgement on what they believe to be the realities. Those realities include the fact that we are able to show that we have a good, strong supply of labour coming forward in demographic terms. It is the best in these islands and, indeed, among the best in western Europe. That is going to be a very great asset in the years to come.

The biggest problem that many economies face — the Japanese economy is a classic example — is that they are going to run out of people because their populations have negative growth. Germany is going to experience major shortages. Its short-term solution is to try to bring in people from Third-World countries to bridge the gap. In so doing, they are denuding those countries of the very people whom they need to get themselves on track. Members know the social and political implications in Europe of bringing in large numbers of people. We have already seen it. We have a wonderful asset in our people.

12.15 pm

Related to that, the second thing that we have is one of the lowest turnover rates for people in work. We are able to offer to companies worldwide a good quality supply of labour and the lowest turnover rates of labour — attrition rates, as they are called. Those are huge assets we can exploit. We do not have the natural resources of many other countries. Our major natural resource is our people. If we focus on that, it will stand us in good stead.

Mr McCartney referred to the lack of co-operation between Departments. I totally refute that. With regard to the economic areas, there is greater co-operation today than at any time in the past 30 years. It is taking place because the Ministers in those Departments insist upon it. There are joint meetings and committees. It is happening and we are co-ordinating. It is one of the objectives in this document, and it is a first attempt at it. With the public service agreements attached to it, I believe that we have the right basic infrastructure and geometry to create that co-ordination. I do not detect in any sense the rivalries or disparate activity that the Member referred to. I see a totally different picture, and I believe very strongly that whatever flaws there may be in the Programme for Government — and there may well be some — the main thrust is positive. It is a genuine attempt — the first major attempt — to co-ordinate the activities of many different Departments. It is also an attempt to co-ordinate the financial side. Without that the targets and aspirations are meaningless. We should now concentrate on seeing whether we can implement and improve it. It is that, I believe, which will stand us in good stead in the years ahead.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. There have been some welcome additional commitments, particularly in relation to equality. The commitment to bring forward, consult on and implement cross-departmental policies to tackle gender inequalities is long overdue.

It is clear that the equality Bill will harmonise anti-discrimination law as far as is practicable, and the welcome extension into new categories, including age and sexual orientation, will make it inclusive for the whole population. It is also clear that the promotion of best practice is intrinsic in the new Bill.

The Finance and Personnel Minister yesterday announced that the review of the Northern Ireland Civil Service to address the under-representation of many groups, in particular women and Catholics, is under way. This should be applauded.

On the subject of disability, I refer to the pledge to make further progress on the recommendations from the disability rights taskforce. This is an important step in the drive to promote the social inclusion of those with disabilities. Over the past couple of weeks three Departments and the Assembly have collectively addressed the needs of these people, and this is a very positive move. The promise of an additional 35,000 consultations for people suffering from mental illness, and the review of the current legislation relating to mental health — an area that has been left lagging for a long time — will go some way towards redressing the balance in favour of those suffering from mental illness.

I ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that, in future budgets, funds for mental health are ring-fenced in future budgets. This would ensure that trusts, such as Down Lisburn Trust, will not lose £100,000 of their mental health budgets to acute hospitals without knowing when that money will be returned.

I will now turn to education. The structure of our education system must be radically changed to meet the needs of society today and the anticipated needs of the future. The commitment to reviewing school funding to ensure that there is equality between school types and better targeting of social and educational need is an important step towards building equality of opportunity into the system.

While I welcome the Minister's recent announcement on the capital spend allocation, this is still not enough to tackle the dreadful state of the schools estate. Too many schools still depend on sub-standard mobile accommodation, which has a detrimental effect on both pupils and staff. Just yesterday afternoon, Dr Paisley stated that Strandtown Primary School has eight mobile classrooms, five of which he said were "not fit to rear chickens in". Let me tell him that we have 2,500 mobile classrooms throughout our schools in Northern Ireland. A few weeks

ago I asked the Minister of Education to prioritise the issue of mobile accommodation. I hope that his decision last week to award capital funding to two schools in the secondary sector — one of which has 40 mobile classrooms and the other 34 — is an indication of his commitment to addressing the problem of mobile accommodation.

The problem of underachievement should also be prioritised, and I welcome the Minister's commitment to doing this. I also welcome the funding he has allocated to allow children with special needs to enter mainstream education without having to face the terrible bureaucracy that existed in the past. The problem for many children with disabilities is not just one of physical access to schools. There needs to be better access to the services inside these schools once a child has passed the front door.

I hope that there will soon be a positive outcome from the many other initiatives and vital programmes in our education system, including proposals in the Programme for Government, to tackle bullying and behavioural problems. We must ensure that we target social need and direct funding towards areas where those children who are in greatest need will benefit. New targeting social need must be people-based rather than geography-based, as it is at present.

The commitment to developing proposals and having consultation on the establishment of a commissioner for children, and a new strategy for children demonstrates the high priority that the Government give to the protection of young people in Northern Ireland.

Gaps in the legislation still need to be dealt with to ensure that our young people are protected. This is particularly the case with the new Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Bill that will come before the House later in the year.

On the commitment to realising the full potential for enhanced co-operation through the North/South Ministerial Council, I hope that there will be improved communication between the two jurisdictions resulting in a more co-ordinated approach to vetting people who work with our vulnerable young people. It is essential to protect our young people's human rights and promote their right to equality. Moreover, the children's commissioner must be independent of the Government and have a broad mandate to protect children's interest and, thus, to make them more visible in the Government's policy structures. That means looking at how the Government can best take into account issues affecting our young people.

We now have the opportunity to widen consultation with children across the whole of Northern Ireland. Choice and involving children in decisions that affect them are important for promoting social inclusion as well as for showing them that their opinions and beliefs are respected and will be considered at the planning stage of Government policy and legislation. That will give them parity of esteem.

The Administration are already equality proofing all their 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 that. All those actions will contribute to addressing the concern that the Government's structures are failing children and will ensure that their needs are met through those structures. They will permit children's active and responsible participation, giving them the opportunity to achieve their full potential. The effect would be to integrate child-friendly policies and cross-departmental co-ordination on issues that affect children.

The assurance of an improvement in the information available on religion, human rights, disability, sexual orientation and age will guarantee equality proofing for all future policies. Measures designed to tackle the social exclusion of travellers should result in improved standards in the provision of suitable accommodation for that group. Transferring responsibility for serviced sites for travellers to the Housing Executive should give them uniform treatment and empower them to have an input into the provision of better accommodation. The opportunity exists to establish a true inter-agency approach to the disadvantages suffered by the travelling community.

The issue of care for the elderly was debated at length last week and proved the need for funding to be given to those people who are greatly disadvantaged. That pensioners will benefit from free travel and public transport from October this year has to be seen as a favourable development. However, the issue of pensions has to be looked into as inequalities exist in the system, particularly for women who stayed at home to raise their families or who worked part-time. Many women, particularly those who are carers, find that they are not entitled to a full pension because they made a reduced number of national insurance contributions. They therefore have to depend on income support, which places many of them in the poverty trap.

I welcome the commitment to accountability of each Department for implementing the equality schemes and targeting social need (TSN) action plans, which form an integral part of each public service agreement. That is essential because of the proposal to link funding to achieving agreed output and outcomes.

In the main, the new commitments made in the Programme for Government demonstrate a willingness by the Executive to promote actively a socially inclusive society in Northern Ireland and to reflect that inclusiveness in future policy making. I therefore support the motion.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before the start of business I have some bad news for those Members who have not yet spoken, and it is delivered through the usual channels, as they say in another place. Speeches will be limited to seven minutes, as there are around 35 people on the list. The winding-up speech for the amendment by the Alliance Party will be given 10 minutes. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will have 20 minutes. I am sorry about this, but if we are to get through the business, including two Bills later, Members will have to limit their rhetorical prowess.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): I will endeavour to be as brief as possible. There were some directly political comments made this morning by the Member for East Belfast, Sir Reg Empey, in relation to the Programme for Government. There was what I can only describe as the old chestnut of accusation that those of us who are in the Assembly, despite our opposition to the system, were operating the system and sitting on Committees. As this has been the case for a couple of years, I want to state that we have never shied away and we will not shy away from participation in any system, however indirect or faulty it might be. We will not negate the DUP's position by running away from our mandate. Our mandate at the election was to stand for election to the Assembly, to take our seats, to argue our case, to fight our corner and to represent those who voted for us. That was clear in the manifesto, and it is something that we intend to continue — without apology to anyone.

Turning to some departmental issues, the Programme for Government and the public service agreements are supposed to open every aspect of the work of each Department to the Assembly's scrutiny. In the process of preparing documents I have consulted with the Committee for Regional Development and I wish to record my appreciation for the assistance that the Committee has given to me. As this process matures, the Committee's views and advice will increasingly inform my approach.

On the actual content of the Programme for Government, one welcome change from the draft document that appeared last October is the commitment to introduce free travel on public transport for older people by October 2001. This has been one of my priorities ever since I became Minister for Regional Development. I am pleased that we have secured agreement to fund this centrally so that it can be introduced throughout Northern Ireland.

It would be appropriate, at this stage, to pay tribute to my predecessor, Peter Robinson, who did a lot of the groundwork on the initiative; the important role played by district councils throughout the country; all those who strongly advocated the scheme and also the supportive

role of the Committee for Regional Development. This initiative provides an essential link to family, friends and the wider community. It is only right that those who contributed much to our society during their working lives can continue to feel part of it by making full use of public transport.

The announcement yesterday by my Colleague and me that we were taking the issue into the legal domain will, I am sure, mean its being highlighted in the other place in the coming weeks.

Several targets contained in the Programme for Government, particularly for roads and transport, reflect the fact that I have inherited a situation caused by decades of underinvestment in the essential infrastructure of the region. Members will be very familiar by now: an additional £2 billion is needed over the next ten years to develop and maintain roads and transport. The Water Service asset management plan, which is nearing completion, is likely to require at least £3 billion over the next 20 years.

The Programme for Government states

"The provision of infrastructure and major public services such as public transport, roads, water and sewerage, are essential for the social and economic well being of the region."

It is therefore imperative that there be further investment in those areas. If we consider the level of investment in transportation throughout the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, we can see that the economic competitiveness of Northern Ireland is dependent on a quantum leap in investment levels.

The proposals for capital road schemes set out in the Programme for Government for the next calendar year are relatively modest. However, we are still preparing schemes that we hope to take forward in 2002-03 and beyond, so it is imperative that we secure the additional resources required for those years. By their nature, capital infrastructure programmes require secure and adequate forward provision to enable sensible programming. I also intend to increase the road structural maintenance programme, with the objective of conforming to good practice treatment frequencies in due course. Again, in the absence of sufficient resources, that is still some time away.

The welcome additions for railways will enable us to agree a meaningful strategy for tackling the underinvestment in rail services in Northern Ireland with the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company. Consolidating the existing network will provide a platform for the future development of the railways in the context of the ten-year regional transportation strategy. Likewise, the introduction of a new fully integrated ticketing system for Translink will play a key role. Members will note the modest targets that have been set for investment in buses and coaches. That matter will have to be considered further.

I hope that the private sector will contribute substantially to our attempts to address those major funding deficiencies

not only through injections of money, but by introducing innovative solutions to our problems and using its expertise. We will pursue public-private partnerships wherever value-for-money solutions can be found, and in a style and manner with which the people of Northern Ireland are comfortable. Indeed, over the next few days, I am scheduled to visit the United States to gain first-hand experience of private sector involvement in major physical infrastructure projects.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister, for sticking to your time in such a disciplined way.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness):

A LeasChann Comhairle, I want to focus on the education elements of the Programme. In the draft Programme, I set out an agenda for schools and the youth service, concentrating on the key pressures and priorities. I was immensely heartened to find that the responses to the consultations on the draft programme revealed broad consensus, both on the key issues that should be addressed and on the central role of the education service in creating and sustaining a stable and healthy society, a view that I have publicly stated as often as possible.

Many respondents expressed the view that the material in section 4.2 of the programme should be expanded to illustrate not only the importance of investing in education, but the broader strategic context in which the actions proposed in that section are set.

I have been very happy to accept that advice, and the revised draft reflects a significant expansion of the references to education, through the inclusion of a range of strategic targets in the text of section 4 and by the inclusion of the detailed supplementary material in my Department's public service agreement in annex B.

As I said in a previous debate on the draft Programme for Government, we have a successful education system here, which has shown steady progress over recent years, and I think we can be justifiably proud of it. We know that our success as an economy depends on the quality of our education and training systems. Education serves more than the needs of the economy, it is the key to the personal development of individuals and to the building of a stable, tolerant and fair society, based on mutual respect and a recognition of diversity. There is therefore no alternative to continuing and growing investment in education, if we want to improve the quality of our peoples' lives and make the most of the skills and talents of all our young people.

The education agenda set out in the Programme for Government is based on the key principles of equality, excellence, accessibility and choice, and it addresses a wide range of issues. It includes taking forward the review of our whole post-primary structure and commits us to a thorough and comprehensive review of the way in which we fund schools to ensure equity of treatment, regardless of sector and geographical location. It carries

forward the fundamental review of the curriculum, to ensure that we meet the needs of our young people for a renewed and more relevant curriculum. It commits us to a comprehensive programme to equip all our schools with up-to-date information and communication technology (ICT) provision and all our teachers with the skills they need to use that resource properly in the classroom. It commits us to providing one year of pre-school education for all those children whose parents wish it. It includes a range of measures, both in schools and outside them, to support young people who are having difficulty or who are becoming alienated from the mainstream education system and to promote a safe and secure learning environment for our young people. It gives a commitment to renewing the youth service and helping it to extend access particularly among the most disadvantaged, and it commits us to addressing the backlog of high priority maintenance work and the terrible problem of the huge numbers of old and unsuitable temporary classrooms.

Yesterday, Dr Ian Paisley suggested that there was an imbalance in my capital build programme announced last week. I have consistently said that the schools capital build programme is determined on the basis of educational needs. To suggest, as Dr Paisley appears to, that the capital programme should be determined on the basis of school sector rather than on educational needs is, in effect, suggesting that I should discriminate against schools with greater educational needs. That is unacceptable.

The make-up of this year's conventional school building programme, for Mr Paisley's information, was as follows: six Catholic maintained school projects, costing £25.7 million; 10 controlled school projects, costing £24.1 million; and one grant-maintained integrated school, costing £12.5 million.

In addition, I announced provision for up to eight secondary school projects with a total capital value of some £70 million, under public-private partnerships, and they are grouped under three separate contracting authorities. The trustees of the Catholic maintained schools in the Derry diocese received £34 million, and the North Eastern Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board received some £36 million between them.

Dr Paisley is a bit long in the tooth for me to propose that he needs to return to school, but I am prepared to speak with my colleague, Minister Sean Farren, to establish if it is possible to find a place for Dr Paisley in further education, where he might yet learn to count.

One other vital commitment in the programme, is to the development of a real partnership for change. The education system is a complex network of agencies, and to improve the quality of what we offer our young people we need the commitment of everybody working in the education system. Hence the further commitment to

provide an opportunity for all the education partners — the statutory bodies, the voluntary sector, the teachers unions and the teacher training institutions — to have a role and a say in developing education policy through the creation of an education partnership.

Finally, I will continue to take forward co-operation on the agreed North/South agenda in education which includes a range of vital issues such as educational under-achievement, special educational needs, teacher qualifications, and school, youth and teacher exchanges, all of which hold out the prospect of real and practical gains for our young people no matter which part of this island they live on.

2.15 pm

A LeasCheann Comhairle, this is a challenging and exciting programme for our education system and it will require a major investment in our schools and youth service. Consultations have shown that the programme has the commitment of all major interests in society, and I commend it gladly to the Assembly and the wider community.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I am pleased to have the opportunity to outline my Department's contribution to the Programme for Government. However, I will first address two comments that were made about my Department in the debate yesterday.

Mr Neeson commented that the problem of sectarianism in sport is not mentioned in the Programme for Government. I refer him to the answer I gave to Mr McCarthy on 4 December 2000:

"Although not specifically mentioned in the Programme for Government, the issue of sectarianism in sport is included under the Safe Sports Grounds scheme, which is referred to in section 2.4.2 of the Programme for Government. It is a condition of the grant under this scheme that successful applicants will be required to formulate an equity statement for inclusion in the organisation's constitution memorandum and articles of association, highlighting practical measures for how family, disability and sectarian issues will be addressed."

Mr McGrady has commented on the lack of mention of museums in the programme. I refer Mr McGrady to section 5.3.3, which states that we will

"develop a programme to enhance the range and quality of culture and leisure facilities, including our maritime and industrial heritage".

In addition, in my Department's corporate strategy there is a specific action to develop a policy and strategy for local museums and heritage in Northern Ireland in partnership with the Northern Ireland Museums Council. My Department has 27 actions in the document out of a total of 250, all in priority areas.

As a new Department, our most pressing task, apart from tackling the years of underfunding for culture, arts and sports, has been to produce a plan for the future. We have published our first corporate strategy, and it sets out several key goals that underpin the priorities in the

programme. These goals include increased participation in culture, arts and leisure and promoting and celebrating cultural diversity and individual creativity.

It is also vital that we contribute to the positive image of Northern Ireland at home and abroad and that we preserve and make available our cultural and information resources to the widest possible audience. My Department therefore has developed a daunting set of tasks, and we are totally committed to ensuring that we play a full part in making a real difference to everyone. For example, we want to make sure that art galleries, museums and sporting venues are accessible to everyone. It is vital to the well-being of society that as many people as possible can participate in sporting activities.

Creativity must be developed and encouraged for the benefit of the individual and, ultimately, the economy of Northern Ireland. We will help to secure a competitive economy — one of the programme's priorities — by, for example, developing and promoting inland waterways and fisheries.

It is important that Northern Ireland is seen in the best light on the world's stage, and we are committed to securing high-profile, international events. We have made a bid to be the 2008 City of Culture.

To achieve all our goals we will need to work closely with all the Northern Ireland Departments, the voluntary and community sectors and all the non-departmental and North/South bodies that provide culture, arts and leisure services.

I have been heartened by the welcome that our actions have received from the bodies that responded to the draft Programme for Government. Those included the Chinese Welfare Association, the Civic Forum, Queen's University, the Heritage and Lottery Fund and the Training for Women Network Ltd. Those are just a few of the sources of widespread support that I have received, and it is very encouraging as we move forward in the devolved Administration.

As the locally elected representatives of the people, we know what the problems are and what issues really matter to the people of Northern Ireland. The Programme for Government highlights the priority issues that we need to tackle and outlines what we intend to do in the immediate future to solve those problems.

My Department will play its role fully. I urge Members to approve the Executive's first Programme for Government. It is an excellent example of what can be achieved through working together. I am convinced that the programme, when fully implemented, will make a real difference to people's lives. Everyone in Northern Ireland will benefit, and I commend the programme to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The time limit for speeches is now seven minutes.

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): The programme captures all the major themes that will be at the centre of my Department's efforts to make a real difference in higher and further education, training and employment. On the training and employment side, the programme is set in a social, economic and political context that is positive and full of hope and new opportunities.

The more stable political environment has brought significant benefits such as increased investment and higher levels of economic growth. The effects of that growth pertinent to my Department's responsibility can be seen in the increased demand for skills in the new high-tech industries as well as in more traditional areas such as hospitality and catering.

Participation in higher and further education and training has increased due to the recent developments. Northern Ireland's universities and colleges are expanding and are developing plans to meet the increased need. A wider range of full-time and part-time courses is on offer to students. Courses range from basic pre-vocational to degree standard — from pre-employment to post-experience levels.

In further education, the merger of the Training and Employment Agency's training centre network with the further education colleges has provided a new focus for the delivery of vocational training. Lifelong learning has been encouraged by the establishment of the University for Industry through its learn direct services.

Key skill areas such as electronic engineering, software and telecommunications have been identified for particular expansion, and additional places are being made available in colleges and universities to meet current and expected demand.

New two-year foundation degrees — the design of which will involve universities, colleges and employers — will be introduced on a pilot basis in the next academic year.

To ensure that our research capacity is expanded to support, and indeed point the way forward for, social and economic development, additional funding is being provided through programmes such as the innovative support programme for university research.

My Department is conscious of the need to target resources to meet particular social needs. Its policies, as the programme reflects, take full account of those who are deficient in basic skills and the needs of those who could participate in post school education but who do not do so because of social and personal disadvantage.

Too many people have low literacy and numeracy skills. Too many young people leave education poorly equipped for work in a modern economy despite the high levels of achievement by others.

Too many people are unemployed on a long-term basis. Community differentials remain the same: Catholic men are still over represented in the numbers of long-term unemployed. Too many of our women remain economically inactive in comparison with other regions. If appropriate training and further education opportunities were available many would be anxious to return to the labour market.

These are some of the challenges my Department and I hope to address, both in the areas of the Programme for Government that are our responsibility and in those where we share responsibility with other Departments, such as the Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

A particular focus of my Department's work in the coming year will be on widening access to higher and further education. In doing so we will be offering increased support to those from low-income backgrounds. To this end, I will soon bring to the Executive and Assembly detailed proposals on improved student support arrangements, including enhanced fee remission, means-tested, non-repayable access bursaries and additional places in higher and further education. I will also invest in the development of staff, particularly in further education, to improve standards and student achievement.

I will also take further steps to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland have access to continuing education and training, including up-to-date learning resources to maintain and enhance their employability in a fast-changing world. My Department will provide individual learning accounts to help pay fees for part-time students in certain higher and further education vocational courses. Reducing long-term unemployment is fundamental to tackling a whole range of social and economic problems. By March 2002, my Department will have piloted a new training programme for adults with basic literacy and numeracy problems. From April next, we will introduce an enhanced version of the New Deal 25 plus programme, which contains specific Northern Ireland provision allowing early entry to the scheme for those returning to the labour market. In addition, I will chair an inter-departmental task force on employability and the long-term unemployed, the first meeting of which is to take place next week. This will focus on factors that make people employable; not just on knowledge, skills and motivation, but on considerations such as childcare, and the readiness and ability to travel to find work.

I draw particular attention to some of my Department's targets and actions. They include providing an additional 850 domestic higher education places; increasing further education enrolments; developing the adult literacy and numeracy programme; activating 17,000 individual learning accounts, of which 10,000 have already been activated; and piloting the ONE initiative on joined-up welfare and employment services in association with other Government Departments.

In conclusion, I thank the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure for all its hard work and input into the formulation of the Programme for Government in my areas of responsibility.

Sean Neeson raised a question yesterday, and I would just like to answer it. He referred to the absence of a reference to the exchange programme for lecturers on a North/South basis. The absence is explained by the fact that we are now working on a more comprehensive package of activities in further and higher education on a North/South basis, details of which I will bring forward. Those details will include reference to programmes where lecturers from colleges on both sides of the border will be able to participate.

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow):

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on my Department's actions as set out in the Programme for Government. As I have said before, meeting social and economic need lies at the core of my Department's programme. Since the draft programme was presented to the Assembly in October, we have sought to strengthen our commitments in the document to New TSN, as well as our commitments to ensuring that public sector resources are used for the purposes intended. I am grateful to all those, including the Committee for Social Development, who contributed to the consultation process.

Within the priority of "Growing as a Community", my Department will work for the renewal of the most disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods, bringing new life into our towns and cities. We will identify and target those areas that have become the most deprived. We will develop and deliver a co-ordinated response to the needs of those areas on a partnership basis with the community and private sectors. We will also work to improve the physical environment of towns and cities, with a particular focus on urban centres. While a number of existing urban programmes will continue, I intend to bring forward new strategies in support of urban regeneration. These will range from an overarching policy context to particular geographical strategies, relevant European programmes, and policy aimed at reinvigorating town centres. The primary focus will, however, be on disadvantaged urban communities through the establishment of neighbourhood regeneration task forces.

2.30 pm

My Department recognises the strength and vibrancy of our voluntary and community sectors and the contribution they make to social and economic regeneration. Action will be taken to develop community infrastructure in the most disadvantaged areas and where it is weakest.

Specific actions as set out in the Programme for Government will ensure that not only are there specific, targeted programmes of support, but that there are coherent strategies within the Government for the support and funding of the voluntary and community sectors.

In contributing to the priority of securing a competitive economy, Members will be aware that I have introduced new legislation on street trading. This piece of legislation has passed its Final Stage in the Assembly and is awaiting Royal Assent.

I now turn to housing. I have said before, and I make no apology for saying it again, that a decent home is a basic right rather than a privilege. My housing priorities within the Programme for Government recognise that poor housing is a contributory factor to social exclusion, and seek to address the problem across a wide front.

I aim to reduce unfitness levels, especially in rural areas where the problem is greatest. We have a good track record in reducing housing unfitness, and it is important that this continues. I intend to ensure that existing public sector housing is properly maintained. Housing is a valuable asset, and we have a responsibility to ensure that we look after it and do not allow it to deteriorate through neglect or inadequate funding.

I will also ensure that sufficient new houses are built for those unable to buy and that their rents remain affordable. High rents can prove a disincentive for those who want to work, and, as I have done this year, we must keep rent increases to an absolute minimum.

I aim to examine new ways of enabling those on low incomes to get access to the housing market — particularly for first-time buyers. House prices in Northern Ireland have increased dramatically, and I am concerned about the problem that this creates for young people and those who want to move from rented accommodation to owner occupation.

I intend to ensure that the new build programme makes proper provision for special needs accommodation to cater for those vulnerable people who need assistance. I also plan to introduce a new Housing Bill, which will bring forward a raft of new measures designed to improve housing in Northern Ireland. By way of an example, included in this Bill will be new provisions for dealing with anti-social behaviour, measures that I am sure all Members will welcome.

It is estimated that approximately 600 people die each year in Northern Ireland because they live in cold, badly insulated houses, which they cannot afford to heat properly. That this should be happening in the twenty-first century is a total scandal. Therefore I am proposing to tackle this problem by introducing a new energy efficiency scheme. This will come into operation on 1 April and will provide a comprehensive range of energy-efficiency measures to the most vulnerable groups in society from 1 July onwards.

My objective for housing is therefore to ensure that affordable, fit, energy-efficient homes are available to those on low incomes. My Department and its agencies touch the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland at one

stage or another — from childhood, through our working lifetimes and in times of sickness and retirement.

The social security, child support and pension schemes bring support to every individual and household in Northern Ireland at some stage and play a key role in our drive to combat poverty, particularly where it affects children.

We often provide the sole means of support for some of the most vulnerable groups of people. Therefore, it is essential that we seek to identify and meet the needs of our customers, continuously improving all we do. It is also essential that they understand their rights; have ready information about the various services provided; know how to get access to them and where to go or whom to speak to when they need assistance; are given the right support at the right time; and that they are treated with understanding and dignity.

Poverty has blighted the lives of individuals and whole communities for too long. As a key part of my Department's plans in the Programme for Government, we are committed to tackling both its causes and its effects.

Our policies and actions will focus on activities to address deprivation. We will ensure that housing and social security work alongside education and training programmes to ensure that actions to meet the needs of our community are properly co-ordinated. We will work with others in the Government to combat unemployment and differentials in employment rates.

I am committed to the modernisation of social welfare, promoting social inclusion, tackling fraud and error and putting work at the heart of the system. I also fully recognise our responsibility to ensure a reasonable standard of living for those who cannot support themselves. My Department and I are committed to providing a fair system of financial help for those in need.

We will work to modernise the delivery of social security benefits and provide a high quality, social security service as set out in my Department's public service agreements.

We will seek to improve the service given to all customers by implementing a programme of action plans to improve the delivery of social security services to the disabled, older people, people with literacy problems, people living in isolated and deprived areas, those affected by the conflict and those belonging to minority ethnic groups. We will start to bring the tax and benefit systems together for pensioners and provide more help for those who need it.

In conclusion, my Department will work vigorously to tackle disadvantage where it occurs and to strengthen communities, particularly for those living in the most disadvantaged and deprived areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Again, that was an admirably timed script.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is cóir go dtugtar áit do thosaíocht 'Ag Obair ar mhaithe le Pobal níos Sláintiúla' sa Chlár do Rialtas ós cuspóir don Chlár "dífear a dhéanamh" trí "oibriú i gcomhar le chéile trasna Ranna agus gníomhaireachtaí." Caithfidimid oibriú i gcomhar le chéile má táimid le dul i ngleic le cuid de na fadhbanna sláinte is daingne atá againn agus le deis a thabhairt do chách togha na sláinte a bheith acu. B'fhéidir gurb eol do Chomhaltaí go bhfuil mé i mo chathaoirleach ar an Ghrúpa Aireachta ar an tSláinte Phoiblí. Cuimsíonn seo iomlán na Ranna, nó tá foinsí na sláinte agus an leasa sóisialta, eacnamaíoch agus timpeallachtach chomh maith le pearsanta agus cliniciúil.

Ar ndóigh, ní ar chúram an Rialtais amháin atá seo: tá fachtóirí pearsanta tábhachtacha sa siúl, agus caithfidimid ár ndícheall a dhéanamh ar fud na sochaí. Aithníonn 'Ag Infheistiú don tSláinte', ar toradh é ar chomhchainteanna an Ghrúpa Aireachta, go bhfuil teorainn ar an mhéid a thig le gníomhaireachtaí poiblí a dhéanamh agus guíonn sé ar chách oibriú ar son na tosaíochta seo. Caithfidh an cur chuige bheith cuimsitheach má tá le héirí leis ár gcaighdeáin sláinte agus leasa a ardú go dtí sin ár gcomharsan Eorpach.

It is particularly fitting that the priority of 'Working for a Healthier People' should find a place in the Programme for Government because the programme's purpose is to make a difference by working together across Departments and agencies. It is essential that we work together if we are to tackle some of the most deep-seated health problems and give everyone a fair chance of better health. Members may know that I chair the ministerial group on public health. This comprises all Departments because the upstream sources of health and well-being are social, economic and environmental, as well personal and clinical.

Of course, it is not just a matter for the Government to deal with. There are important personal factors at work. We must also mobilise efforts across the whole of society. 'Investing for Health' — the product of the ministerial group's joint deliberations — recognises that there are limitations to what public agencies can do and calls on everyone to work to make this a priority. This approach must be inclusive if it is to succeed and bring our standards of health and well-being up to those of our European neighbours.

Until the consultation on 'Investing for Health' is complete, the Programme for Government cannot offer detailed, measurable targets for improving health and well-being. There are other aspects of my Department's contribution to the programme, in particular, the public service agreement (PSA), that require development. Some of these are partly technical — for example, the desirability of having milestones for some of the more distant targets. In some cases, such as the reduction in waiting lists, we have been able to set meaningful, intermediate targets. I would also like to see a greater

emphasis on the output rather than the input of each investment.

The Programme for Government and the PSA aim to explain how health and social services will provide better and more accessible care over the next three years. The commitments that we are now entering into take account of the numerous suggestions received since we began to draft our contribution.

As we all know, the clinical dimension of health and social care costs a lot of money. I inherited a health and personal social services budget of £2 billion, but that has not been adequate to deliver the kind of effective and accessible service that we wish for the public. Mr McGrady asked about the costing of developments that would follow the reviews of the ambulance and maternity services in Belfast and especially the review of acute hospitals. The key point is that all the commitments in the Programme for Government and the public service agreement have been costed to the best of our ability. We have given undertakings only where we feel that it is possible to deliver.

In fact, the outcome of the acute hospitals review is a good example of that. The target is to develop a fully articulated implementation plan by December 2002. The target date was carefully chosen. It reflects not only the time required to examine the review's recommendations, assess its quality impact, consult and draw up a rigorous business case, but also the fact that the 2002 spending review will give us the opportunity to bid for the necessary funds.

The same applies to the Ambulance Service, where it is the Health Department's commitment to begin the implementation of an investment programme targeted initially at essential fleet replacement by the autumn. The health budget allows for that. However, the full implementation of the review's recommendations will be dependent on more money's being available.

Health and personal social services are contending with the legacy of years of underfunding, and those inherited problems will not be solved at a stroke. It was due to the scale of those difficulties that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's spending review bids amounted to £274 million, a sum that represented a realistic assessment of what would be needed to meet next year's challenges. Even though the budget addition of £161 million is a lot of money, it will not enable the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to match the radical programme for action that is, for instance, set out in the public service agreement for the NHS in England.

In allocating the budget my priority was the maintenance next year of this year's level of service. Having done so I am left with £41 million and some difficult choices. In deciding where to allocate the money I have listened to the views of representatives from the wider

health and social services bodies, members of the public, representatives from community and voluntary groups, public representatives and, in particular, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. There is more to be done, and more resources are required.

Many Members share the view that the Health Service here is underfunded given its needs. I agree that unless the Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety receives more money through the Barnett formula it will be difficult to generate the sort of improvements that the health and personal social services and the public are crying out for.

Mr McGrady and Dr Paisley criticised the level of community care provision. I have stated publicly that community care has been underfunded, and that continues to create difficulties. However, it is hoped that the allocations for next year and the targets in the Programme for Government will make some improvements.

Robert McCartney asked about my decision on maternity services. In making that decision my sole focus was on the welfare of women, including mothers, and babies. I well understand the importance of getting that decision right. I refer the Member to my remarks in the House on 30 January.

Patricia Lewsley asked about child protection and co-operation with the Department of Health and Children. Some of the work being done in that regard will be done on the North/South Ministerial Council in which we work with our colleagues in education. It is important that nothing interferes with the activity of the North/South Ministerial Council or its work.

The new social care council to be established in October will, for the first time, regulate the strong social care workforce. It will also help to achieve the child protection aims of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Close: The problem that the Alliance Party has with the Programme for Government lies not so much with what it says but rather with what it does not say. In many respects the Programme for Government suffers from one large capital sin — the sin of omission.

It is essential that any programme, structure or plan is based on a solid foundation. It must have that strength and demonstrate that strength. If the foundation to that structure, plan or programme is weak, that weakness will permeate throughout it and weaken its implementation and application.

The Alliance Party is a fervent supporter of the Good Friday Agreement. It believes in devolution and its members were delighted to share in the joy of the many people in Northern Ireland who voted by an overwhelming majority in support of it.

The Alliance Party wants to see the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. That can only be done

by a firm, strong and cohesive Executive whose leadership permeates the Assembly. The people of Northern Ireland voted for a new beginning. They wanted to see change.

They wanted to see changes in health, education, infrastructure and in how farmers are treated, et cetera. However, more fundamentally than that the people wanted to see changes in society.

2.45 pm

This is a divided society. The people did not want a change that simply plastered over those divisions, but one that dealt with them at root and branch. They wanted to see an end to tribalism. They wanted to see an end to sectarianism, to bigotry and to the hatred that has riven this society. They wanted an end to the violence, the bombing, the destruction, the gangsterism and the thuggery. Do they have that? They wanted to see the new beginning, and they wanted to see the new day dawning. They wanted to see action taken to eradicate the ills of the past.

The people have been disappointed. They do not see this operating through their Executive. People tell me that they are getting a bad example from their Executive, because they are still riven by this tribalism. The Executive, to a large degree, are still putting party before country. They are fighting the battles of yesterday rather than acting as a cohesive group to try to eradicate the problems of Northern Ireland, namely sectarianism and tribalism. The parties in the Executive, with one exception, promised to work in good faith to resolve their political difficulties, but all we see is bad faith and political point scoring. That bad example rubs off onto the Floor of the House, and it also rubs off onto society in general, which the Executive claim to lead.

The Programme for Government does very little to try to deal with the real problems, because they are rooted in the Executive. In many respects the parties in the Executive have a vested interest in maintaining that type of tribalism. To attempt, Pilate-like, to wash our hands of those real problems which confront society and say that they are security-orientated is to try to bury one's head in the sand. We must confront these problems and deal with them. The Executive should take the lead in that.

The political parties make up the Executive have a duty to resolve the policing issue. They have a duty to resolve the arms issue. They have a duty to demonstrate their preparedness to move forward that extra inch, that extra centimetre, to enable us to have the new beginning that the people seek. It appears that some, if not all, the parties in the Executive are prepared to sacrifice all that is in the Programme for Government rather than move another inch. As for the other party that is not in the Executive, or that is in the Executive but wants to remain semi-detached —

Rev Dr William McCrea: Make up your mind.

Mr Close: My mind is made up; my mind is crystal clear.

The party to my left claims all the advantages of having Ministers. In fact, just a few minutes ago they were pronouncing what they were doing with their respective portfolios, but at the same time they act like the real Judases in betraying their fellow Members of the Executive —

Rev Dr William McCrea: Settle yourself. Calm yourself down.

Mr Close: I am not angry. I am glad that the Member prefers a lower tone.

At every turn they betray their fellow Members. Are they Judases, or are they Januses? They look both ways at the same time. They want to claim the benefits but deny any part of it. This is extremely strange, but it is also rubbing off onto this society.

This society must deal with the tribalism. Is there anything in the Programme for Government that deals with the plastering of our kerb stones and our gable walls with sectarian murals? Is there anything about the roadsides being painted red, white and blue or green, white and gold? Is there anything about flags flying with disrespect to both the Union Jack and the tricolour? Where does the Programme for Government deal with that? The Executive omit to include these issues in the Programme for Government, because they cannot deal with them. That very tribalism rives the Executive — that is the fundamental flaw.

Ms McWilliams: I have some concern about today's debate on the Programme for Government. I am amazed to find that the Ministers are making statements at this stage. When the draft programme was introduced, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister could have introduced some of these points on behalf of all of the Executive and left more time for Members to debate today what is or is not in this programme. Having said that, and in relation to the three themes of justice, inclusion and cohesion, it would be good if politicians and parties in Government could lead from the front — I concur with the Member from the Alliance Party, Mr Close, on that.

I do not think that it is enough, in the Programme for Government, to ask trade unions, employers and schools to combat sectarianism and challenge exclusion if they do not see that example being set by the Government. It is disappointing to see that, to date, they have not pulled together in a cohesive and inclusive fashion.

On that point, is it the intention of the Executive to make a submission on the Bill of Rights consultation based on the principles of justice, inclusion and cohesion, because the current Programme for Government does not cover that point?

I have some reservations about the Deputy First Minister's comments this morning on his reservations about everybody else's reservations. I would like to see what he intends to do in relation to the principle that was applied when people signed the agreement. I believe that authorship is ownership, and that principle, to date, has fallen apart.

I welcome the programme's objectives, although I find that the delivery mechanisms need much greater clarification. It is not enough for us to read that the Government will attempt to progressively eliminate the backlog of EC Directives to be implemented, or, indeed, the backlog of planning applications. I note that a date has been set for planning applications of 2002, but that is cold comfort for those who are waiting to hear the outcome of many of these planning applications. However, I suggest to the Government that it is illegal to make such a statement — that they will work to eliminate the backlog of EC Directives to be implemented. It is a statutory obligation to implement EC Directives, not to work progressively to eliminate any backlog.

I am concerned about the compartmentalised approach to some of the policy issues in this document. There has been a missed opportunity here to have a regional anti-poverty strategy. Perhaps the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will respond by saying that the entire programme is an anti-poverty strategy. However, here was an occasion where we in Northern Ireland could have highlighted how far behind we have fallen in issues such as illiteracy and other issues of social exclusion, such as basic education principles and child poverty.

I have asked the Minister for Social Development if he knows how many children are living below the poverty line in Northern Ireland, and his answer was that he does not. We do not have the basic research data to combat some of these poverty issues, yet we have that information in respect of Scotland, England and Wales. How can we base a Programme for Government on something for which we have no data? We do not know what we are trying to challenge and combat in the future?

Because of the lack of resources, too many of our policy initiatives and pieces of legislation have had to focus on child protection rather than on the prevention of many of the problems that we should have been dealing with. All of that could have been incorporated into a Government strategy on anti-poverty.

I also have concerns about the number of strategies. I hope that we meet our deadlines, but I wonder what will happen if the public service agreement deadlines are not met. I know that we will not meet the December deadline on the 10 new beds for adolescent and mental healthcare. With the best will in the world, the Minister will not meet that deadline, because the nurses have not been trained and there are no places in which to put

those beds. That is just one example of a target that will not be met. I could mention more, but I do not have enough time.

Will there be sanctions, or do the Government intend to have an annual review? Will they be honest enough to return in a year's time and say that they have had to tear up some of the strategies, as happened with the health strategy for 1997-2002? The Minister was honest enough to say that that was no longer relevant. Will the Government come back next year and tell us that they have not been able to meet the targets and let us know what they intend to do to address that inadequacy?

I am still concerned about the private finance initiatives. When we debated the draft Programme, I asked whether it was the intention of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to seek private finance if they did not have the resources in house. If that is the case, it is only fair that the Assembly should have an honest and transparent answer. Which initiatives will be sponsored by private finance? What are the dates of those initiatives? I hope that we never again have the Audit Office reporting that £450,000 went down the drain because a project went out to tender for private finance, even though planning permission had not been sought.

It is time that we had decent policy outcomes, timetables and targets that we can debate properly. We have fallen far short of that. I am pleased to see that, since the draft programme was published, there are initiatives such as the Civil Service review of senior positions and legislation on disability and housing. I would like to have seen the resources for those initiatives; they were not in any Budget figures that I saw. I would like to see how much money it will take to produce those Bills.

I am still concerned about one principle that we fought for in the Belfast Agreement — the advancement of women in public life. I see no resources attached to that and every Department continues to pay lip-service to it. People in Northern Ireland should be able to share in some of the fruits of our move from conflict to democracy. I commend the Government for their attempt to produce our first Programme for Government, although it falls far short of the principles set out in its introduction.

Mr Gallagher: I support the Programme for Government, but I draw Members' attention to some important issues that are either not included or are not specifically referred to.

I welcome the grants that will be made available for 7,500 houses in the next year. However, there is no indication from the Department for Social Development or the Minister that anything will be done about the invidious use of closing orders. I have asked for that issue to be tackled before. Closing orders are part of a petty exercise engaged in by the Housing Executive when some applicants apply for replacement grants. People are informed that their application has been

refused and that they are barred from reapplying. Then they are informed that they are occupying their home illegally, even though the situation has come about through no fault of their own.

3.00 pm

This is an absurdity, especially in a county such as Fermanagh, where there is a 17.5% housing unfitness rate. I call on the Minister for that Department to tackle this serious issue rather than to shy away from it and to have all cases affected by closing orders reviewed. If the Minister does not do this, I will expect the Executive to take overall responsibility and do something about it. In this paper they tell us

“We will work to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to access decent, affordable housing in the tenure of their choice”.

That aim, worthy as it is, will not be realised for those people unless and until the closing orders are urgently reviewed.

I want to move on to the subject of the Department of Education. The Executive expressed the sentiment that they aim to promote the concept of citizenship amongst children and young people, yet under the Department of Education's public service agreement, there is little indication as to how this will be achieved. There has been much discussion about how knowledge and skills are to be imparted to our young people, however there has been little mention about how the important values in education are to be transmitted. The promotion of citizenship is — as the Executive claim — a worthy ideal, especially for this society, which is emerging from a conflict situation into a stable and peaceful one. The promotion of citizenship amongst our young people will be essential if peace is to become firmly embedded in this society. We all yearn for a just, cohesive and inclusive society, but for this to be realised, there will have to be a great deal of work done on a long-term basis. Nevertheless, all children need to be prepared for it from an early age.

Education must play a central role in the concept of citizenship if our young people are to develop their capacity to be active citizens and participators in society throughout their lives. Therefore, a firm commitment in the Programme for Government is needed by the Department responsible to introducing education for citizenship as a compulsory part of the curriculum in all of our schools.

The instability that dogged this society for far too long produced an environment where human rights on all sides were constantly violated. In future, we hope that we will resolve our differences through democratic means. However, if democracy is to be real and meaningful for society in the future, our education system should lead the way in educating our children about their rights, their responsibilities and the rights of others. So far, the curriculum has been underpinned by values through the delivery of cross-curricular themes and programmes of

study. We must now place values such as equality, justice and human rights at the centre of the curriculum. That is the best way to strengthen the capacity for all of our citizens to resolve conflicts in the future by democratic means. This will ensure that a just and peaceful society, for which we all yearn, becomes a reality.

Regarding the issue of jobs, I welcome the measures aimed at improving local businesses and attracting inward investment. One measure to achieve economic improvement in the more deprived areas could be the decentralisation of government jobs. I am glad to see that this is now recognised in the Programme for Government, and I hope that that initiative will progress. I look forward to the day when a constituency such as Fermanagh and South Tyrone will benefit from the decentralization of Civil Service jobs.

That constituency and others have been affected by the differences between sterling and the Irish punt. It is one of those that will be hardest hit if the Chancellor of the Exchequer's aggregate tax is implemented after 2002. One thousand jobs in that sector will be threatened, and there is concern in the quarrying industry. Everyone in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency and beyond — and, I am sure, everyone here — will want the Executive to mount a strenuous effort to resist the implementation of the aggregate tax in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee (Dr Birnie): I want to use my ration, as it were, of seven minutes to concentrate on the public service agreements (PSAs) and to welcome those as an attempt to make Government more measurable. The Civic Forum commended that aim in its recent report on the Programme for Government.

My welcome is qualified by four points. The first relates to my own Committee's response to the PSAs in the area of the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment. We were pleased to see that in most cases the Department incorporated some of our concerns. Those perhaps were not so much to do with the content of the PSAs, but rather with the clarity of their presentation.

A second point relates to the number of PSAs, and particularly PSA targets, in the programme. There is a fine balance here — on one hand there is a need to avoid having too many targets, and on the other, there is a risk of having too few for good government. It is of note that when PSAs were introduced in Whitehall there were some 600 targets. In 2000 that number was reduced to only 200. It is perhaps significant that in the Programme for Government there are 249. Are we going over the top in respect of numerical targets?

A third point is the crucial question of the level at which those targets are set. Once again there is a basic dilemma. It might be possible to set them far too high;

in other words, at an unrealistic level. That would be a case of putting the Government on the track of “mission impossible”. Let me illustrate this point by one historical example, concerning someone who perhaps would not be much loved in some quarters of this House. In 1963 no less a person than Terence O’Neill stated that he thought that in 46 years Northern Ireland would achieve the same level of economic output and social standard of living as Great Britain; in other words, that that would be achieved by the year 2009. That is only eight years away, and currently our level of gross domestic product per capita is only approximately 80% of the UK average. The recent Strategy 2010 document sets a target of 90% for the year 2010. Most experts feel that that level is unrealistically high. There is a sense that the target set by O’Neill in the 1960s was far too high.

However, if targets are set at too low a level, we are in danger of becoming complacent. We might fall into the same trap that affected planning in the old Soviet Union. Under Stalin’s five-year plans targets were often set in such a way that the goals had already been achieved. There was a very good reason for that. The labour camps in Siberia, or perhaps worse, threatened those perceived as failures. However, I really doubt if our two junior Ministers are the Berias of this Executive. Time will tell.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member agree that under the Belfast Agreement the labour camps have all been closed down, so we cannot have any?

Dr Birnie: That was a very amusing comment, as always, from Mr Wilson.

Time will tell if the levels at which the PSAs have been set are correct. That would be easier to judge if the document contained more information about the UK average performance and, indeed, what was happening in the rest of the world. In some respects this is an insular document. We are not being told what is going on in other parts of the UK, the European Union or the United States.

I am pleased that the document puts emphasis on cross-cutting at its heart. That is very valuable. As time is short I will give one example. I would like to see more on the crucial issue of research and development. We have already had speeches about how we must grow our economy. Ultimately, we must create resources rather than run to the Treasury in London, constantly appealing for more money.

I would like to see a target in either section, or in both, relating to the Departments of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment and Enterprise, Trade and Investment, on raising the percentage level of research and development relative to the gross domestic product. That was focused on in a recent Northern Ireland Economic Council report.

I am attempting to bring some constructive criticism to the matter so I am supporting the motion and rejecting the amendment. The PSA concept is good even if, inevitably, it has been somewhat flawed in its first application in the Province.

Let me respond to Dr Paisley’s criticism of the quality of paper in the document. As a teacher, I noted that sometimes it was the weakest students who put the greatest care into the quality of their presentation, to cover up poor content. If it is so in this case, that is a good sign, not a bad one.

I commend some of the targets mentioned earlier — raising school standards, pushing Northern Ireland ahead in e-commerce, and reducing the terrible toll of casualties on our roads.

To sum up, the Programme for Government is not a return to the past. It is only superficially similar to the type of planning popular in Northern Ireland 35 years ago — for example, the Wilson report and others of the mid-1960s. Today, we have more realistic targets, because they are more attainable.

For too long, Northern Ireland has languished at the bottom of so many league tables, be it public health or in aspects of the environment. We should aim to change that situation and put Northern Ireland at the top of performance league tables, not just within the UK but in some cases in the rest of the world.

It is a good start. The PSAs can and should be improved as they have been in Whitehall.

Rev Dr William McCrea: We have had an interesting debate. It has been toing and froing. Some people think they are in, some think they are out; and some are not sure whether they are in or out.

A few moments ago we listened to remarks about the quality of paper in the Programme for Government document. The quality of the paper probably sums up what is on the paper and therefore the quality would be sufficient for the contents.

The debate has been strong in rhetoric. Rhetoric has been substituted for content because the content is not very good. We have listened to homilies and generalities, many of which came from members of the Executive.

We had the introduction by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, but sadly, after they had made their comments, they were so concerned about what the Assembly had to say that they left the Chamber and have not returned. Actually, the First Minister did come in to speak to someone from his party on the back Benches for about two minutes and then went out through the door again. His return was not for the content of the debate.

No one from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister who is also from the SDLP has

been here. The Deputy First Minister's junior Minister is not here. With the greatest respect, Mr Nesbitt has been sitting in on the debate, and Mr Haughey is usually evident at his side, but to the best of my knowledge Mr Haughey is not in his place nor has he been during the debate. Again, this epitomises their interest in what Members have to say. What we had earlier was simply a homily, and when that homily was given —

3.15 pm

Junior Minister (Office of First and Deputy First Ministers) (Mr Nesbitt): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The request was made that Mr Haughey and I both be present to speak in the debate. The ruling from the Business Committee was that only one of us was to speak. I am here to respond on the Programme for Government.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Therefore, because the Member's Colleague did not have the opportunity to speak, he does not bother coming here. It shows exactly what they really believe and want to hear from Members. I thank the hon Member — it was not a point of order, but his information was very helpful. It proves that unless they have the opportunity of standing at a little dispatch box looking important, they do not want to come, because they are not interested in any part of the debate. I thank Mr Nesbitt for his very helpful and useful intervention.

We listened very carefully to Mr Neeson and Mr Close, who spoke on behalf of the Alliance Party. We noticed the tenor of Mr Close's voice when he was trying to smack the various parties of the Executive over the knuckles. He was speaking to the Ulster Unionists, the SDLP and Sinn Féin. He tried his best to rap them nicely over the knuckles, but you saw the hump appear on his back when it came to the DUP. Somehow it seems that this little moderate party loses its moderate and liberal image when it comes to the Democratic Unionist Party.

However, what he said was interesting. He said that the Executive, which is made up of the three parties which he was rapping over the knuckles, was riven with sectarianism. Was he referring to Mr Trimble, his party representative, the SDLP or Sinn Féin?

Ms McWilliams said that she had reservations about the Deputy First Minister's reservations about everybody else's reservations. I must be honest and say that after listening to Ms McWilliams's speech, I have reservations about what she said also. We are having a wonderful party time here today. It is really disgraceful when we get to such a situation in such an important debate. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister should have treated the Assembly properly and with the dignity it deserves.

There are very important issues, which ought to be placed on the record. In relation to the Department of the Environment, we have this statement about protecting the environment:

"We also appreciate the importance of protecting and, where possible, enhancing the environment. A good quality built and natural environment is also the key to our economy, helping for example to attract investors and visitors as well as being integral to the future of agriculture."

That is lovely verbiage. To find out what it really means you would have to call on Mr Ervine who usually explains such words. You have to ask what the real importance of it is. Does it mean that investors and visitors are the most important concerns in relation to the environment? I suggest that the environment is important to the people who live here — the ordinary people in this society. In this document there is nothing about third-party appeals for people who are aggrieved and feel that the Department of the Environment is forcing its will upon a local community. This was mentioned in relation to Kircubbin. I genuinely feel that this is very important. We must think of the people, whether they are citizens in Antrim concerned about the Deerpark Hotel, or those concerned about the overdevelopment of a site at Manse Road. These are important issues to individual people. The rights of the individual are of equal importance to those of the investor.

Waste management and council support are mentioned. It would be better if the Department had worked in partnership with the councils from the outset rather than sitting on the sidelines waiting to see how they develop their plans. It is essential to work with councils to achieve the best possible waste management strategy for particular areas. Whether it is Cottonmount, Green Road in Ballyclare or Ladyhill, we need transparency. People have a right to know what is happening.

What is going on in our hospitals? They are full to capacity and patients are lying on trolleys. The Health Service is in chaos.

This document is plenteous in verbiage but offers nothing that will truly affect the lives of my constituents.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak on behalf of myself and my party. In moving forward and recognising a new beginning, I am hopeful that the Programme for Government will give us the best opportunity to open up avenues that this part of the island has been deprived of for years.

I would like to see further resources being provided by the Programme for Government. My concern is that not enough focus has been placed on the delivery of a waste management strategy. I would like to put on record that in the debate on zero waste which we had in this Chamber I was disappointed, but not surprised, that there was no support from the parties in the House. Support would have meant that the Minister of the Environment and the Executive are giving more attention to zero waste in their Programme for Government. After all, this is a key issue that should have been better addressed in order to improve the lives of all the people of this island. It is crucial to deal with the issue of waste

management on an all-Ireland basis. I am disappointed that the Programme for Government does not reflect the views of my party on this.

I recognise the funding increases that the Budget allocates to the environment, testimony to the priority that it has been given by the Executive. It is now up to the Minister, Sam Foster, to control this funding increase and to spend it wisely. Matters of great concern are: planning; waste; roads; water pollution; delivery of a waste management strategy; completion of the all-area plan by 2006; a reduction in road casualties by 2010; a review of the equality scheme in 2005; and a review of the work on time, change and sustainability of the diversification strategy.

I am disappointed that the Minister has not paid attention to the problem of school buses. There will be a serious tragedy. In rural areas in particular, the Department does not look after the roads properly in winter under conditions of ice, snow and frost. It ignores the fact that children have to travel along these roads in cars and overcrowded buses. No provision is made for the safety of children travelling to and from schools. Yet targets are set for driving improvement courses and practical child pedestrian safety training, et cetera, which do not deal with the problems I have highlighted that are crying out to be addressed.

On the completion of the area plan to provide land use planning, which balanced the development needs of the region with environmental protection and targeted the elimination of the planning applications backlog, I have to agree with Ms McWilliams's statement that it should be an obligation to review the scheme of planning policy development and development control.

On development control, I would like to have seen priority given to the telephone masts that litter our countryside. Given concerns over public health, with masts near homes, schools and hospitals, the Minister must get together with other Departments to alleviate the problems telephone masts present, and they must work together to promote the health of our people. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr Adamson: I commend the Programme for Government and its commitment to human rights, linguistic rights and cultural diversity. One has only to trawl the local press to see how Ulster-Scots bashing has become perhaps the only respectable form of racism left in western Europe.

So that the Assembly is under no misapprehension about the means by which its commitment to equality is measured, I wish to reiterate the standards, expectations and aspirations that Ulster-Scots people have for our cultural rights.

The Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities considers that

"a pluralist and genuinely democratic society should not only respect the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of each

person belonging to a national minority, but also create appropriate conditions enabling them to express, preserve and develop this identity."

Further to that, the objective and standard laid down for any society defining itself as pluralistic and democratic, as we do, is exemplified in section II, article 4(2) of the convention. That commits those who subscribe to it to

"undertake to adopt, where necessary, adequate measures in order to promote, in all areas of economic, social, political and cultural life, full and effective equality between persons belonging to a national minority and those belonging to the majority."

Article 5(1) of the same protocol commits signatories

"to promote the conditions necessary for persons belonging to national minorities to maintain and develop their culture, and to preserve the essential elements of their identity, namely their religion, language, traditions and cultural heritage."

One of the key elements of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities concerns freedom from the threat of enforced assimilation. Under article 5(2), it is stated that those subscribing to the convention

"shall refrain from policies or practices aimed at assimilation of persons belonging to national minorities against their will and shall protect these persons from any action aimed at such assimilation."

That is an important element in the convention, which has special relevance to the circumstances in Ulster.

3.30 pm

Frae oot o aw this, A maun hae it pitten down in the skreived raicord sae as the Assemlee is in nae dout o the staundart that maun be uised for gaugin hou weill it haes wrocht for jonik anent oor fowk richts.

The Council o Europe's Protocol Girdwark for the Beildin o Fowk Minorities hauds that 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 that belangs an unner-leid o the kintra. An mair, the 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

"tak on haund the daein o aw that is needit in ilka pairt o leevin, siller haundlin, fowk oncum an residerter 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."

Airticle 5 o thon protocol gars aw unnerskreivars

"forder the grund needit for thaim belangin a kintra's minoritie fowk leid ti fend an forder thair ain fowkgates an gie beild til the things as bes at the founds o thair hert leid, ti pit a name on it, thair kirk, thair leid, thair heirskip an thair fowkgates."

Yin o the main things in the Protocol Girdwark for the Beildin o Fowk Minorities is adae wi freedom frae be-in gart faw in wi the leid o the maist fek. Unner airticle 5, indyte 2, ye hae it that thaim as unnerskreives

“ti the protocol maunna dae ocht or ettil at ocht that gars thaim belangin minoritie leids faw in wi the leid o the maist fek agin thair wull an maun beild sic yins frae onie daeins ettlin at siccan tak-ower”.

This bes aye pairt o the protocol, that haes a guid whein ti say anent oor daeins here in Ulster.

I commend the study of the European Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities (1994) to the Assembly. The Ulster-Scots community is not engaged in making excessive demands. We ask only that the principles of equality and fairness be applied to those indigenous inhabitants of Ulster, and that the requirement for equality extends beyond the broad principles and protocols that I have briefly set before the House. The requirement calls for an end to discriminatory practices and to unfairness and extends to all other areas of human life and experience, including the educational environment, where the Ulster-Scots language has been deeply discriminated against and marginalised.

The area of education is one in which the Ulster Scots community, particularly the Ulster-Scots language movement, calls for significant improvement. Historically, the Ulster-Scots language has suffered much greater discrimination and marginalisation than Irish Gaelic. That situation is no longer tenable or acceptable.

In particular, we are calling for a rapid expansion of facilities for Ulster-Scots in the field of education. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Oslo recommendations regarding the linguistic rights of national minorities, and the Hague recommendations requiring the educational rights of national minorities, together with the relevant United Nations documents, set out the standards of treatment and of development to which the Ulster-Scots community and the language lobby aspire. We recommend that a more culturally supportive environment should be developed in schools located in core Ulster-Scots areas, including specific recognition of the Ulster-Scots language. However, this Programme of Government has gone a long way in providing this for us.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Programme for Government document, and I pay tribute to those officials and Ministers who have worked on it. Making a difference is the challenge faced by the Assembly in making devolved government a better system of managing our affairs on behalf of the people. The people across our entire community, whether Unionist or Nationalist, want to see real improvement and progress. They expect the Assembly to bring about tangible improvements. The people, rightly, want the devolved Administration to face up to its responsibilities and implement change. Obviously there is a major challenge for the Executive and the Assembly in this regard. Northern Ireland is a small region within the British Isles, and it is an even smaller region within the European Union.

I will endeavour to limit my contribution in this debate to the activities of the two Committees on which I serve — the Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment Committee, with regard to education and training, and the Regional Development Committee, primarily concerned with physical infrastructure.

The Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment is essentially about developing the skills of our people so that the labour market, and the economy generally, can obtain capable and skilled workers. Further and higher education and skills training are vital areas for meeting the challenge for all of us in Northern Ireland. Employers need more people who have adaptable and competent skills to meet the needs of modern industry and commerce.

There is a need for a radical shake up of our skills training provision so that there will be good training opportunities that young people feel are worthwhile and which employers feel are of consistent quality. Skills training — as provided over the past ten years or more — is too short-term. It is less than good for our young people and, in particular, the long-term unemployed.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

It is essential that the Department and the Training and Employment Agency grasp the nettle of training and insist on a quality, relevant assessment approach to the range and type of training courses available. Skills shortages are becoming quite apparent in construction, engineering, electronics and computing. They are also apparent in the catering and hospitality industries.

Employers in those industries want to see real quality training schemes, not short-term training courses. Practical skills training must be appreciated and provided. New Deal, modern apprenticeships and Jobskills must be adjusted and revamped to meet our needs in Northern Ireland.

There must be more places in higher and further education so that our young people can make a real choice, and so that they do not have to go outside Northern Ireland at the age of 18 to be educated. I welcome the intention to have 850 more higher education places here and, in particular, the intention to have 2,500 further education places for skills needs areas. The student support package, aimed at the less well off, is sensible and helpful given the limit of public finance resources. The waiving of further education tuition fees for students aged over 19 in vocational areas is particularly welcome.

The Department for Regional Development is primarily involved with the provision and maintenance of our physical infrastructure — roads, railways, public transport and water and sewage services. The stark reality for all of us in Northern Ireland is that there has been severe neglect of capital investment in our physical infra-

structure for almost 30 years. Indeed, our infrastructure is almost as weak as that in parts of Eastern Europe.

The biggest problem that we now have in regional development is the shortage of public finance to fund the major investment capital needs. It is an unfortunate fact that our economy is being prevented from growing and developing because of the bottlenecks that result from having inadequate roads and transport facilities. Too many of our roads are sub-standard. Even our short stretches of motorway and dual carriageway are unable to cope with road traffic congestion.

I want to see a special capital finance unit, within the Executive, tasked with addressing the finance needs of our capital investment requirements. I agree that there needs to be radical and resourceful thinking on how finance should be provided for those capital needs. Our economy needs expenditure on infrastructure sooner rather than later.

The Executive programme funds are a very welcome feature of the Programme for Government. These funds can help to redirect public sector performance to enable the private sector of the economy to perform more effectively and efficiently.

The public service agreements are vital to improving the performance of Departments. I am glad that all the Departments are facing up to the challenge of drawing up and implementing their own public service agreements. The public want to see Departments working better under devolved accountability and control.

Because Northern Ireland has such a large public sector, it is imperative that there be the best possible delivery of all our public services. The public service agreements are a bold attempt to get a handle on how the Civil Service — the permanent Government — carries out its functions under political control.

The primary challenge now is how we, through Government policy, can achieve a better regional economic performance and meet the public service needs of the people — be it through healthcare, education or the Water Service.

The Programme for Government is a good attempt to set parameters and to outline, from the start, necessary targets and objectives. This region, which is very public-sector dependent, must become more economically productive through the development of a more energetic and dynamic private-enterprise sector. We need more business activity — whether that be through more small and medium-sized enterprises or more inward investment projects.

The population is growing so it is imperative that more jobs be created to meet the employment needs of young people. On an economic level, the challenge is to create a more responsive and productive private sector and to create more businesses with more value-added

production. This can only be done by stimulating and promoting a better spirit of enterprise and by valuing those attempting to set up businesses and, therefore, create jobs.

Mr Poots: I will not be supporting the Programme for Government. This is an attempt to deceive — joined-up government does not exist. First, DUP Ministers did not participate in the Executive and are not part of the Government. Secondly, the IRA/Sinn Féin Ministers are taking the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to court, and, thirdly, the Ulster Unionists are refusing to nominate Ministers to the North/South Ministerial Council. The perception of joined-up government that the Programme of Government is trying to create is, therefore, deceitful. There are 11 Departments which operate individual fiefdoms and, to a great extent, those Departments operate independently within the Government.

The public service agreement of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is lightweight. It does not go into much depth on any subject. I draw Members' attention to the fact that, although victims' needs are mentioned on page 186 of the programme, there is no indication of a budget for support for them. Other Departments have indicated the amount of money allocated to fund the actions set out in each section. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has made no such indication of the budget for services for victims.

The modernisation of the Government is dealt with on page 183. Again, there is an empty box — the amount of money to be spent on this action is not indicated. How can we take action if we do not have the money to do so? These are not proposed actions; they are, in reality, mere aspirations.

The more I have heard about equality issues through the Committee, the less impressed I have been by the people who are delivering this service. Often, all we get is rhetoric — there is no delivery. We have a gender policy unit but when I asked representatives from it what they were doing about maternity leave, and whether they thought that it was fair that women should get just nine weeks' full pay for maternity leave, they did not have an opinion. We have, therefore, a gender policy unit which is not looking at those issues. Many of the Departments that are supposed to deal with equality issues are not tackling them at all.

The proposal for a children's commissioner is to be welcomed but it should be delivered soon and the issue should not be dragged out by a long process. There were a number of interesting elements in the chapter of the Programme for Government entitled "Working for a Healthier People". Among the priorities listed are

"modernising and improving hospital and primary care services to ensure more timely and effective care and treatment for patients".

That is a wonderful statement, but if you need a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan, you will have

to wait for two years. The waiting list for treatment in the renal unit is longer than it was this time last year. If you need thoracic surgery for cancer, you will find that your appointments for treatment will be cancelled again and again because there are not enough available post-surgery, intensive-care beds.

The document refers to the workforce shortage, yet fewer nurses in Northern Ireland are recognised for their work than in the rest of the United Kingdom. They work at lower grades than their counterparts in the rest of the UK, and they are not paid as much as they should be. Junior doctors are working excessive hours — the length of time they work is beyond the legal limit.

Page 146 features targets to increase the uptake rate for breast and cervical screening, yet there are no targets for the screening for cancers which affect men. The serious issues of prostate and testicular cancer have not been dealt with in the Programme for Government.

3.45 pm

Strokes and smoking are mentioned on page 147. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety set the ludicrous target of March 2001 for reducing the number of strokes from 34 in every 100,000 to 27 in every 100,000. It is March 2001, and I wonder if the target has been met. Perhaps we could be told.

The Department wants to reduce the number of people who smoke and who take illicit drugs, but people who drink too much alcohol are not dealt with. It is not trendy to criticise the consumption of alcohol, but alcohol is the third largest killer in Northern Ireland. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety mentions the word “alcohol” once in its contribution to the Programme for Government; the misuse of drugs and smoking are mentioned several times.

The Minister of Education spoke about equal access. My constituency does not have equal access to nursery school places. We do not have as many nursery places as other areas. Why is that? It is because we are a Unionist constituency. We are discriminated against because the children happen to come from Protestant homes. The Minister of Education does not ensure that there is equal access for Protestant schoolchildren.

On page 42 the Minister addresses better GCSE results. GCSE results are better in Northern Ireland than in England and Wales. Rather than put money into the resources that we have, the Minister wants to pull all that down and replace it with a new education structure, probably based on the English structure. We should not destroy the good elements of our education system because of the Minister’s aspirations. The Review Body on Post-Primary Education is due to report in June. That timescale is too short. The review body is not looking at the real issues. It is dealing with the 11-plus, which pupils sit in primary schools not post-primary schools.

The review body is focusing on the wrong issues and it should be paying more attention to vocational skills.

Bullying and disruptive behaviour are dealt with on page 43. What about the Minister of Education? Bullying and disruptive behaviour have got him where he is today. It is a disgrace and is not a good example for our children.

I oppose the Programme for Government.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Today’s debate is reasonably historic. We are at the start of a journey that will address the democratic deficit that has existed since partition.

Sílim féin go bhfuil muid ag pointe stairiúil eile agus sinn ag plé an Chláir seo do Rialtas. Bhí easpa daonlathais sna sé chontae ó bunaíodh an stát agus tá easpa daonlathais sa stát seo go fóill. Tá súil agam, áfach, go bhfuil muid ar a laghad ag tús an bhóthair — nó b’fhéidir i lár an bhóthair fiú féin.

I welcome the Programme for Government and give it qualified support. Members, including that great advocate of equality, Edwin Poots, have said that the success of the programme will be measured by its impact on local communities. I have a number of questions about the Programme for Government. Will it help to redress the historical legacy of underinvestment in areas west of the Bann? I want a cross-departmental public service agreement from the Executive to redress that underinvestment. Does the programme facilitate growing North/South harmonisation as legislated for in the Good Friday Agreement? I agree with Esmond Birnie when he says that the document is insular in that regard. Does the Programme for Government treat all our children equally? Does it address the significant unemployment rate, particularly among Catholics? Last Thursday the Government’s Statistics and Research Agency report said that 8.8% of Catholics and 5% of Protestants are unemployed.

Of course, we want to eradicate unemployment, but there is still an alarming differential, which is institutionalised. Does it enable Irish-national citizens in the Six Counties to see a reflection of our Irishness in institutions, symbols and emblems, or does it seek to foist a Six-Counties identity on people who view the nine counties of Ulster as the Province and the thirty-two counties as the country?

Does it set out to put right the under-representation of Catholics in the Senior Civil Service? On page 16 we see that a review will be completed by autumn 2001 of the appointment and promotion procedures of the Senior Civil Service, with a view to tackling under-representation as quickly and effectively as possible. We look forward to that. Does it eradicate unfit housing and fuel poverty? Does it renew and extend the roads and rail infrastructure to the greater north-west — Tyrone, Fermanagh and Donegal? Does it equalise economic and social opportunities, and, crucially, health provision for rural areas? I

have concerns about each and every one of these questions and will revisit them accordingly.

Generally, does the Programme for Government set out clear and measurable targets for the delivery of these objectives? Does it set out detailed implementation plans with specific timetables? Is it specific enough? Take, for example, the promise by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, on page 26, point 2.5.2, to make key information available by May 2001 in languages other than English. With the greatest of respect, the corporate plan did not do that — surely that is key information. The Minister does not respond in Irish to correspondence or queries that he receives in Irish. These things must be addressed. How is key information defined? I would like an answer. The Irish language section of the Programme for Government does not go anywhere near fulfilling the part of the Good Friday Agreement dedicated to this theme.

I am pleased to note specific targets for reducing the number of mobile classrooms within a certain timeframe. There could perhaps be a tighter timeframe and even more challenging targets. They are there as targets to be reached and judged accordingly. Targets for improving standards of literacy and numeracy could be greater in percentage terms, with more challenging timetables. However, we are moving in the right direction. I also welcome the cross-departmental consultation on the harm caused by smoking — by October 2001 a consultation exercise is to be undertaken and worked towards.

With regard to the day on the question “Does it make a difference?” raised in the introduction, only time will tell. Is maith an scéalaí an aimsir. The Executive needs the will to deliver equality, east-west, in the Six Counties. It needs to pour resources into areas of greatest social need and to have the relevant focus. To remind people of obligations to the all-Ireland dimension and equality in every aspect of public and private life, will anyone here object if I urge the Executive to go forward with the Programme for Government in one hand and the Good Friday Agreement in the other. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Savage: I give a broad welcome to the Programme for Government and endorse its provisions. It is evidence of the real, solid work that has taken place here at Stormont, something I feel the public does not adequately appreciate.

Having said that, I have certain concerns about the Programme for Government. The ideas that underpin the thinking about agriculture are essentially consumer driven. This is understandable and sensible. The agri-food industry will only thrive if it takes proper account of the consumer.

However, the crisis in agriculture today — following all the disasters which have befallen that industry — lies in the area of farm incomes. It does not primarily lie in the consumer area, where our reputation is already high. I know that this reputation needs to be maintained, but

farm incomes are the real priority issue, and I am disappointed that the Programme for Government does not take proper account of that.

Measures on product quality, which are written large in the Programme for Government, have only the most indirect of impacts on the real point of crisis — farm incomes — which stand at only 20% of their 1995 level. The Programme for Government would have been a good opportunity for the Executive to signal its support for the agriculture industry — an industry which employs over 85,000 people and impacts on the lives of many more.

I cannot help but feel that in the light of subsequent events — particularly the current foot-and-mouth disease situation — the Executive could have readjusted its priorities away from the consumer towards the real crisis facing the producer in agriculture.

The Programme for Government, in paragraph 5.1.3, indicates that the Executive will seek

“to promote other sources of income generation in the rural economy”.

However, this must be more specific. Rural development, as I have said before, is no bolt-on to the responsibilities of the Department of Agriculture; it is a very real lifeline to many farmers who are struggling to make ends meet. Supplementing farm incomes is not a marginal activity; it is a pressing necessity requiring immediate action.

I also ask for a clear definition of the process known as rural proofing. I want to know exactly what procedures are undertaken in that process. They should be transparent and detailed, not just simply a form of words. It is disappointing that there is to be no movement on a natural resource tourist programme until the end of 2001. I do not want to seem impatient, but there is a sense of urgency about this.

I cannot see how failure to move in this area and how the effective freeze on rural development spending is consistent with the objective of the Programme for Government, which is that there is a need to assist and to promote other sources of income for this generation, especially in the rural economy.

It also sits uneasily within the Annex C, paragraph 6.8, which is about the need to diversify local farming. Despite these reservations, I believe that the Ministers have done a reasonably good job in a short time. They have put in place a coherent and well thought out proposal to place before this House. I ask, however, that the concerns I have expressed as regards agriculture are taken on board for the next round of Executive spending.

Environmental issues are important and wide-ranging and cover many issues concerning the well-being and pollution-free environment we all desire. This big task must be addressed, and schemes must come forward with the ultimate aim of moving and protecting our rural

way of life and developing an environment in which we can all be proud to play an important part.

Many areas have been missed out in the Programme for Government. I would like to draw Members' attention to one aspect that we all miss from time to time — the horse-breeding industry in Northern Ireland. Looking back over the last year, all the top racehorses, show-jumpers, flat-racing horses were all bred in Northern Ireland. Many of them were bred in my own constituency in Upper Bann. I do not want to name any of them just in case I leave somebody out, but that is a fact.

4.00 pm

There is a real crisis at the moment with the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. Sheikh Mohammed, one of the world's top racehorse owners, currently has some mares in Northern Ireland. Some of the world's top stallions are in stud farms in the Province. This is a niche market for a niche product. Members can laugh, but it is a big part of the agriculture industry.

Several Members mentioned state aid yesterday. The untapped benefits that are available in Brussels are unbelievable. Mind you, the Junior Minister Mr Nesbitt should not think that a Back-Bencher such as myself knows nothing about state aid. I have studied state aid for the past three years. One of these days I am going to take you to task about it.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must intervene on two counts. First, and most importantly, the Member's time is up. Secondly, I remind the Member and other Members to address the House through the Speaker.

Mr Nesbitt: I forgive him.

Mr Speaker: I have no doubt that you do, for you are a generous man. However, the procedures of the House must be adhered to.

Mr S Wilson: You are not a generous man, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will make a note of that remark. *[Laughter]*

Mr A Doherty: The Programme for Government is an amazing document. It is aspirational, but it is also inspirational. It is an affirmation that the Executive and Assembly are keeping faith with the people of Northern Ireland who strongly supported the Good Friday Agreement in the referendum.

The Programme for Government is the Good Friday Agreement in action. Therefore, it would be a betrayal and a tragedy if the actions of those who begrudge and wreck — inside and outside the Assembly — created a situation where the programme might be aborted or removed from the hands of those elected in Northern Ireland to serve Northern Ireland's people. It would be equally disgraceful if the programme were to be put in jeopardy by the actions of certain Members who pay lip-

service to the agreement, but whose agendas seem directed towards either self-preservation or self-promotion.

Having begun by praising the programme for the clarity of its vision and direction as expressed in paragraph 1.13 and elsewhere, I query its lack of detail in some areas. I will limit my input mainly to matters in the competence of the Department of the Environment, while acknowledging that there are many cross-cutting themes. If I do have some criticisms, I will try to be neither cross nor cutting.

In general, I warmly welcome the proposals relating to Department of the Environment matters. However, there are some questions of the "who, what, where, when and how" variety which need examination. I refer to just one — the future of local government. We are told that there will be a review of local government. There is going to be a comprehensive review of public administration, and as the song says "You can't have one without the other".

I have been involved in local government for over 30 years — 24 of those years as a district councillor. I have never known such high levels of uncertainty regarding the future integrity of local government. There is widespread unhappiness. Councils are being bombarded with requirements to fulfil and deadlines to meet on a raft of complex and important issues, including best value, waste management strategies, Peace II programmes, equality and more — with local elections thrown in for good measure.

However, the most precise reference that I can find to the review of public administration is in paragraph 7.4:

"establish the Review of Public Administration in the coming months".

Some deadline: "in the coming months".

Local government needs a review, and the sooner the better. I hope the most significant outcome will not be the removal of the word "local", for if it is not that, it is not anything. I also hope most Members will agree that presumptions — particularly by some Members — that local government reform will entail a significant reduction in the number of local government districts is an unfortunate, if not irresponsible, pre-emption of the results of the local government review.

I will resist the temptation to quote at length from the more poetic statements about local government and will rely on the dry but true last sentence of paragraph 7.1.1:

"Local authorities have a knowledge of the needs of their areas and a capacity to ensure effective co-ordination and leadership."

The Good Friday Agreement was a beacon of hope to the long-suffering people of our country. The Programme for Government is the fuel that will keep that hope alive.

Mr Carrick: In the short time allotted I will present my remarks in the context of "Making a Difference". Will the Programme for Government make a difference? In some cases it will; in others the jury is still out; in yet others,

despite the fine words, the Programme for Government will not make a difference.

I refer particularly to chapter 3 entitled “Working for a Healthier People”, which states the Executive’s aims to improve public health, paragraph 3.1.3, entitled “Providing timely and effective treatment”, and paragraph 3.1.4, entitled “Caring in the Community”.

The Programme for Government says that there must be major improvements in the health of Northern Ireland’s people. If there is to be a timely and effective acute hospital service, resources must be available to support the delivery of such a service.

In Upper Bann, Craigavon Area Hospital has been expected to absorb an increased patient load. That was due firstly to the downgrading of Banbridge Hospital and recently because of the transfer of services from South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon.

As a result, Craigavon Area Hospital is under intense pressure because there appears to have been a deliberate attempt to transfer goods and services without transferring the commensurate funding. The outcome of such a policy is an adverse impact upon the delivery of services. Not only does it affect patients’ health, it also has a knock-on effect on the care regime in the community. On one extreme, it is claimed that patients are being pushed out of one hospital more quickly than they would be from another hospital. All too frequently staff in the community care sector are notified on a Friday afternoon of patient discharges and thus are given little opportunity to arrange appropriate care packages.

On the other hand, there are instances in which patients are being kept in hospital beds awaiting placement in residential or nursing homes because of a lack of funding by the community health trust. The community health trusts, due to lack of funding, are unable to purchase bed placements and that causes the bed blocking of acute beds further exacerbating the growing waiting lists.

The stress and strain on patients, carers, and on hospital and health trust staff is evidenced by the number of people on sick leave due to work-related stress. This situation is intolerable. If the Programme for Government is really going to make a difference, healthcare provision must be tackled in a meaningful way and must be adequately resourced by the Department of Finance and Personnel. It needs to be turned into a reality and should not be merely an aspiration.

I refer now to equity in service provision. Health and social care is a lottery. There is no uniformity in the same trust, never mind between trusts. Older people always lose out. They are exploited in that they are the least likely to complain and will normally make do with whatever inadequate support they receive. The service provided by the Craigavon and Banbridge Community Health and Social Services Trust is an example of that.

If you are under 75 years of age and in the elderly programme of care you will be financially assessed for services. In contrast, if you are in the physically disabled programme of care the likelihood is that you will not be financially assessed. Where is the equity in the provision of service there?

There are also discrepancies in care-managed cases — for example, under the home-help service many older people have no weekend service suggesting, in some ridiculous way, that the needs of the elderly change on Saturday and Sunday compared with Monday to Friday. Making a difference for the elderly and the infirm now is an imperative, not an aspiration. Will the Programme for Government make a difference to the occupational therapy assessment waiting lists? Waiting lists of 18 to 24 months are totally unacceptable. Even in my constituency of Upper Bann, with a transfer of approximately 200 cases of heating assessment to the Housing Executive, there are still over 1,000 cases on the occupational therapy waiting list in the Craigavon and Banbridge Community Health and Social Services Trust area.

In spite of the fine words, the Programme for Government, with the associated budget resources, will not make the difference to the socially disadvantaged people to whom I have been referring — the infirm, the disabled and the elderly. In many instances those people will not have the time to wait on the realisation of aspirational objectives in the Programme for Government. My constituents and those across Northern Ireland expect and, indeed, demand immediate action to ensure that the inequalities of health and health care provision are tackled now and not by some visionary promise which may be realised some years down the line.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I support the Programme for Government as a vision for the future, but I have some concerns about public service agreements. Recently the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety submitted a document to the Health Committee — of which I am a member — called ‘Priorities for Action’. It seems to cut across into the public service agreements. In that document the need to consolidate services and financial stability is stated throughout the chapter entitled “Service Investment and Delivery Plans”.

While I agree that there is a need to sustain existing services, there also needs to be a focus on the years of underfunding and mismanagement of the Health Service. There needs to be a focus on the years of no long-term strategic overview and the impact on other services. Several Members have mentioned the neglect or closure of hospitals and the impact that that has had on others. We have heard about the lack of proper funding for care in the community, which results in beds being held up, and about the years of inequality in the Health Service as a whole.

Recently we all witnessed the scandal of chief executives’ pay. In the public service agreement I welcome

accountability for all expenditure in the Health Service. However, we are told that it will need legislation to tackle chief executives' pay.

4.15 pm

I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which also looked at that matter. The permanent secretary told the Committee that legislation is needed before the matter can be tackled properly. I call on the Minister to bring such legislation forward as soon as possible. We can all raise issues, but unless the legislation is put in place we can do nothing about them.

I welcome objective 1 in the public service agreement, which states that the Health Department is going to maximise the level of resources going into front-line care. I think that everyone is fed up with the level of administration in the health service and the number of different channels that elected representatives and patients have to go through before the service reaches the community and gets into the front line. I welcome the maximising of money to patient care and the minimising of money to administration.

The ministerial grouping on public health was mentioned earlier. It is a welcome feature. It was said that over 70% of health problems are not necessarily connected with the health Department. Other Ministers need to take that on board. The issues include the building and maintenance of proper housing that the Minister touched on earlier, educating people, especially our young on the issue of public health, providing play facilities, gritting roads and footpaths, and tackling the level of unemployment and low incomes. That is why I welcome the ministerial grouping on health.

I am concerned about the three-year period in which we have to implement the recommendations of the capitation formula, which has been included in the public service agreement. The period is too long. I agree that the present formula is flawed, but it must be changed now. I do not see why we should wait three years to implement the new formula. Once it is implemented it will go a long way towards tackling inequalities within the health service. Mr Carrick mentioned the level of different needs within each board — the elderly, for example.

While I welcome the target to increase the number of children being breastfed during the first three days of life, I am concerned that the target for numbers breastfed at six weeks is too small. We need to tackle that issue, and we can talk about ministerial groupings on public health, but unless we tackle the issue at an early age we are going to face problems. We should invest in community midwives and health visitors. Once mothers leave hospitals there is no follow-up on the need for them to continue breastfeeding.

We are informed that there will be an increase in the Sure Start Programme. While that programme covers children, I want to know if there will be additional money, or is this being used as a smokescreen because it is going into the family and childcare budget? We need to have one definition for children in need, because this seems to change across trust and board areas.

I welcome the proposal to issue new child protection guidelines and to introduce a Bill for the protection of children and vulnerable adults. It is an issue that comes up time and time again. I believe September is the deadline, and I welcome that.

I have a concern about something in the public service agreement concerning mental health. There is a target, which Ms McWilliams mentioned, to increase the number of child and adolescent psychiatric beds from six to 16 by December 2001. Recent figures, which I received from the Department in response to questions about children being admitted to adult psychiatric wards, showed that 103 children were admitted in the last 12 months, all under 17 years of age. The statistics are there for everyone to see. The increase of 10 beds will not make an impact when we are talking about 103 children this year.

I welcome the proposal to appoint a commissioner for children, but we need to take seriously these issues.

I am concerned that money allocated to boards and trusts will be attributed to the family and childcare budget. Will that be the case, or will it be allocated under mental health? The money would normally be allocated under family and childcare, but the document is telling us that it will be allocated under mental health. Including this additional money only hides the lack of investment in mental health programmes.

On page 151 we are informed that there is a target to take forward work in the North/South Ministerial Council giving priority to cancer research and health promotion. What is the present situation on that work due to David Trimble's refusal to nominate the Minister for Health? What work or research has been put on hold due to this?

Where is that work at present, given the refusal of David Trimble to nominate the Minister for Health? What work or research has had to be put on hold because of that? What impact will his refusal to nominate have on our communities? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCarthy: It has been interesting to hear Members who have party colleagues in the Executive ask in-depth questions about many aspects of the Programme for Government — indeed, some are totally against it.

The Belfast Agreement states:

"The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all."

That is what we in the Alliance Party have been fighting for — a fresh start, with reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust for everyone. The biggest problem facing Northern Ireland is the persistence of bitter sectarian division. Unless and until we begin to address that, we will not have the new beginning that the agreement identifies. Sadly, the Programme for Government fails to address the deep divisions in our society. The Deputy First Minister briefly mentioned our concerns, and I welcome that.

I shall identify some of the major deficiencies. Most of our people live in areas in which over 90% of the population is from one section of the community. Such segregation epitomises and reinforces division. If anything, the problems are getting worse, but there is no mention in the document of plans to promote mixed housing throughout Northern Ireland. To begin with, we must tackle the blight of paramilitary flags, sectarian emblems and graffiti. Such flags and clabbers of paint disfigure our neighbourhoods. Most people do not want them outside their door. Such things create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. They reinforce segregation and ought to be removed immediately.

The people who deface our environment should be encouraged to put their efforts into something more constructive. The Roads Service, the Housing Executive and other bodies wash their hands of the problem, despite their duty, under equality legislation, to provide a neutral environment. Such problems would not be tolerated in Great Britain or any other modern society. We expect the Executive to act. We need a cross-departmental response, which will help us to avoid the buck-passing that has so often characterised responses to the problem. We must not allow people to break the law and increase fear and tension. We must act. I am bitterly disappointed that the Executive have chosen not even to mention the problem in the Programme for Government.

Thirteen months ago, I asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what he was doing to combat sectarianism in our football grounds. The Minister assured me that he was considering legislation to stop indecent, sectarian or racist chanting. Unfortunately, the issue was brought to prominence once again last week by the disgraceful abuse of footballer Neil Lennon at Windsor Park.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: No. I have only a few minutes.

Neil Lennon's only crime was to play football for his country. What sort of brainless people would treat their fellow countryman in such a fashion?

Despite this type of activity, there no reference to the introduction of related legislation in the programme. There is no mention of the problem of sectarianism in sport. An opportunity has been missed, and Mr McGimpsey

will not get peace from the Alliance Party or myself until he takes the appropriate action to rid us of this cancer. We do, however, give credit to Mr McGimpsey for his outright condemnation of last week's deplorable incident at Windsor Park.

The Alliance Party is fighting more than just sectarianism. We are fighting for all groups to be more fully integrated into society. I am concerned that the Executive do not do enough to help the elderly. I have tabled motions in the House calling for an increase in pensions — and we have had some limited success. I have sought for pensions to be linked to incomes, but we have had no success as yet. We have also called for the provision of free personal care for the elderly, as recommended in the Sutherland Report. We were successful in getting the Executive to fund free travel for the elderly 100%. We are thankful for that.

I understand that the Executive, because they lack tax-varying powers, cannot change the rate of pensions. However, we, in the Assembly, should have the right to vary taxes and decide how to spend any extra moneys that are raised. We ought to be fully capable of implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission to ensure that the elderly get the support they need, particularly free personal care, so that our old folk do not have to sell their homes to pay for health care when they need it most. Our Scottish neighbours are doing this, our Welsh neighbours are considering it, and we can do it if the will is there. However, the Executive make no mention of this in their Programme for Government. Also, they do not provide the fresh start promised in the Belfast Agreement —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member's time is up.

Ms Morrice: I welcome the Programme for Government. It is undoubtedly the first time in many years that we, and the public, can see what is set out to be done and so ensure that it is done. That is called accountability. We can use this programme to tick off where we see something positive has been done and mark an "X" where it has not been done. We can then check up on it in the next year. That is excellent accountability.

The Alliance Party has spoken lucidly about the insufficient focus on the need to be more proactive in our fight against division and sectarianism. I recognise that need. There are two areas where more work could have been done. First, Mr McCarthy mentioned the idea of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure extending legislation to Northern Ireland to prohibit and outlaw racist chanting in sports grounds. Something concrete must be done to eradicate this sort of ugliness in our society.

Secondly, divisions arise in the area of education. Addressing that issue is vitally important at primary level, at secondary level and at further and higher education level. Obviously, there is the field of integrated

education. I am very disappointed that targets have not yet been set. The integrated education fund has set a fundraising target in an attempt to get 10% of children to go to integrated schools by 2008. Why was that not mentioned in the Programme for Government? I declare an interest, because I am a member of the integrated education fund, fighting for integrated schools.

4.30 pm

I also want to mention further and higher education. Why is there not integrated teacher training to combat division? We have the financial duplication of two teacher training institutions, teaching people of different religions exactly the same thing. Does that make any sense? It is the only area of third-level education that is divided. I totally support what the Alliance Party said concerning much more focus being put on bringing us together rather than confirming our separateness.

I would have liked to compliment the Programme for Government in more detail, but time is limited. I have compared the draft with the new programme, and I like the emphasis on equality, particularly on gender equality. Much more reference to that has been made in the new programme. Moreover, the valuable area of sustainable development has also been slotted into the new programme.

In some areas, however, I would like to make constructive criticism of what could be done this year or, if not, next year.

Regarding accidents and road deaths, I am disappointed that more is not being done to reduce the amount of casualties on our roads. Our attitude should be one of zero tolerance.

We talk about education programmes and primary schools, but what about traffic calming? I notice that the Department for Regional Development talks about "minor issues" including traffic calming. Traffic calming is not a minor issue. We want many more resources to reduce speeding — they are called sleeping policemen.

We have all seen in our constituencies the numerous gatherings supporting the rail service, yet has anyone looked at the figures for rail compared to those for road? Off the top of my head, £187 million has been allocated to roads this year and next year, and £97 million to all public transport, with £30 million going to rail. That is half of the amount for roads. What is going on? Where is the commitment to public transport? Let us put our money where our mouth is. Our railways need to be protected. Where is the money for that?

I would like to make a plea for renewable energy. Not enough has been written about that by the Department of the Environment, the Department for Regional Development or the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Not enough is being done about environmental issues. Waste management, recycling and renewable energy are vital. The Prime Minister today announced

an allocation of £100 million for renewable energy projects. How much are we getting from that?

Concerning planning and the environment, it has been announced that there will be 40% brownfield and 60% greenfield development in the Belfast metropolitan area. It should be at least the other way round. In London, the figure is 75%. How far behind are we? Let us get our priorities right.

My final point concerns cancer. I have just returned from a valuable cross-party meeting on combating cancer. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has mentioned that, but not nearly enough resources are going into it. We have the lowest survival rate in Europe. The Minister must do something to change that.

Mrs Carson: I am pleased to welcome the Programme for Government. This is the first time in 30 years that our own politicians are making the decisions for Northern Ireland. There is much to welcome in the document. However, it is not perfect, but we have to start somewhere and, it is to be hoped, learn for the next Programme for Government. I am pleased to see issues mentioned in the document that are important to all the people of Northern Ireland — a healthy society, encouraging children, creating jobs and education for all.

I wish to concentrate, however, on the environmental issue — one that is missing from the Executive's list of priorities on page 9. Five principles are mentioned, but the environment is not among them.

In the chapter entitled "Growing as a Community" on page 13 the document mentions "sustaining and enhancing local communities". How can we do that without taking the environment into consideration? On page 28, under the heading "Working for a Healthier People" one of the priorities is listed as

"ensuring that the environment supports healthy living".

The document does not state how that will be accomplished.

Page 33 of the document states:

"We will work to ensure".

"Ensure" is an overworked word, and how do we accomplish that?

The document also mentions safer food production but does not say how that will be achieved. Under the action points the aim is to

"progressively eliminate the backlog in transposing and implementing EC Directives on air, land and water quality".

Again, how is that going to be done?

On the same page we find these words:

"By March 2003, achieve a 20% reduction in the 1996 level in the number of high and medium severity water pollution incidents".

The aim to achieve 20% reduction of water pollution incidents from the 1996 level over seven years is not good enough; it must be done more quickly.

In chapter 4 — “Investing in Education and Skills” — there is no mention of educating our children and young people in protecting and caring for the environment.

The section headed “Protecting the Environment” mentions the provision of an additional 12,000 places for environmental training for farmers. I am glad to see that point.

On Page 63 there is a reference to this aim:

“By 2005, achieve 80% compliance with the waste water treatment works discharge standards set by the Environment and Heritage Service”.

Does that go far enough?

I am really disappointed with the Department’s public service agreement. Objective 1 is:

“To protect, conserve and enhance the natural and built environment for the benefit of present and future generations.”

It could also have included the word “care”. The Environment Committee asked for this to be included but was ignored. You can have education to protect, but we also require education to “care” for our environment.

The action columns are meaningless and could be more specific as to what needs to be done. The target columns are inconsistent and merely use dates — this makes it totally incomprehensible.

On page 119 we read that the Department is to

“assist district councils in implementing acceptable arrangements for the disposal of waste by production of Group Waste Management Plans.”

How are district councils to be assisted? Will this be merely with advice or finance? That has not been explained.

This is typical of the majority of the entries in the action columns. There are statements of intent but no indication as to how they should be carried out.

On page 120, with reference to the historic buildings grant, there is no Programme for Government reference, but there are for the other entries. Also in connection with the historic buildings grants, all that has been restored has been the receipt of applications, with no grants being available until 2002. That is even with the funding being doubled from £1.7 million to £3.4 million. It is still not enough. If more funding were required for immediate restoration of grants and reinstatement of the grants, why was there no bid or effort made to sort this problem out?

Overall the Programme for Government is a valiant first attempt for the Northern Ireland Assembly to deliver accountable objectives and outcomes. I am looking forward to the next Programme for Government. I

recommend that there should be more definite targets and actions.

If I were giving marks for effort, as an old teacher —

Several Members: Former teacher.

Mrs Carson: As a former teacher, I would give it six out of 10.

I support the motion and reject the amendment.

Mr Speaker: As a former pupil, I think that this is beginning to feel like detention.

Mr O'Neill: I will try my best to make sure that it is.

I, of course, support the Programme for Government. All of us here are aware of the historic nature of the document. Both those who support this Government and, interestingly, those who are opposed to it see its real relevance.

As the Executive and the Assembly grow more permanent and begin to deliver the benefits of a devolved Government, is it any surprise that those who have railed against these arrangements and have opposed the will of the people from the start should have demonstrated their fear of failure yesterday and again today? We heard them today repeating — with a mounting degree of panic, in my view — the same, several-years-old arguments that are now beginning to take on the well-worn transparency of a cyclist’s old jockstrap. They are beginning to realise that despite their opposition and the many problems and political tripwires that have been placed in their path, these arrangements are not only capable of working but are working and are beginning to deliver.

A document of this nature is going to create a considerable number of views because of the many issues that it deals with and because it is, as has been said often today, aspirational in nature. However, it is a remarkable document. As Séamus Mallon said this morning, to have come from scratch to this in a relatively short time is a job well done.

I have to place on record a number of concerns. First of all, as Chairman of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee I raise three issues that we put into the draft programme which we feel did not get any attention at all. Some of this has been referred to by others from different angles today.

Many references are made to joined-up government, but there are no specifics about how Departments will work together in practice towards mutual goals.

It was also the view of our Committee that there appeared to be too many short-term goals — things to be achieved in one year or two years. The programme covers a three-year period. For example, only one Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure goal is for 2003. That, incidentally, is to prepare a strategy to develop the recreational potential of inland waterways as a tourist attraction.

The third point is that we also have concerns about whether the targets are challenging enough. For example, why will it take until April 2002 to produce a strategy for the development of centres of curiosity and imagination? Maybe there is a wee bit of that missing.

I also want, on behalf of the Committee, to make a few further comments about the draft public service agreement. When considering the Department's public service agreement, the Committee waded in against the definition provided and took into account the difficulties that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure — as a new Department — had in establishing baseline information by which to measure performance.

The Committee welcomes the Department's statement of its commitment to promoting equality of opportunity, good community relations, protecting human rights and meeting the objectives of the new targeting social needs policy.

4.45 pm

However, it might have been helpful to give some indication of how the Department proposes to do that. It is left to the reader to establish the connection between the statement of commitment and the Department's targets, programme and budget. The introduction of the PSA also states that the Department is committed to modernising the provision of its services and improving efficiency and effectiveness. It might have been helpful to clarify exactly what this means, and how it is connected to targets, programmes and budgets.

We wish to welcome several changes. The extension of the interim safe sports grounds scheme to improve the physical infrastructure of sporting facilities has been extended in the final programme. I commend the undertaking of an audit of an initial 40 culture, arts and leisure venues as part of a programme to improve accessibility for people with disabilities who are socially disadvantaged. I welcome the target of increasing private sector funding to at least 50% of the Northern Ireland Events Company annual budget. There will be a great benefit from that.

By the same token, we noticed that some issues have slipped between the draft and the final document. Paragraph 2.5.2 states that action to

“make key information available in languages other than English including the development of services for Irish and Ulster Scots in support of the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages”

has slipped from April 2001 to May 2001. Also in the PSA, the

“review of community-based arts and work with district councils to enable them to develop integrated plans of culture, arts and leisure”

has slipped from April 2001 to June 2001. We do not see any particular reason why that should have happened, and I wish to highlight that issue.

As an Assembly Member, I am concerned about the statement in 2.3.2 of the “Growing as a Community” section on page 21, which states that secure permanent tenancies will be provided for 70% of accepted homeless cases within three months. Do we really have room to allow for 30% of confirmed homeless cases?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I am amazed by Mr O'Neill's comments. He spent some time criticising the DUP because it opposes the Programme for Government. Then he read out a long list of all his objections to the Programme for Government. Of course, he has followed criticism from Sinn Féin, criticism from the Alliance Party and criticism from the Ulster Unionist Party, all of whom listed, line-by-line, opposition to this Programme for Government. He implies that I am a hypocrite. At least I will be voting against it. He is nothing more than lobby-fodder — to be marched through those lobbies on behalf of this pro-Sinn Féin/IRA Government. That is all he is. I am amazed that he has the audacity to take my party to task because we are being honest with people. Yes, we are opposed to this Programme for Government. We have stated reasons, just as his party has stated reasons for its opposition, but at least we will be putting our vote in the right place as a result of that.

The person who wrote the chapter headings for the Programme for Government must have had a very wry sense of humour. Perhaps it was the junior Minister. “Making a difference” — well, this programme really will make a difference to the lives of people in Northern Ireland. We have already seen the difference — hundreds of prisoners are out of jail, the RUC has been destroyed, and it will go on. We will see the difference of having gunmen in Government — their words, not mine. That is what they have done. Yes, they have made a difference in the Government they are supporting by these programmes that they will be putting in place.

There is a section entitled “Working for a Healthier People”. We have a Health Minister who justified the allocation of, I think, £32.7 million for the running of her Department. She justifies, again and again, the wasteful use of resources that are being put into the Irish language — as if she is the Minister to promote the Irish language. Hundreds of people are crying out to get a place on a hospital waiting list, or to get into hospital for operations, or to get hip replacements.

She can then justify spending tens of thousands of pounds on the promotion of the Irish language. “Working for a healthier people”? I do not think so, Mr Speaker.

Then we have the sinister Minister of Education, Mr Martin McGuinness. He says that he is investing in education and skills. He had the cheek to offer some educational resources to the Leader of my party — he was going to get the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to give him some.

Given that the Minister of Education does not have a spirit level let alone an O level, he has a cheek to talk about people getting a better education. Indeed, I would say “Physician, heal thyself”, but as he cannot go to the Minister of Health to be healed because she is too busy spending money on the Irish language, I really do not know whom I can advise him to go to.

What has the sinister Minister — who is supposedly investing in education — done? He has prevented money from going to Protestant schools — that is the reality. A few yards from this Building is one of the largest primary schools in Northern Ireland — Strandtown Primary School. I know it well — I was educated there.

A Member: I thought they were going to close it.

Mr Paisley Jnr: It may as well be closed. The principal of that primary school says that the rooms and facilities are not fit to rear chickens in. That is an indictment of the Minister of Education. What is he prepared to do? He is prepared to spend nothing, absolutely nothing, on that school.

Over the past few months the Minister of Education has been gurning about the terrible sectarian attacks in my constituency of North Antrim. However, he has allocated not one pound in his recent announcement to any of those schools in North Antrim, let alone to the many other, more needy projects in North Antrim for which the North Eastern Education and Library Board has put in claims. He is indicted by his own policy.

Then there is the heading “Working Together”. The unfortunate fact is that this Government is not working together. The First Minister banned Sinn Féin from participating in North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meetings. When that was proved to be unlawful, he withdrew his own people and followed the DUP line of not sending people to the NSMC.

On a good-news day we have the ludicrous situation of his Ministers making announcements for other Departments. However, on a bad-news day with a serious issue such as foot-and-mouth disease, we cannot find a Minister to support the Minister of Agriculture. No one demonstrates any cohesiveness in the Government to show that they are all working together for the benefit of Northern Ireland. It is “stand alone” when it comes to bad news.

Edmund Burke said that the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. If good men do nothing tonight and allow the Programme for Government to go through, they will be allowing evil to triumph. They will be supporting a programme that does nothing to stop Sinn Féin from being in the Government of Northern Ireland and that does nothing to prevent the destruction of the Union that we care for. Nothing is being done to prevent Sinn Féin from having a say in the future of Northern Ireland.

I say to those people “Do not to allow evil to triumph tonight by supporting such a programme.” Indeed, they should allow good to prosper by taking on the challenge and opposing the Programme for Government. It will not make people’s lives better, it will destroy their lives. The Programme for Government offers neither a healthier nation nor education to our people. It offers a self-serving allocation of resources to petty little men running certain Departments. I oppose the Programme for Government.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will be very brief, for I have listened carefully all day to many Members. While I welcome the Programme for Government as a vision and a basis that, like the Good Friday Agreement, commits us all to a shared vision of peace, stability and inclusiveness, I was not elected to promote a vision.

I was elected to be the voice of and to represent those who, in good faith, put their trust in us, as politicians, to deliver a better society. The Programme for Government is the basis for that better society. However, a better society can be delivered only if the Programme for Government is underpinned by a dedicated department of equality.

If we really want to make a difference then we must make the issue of equality central to everything that we do. This will not happen if we relegate equality to an all-kinds-of-everything list in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

I think that everyone accepts that the Six Counties is a profoundly unequal place. If we are to address the historical, political, social, economic and cultural inequalities that are the hallmark of the Six Counties and recognized throughout the world, then we need to prioritise the issue. The lack of equality is at the heart of the divisions in this society, division between Protestant and Catholic, between men and women and between this island and that other island, England.

We could start by using the Programme for Government as a basis and by building alliances among the groups that are most affected by inequality. Some of that is already mentioned in the programme. I am speaking about the Nationalist community, the travelling community, ethnic minority groups, disability organisations, ex-prisoners, young people, the elderly and Irish-language groups.

The commitment to equality is enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, which places equality at the very heart of current and future political developments. I want to echo the words of Mr McEluff, who said something very profound in the Chamber today. He said that we should all go forward with the Programme for Government in one hand — *[Interruption]*.

Mr S Wilson: And the Armalite in the other?

Mrs Nelis: We should go forward with the Programme for Government in one hand and the Good Friday

Agreement in the other, and those two together should add up — fully clothed, of course, Sammy — to a department of equality. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Cobain): I will try to get you out of detention as quickly as possible, Mr Speaker. It is unfortunate that the role of the Social Development Committee was largely overlooked in the drafting of the social development public service agreement. We were given very little time to view the proposals. We were not given sufficient opportunity to consider the proposals in detail and decide whether we thought that they met the needs of the people whom we are charged with representing.

We have a new child support system that will have major implications for the whole area of child maintenance in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. *[Interruption]*.

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

Mr Speaker: Before Mr Kennedy troubles himself, the clock will be changed back to the appropriate time when the Clerk at my right hand has returned.

Mr Kennedy: I was going to ask you to hasten the clock, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I have become familiar with Mr Kennedy's heckling of everybody else. The fact that he is now heckling his Colleague, Mr Cobain, is a departure.

Mr Cobain: What he does not know is that he has to speak after me.

A new child support system will be introduced that will have major implications for the whole area of child maintenance in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the United Kingdom. The new system will make radical changes to the way that child support is handled. I accept that that should lead to a more straightforward system and that cases will be processed more quickly, and I welcome the fact that modern and more efficient information technology systems will be used to achieve this.

5.00 pm

I fear that, without improved planning, the transition period will undermine the whole project. Staff will be required to operate two systems simultaneously. The Committee has some concerns that it has expressed to the Department about the likelihood of the agency's achieving the ambitious targets that are set out in the public service agreement. The situation needs careful attention, and the Committee will be monitoring it closely.

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

We are concerned about three areas of the Department's housing commitments — fuel poverty, replacement programmes and urban/rural regeneration. When the Minister proposed the Domestic Energy Efficiency

Scheme II programme to tackle fuel poverty he told the House that it was targeted at those members of society most in need. The qualifying criteria show that that is not the case. Nor is it the case when we consider the amount of finance that is available to the programme. How can one say that £2,000 — whether in an urban or rural community — is sufficient to install a functioning central heating system? My Committee took evidence that indicated that £3,000 is a more realistic figure. How, therefore, will people in receipt of benefits find the additional £1,000 to ensure that their homes are adequately heated?

How can one say that a person on benefit is not a person in need, irrespective of whether they are over or under 60 years of age? The Minister has stated that the purpose of the scheme is to help those people most in need. Is it right that a person who is under 60 and who is chronically ill can only qualify for £750 to cover the cost of draught-proofing and a person who is over 60 and in good health can qualify for a grant — albeit inadequate — for a full central heating system?

The Department has explained that the intention behind the scheme is to protect those in society who are most vulnerable — the over 60s on benefit. While I respect that, I have difficulty in reconciling that explanation when I see someone who is over 60 living in deplorable conditions, and he or she is not entitled to the grant because a small occupational pension disqualifies that individual from benefit. How is such a person any less vulnerable than a person who is over 60 and receiving benefit? How is someone under 60 who suffers from a severe disability any less vulnerable? How are low-income families who live in poor conditions less vulnerable? Perhaps the Minister could explain his criteria for assessing vulnerability.

No significant sums have been set aside to replace Economy 7 heating in Housing Executive properties. It is the most expensive way to heat a home because it uses electricity. It is often the elderly who find themselves burdened with Economy 7. Converting homes to gas or oil-fired central heating will save tenants £3 per week. If we are serious about tackling fuel poverty we must be serious about our commitment to funding the area properly. We must address the needs of the most vulnerable. My Committee is serious about that. We will re-examine the effectiveness of the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme II programme after its first year.

The Committee also has concerns about the replacement programme and the issue of raising the quality of our housing stock. That area needs to be considered in the context of the Minister's assumed rent increase of gross domestic product plus 2%. However, the Minister decided not to implement his proposed rent increase, and that reduced his revenues to such an extent that he needed to cut programmes. One of the first victims of the cuts was the improvement schemes. No kitchen or

bathroom improvements have started in this financial year. Apart from those homes eligible for the multi-element improvement schemes, there are no plans to start upgrading kitchens or bathrooms in any other Housing Executive homes. The Programme for Government, through its public service agreements, shows a commitment to raising the standards of housing stock and thereby the quality of life for tenants. How can that be achieved when the Department concerned neglects to make basic improvements on bathrooms and kitchens over 25 years of age?

On the issue of urban and rural regeneration, the Committee was disappointed to note that the Department is only committing itself to a strategy for reinvigorating city and town centres. I am alarmed to see that there is no additional funding commitment in this field. Regeneration requires a bigger effort. I call on the Minister to recognise that his Department needs further commitment in this area.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I support the Programme for Government, including its vision of a cohesive, inclusive and just society. In June 2000 the World Health Organisation confirmed what most people in these islands already knew — that the United Kingdom has a third-rate Health Service. It is rated eighteenth in the world for the effectiveness of care delivered per every £1 spent, and twenty-sixth for its responsiveness to patients and its ability to treat them professionally and with dignity.

The National Health Service is failing in its purpose. Given that the UK is a wealthy nation, its cancer survival rates are appalling; they are far lower than equivalent rates in the rest of Europe, the United States and Japan. Patients with life threatening diseases have to wait unacceptable lengths of time for operations, which means that they live in fear and anxiety. Often, when they do get to hospital, their operations are cancelled.

That was the situation last summer — things may have improved a little because some funding has been made available, but numerous patients still have to wait on trolleys in our A&E departments. Patient discharges from hospitals are being delayed because there are inadequate funds for providing community care and long waiting lists for occupational therapists. These problems are causing great distress to the old and vulnerable in our society. Sadly, similar difficulties are being caused by a lack of resources for the health care of children, the mentally ill and those with physical or learning disabilities.

The NHS Confederation, which encompasses all four health authorities, recently produced figures which show that, in terms of financial resources, Northern Ireland is far behind England, Scotland and Wales. The comparative figures are available.

My Committee held an inquiry into residential and secure accommodation for children in Northern Ireland. It made 36 recommendations. One of the most important of these was the introduction of a commissioner for children, and we are delighted that this is going ahead. Having looked at the public service agreements, it would appear that other recommendations are to be followed through. I hope that all 36 recommendations will be taken on board and that the Children (Northern Ireland) Order will be fully implemented.

It is essential to have good quality community care to meet the needs of young people with learning disabilities, including those discharged from Muckamore Abbey. Those services should be well developed before patients from Muckamore Abbey are resettled.

There has been a good deal of talk about the recent report by the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care for the Elderly, and I am pleased about the introduction of free transport. However, the funding of nursing care but not personal care will lead to inequalities in treatment. As a result, those nursing homes which are intended for the most dependant will be slightly cheaper than residential homes intended for the less dependant. It is also likely that they will be cheaper than certain packages for intensive domiciliary care. Care of the elderly is part of the review of primary-care services, and my Committee will continue to monitor its progress and development.

Our Health Service not just not good: it is the poorest. Our people have to pay the highest price for their health. Inequality in health is evident in every age group. I welcome the Minister's document 'Investing for Health', and I will make two main points to her. First, the term "targeting social need" appears throughout 'Investing for Health' and in the public service agreements. We have a few health action zones in Northern Ireland. Each board, the Department and the Chief Medical Officer does its or her own thing in response to targeting social need, but there is no overall co-ordination. I appreciate that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and the Minister herself, will be looking at all these matters. However, one person should be made responsible for co-ordinating these issues. The Health Promotion Agency is a good organisation, but it is not responsible for such co-ordination.

Secondly, my Committee is very involved in the future of primary care. I would like the Minister's assurance — if not today, then at some time in the future — that there is no reason why we cannot look at the organisation of the health service within the review of public administration and local government. There is no reason why communities who have lived in deprivation for 20 years should have to continue to do so.

I am not talking about extra resources; I am talking about organisation. There is no reason why we cannot look at that issue. In the Minister's document on primary

care the reason is given over and over again that we cannot look at the boards because there is to be a review of public administration. I resent that, and most of my Committee would support me in my hope that we can look at those other bodies.

Mr Hilditch: I have several concerns about the Programme for Government. At the outset I will, like others on this side of the Chamber, take the opportunity to voice my opposition to the North/South Ministerial Council and equally to the North/South Implementation Body as agreed on 18 December 1998.

Many people in my community are angered by the resources and funding being made available to those bodies. They believe that it is to the detriment of many other services, which are underfunded.

First, as a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee I want to comment on those areas. The efforts of the Minister and the Department over the past six months in relation to the crisis facing Irish League soccer must be acknowledged. There are two aspects: the safe sports grounds scheme and the soccer strategy report.

I hope that the proposed extension to the Safe Grounds scheme from April 2001 will include those premiership clubs that missed the initial round and the first division clubs, all of whom were previously left out.

Despite the growing calls for a new national stadium, I hope that the refurbishment of existing grounds will take preference as a reward for the clubs' efforts to keep sport alive in Northern Ireland over three decades of our darkest days.

I want to express some disappointment that the Soccer Strategy report will not be ready until the autumn and will be followed by a period of consultation. Having raised this matter in earlier days, the Minister indicated there would be a report before the end of the current season. I am not sure that time is on our side in this matter. It might be interesting to hear whether the Soccer Strategy fits into the Department's programme.

Staying with sport but moving to perhaps the more leisurely but equally popular pastime of fishing, I note from the programme that a couple of actions are included. However, it is worth noting at this stage that the report from the Culture, Art and Leisure Committee, which will shortly be before this Assembly, will contain a number of recommendations, which I hope will be fitted into the programmes of the Departments concerned.

I want to draw attention to the lack of recognition of minority sports and the difficulties faced by our disabled sportsmen and sportswomen. The minority sports, which include many of the contact sports, such as karate and boxing receive little recognition and are unable to access funding. Again, society has been thankful for their contribution through troubled times. These sports were able

to instil discipline in young people, which stood them in good stead as they progressed through life.

I was equally disappointed with the treatment of disabled sports people. Most of us would have been surprised by the current figures, which indicate that one person in six in our society is registered as disabled. What was even more shocking was to learn of the extent of the lack of purpose-built training facilities, which are virtually non-existent. Urgent progress must be made, to allow our talented disabled sports people to compete in equal terms with their overseas competitors.

One cannot help feeling that the current language policy has gone over the top. When speaking to people in my own community, it is increasingly difficult to explain how so much money and resources can be given to what in reality is only a pastime and a hobby for an unquantified number of participants. This is especially so when our hospitals, social services and educationalists are crying out for assistance.

Everyone should be proud of his or her culture and should respect others within realistic constraints.

I note the aspects of the programme relating to the arts. This area has been falsely perceived at times to be elitist. The Committee will soon be embarking on an inquiry into accessibility to the arts, and we look forward to that.

However, I believe the term "socially disadvantaged" should be changed to "wider community" as there are many people at all levels of society from the socially disadvantaged to the middle classes who have never been in a position to access the arts.

Another item of interest in the programme is that of the cultural quarter concept of designated areas for locating cultural activity. I hope that any forum established to co-ordinate and promote such a dimension will look to do so outside Belfast. There is much potential in some of our historic towns, which would benefit by locating cultural activities there.

5.15 pm

I turn now to the other Departments. In my constituency, there are concerns about the Department of the Environment's proposals for waste management. I am concerned that the Department has dragged its feet on the matter — the timescale indicated in the programme is totally unacceptable. Many district councils cannot wait a year. I am aware of at least one council that is still unsure of where its waste will go after 31 March. I appeal to the Department to review its timescales, treat the matter of waste management with the utmost urgency and give a better lead.

I also have concerns about infrastructure, particularly in east Antrim and my town, Carrickfergus. While I welcome the efforts in the programme to stabilise the transport system — and I hope that east Antrim receives its fair share — there is disappointment that the A2

between Silverstream and Ravenhill on the Shore Road still does not feature. I again appeal to the Department about that matter, considering the growth of and development in the area that that part of the A2 serves.

Another area of concern about infrastructure relates to the old town system in Carrickfergus. Every year there is an increasing level of complaints about flooding and overflow, particularly in the older part of the town. Pressure on the old system is increasing, because it has to cope with continual development. I ask the Department to review the operations in the Programme for Government.

Finally, I refer to health, social services and public safety issues, especially the Ambulance Service. I note that the Department is to provide a modernisation programme for the service, initially targeting fleet replacement. I have been told that on at least six occasions ordinary vans were purchased and converted instead of purchasing six purpose-built ambulances. That cheaper option provides inadequate vehicles that could be a danger to those who operate them. I hope that any replacement fleet will be the real thing.

There is also concern about the state of some ambulance depots and the conditions in which crews are expected to work. Reports about Templemore Avenue, for example, have been particularly unfavourable. In addition, when the Department plans any staff-support programmes, it should take account of the increasing number of attacks on personnel.

In conclusion, as other Members for East Antrim have done, I ask the Department to consider Carrickfergus again as a location for a depot if the service is expanded or if there is a static situation. The location of an appliance there would dramatically improve the response times in the rural areas of east Antrim.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I have waited a long time, but it appears that the debate is going to last a while longer.

I also welcome the Programme for Government, particularly the public service agreements and the important possibilities that they have for the equality agenda. This is similar to other Government documents: it is well put together and reads easily. However, much can be read into it or read out of it. It is very wordy — perhaps trying to hide what it will eventually deliver.

I examined the rural development section. It mentions modernising and diversifying the structure of farming. It makes me wonder what “modernise”, “structure” and the “ability to produce food that is trusted throughout the world” mean, particularly given the current situation with foot-and-mouth disease and other difficulties. It states that during 2001 the Department will consider the feasibility of schemes for early retirement and to assist new entrants into farming. What does “consider” mean?

Many of the targets and objectives are only aims. That is my difficulty with the programme. There is too much leeway and no specific details on targets and objectives — they could be removed. It will be a year or three years down the line before we see if anything in the Departments’ public service agreements or in the programme comes about. We will have to wait at least 12 months before getting an idea of what is happening. That is a failing in the document.

With regard to employment matters and Reg Empey’s Department, my area of the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency expects the Budget and the Programme for Government to deliver on many issues relating to job provision, small businesses and offsetting the serious situation agriculture now faces.

It does not look as if the policies contained in the programme will help to alleviate the effect of the loss of around 700 jobs in areas west of the Bann in the past three years. Those are the targets that we want to see the Government meet.

Members have mentioned the road and rail system, and there was talk of the budget being halved. I would not like to see much more of the roads budget going towards rail if it means that people in rural areas will have to drive on bad roads every day. People in urban areas could use the rail links but do not do so. We must get the balance right before we start playing off one thing against another without taking into account the fact that most people use cars and will probably continue to do so for some considerable time.

I welcome the TSN targets for the various Departments. We can use them as a barometer to judge how well Departments are delivering. In particular, it is important that we have accountability and openness from Departments, especially as we now have a local Government. The public can already see the benefit of that.

Other Members who have spoken about agriculture have said that there was a clear lack of commitment to help the farmers in the Programme for Government and the Budget. The emphasis is on targets, re-training and administration; very little is delivered at local level. That is a serious failure which will have to be put right, and we will press for that. The role of women in agriculture — in the Department or anywhere else — has not really been mentioned. Farming delegations are still dominated by one gender. The role of women should be promoted.

We need more focus on the real issues that affect people in rural areas. I told the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee that we need to think about rural development. Our Committee has spent a lot of time on mainstream farming issues, to the detriment of rural development. Communities are waiting for the second tranche of EU funds, and it is important that our programme is aimed at helping those communities to get access to the new funding, so that the programme

delivers for them. The programme talks about delivery in the context of rural development, but I have had some experience of that, and that simply has not happened. It must happen the next time around, and we will watch out to make sure that it does.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and, indeed, its Minister seem to find it difficult to take criticism about their handling of the current situation. They will find that they will have to take criticism from everybody; it is well founded and is not simply for political purposes. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Kennedy): I rise to general approval, Mr Deputy Speaker. Members should not clap — they should just throw money. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. The debate has been an endurance test for Members, especially those in the Chair and the junior Minister.

I am disappointed that the Education Committee, like all other departmental Committees, had very little time to consider the draft public service agreement and to make an effective contribution. That is unsatisfactory, and the matter must be addressed to ensure that all Committees have appropriate time to consider and carry out proper scrutiny in future.

The Education Committee welcomes the fact that investment in education and skills is an Executive priority. That is only right; education should and must remain a priority. Education is a key component in ensuring that a strong, vibrant and competitive economy is created for Northern Ireland. It is an investment in Northern Ireland's future. It is also imperative that all young people be given the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills that they will need to take their place in the modern-day workplace and society.

In the time afforded to me it is not possible to cover all the details of the Programme for Government. However, I will make some general comments and then refer to some of the education targets and actions. The Programme for Government is an important document that sets out the main priorities for the months and years ahead. It is a high-level document, but parts of the public service agreements section are vague and lack detail. Clarification is required with regard to some of the terms used. More specific linkages between the various actions and the allocations of finance also need to be clarified. Progress on the actions and targets will have to be monitored. Therefore clarity is essential to ensure that a meaningful and accurate assessment is made.

The actions outline a number of major policy reviews on school funding, the curriculum, post-primary education and, of course, the review of the transfer procedure selection in education and the future structure of post-primary education is ongoing. I am glad to see that account has been taken of the Education Committee's views and that the appropriate action point has been

amended to prevent unrealistic expectations that the review of selection will be completed by June 2001.

That review has initiated an in-depth and crucial debate in Northern Ireland on its education systems. It should not be viewed in isolation. Consideration of those issues must not be rushed in order to achieve arbitrary deadlines. The necessary time must be taken to ensure that the review is done properly. The Education Committee welcomes the target to provide one year of pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it by March 2003. However, the Committee wishes to see more detail on the form that the pre-school education should take. That should be based on research and current best practice.

The Education Committee also acknowledges the vital role that rural schools play in their communities, and it is hoped that the Programme for Government will provide the support that those schools need.

I also welcome the commitment to raising educational standards and to addressing low achievement and under-achievement. However, I have reservations regarding those targets outlined in the public service agreement, which have been set at a lower level than those outlined in the strategy for numeracy and literacy. While the targets have taken account of the levels of performance, I am concerned that the more challenging targets have not been retained, particularly given the timescale for achievement and the significant resources that will be allocated to address this issue. Targets should be achievable, but previous performance that has not met expectations should not automatically mean that the expectation is reduced. It should prompt us all to try harder to find innovative ways to achieve our goals.

5.30 pm

I am pleased that account has been taken of the comments of the Education Committee regarding the need for more linkages between the Programme for Government and the public service agreements. This has resulted in specific targets on non-attendance, suspensions and expulsions being included as well as targets relating to information and communication technologies.

The inclusion of targets regarding major capital works is also pleasing. I am sure all Members have seen at first hand the major problems in school estates and the backlog of priority works that must be urgently addressed. I could say much more in a party political sense, but unfortunately time does not permit.

In conclusion, the final judgement on the Programme for Government will be what we achieve and whether we will have made a real difference. I welcome the programme and the actions and targets contained in it. Much work is required to ensure that these targets are met. This is the start of the process, and I have no doubt that the Education Committee will play a full leading part and

will closely scrutinise the Department of Education's work to ensure that adequate progress is made, better services are provided and value for money is achieved.

Mrs Courtney: I support the Programme for Government and commend the Ministers and officials involved in its production. I also want to pay tribute to those bodies who were consulted and who responded to the draft programme. However, as party spokesperson for health, I intend to concentrate on the many and varied health issues.

Northern Ireland has an unenviable health record with death rates from coronary heart disease and some cancers the highest in Europe. There are some issues which need to be urgently addressed such as lengthy waiting lists, particularly in the field of orthopaedic surgery, and ill health associated with social disadvantage. We have to encourage health promotion with regard to smoking. There are currently 3,000 deaths a year from smoking. We have to at least encourage people to try to stop. Alcohol is the most widely available and widely abused drug. People are a bit blasé about alcohol and do not see it in those terms. We have to, through education, reduce the numbers of teenage pregnancies. We have to encourage all major employers to have safety managers to avoid accidents at work. We have to encourage more young mothers to breastfeed to give their babies the best chance in life.

With regard to coronary heart disease, we have to teach cardio pulmonary resuscitation to the general public. We are all aware that those first few minutes after a cardiac arrest are the most critical. If there is someone on hand who can perform resuscitation the person has a better chance of recovery.

Children's concerns need to be addressed. We are all aware that a bad episode in hospital can give a child a philosophy for life that makes him afraid to attend hospital. We have to attempt to allay their fears. We must also encourage healthy eating. The fact is that we all know what to do but very few of us do it. We need to be more concerned about keeping people out of hospitals, rather than feeling that the only available option is inpatient treatment. We need to keep targeting social need (TSN) policies to the forefront in all decision-making processes and have section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 written into all contracts and agreements. We need to ensure a more equitable distribution of funds across the four board areas. We must ensure that those with disabilities are treated equally and have access to all facilities. We also need to ensure equality of opportunity and have day-surgery facilities available to all communities. At present we have an inadequate Ambulance Service. In Derry there was a very bad fire. The whole family, with the exception of one child, were fatally burned.

At that particular time there was only one ambulance available. When the paramedics came, one of the policemen

had to drive the ambulance. A dead person had to be put onto the floor. That is unacceptable in this day and age. We need better ambulance cover in all the board areas.

In relation to cancer, I agree with Edwin Poots's point that men's cancers have to be addressed. We need to address the issue of testicular and prostate cancers. There is now a very simple test for prostate cancer, which was not available in the past. It is not currently available here, but I think that the Health Service should be looking at that. We also have to make sure that the cancer services are friendly services. At the minute, cancer is the number two killer in our community. If we do not take action soon, it will become the number one killer. This afternoon we had a meeting with Prof Roy Spence, who is the leading cancer clinician in Belfast. Some of the figures he gave us on deaths from cancers made very sad reading.

These death rates are rising. The incidence of lung cancer is rising, as is the rate of other cancers. Some can be cured if they are caught in time, so early detection is the answer in that regard. We are currently very short of oncology services in Belfast and throughout the North of Ireland. There are two oncologists. We need more oncologists in Belfast. We also need a magnetic resonance imaging scanner available in Belfast. At the minute that is not the case, and it is a disgrace that a major city does not have one.

We need a dedicated cancer centre day unit that is linked to treatment. It is wrong that people have to travel to Belfast, but if they cannot get their treatment locally they must do so. If the disease can be controlled, people should be available to give the necessary palliative care and counselling. Patients should not have to travel 70 miles to get it, as happens at the moment.

I am aware of three patients who have been diagnosed as having cancer in the last five years. One is a young woman who travels daily from Omagh. She travelled initially to Belfast by bus for chemotherapy, although she has now managed to get alternative transport. That is staggering. Anybody who has had chemotherapy will know that some of the drugs can make you very sick. Day patients going for chemotherapy at the City Hospital are suffering at present. There are no toilet facilities available and no water fountain near the day patients' entrance. Some people are sick and have to walk — perhaps while receiving drip-fed treatment — through the treatment room. That is unacceptable.

We must ensure that we get a proper service here — a dedicated cancer service available in the City Hospital. Space is currently available, and we want that provision now rather than having to wait for another couple of years for it. I hope that this will be taken on board by the health and social services in the very near future, and that they will not wait until more people die.

Mr Berry: The Programme for Government could be considered as being the wish-list of the Executive and the various Departments. That is where the problems really begin. Many questions have been asked here today, and more need to be asked.

What is the structure by which the public are to determine what outcomes have been achieved? Take mental health, for example. A target of 35,000 consultations seems to be excellent news. How will the public know that this target is genuine and that it will genuinely be met? Given the amount of dishonesty and massaging of figures in Government circles, how can this be determined?

What about the issue of effectiveness? Is there any way that those outcomes can be determined? What about those who are already having consultations? How effective are they? I note with interest that some dates are given for parts of this wish-list to be achieved. The public's problem will be in assessing which targets have been achieved.

Let us take, for example, the acute hospitals. The target on page 35 is to agree a way forward by December, but that depends on other reviews and strategies, some of which are listed. How can the one be achieved if the other is not in place?

Let us look at the plan to provide 40 to 50 specialist staff by March 2002. Are those people already being trained? If not, how is that going to be achieved? There is a target to recruit 640 nurses by 2003-04. Are sufficient numbers already being trained? What about the failure to retain those already in nursing? How can we meet such a target if we are continually losing staff in the Health Service? Why are these real problems not included?

The capital programme for health in the document aims

“to finalise and begin implementation of a strategic development plan to modernise the forty-year-old Ulster Hospital”

and

“by September 2001, to finalise plans for the Belfast City Hospital cancer centre.”

However, there is no mention of any action taking place. It was staggering to hear — during a presentation by the Ulster Cancer Foundation this afternoon — that by the year 2004 cancer will be the number-one killer. It is a tragedy that there is no action plan in this Programme for Government to deal with this serious problem.

Let us turn to education, where there is another range of problems. On page 40 there is a reference to upgrading buildings. This is laudable in itself, but how is it going to be achieved when the bulk of the money is all going one way? Considering his current practices, how will the Minister achieve that unless he really means that he will only be concerned with the integrated sector?

The problem is not that there is no Programme for Government but that it is so huge that what is called the

“Durkan tax” would need to be trebled. This seems to me to be the real issue: is the programme sensible, achievable and workable?

All of these things will not be achieved in two or three years, which leads me to a further point; if these plans are put into operation — requiring huge sums of money — then there is no sane reason why we should need another Programme for Government for at least two years. All we would be getting would be a simple update. What is more, there is no possibility of flexibility in such a system. By aiming at everything, there is the danger of achieving nothing.

Finally, the Executive's own agenda says nothing about developing and enhancing the UK dimension. A great deal is said about the North/South dimension, and it is evident that the First Minister, Mr Trimble, has not even bothered to try to do anything about that disparity. He has capitulated completely. It is little wonder that my party refuses to take its seats on such a body of united Ireland promoters. I oppose the Programme for Government.

Mr Molloy: A LeasCheann Comhairle, go raibh maith agat. I support the Programme for Government, although I have reservations. If we are honest about it, there are many proposals in the document, but they are bland enough to cover all circumstances. However, we also have to recognise that a great deal of work went into this, the first programme. We will need to keep a tight reign on it to see that it is implemented in full.

My concerns centre around the rebalancing of services, facilities and infrastructure, east and west of the Bann. This is one of the main issues, but there is no mention within the Programme for Government — either in a Department context or even from an overarching point of view — that this re-balance is necessary and will be carried out.

Today's Finance Committee did not give me any extra details about the Programme for Government, however I welcome the commitment given by the Minister, Mark Durkan, and his promise of swift action to review the Civil Service to decentralise its jobs. I hope that this move can be rural-proofed to ensure that we get the jobs out of the city — not just into Derry city, but west of the Bann as well.

5.45 pm

Perhaps the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development could be rural-proofed. It would be good to see it based in a rural area.

Finance-raising powers have been limited to rates collection. Rates are a crude way of collecting taxes, which we must re-examine. I welcome the review of rating policy by the Minister, although there is certainly an opportunity to review rating policy and taxation in general.

We must look at who is paying rates — namely, the town centres. Much damage has been done to town centres over the past years. We must look at out-of-town shopping to ensure that there is fair rates distribution. As regards domestic rates, we must have a situation where we target social need.

We must look at businesses. We must look at their location, their turnover, and their abilities to pay rates, rather than simply basing our rates on the square footage of a building. That is an unfair system of tax collection.

I welcome the cross-departmental approach proposed by the Executive as regards agriculture and rural development. However, I question whether rural-proofing ought to be left to self-regulation. There is a big question mark about who polices who in such a situation. I am concerned that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development could not define what rural proofing meant during the Committee meeting with the Minister last week. Perhaps we could measure proposals against what happens in reality.

I support the Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee's statement yesterday in relation to the fishing crisis. There is not only an agricultural crisis, there is also a fishing crisis. There is a crisis in rural development and in the entire rural structure. The fishing industry was once a strong major resource, and many good fishing areas existed. However, that was long before we joined the European Community. Stocks are now depleted. Our fishermen are being restricted in the areas they can fish, whereas everyone else seems to have free reign. Our fishermen have been sold out. Their stocks and their rights have been sold off for seats in the European empire.

The Minister told the Committee last week that she could not restrict cattle and traffic coming from England, Scotland and Wales into the North. That flies against all the advice that has been given in the past. Certainly, every vehicle leaving the North has been searched umpteen times. We were told that there would be no borders in the European Union, and now we are seeing the effect of having no internal restrictions. The situation exists in the European Union that our Minister was unable to stop the influx of sheep into this country.

The European partnership and rural development are in danger of collapse if the Executive do not deal with the gap funding. This is one of the main causes of rural decline at present.

As regards European programmes, there is no infill between the Peace I and Peace II programmes. The Minister must clarify when Peace II funding will be on the ground and when the rural communities will benefit from it. Otherwise, we will lose a major asset in the rural community.

On the matter of health, which is another issue close to my heart, Mr McGrady said that the Hayes review

was becoming a barrier to action, and I agree. Action cannot be taken as everything is being put back until after the review has been completed. There is much pending its completion. There is a lot of pressure on the shoulders of Dr Hayes and his group to come up with a new health structure. It is a flaw that we are left waiting for the Hayes review to rectify all the wrongs of the past 20 years. We need a new direction, but the Programme for Government does not give a clear direction as to what resources will be put into the Hayes review. If Dr Hayes were to say that we should rebalance services east and west of the Bann, that we were going to have an end to the "golden six" hospitals and that rural hospitals would be provided for us, there would be no money in the Programme for Government to do anything about it.

We can see that the Royal Victoria Hospital is continuing with its build programme. I welcome that. There is certainly a need for centres of excellence. But all centres of excellence do not need to be in Belfast. They can be anywhere. What about the acute services review? That has not restricted the build programme.

The Assembly needs to give a clear indication that services east and west of the Bann must be rebalanced to provide the rural community with the hospital service, infrastructure and facilities it needs. Otherwise, it is wasting its time.

Discrimination west of the Bann was a trademark of the old Stormont Administration. If we continue in that vein, we will be as guilty as those who have gone before us. Discrimination was exercised not only against the Catholic community but against the entire community west of the Bann. The whole service was restructured when hospital services and many others were taken from those rural communities and put into such places as Craigavon. We need a clear indication that we will rebalance all of that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Molloy: I will finish by saying that we need a clear and definite line of action in the Programme for Government if we are going to succeed. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs E Bell: I, like others, welcome the document with reservations. It is historic, being the first locally drawn up action plan for the Government of Northern Ireland. However, as my Colleagues and I are pointing out today, it must also be an opportunity for concerns about the overall ethos of the programme and — more importantly — for its implementation for the benefit of all the people in Northern Ireland.

As regards education, there is a commitment in the programme to provide high-quality education for all, with equal access for all. Last week, the Minister of Education announced a practical commitment in the

capital spending programme to improve the quality of school buildings and equipment. However, there is still a long way to go to create an ethos of equality — perceived or otherwise — in a number of areas of educational life. I regret to say that one of the most glaring omissions is that of a full commitment to children with learning disabilities. If we are to have equality of opportunity to achieve the potential for each child, whatever his or her ability, surely some definite promise of action should have been made.

On the subject of integrated education, some progress has been made in the funding and setting up of schools, but the viability criteria are still far too restrictive to the extent that most integrated schools are turning away large numbers of potential pupils every year. Integrated schools are often criticised as being a minor part of the education sector, and there will be clear discrimination against pupils and parents if some action is not taken to promote the free choice of integrated education.

I must point out that pre-school education has been largely integrated until now, and it is hoped that the Government will encourage the continuation of that under the action programme.

I am also concerned about the comments on the 11-plus in the programme. It states that by June 2001 consideration will be initiated on the review body report on post-primary education. What exactly does that mean? Where, and between whom, will that discussion take place? How can this implement the process for higher-quality education for all, when the current system has been largely discredited? The key to any programme should be the swift implementation of all its actions to promote equality of opportunity, but much of the education section must be clarified before that can be done.

The promises made for education by the Executive are to be welcomed for their attention to the enhancement of pre-school education, the vocational element in education and the promised aims of providing lifelong education opportunities for all. However, it must be accepted that these promises need to be fully explained so that people know they can be delivered.

The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister did commit the Executive to carrying out equality proofing in all their schemes, but it is still not clear if the forthcoming Single Equality Act will consolidate all existing legislation. We would ask that it does that as soon as possible. In that, I welcome the commissioner for children, but again I have to say that the remit and status of this position must be transparent to ensure the basic necessity for it, which is that all children should feel confident of equal treatment.

One and a half pages of the Programme for Government tackle the divisions in our society. These include a large paragraph on the need to encourage and support the celebration of cultural and linguistic diversity. I fully

agree with that, but I would like there to be a better appreciation of the diversity among our people; this should also be noted in the same specific language.

One of the first priorities should be community relations and work to combat sectarianism. However, given my direct knowledge of the good and the bad occurrences of many communities in Northern Ireland today, there is no real comfort in the promises made in the Programme for Government. With due respect to the Deputy First Minister, it is not enough to say that good community relations are inherent in the whole programme, without taking specific steps to counteract the sectarianism which is ingrained in our society.

The Community Relations Council must be strengthened and it needs to be shown more appreciation through increased support and funding. In this way, the positive work, past and present, of the many different community groups, including women's organisations et cetera, can be built upon rather than thrown away.

There are many points in the Programme for Government about which one can be hopeful, and no one can deny the direct and constructive effect of the Executive and the Assembly on Northern Ireland to date. However, the Alliance party needs to express its concerns along with its praise because there is still no real acknowledgement of the diversity of our society, including its variety of cultures and religions, which requires positive recognition here and now. There is still a perception abroad that in Northern Ireland, if one is not a Protestant or a Roman Catholic, one is outside the norm. Unfortunately, this programme proposes nothing that will change that perception at all.

I support the amendment.

Mr Dallat: Several Members have spoken at length about education. I was pleased that both the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister highlighted the need to meet targets, particularly those relating to literacy and numeracy at Key Stage 3. Until now, targets set by the Department have not been met, but they are now enshrined in this document. We have a firm commitment that our children will have a fundamental right to an education that will spare them the agony of going through life with serious literacy and numeracy problems. That is the best news any child could hope to receive. It is a fundamental basic right of children, and it will be protected by equality legislation. If the Department fails, we can ask questions. I, along with others, have been doing that.

Many other targets have been set. As politicians, we have a duty to ensure that the Department meets those targets in the interests of those who matter most — our children and young people. Funding is allocated for a modest increase in youth service provision, and help is to be provided for young people with severe learning difficulties in particular. More provision is needed if we are to give our young people a healthy start in life, free

from the influence of drug pushers, paramilitaries, joyriders and all of the other anti-social elements which have destroyed so many lives in Northern Ireland for many years.

There are now opportunities to address the education needs, through lifelong learning programmes, of those who have been let down by the education system in the past. There is to be funding for educational guidance organisations such as the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA), which has done a great deal to give hope to the 250,000 people between the ages of 16 and 64 who need its help.

I am concerned that there is insufficient funding to address the problems that exist, but at least we now have a direct influence on widening access to education for everyone. Surely that marks the first real step towards progress. Young people in further education colleges now have some sense of equality with others in universities — who in his right mind would be opposed to that?

In the past, those who suffered from social disadvantage have been exploited for political gain. This programme aims to make those people equal in every respect. It is not simply telling them that they have been discriminated against; it is providing them with the resources and tools to allow them to raise their heads above the parapet as equals.

6.00 pm

The funding allocated to the Northern Ireland Audit Office will transform the way in which the Government spend taxpayers' money. For some time now, Members from all political parties have had the right to scrutinise reports prepared by the Comptroller and Auditor General. That simple but effective exercise has the potential to save millions of pounds of public money and redirect it to other areas.

Sadly, a small number of Assembly Members who continue to draw their salaries have decided not to sit on the Public Accounts Committee, or on any Committee, to carry out the crucial work to which I have referred. Others enjoy Ministers' perks but refuse to sit in the Executive to make the collective decisions that are so important to our people.

My earliest childhood memories are of listening to politicians who preached doom and gloom from platforms at seasonal intervals. While they lectured society, the rest of us were forced to endure appalling housing conditions and suffer the indignity of seeing our parents without jobs. That day is now over. It does not matter whether the prophets of doom spew out their negative views from the backs of lorries or from hilltops — things are not going back for me, my family or anyone, no matter what their colour, class or creed. Members of the public are not fools. They know that for the first time they are being represented and that their views are being listened

to. Why else would so many Assembly Members in the "No" camp have opened advice centres?

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which some like to malign, is helping the farming industry through one of the most difficult periods in its history. The Minister for that Department has won the respect and admiration of people from diverse quarters for the way in which she is handling the foot-and-mouth-disease crisis. In the Programme for Government there are, for the first time, new proposals and opportunities that should restore our farming industry to profitability in a way that it has not experienced in the past. Agriculture and rural development are no longer in competition but working as a partnership, helping to preserve the countryside and protect the environment. Under direct rule it was a horror story with many rural communities in danger of extinction. Now there is hope.

Over the past 30 years I watched helplessly as various British Governments treated this part of Ireland with contempt and scorn. I watched their antics as they jetted in and enjoyed the perks of high office but contributed little or nothing to our people or to their quality of life. The programme marks a new beginning and a new future that leaves that unfortunate period of history behind. It addresses the issues that created injustice and inequality and prevented any opportunity to address social need. I grew up experiencing all those injustices. I want to see an end to them, and so do the vast majority of people on this island.

The programme sets the targets to achieve that — targets that we can measure and improve upon as time goes by. Surely it is better to light a single candle than to sit and curse the darkness? Of course, the programme is not a single candle. As my Colleague Arthur Doherty said earlier today, it is a beacon of light offering much more than a ray of hope to so many people badly affected by the darkness and sterility of the politics in this land in the past. It threatens no one except those who have preached doom and gloom in the past. I know that, and so do the people of Northern Ireland.

I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: Mr Depute Convener, A'm for tawkin maistlie anent the Govrenment's plicht ti mak the Heftin o Unnerdocht Fowk (TSN) a heich maitter. A maun lofe the Govrenment for pittin TSN as the steid o the Daein for Govrenment. A pensie Govrenment maun heft the unnerdocht fowk o wir kintra bi helpin thaim get back ti wirkin an get awa frae puirtith. The Govrenment wad hae plicht ti luik haird at thaim wi nae wark an thaim athoot. The Govrenment plans wad be luikin ti seek oot the fowk an quarters as needs hae the maist an mak siccar Govrenment daeins wrocht ti heft thaim.

I am going to concentrate my discussion on the Government's promise to making the targeting of social

needs a priority. They have included this promise in the new TSN to underpin and inform the Programme for Government. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of Government to help the most disadvantaged people in our communities by helping them to get jobs and escape the cycle of deprivation. The Government have promised to focus on unemployment and social deprivation. The plans put forward aim to do this by identifying the people and the areas in greatest need, then trying to ensure that Government programmes are more effective in helping them. However, there are large sections of the community in TSN areas whose needs will not be met by this Programme for Government.

Without question, there are major inequalities in our society: in health, in education, and in the numbers of long-term unemployed in the Province. Northern Ireland is one of the most deprived areas in the United Kingdom. It consistently displays the highest levels of unemployment and comparison shows an even greater disparity in the rates of long-term unemployment.

The average gross weekly earnings per household and per person are among the lowest of any of the four home nations, and a much greater proportion of the population here relies on social security benefits. It grieves me to listen to Mr Dallat talk about the deprivation that he experienced in his area. Deprivation is not exclusive to one side of the community; it occurs in the Protestant and Unionist areas too. I come from a poor background, as did many other Members in this Chamber. Poverty is not exclusive to one side or the other.

The Government have promised to target long-term unemployment and social deprivation. I would like to use my constituency of Strangford as a case study. The borough of Ards has extremely high levels of deprivation. It is comparable to the very worst areas of the Province. As we speak, the industries of agriculture, fishing and textiles are under enormous pressure. The situation seems to be spiralling out of control. As a Unionist area, it is having great problems; that is not exclusive to one side or the other. We are in the midst of a crisis that will have an immense negative impact upon the economy in my area.

At this point, I should mention the high unemployment levels in the Ards borough. As has already been emphasised and illustrated with figures, many industries which formed the backbone of the local economy have recently closed or are facing meltdown. The textile industry has seen over 2,000 job losses. Farming, which is a core industry in our council area, is under great pressure, as is the fishing industry in the village of Portavogie. The Ards borough is having problems on all three fronts.

Unemployment levels among the male workforce are among the highest in the Province. The Northern Ireland average stands at 7.3%, whereas the figure for Newtown-

ards is 8.5%. Overall, unemployment figures are also well above the Northern Ireland average. Deprivation is a vicious circle which needs to be broken to allow people any real chance of life. The people of Strangford and of the Ards borough deserve that opportunity in the same way as everyone else. Will New TSN achieve that goal?

I question aspects of the Government's existing TSN policy, as the results do not appear to produce a true or accurate indication of social deprivation within any given area. There must be parity of social recognition between a disadvantaged person living in an area perceived to be affluent and a disadvantaged person in an area that is perceived to be disadvantaged. Although areas such as Ards and Strangford are perceived to be affluent areas, one only has to look at one of the local housing estates to see a different story. Take, for example, the Glen estate or the Westwinds estate in Newtownards, or the villages on the Ards Peninsula. These communities have higher rates of unemployment, more people on social security benefits, a lower rate of car ownership, and more people on the poverty level than in many other parts of the Province. That is the reality in the Ards borough — an area perceived to be affluent.

There must be flexibility in Government policy, or else this system of TSN will continue to punish the people of Ards borough and the Ards Peninsula. The Government and this Programme for Government must ensure that deprived areas are not ignored but are targeted for assistance. Can that be done within New TSN? Many believe that it cannot. I have a problem with the Programme for Government for that reason.

Mr O'Connor: I support the Programme for Government. I have listened to the debate intently, both in the Chamber and on television. I would like to speak about social development.

"We will combat social exclusion and poverty, with a particular emphasis on children."

That should be music to the ears of us all. Mr Shannon is correct to say that poverty knows no boundaries. Poverty is the same whether it is Larne, Carrickfergus or Newtownards.

We have a collective here, with Departments cutting across issues to deliver a service that targets social need and combats poverty — something we all want to see.

Mr Cobain spoke about child support and social security. Some of those benefits are very difficult to administer. I welcome the £3 million capital investment to administer those benefits through new computer systems. However, we need to ensure that we do not have the same kind of problems that were encountered with the computer system to administer child benefit. Like Mr Cobain, I have reservations about trying to administer different systems simultaneously.

In the Social Security Agency we see people on benefit, people from low-income families, people who live in poor housing, who are more likely to smoke, drink and have an unhealthy lifestyle. There must be a collective approach to targeting social need within those groups.

Education is a way out for many people and more needs to be done in this area. Although we have the top A level results in the United Kingdom, we also have major problems with people leaving school unable to read and write. These issues must be tackled over the next few years, and in the context of this programme. I believe this will happen because there is Executive authority behind it. Individual Departments can do certain things on their own.

I welcome some of the measures introduced by the Minister for Social Development. The new domestic energy efficiency scheme will go a long way towards trying to eliminate fuel poverty. Houses will be better heated so people will spend less money. However, we also need cheaper electricity for people who are wholly dependent on this source of energy.

Where I live not everyone claims all that he or she is entitled to. I deal with constituents who should have been receiving benefits some five or six years ago. Why has society let those people down for so long? I was particularly pleased to hear the Deputy First Minister say that he would look at benefit outreach programmes to try to ensure that people who are in real need receive every single penny to which they are entitled. In that context, we must make it easier for those people to claim benefits. The forms must be simplified; the whole social security package could be a one-stop shop — I hope that that is what is meant by the references to one system.

6.15 pm

There is a need to reduce electricity prices. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment made a statement yesterday. However, it is extremely perverse that electricity is 9% more expensive here than it is in the Republic of Ireland. We export electricity to the Republic, where it is provided to consumers at a price that is 9% lower than the price at which Northern Ireland Electricity provides it to us. Such things must be looked at in order to help those most in need. People need to be protected; there must be a safety net.

Some aspects that fall within the remit of the Department for Social Development could be improved. Just before Christmas, the Child Support Agency produced a report that contained a number of glaring inaccuracies. I welcome the fact that the Minister has brought forward new legislation to simplify the administration of that benefit. Unfortunately, it will not take effect until next year.

I want to thank the Executive for bringing forward the Programme for Government. It is a major first step towards combating poverty in our society.

Mr S Wilson: I want to make it clear, as other Members from this party have done already, that we do not support the document. It is presented as a Programme for Government, and the implication is that it is based on agreement and common action and that it is a collective piece of work. That, of course, is far from the case.

The background to our discussion is that the two main parties, which have supposedly signed up to the Programme for Government, are at loggerheads. They have been to the courts to fight each other, and more court actions are pending. One party has now withdrawn from the North/South Ministerial Council, in support, no doubt, of the long-standing DUP position.

The Deputy First Minister criticised Members from my party for their irresponsibility in not participating in the Executive that supposedly drew up this collective document. Members from all parties have criticised the document. Some have done it constructively, and some of their criticisms have been acceptable; others have not been constructive. The best example of that was Mrs Nelis, who in her own distinctive way has carried on the Republican tradition of whingeing about everything. After whingeing about it, she told us that the way forward was to have the Programme for Government in one hand and equality legislation in the other. I do not know whether Sinn Féin intend to recruit octopuses, but they will have to, for they have Armalites, ballot boxes, the Programme for Government, equality agendas and Lord knows what else in their hands.

The Programme for Government is meant to be a collective piece of work, but those who were supposedly involved in it are criticising each other. All the parties in the Assembly have criticised it, although some have defended it stoutly. This morning, we heard Sir Reg Empey claim all sorts of things for the Programme for Government: unemployment was down, house prices were up, and confidence was up. He did not say that that was happening in the economy a long time before the Programme for Government was even dreamt up, let alone drawn up.

It was an example of greater co-operation between parties than ever before. There was no rivalry between the parties involved in the Executive. Mr O'Neill echoed that this afternoon when he said that the document had been drawn up from scratch — a remarkable document. It was as if there had never been any ongoing programmes in Departments before the document was drawn up. It seemed that Government in Northern Ireland suddenly started when the document was drawn up. That is not true.

We do not have the ability to make decisions collectively and operate together. There is rivalry. There

is evidence that individual Ministers are using their Departments to further their own aims.

I will draw attention to the Minister of Education, whom my Colleague described as “the sinister Minister”. He tells us on page 107 of the Programme for Government that he intends to undertake 12 major works projects that will reduce the backlog of work across the schools estate. However, he has used the budget available to him like his own Sinn Féin election fund.

Half of the money has gone to schools in Londonderry — where he lives — or to Mid Ulster and West Tyrone, constituencies in which his party will contend for seats at the next election. Half of the private finance initiative funds have been spent in those areas. That is blatantly for electoral purposes. Has he directed those funds across the schools estate? No. The money has been directed at the Republican community. Thirty-four million pounds of private finance initiative money and £25.2 million of departmental money — half of the money from both funds — has been directed at a Sinn Féin election drive in three constituencies where they either hold seats or wish to hold seats after the next Westminster election.

We are told that the Programme for Government shows that the parties are not rivals and that they are working together towards a common programme. Reg Empey made that claim. Is he saying that the Ulster Unionist Party is so far down the road with Sinn Féin that he is endorsing their electoral campaign and the use of the schools budget to further it? Is that what he is saying? That is the reality. That is what lies behind the softened words of the Programme for Government. A Minister who is not accountable to the Executive, the Assembly or the Committees will direct money; he can do his own thing. That is not a programme for collective action; it is a programme for narrow party political action. Unfortunately our set-up allows people such as Martin McGuinness to get away with it.

Mr Ford: In the debate on the draft Programme for Government on 13 November 2000 I said that the test of the programme would be how well it would deal with all society's problems. I said that it had made a good start on socio-economic policies, and I would give it 7 out of 10 if we were in Scotland or Wales. There have been some improvements in the final programme. Areas such as equality, which were highlighted by the Deputy First Minister, have been improved considerably.

Jane Morrice highlighted references to sustainable development, which now seems to have become a little more apparent — although it was supposed to have been UK policy for some years.

There also has been some slippage in the programme. It is remarkable how often an aspiration for June has become October, or spring has become summer. Perhaps

the permanent secretaries have nobbled the politicians, or they have made it more realistic — that may be a more charitable way to express it. Certainly it is doubtful whether in many cases the public service agreements could be described as excessively overambitious. However, since I am a charitable man, perhaps I should now increase the mark to 7.5 or 8 out of 10 — if we were Scotland or Wales. Of course, we are not Scotland or Wales. We are a unique society with a distinct set of problems.

As I said in November, our fundamental problem is the deep division in our society. In that respect, the Programme for Government is sadly lacking. This remains my concern today, even after having listened to the contributions from all those Ministers who took time to speak in the debate. The programme has much fine rhetoric but very little substance. The thinness of the public service agreements that have been added illustrate that. Indeed, Alex Maskey of Sinn Féin, speaking in support of the programme, said the linkage between aspirations, firm targets and specific actions was lacking.

Opening the debate yesterday, the First Minister said he was disappointed with our amendment. He said that we had five months to consider the programme and that in many areas our ideas were close to those of the parties involved in drafting it. We have had a little over a week to consider the final report, and I agree that many of our ideas are close to those in the programme — which is why I have just given it 8 out of 10 in certain circumstances. However, many of the points raised by Sean Neeson in proposing our amendment were made by us last November, have since been made by us in questions to Ministers in this Assembly, and they have not been taken on board.

I want to look at some of those points. In November I highlighted the issue of sharing over separation as being a fundamental primary objective. That should not have come as any great surprise to the First Minister. In September 1998 he sat on a platform in Brighton while I made a speech on that topic, yet it does not seem to have made any difference. What about those who do not fall within the two main streams? We are all minorities in this place. However, two minorities appear to be more significant than all the others. Looking at the current version — the final version, we are told — there is almost nothing about promoting a shared society.

Back in November Kieran McCarthy highlighted the problems of graffiti, illegal flags and paramilitary murals. They intimidate the average person in Northern Ireland and make areas unwelcoming to visitors, but the subject is not mentioned. In fact, the Programme for Government has a section on promoting tourism. Paragraph 5.3.3 is headed:

“We will work to increase Northern Ireland’s attractiveness to visitors”.

However, there is not a single word about graffiti or painted kerbstones.

In the debate on the draft programme Eileen Bell said that the title of the introduction, “Making a Difference”, would be more credible if there had been any attempt whatsoever to get away from this dangerously traditional “two nations” concept. There is no sign that this concern has been taken on board. Today she highlighted aspects of community relations, where the Programme for Government still falls short. Similarly, I highlighted the vagueness of section 2.5 in that debate in November, and there has been no change of substance. There is nothing at all on our call for measures to promote integrated housing.

I really wonder where the First Minister has been — of course, he is not in the Chamber to hear a response to his speech — if he is surprised by our amendment. On the other hand, the Deputy First Minister acknowledged the sincerity of Sean Neeson’s amendment. Mr Mallon, unlike his Colleague Mr McGrady, who accused us of opportunism, accepts our sincerity and our right to put forward proposals. He claims that Alliance’s seven priorities are inherent in the Programme for Government and referred us to section 3.7 of annex C. He said that his vision was for a peaceful, inclusive society. Of course we share that, but section 3.7 is remarkably vague, with no specific targets or actions whatsoever.

We are not the only Members who have commented on the vagueness of the programme. Mr McCartney said that Sinn Féin and the NIUP both agree on the view we expressed in November about its vagueness. That is possibly some achievement for us. Many commentators, notably the Civic Forum in its response, which we received yesterday, have made the same point. Dr Paisley took time to criticise the presentation, the printing and the quality of the paper — I took time to read the contents. I must ask the Deputy First Minister, who, like most Ministers, is not present in the House — one hopes that one of his deputies will answer for him — what will actually get noticed out of this programme.

6.30 pm

Will people notice a specific aspiration, regardless of how vague its target is, or will they notice what he describes as an “inherent aspiration”, which has neither a target nor a specific action? If there is nothing specific in the programme, it will not be taken seriously — that is the crucial gap. We highlighted this problem during the debate on the draft programme last November. That gap still exists and our concerns have not been addressed.

This morning Mr McCartney and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment debated at length the

role and structure of the programme. Mr McCartney said that the Alliance Party, the Women’s Coalition and the PUP support the agreement and the Executive. The Women’s Coalition and the PUP can speak for themselves, but I wish to make our position quite clear. As Mr Close said, we endorse the Good Friday Agreement and we support it. It is not perfect, and there are many threads of petty sectarianism that we do not like. However, it is a massive step forward towards the kind of society that we want.

Nevertheless, support for the agreement does not constitute support for the Executive. Mr McCartney would have us believe that the only possible kind of opposition is a strident attempt to tear down the institutions of the agreement and to oppose everything that they stand for. The Alliance Party’s aim is to provide constructive opposition. It will support the agreement but it will also represent the views of those who are neither Unionist nor Nationalist, and who are not easily pigeonholed by those traditional politicians who wish to categorise people in this way. The Alliance Party will seek to promote an inclusive society.

I was saddened, but not particularly surprised, by the fact that only Ms McWilliams supported Mr Close’s call for the Executive to lead from the front to promote inclusion. There was no support from any of the Executive parties. The Civic Forum also noted the importance of this issue in its response to the programme. In referring to citizenship, it called for the Executive to lead by example and to demonstrate the potential of consensual politics. Would it not be an interesting example if the Executive followed this recommendation?

In proposing the amendment, Mr Neeson highlighted the issue of sectarianism in sport. The Deputy First Minister acknowledged that there was a problem, as did the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, who attempted to defend the Executive’s record. However, as Mr McCarthy said, it is over a year since we called for legislation similar to the Football (Offences) Act 1991. A year ago the Minister agreed to look at what was happening, yet there is absolutely nothing in the Programme for Government to address this fundamental, crucial problem. Even in the light of the scenes in Windsor Park last week, the best we can get is condemnation.

But the Executive have power in this place. We are no longer opposition politicians who have to call on direct rule Ministers. The Executive should have done something rather than simply making pious platitudes that had no substance. That was a completely inadequate response.

The Civic Forum also commented on the section in the Programme for Government that deals with community relations. It called for greater recognition of our wider cultural diversity than appears in the programme. It

pointed out that there is a surprising lack of detail on how to improve community relations. It stated that there is insufficient detail on the cross-departmental strategy for community relations.

Is it not clear that when we object to the inadequacies of the Programme for Government we are speaking in concert with a much wider group of civic society? We are speaking along with those who seek more from this Executive than we have received and who seek the full implementation of the vision with those of the agreement, which is not being fulfilled at the moment.

Mr Arthur Doherty — yet another Member who is not present — suggested that the Programme for Government was the Good Friday Agreement in action. This was followed by that lovely little interchange between Mr McElduff and Mrs Nelis, neither of whom is present, which included a description of people marching along with the Programme for Government in one hand and the Good Friday Agreement in the other. If people did this, they would discover that the Programme for Government has considerably more bulk but not necessarily more weight or gravitas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Ford: They would also discover that it fails to live up to the promise of the agreement. The Programme for Government is a step forward but it is not a big enough step. We need to begin the journey towards a more equal society today, not in next year's Programme for Government. That is why the amendment should be supported.

Mr Nesbitt: This has been a very broad debate. As Mr Ford said, we learned about the quality of paper, and we even learned about whose daughter is an artist, and whose daughter is not. It has been broad, and I trust that it has also been valuable. Of course, there were some Members on my right who despaired, who viewed the work as futile. Nonetheless, I trust that there are enough of us in the Executive, the Committees and the Assembly to move forward and prove that we have something in this motion and to carry it through to its conclusion.

We represent the first politicians in 28 years to consider how we govern ourselves, and the decisions that we take affect the citizens who elected us. Of course, this document is aspirational; it lasts for three years. However, it also indicates actions that must be taken. Over 50 Members of the Assembly debated this motion. Some of my ministerial Colleagues also mentioned aspects of the agreement. I will try to answer some of the questions raised and others will receive written answers.

Much was said about public service agreements, which were added to the draft programme after it was introduced in October. Dr Birnie asked whether we had too many

targets and whether there was a balance between too high and too low an expectation. We spoke to the Treasury, and we took its comments on board. The issue of public service agreements is a learning experience not only for us but also for those in government in London, Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Ms McWilliams asked how far behind we were with regard to poverty. She said that we have the answers. Yes, for Scotland and for Wales. I agree that we have to make more progress.

While Mr Maskey supported the Programme for Government and said that it was a very important document, he felt that it fell short and that some work remained to be done. We recognise that.

We were first charged with drawing up public service agreements in October 2000 within a short time frame. To date, the way in which we have developed public service agreements has met with the broad support of those we consulted throughout Northern Ireland. Having drawn up these public service agreements, we would be the first to say that they are not ideal and that further work is required. Indeed, the Programme for Government recognises that a start has been made but that there is still work to do.

There are aims and objectives in the public service agreements that are relatively easy to identify, but there are actions and targets that are more difficult to devise. Through the Departments we are trying to demonstrate that we are making a difference by fulfilling the Programme for Government.

These actions must be precise enough to be linked to spending allocations, which is a difficult exercise because some priorities may require no cash at all. However, the cash spend for 2000 and 2001 will be enough to deliver the targets set for other priorities. The Treasury recognises that this is not an easy exercise. There are pitfalls and actions may be nebulous and difficult to define. Some people might say that they are time-consuming to construct. Everyone involved found it difficult to match the resources to the actions.

Ms McWilliams and other Members said that we need decent policy outcomes, timetables and targets. I agree that targets are important. They are, in essence, performance measures for this Administration. We are in the process of developing a very simple four-part scheme: baselines as to where we are; targets that we wish to achieve; a timescale to achieve those targets; and, above all, a benchmark to indicate what is best standard. Members referred to those today. We are aware of those dynamics and dimensions to targets, and we are in the process of developing them.

Indeed, the overall aim of the PSAs is that targets should be affected by actions. We are trying to make them testable, deliverable, achievable and meaningful. We wish to do that, and we hope to make that difference.

I want to quote Monica McWilliams again. This is the third time that I have made reference to her, so I will give her her first name.

Ms Morrice: We are home and dry.

Mr Nesbitt: Who said that? It was Jane Morrice — she is here as well.

Monica said that we will not meet some of the targets, and she asked whether we will come back and be honest, upright and open and say why we did not. That is also an important element. This is a process that will be monitored. All those involved in this process will be accountable. Indeed, in monitoring the targets, it may not be such a bad thing if we do not make a target because the process will allow us to ask questions of the Government as to where, why and what we did not achieve. The intrinsic value of the process itself is, therefore, beneficial. That is another reason why I commend this.

Finally, PSAs are about identifying clear actions, the resources associated with those actions, the expected outcomes and the time period in which they are expected. At 4.30 pm — that seems a long time ago — Jane Morrice referred to excellent accountability. We are about trying to deliver excellent accountability.

Let me move to the amendment that was proposed yesterday by the Alliance Party. It “declines to approve”. That is a lovely way of saying “No”. The Alliance Party, of course, does not like to say “No”, but by declining to approve, it is saying “No” to this motion. Why? Because “it does not properly address the deep divisions and inequalities in this society”.

Mr Neeson, in making his proposition yesterday, said that there has never been a greater need for reconciliation. I agree entirely with that. There has never been a greater need for reconciliation than there is now. However, he went on to say that there are only seven measures for dealing with division.

I had some sympathy with Mr McGrady when he said that the Alliance Party has been slightly opportunistic. I recognise and share his concerns to make progress — I genuinely do. However, it is naïve to think that we can make that progress some very quick fix by producing a document.

A central element of the Programme for Government deals with equality, investing in education and skills, securing a competitive economy, and ensuring better health. Those will represent the core components of tackling division. Dr Farren, who has just entered the Chamber,

made reference to that aspect. He referred to the task force that was being set up, which he would be chairing. My Colleague Danny Kennedy also referred to that. He said that education is a vibrant aspect necessary for the economy and well-being of Northern Ireland. All of those represent a package that will, it is to be hoped, heal the divisions.

I shall refer quickly to some of Mr Neeson’s comments. He said that the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 needs to be dealt with. We must not overlook the fact that the responsibility for justice in Northern Ireland resides with the Northern Ireland Office. It makes no sense to call for the rejection of a Programme for Government on the basis of something for which we have no responsibility.

6.45 pm

Mr Neeson mentioned flags and graffiti. It is important that both communities are able to celebrate their culture and identity. There is a Northern Ireland community that has many facets and which can recognise culture, identity and diversity — as was seen very clearly at the Odyssey complex two months ago when many thousands witnessed a very enjoyable event. The Council of Europe defines those aspects very clearly, and Dr Adamson referred to it earlier. We are about reflecting that in the business of government.

Mr Neeson also said that more resources should be available for community relations. I assure the Member that £5.5 million, out of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister’s budget of £28 million, is allocated for community relations. There is also £3.4 million from the Department of Education and more money from Peace II.

Northern Ireland has had 30 years of violence. The fact that the Assembly is debating the Programme for Government represents a healing of the divisions and a coming together of the community that no Programme for Government can show. Words are not enough. Action is here today.

When you peel away the rhetoric of some of my Colleagues on the right, the Pledge of Office states that all must partake in the Programme for Government and that all must act within it. What better example of healing community division is there than the Democratic Unionist Party’s Social Development Minister, Mr Morrow, saying, “I will target areas most deprived. My Department will do this”? Those are the very aspects that Members opposite have been calling for. And that is from a DUP Minister. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Nesbitt: It always hurts them to hear these things.

The implementation of the Belfast Agreement subscribes in the fullest manner possible — and I say this to the Alliance Party — to all rights and obligations to deal with Northern Ireland's divided society. That will manifest itself.

Economic issues were also raised over the past two days. Mr Roche said that the Programme for Government had no analysis of problems facing the Departments. In the section of the Programme for Government entitled "Securing a Competitive Economy" one will find an assessment of the difficulties relating to the infrastructure and the economy of Northern Ireland. The challenges that need to be met in respect of globalisation are also stated. Northern Ireland, with its population of 1·8 million, is very small compared to the rest of the United Kingdom, never mind to Europe and the world.

George Savage and Dr Paisley raised some agriculture issues — very important, sensitive and serious at this time. The process of rural proofing will be steered by an interdepartmental group. It will be chaired by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, and it will have representatives from all Departments. Each Department will be required to rural proof its own policies. The early retirement scheme will be examined. I am glad that my Colleague George Savage is still in the Chamber — he will be mindful of what happened before.

Mr Savage: I have not forgotten it.

Mr Nesbitt: He has not forgotten it, nor have I. Mr Poots raised the issue of victims. That is another sensitive subject that must be referred to. We accept that there is not much cash — only £420,000 — in the Victims Unit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. We anticipate increasing that, but £6·7 million is expected to come through Peace II, and £12 million has been announced through Mr Ingram, the Northern Ireland Office Minister.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: What about the fishermen?

Mr Nesbitt: I have not forgotten about the fishermen and the tie-up scheme that the Member mentioned the other day. I am liaising — wearing my constituency hat — with the fishermen in South Down. You can strike that off if you wish, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I did say that I was wearing my constituency hat.

Let us come to money — the fluidity that makes government work. I can understand the comments made by some Members. Mr McGrady said that we must pressurise central Government to get funds for our roads. Dr Paisley said that the rural roads need to be attended to. Mr Campbell talked about the decades of underinvestment. Ms de Brún said that the inherited budget of £2 billion is not enough.

Mr McCartney, who, I am glad to see, has entered the Chamber, made reference using economic arguments to twist the reality when he said that economic power is limited to the cake you share. Let us try to analyse that. Is he saying that we should have power to raise taxes because we do not have enough money? Is he aware that regions such as the Länder in Germany, though they do not raise taxes, are very economically viable? Is he saying that we should raise marginal taxes? Is he aware that in Scotland, for example, where there is a £14 billion Government purse, that would raise taxes of only £300 million? In Northern Ireland 1p on the rates would raise only £50 million. The point of taxation, if that is what he is on about, is that it is a marginal cost, which tests whether the Government that makes that decision is spending wisely.

Does Mr McCartney realise that we are a devolved region in the United Kingdom within a single fiscal unit? Unfortunately, I will leave Mr McCartney with one word and say that, as always, he is a Cassandra — a prophet of doom.

Globalisation of economic power is limited. OPEC and oil prices, the USA and its economy, currency and currency fluctuations all affect our economy. Mr McCartney may be — may be — a good lawyer, but a lesson or two in economics would not go amiss.

Mr Haughey and I are jointly responsible for bringing the Programme for Government forward to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I thank Mr Haughey, but, more importantly, I thank Will Haire and other officials in the Economic Policy Unit for the work that they have done.

We work in conjunction with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel. I thank them for the Programme for Government that has been brought to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

I have sought to answer some of the points but not all of them. We have had a wide ranging debate about many things that I mentioned at the beginning. The programme that is before Members provides a framework. It is a public document. It is a working document. It is an unfolding and developing document. I therefore ask that the Assembly reject the amendment proposed by the leader of the Alliance Party and endorse the Programme for Government as agreed by the Executive. I commend the motion to Members.

Question put That the Amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 5; Noes 46.

AYES

Eileen Bell, Seamus Close, David Ford, Kieran McCarthy, Sean Neeson.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Alex Attwood, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Esmond Birnie, P J Bradley, Joan Carson, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Ivan Davis, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Reg Empey, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Tom Hamilton, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, Derek Hussey, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Alban Maginness, Seamus Mallon, David McClarty, Alasdair McDonnell, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Eddie McGrady, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Monica McWilliams, Francie Molloy, Mick Murphy, Dermot Nesbitt, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Ken Robinson, George Savage, John Tierney.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 47; Noes 27.

AYES

Ian Adamson, Alex Attwood, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Esmond Birnie, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Joan Carson, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Ivan Davis, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Reg Empey, Séan Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Tom Hamilton, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, Derek Hussey, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Alban Maginness, Seamus Mallon, David McClarty, Alasdair McDonnell, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Eddie McGrady, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Monica McWilliams, Francie Molloy, Mick Murphy, Dermot Nesbitt, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Ken Robinson, George Savage, John Tierney.

NOES

Eileen Bell, Paul Berry, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Séamus Close, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, David Ford, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Kieran McCarthy, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Séan Neeson, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government agreed by the Executive.

7.15 pm

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: We had a happening here which I hope will never be repeated in this House. An attempt was made to keep a section of the Assembly from registering its vote. This is very serious. If people on the other side think that it is a laugh, that is their democracy. If two Members say "No" the House has to divide. If the great House of Commons divides for two people, this devolved Assembly must do likewise.

I intend raising this issue with the Speaker. An attempt was made to take away the right of individuals to vote.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I note your comments, Dr Paisley. Thank you.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker:

As no amendments have been tabled, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the five clauses of the Bill.

Clauses 1 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

BUDGET BILL

Final Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I beg to move

That the Budget Bill [NIA 10/00] do now pass.

I will be brief. The Final Stage of the Budget Bill is the conclusion of the first full financial year during which the Assembly has been responsible for approving Estimates. The Assembly has had the opportunity to question and debate the detailed expenditure proposals for the 2000-01 financial year. I am glad, for want of a better word, to say that it has taken full advantage of that opportunity. This began with the Supply resolutions associated with the main Estimates early last summer. We had a full debate again in February on the 2000-01 spring Supplementary Estimates. It is right that there should be full that which we had today on the Programme for Government. That is the important difference that devolution is helping to make.

These expenditure proposals emanate from our devolved Administration, which is fully accountable to the Assembly. The Assembly has the ultimate say on whether to accept them. I can assure all those who participated in the various debates and in the deliberations of the Committees that the points they raised are of interest. Their validity and merit is recognised, not least because they reflect the concerns of the wider community that Members represent.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: If this Assembly has the final say, why is it that we were not able to put down an amendment on this today? We tried to put down five amendments and were told that we could not do so. If we have the final say on everything that we are passing tonight, why is it not amended?

Mr Deputy Speaker: My understanding is that no amendments can be put down at this stage.

Mr Durkan: This is the Final Stage. There would not be amendments at this stage. Amendments were submitted yesterday for the Further Consideration Stage, but those amendments were not taken. The Speaker gave his ruling and his grounds for it, in answer to points raised by Mr Dodds. Those points were accepted. It was the nature of the amendments, not the fact of amendments, that was ruled out. The Speaker in his ruling said that the particular nature of the amendments would have had the effect of making the Bill ultra vires. That was the reason that those particular amendments were not taken. That is a matter for the Speaker, not for me or, indeed, the Executive.

Mr Dodds: The Minister accurately records what happened. However, the Speaker, in his ruling, agreed with me that the amendments — which would have deleted

expenditure on the all-Ireland aspects of the Belfast Agreement (the North/South bodies) and kept it within Northern Ireland Departments — were not acceptable because those particular bodies were given a special position in the legislation. You can amend and remove expenditure in relation to health, education and agriculture, but you cannot do so for the North/South bodies. It illustrates a point that we have made in the past — that those bodies are given a special position within the institutions set up under the agreement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I support the ruling of the Speaker yesterday. I therefore do not see any point in taking amendments at the Final Stage of the Bill.

Mr Durkan: The debate that has taken place yesterday and today on the Programme for Government has served to underline the fact that the Executive and the Ministers in the various Departments have been getting to grips with their responsibilities and tasks. The Ministers have taken up their respective responsibilities and, more importantly, have collectively taken up the key responsibilities of the Executive.

This past year has also seen the various Assembly Committees get to grips with their responsibilities. I know that points of concern have been reflected at various stages of budgetary consideration, and I want again to underline the fact that departmental Committees have a crucial role to play in scrutinising expenditure proposals and presenting their views on priorities and allocations.

I know from the interest that Committees have shown in financial issues that their contribution will develop further. I have no problem with encouraging that, but I also know from the way in which Members' interests are being pressed in Committees that I have no need to encourage it.

I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the role and contribution of the Finance and Personnel Committee. Its work is very difficult and thankless, and it has to work within strict time limits. I appreciate its members' commitment and understanding in helping to develop financial procedures. We need to develop these further and improve them in the interests not just of the Finance and Personnel Committee, but of all the Committees and of the House.

We will continue to work with the Committee and the Assembly to help establish improved practices and procedures. These should facilitate the management of the budget cycle and provide greater confidence that the Assembly is fully exercising its scrutiny responsibilities, and that it is being consulted appropriately on expenditure proposals.

That developing confidence in the activities of the Assembly should in turn help the development of public confidence in the Assembly.

This Administration will be seen to have a proven ability to recognise and reflect local interests and priorities in a way that simply was not possible under direct

rule. The 2001-02 Main Estimates will be coming before the Assembly in a few months. I look forward to that further round of discussions and debate, including those in relation to the greater and more timely involvement of the Committees. I must stress that the interests and concerns on expenditure which people have expressed in budget considerations and in the course of today's debate do not have to wait for the return of the Main Estimates before Committees. People can pursue those interests now. The public service agreements on which so many useful comments were made in the previous debate should be an aid to Committees in exploring those issues.

7.30 pm

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 20.

AYES

Nationalist

Alex Attwood, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, Alban Maginness, Seamus Mallon, Alasdair McDonnell, Eddie McGrady, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Francie Molloy, Mick Murphy, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, John Tierney.

Unionist

Ian Adamson, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Esmond Birnie, Joan Carson, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Reg Empey, Tom Hamilton, Derek Hussey, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, David McClarty, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Dermot Nesbitt, Ken Robinson, George Savage.

Other

Eileen Bell, David Ford, Monica McWilliams.

NOES

Unionist

Paul Berry, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Jim Shannon, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>68</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>48 (70.6%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>26 (100%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>19 (48.7%)</i>

Question accordingly agreed to (by cross-community consent).

Resolved:

That the Budget Bill (NIA 10/00) do now pass.

Adjourned at 7.37 pm.

Committee Stage Records

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 7 February 2001

**ADOPTION (INTERCOUNTRY
ASPECTS) BILL
(NIA 8/00)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Ms Hanna
Mr J Kelly
Mr McFarland
Ms McWilliams
Mrs I Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr J Clarke)
Dr H Harrison) Department of Health, Social
Mr A Sharp) Services and Public Safety

The Chairperson: Thank you for coming, and I apologise for keeping you waiting. I welcome Mr J Clarke, Dr H Harrison and Mr A Sharp from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. We reached clause 12 the last time we met. We had also some queries, which we can perhaps leave to the end.

Clause 13 (Effect of determinations in Convention countries, etc.)

Mr Clarke: This is the part of the Convention that deals with reciprocity. It says that we in the jurisdiction would recognise the decisions of the authorities in the Convention country, which would include those that had the powers to authorise and annul adoptions. It is worded in that way because the authorities themselves will vary from country to country and because we are dealing with a very long list of countries. It also states that the decisions would be recognised here, but that would be subject to a provision in clause 12. Clause 12 states that the power of the other country's authority to make these determinations is challengeable in the High Court here. Therefore, it is mainly a technical provision to do with reciprocity.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 14 (Minor and consequential amendments and repeals)

The Chairperson: The memorandum states that this clause

"effects minor and consequential amendments to the 1987 Order, the Matrimonial and Family Proceedings (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 and the Adoption (Hague Convention) Act (Northern Ireland) 1969."

Mr Clarke: We do not have any particular notes. We are just taking the clauses as they read regarding their definition of things. For example, an overseas adoption means the same here as it does in the legislation operating in England, which is the Adoption Act 1976. They are really technical amendments and are not substantive.

The Chairperson: We raised the question about the case of the twins on the Internet, but we will come to that later.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 15 (Interpretation)

The Chairperson: Clause 15 defines certain terms used in the Bill.

Mr Clarke: Again, I do not have any specific points to note, but clause 15 is an interpretation provision.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 16 (Short title and commencement)

Mr Clarke: The Committee may wish to talk about the commencement provision.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Schedule

The Chairperson: The schedule sets out the text of the Convention. It is based directly on the Convention, so I doubt if it will be queried.

Mr Clarke: It was reproduced in the schedule because the purpose of the Convention was to make regulations et cetera. Therefore, including the text of the Convention will be of importance when regulations are made. It will show that the regulations are within the vines of the legislation.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

The Chairperson: We shall now return to some queries we have had.

Mr McFarland: Do the financial effects of the Bill have to be passed?

The Chairperson: That matter has to be addressed. Is it correct that the Kilshaw and Internet twins' case

will not be covered by the Bill but by United Kingdom legislation?

Mr Clarke: We do not want to cover United Kingdom-wide legislation because at present many issues are being considered regarding the potential loopholes and safeguards for children.

The Chairperson: Is the loophole discovered in the Kilshaw case part and parcel of that?

Mr Clarke: Yes, that is part and parcel of it. I could say more about that, but the situation across the United Kingdom is fluid at present with regard to what needs to be done to close that loophole.

The Chairperson: Will Northern Ireland need new legislation for that or will it be covered in United Kingdom legislation?

Mr Clarke: The preference is to have separate Northern Ireland legislation.

The Chairperson: Please keep the Committee informed on that matter. Will we need to amend the legislation? If changes have to be made, will they have to be made to primary legislation? That is a problem for the Committee.

Mr Clarke: It is a problem for all of us because it is a matter of timing. I do not know what the amendments will be, but it is likely that there will be a need for primary legislation to deal with some of the loopholes. Some of the legislation would go further if other issues such as immigration needed to be addressed.

The Chairperson: Will the passage of this legislation have to be halted unless that is clarified?

Mr Clarke: This legislation contains safeguards. One safeguard is the home study report, which would close one important loophole. There is also the provision about restrictions on bringing children to Northern Ireland from abroad, which is in contravention of regulations. Those provisions will have to be introduced as they are important safeguards for children.

Ms McWilliams: Did the Kilshaws circumvent the home study report or was that not in the legislation?

Mr Clarke: My understanding is that, in England and Wales, the home study provision is the aspect of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 that was introduced. However, it had not been commenced at the relevant time for the home study report carried out in the Kilshaw case. In other words, we cannot say that they circumvented the law because it was not in operation at that time.

Ms McWilliams: At least that matter has been addressed in this legislation.

Mr Clarke: That is correct, and that is why I made the comment about commencement at that moment. It is an appointed day commencement provision, which does not rely on any subordinate rule or regulation.

The Chairperson: Our problem is that the Committee stage must go to print by 6 April 2001, so that just gives us March. Whatever we do has to happen before that date.

Mr Clarke: I am trying to be as helpful as I can.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that. It is very complex.

Mr Clarke: My perception is that we will see primary legislation in England and Wales between now and then. If we can pick up some of that legislation, that is all well and good. However, the safeguards have to be in place. Another safeguard is bringing the child into the United Kingdom without being in contravention of the legislation.

The Chairperson: Shall we continue as normal then?

Mr Clarke: That is our stance, otherwise we could be holding this open for some time.

Ms McWilliams: I asked one of the adoption agencies for help with the Bill, and they pointed out that they were concerned about the resource implications. Although the numbers are small, their view was that carrying out the home study visits would add to the workload of the registered bodies. Their argument was that, if they are asked to carry out that work with a limited budget, it may affect domestic adoptions. It seems that domestic adoptions in Northern Ireland are proportionately lower than elsewhere, which is of some concern. However, if they are asked to carry out more of those type of adoptions, will it eat into the budget? The explanatory memorandum says that it would not, but what is your view?

Dr Harrison: At present, the number of intercountry adoption applications in Northern Ireland is low in comparison with areas in England and Wales. We do not encounter the problem that the Kilshaw case demonstrated, in that all of our intercountry adoption home study reports have been carried out by qualified social workers from registered adoption agencies. The number of intercountry adoption applications is rising, but an issue that arose at the last Committee meeting was that couples are being charged for the home study report. My understanding is that all boards and trusts will begin to charge for such a report. Technically, therefore, the service should be self-financing, enabling sessional workers to be brought in as necessary. Alternatively, it should enable the work to be subcontracted to voluntary organisations.

You may be aware that the Family Care Society is already undertaking a number of home study reports for certain trusts in the Province. Therefore there should not be any major resource implications for boards and trusts.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. Before we return to matters arising from clause 1, can I draw your attention to an email, which the Committee Clerk has received from Faith Henderson. She says:

"I would like to convey, as an intercountry adoptive parent, some of my concerns in relation to the Intercountry Aspects Bill."

She talks about the lack of training available for staff in adoption agencies involved in that specialised area. She continues:

"This sometimes leads to unnecessary and frustrating time lapses in processing the home study to the panel."

She goes on to say:

"it is realised it is not in the Bill's remit to address post-placement health status confirmation. This, I feel, is neglected to the children, parents and professionals involved's detriment. Finance is always referred to — but as Ms de Brún stated on 4/12/00, 'the benefits, happiness and fulfilment of childless couples and their adopted children in a good home cannot be overestimated'".

We shall refer that to the Minister. It does not directly concern our work on the Bill, but it is important that it be recorded. We shall move back to clause 1, and hand over to Mr Clarke.

Ms McWilliams: I have read the email and though I am aware that the issue of post-placement health checks does not relate to this Bill, the question of training came up indirectly when the Bill was first laid before the House, because of the issue of the umbrella body and its state of development, as well as related local aspects. Do you have anything specific to say on the financial implications? Is the Bill required to address any special expertise and training not already covered in the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999?

Dr Harrison: Training is certainly a big issue. Training for social workers carrying out home study reports relating to intercountry adoption applications arose in the social services inspection of adoption services. We have training recommendations on the question in the overview report, which is due in May 2001. The Department will be looking at the resources associated with the training recommendations to see whether we can find the additional sums required. The Bill need not address anything like that at the moment.

Clause 1 (Regulations giving effect to Convention)

The Chairperson: We shall go back to clause 1. The Committee had asked for clarification on the difference between the term of imprisonment referred to in clause 1 and that referred to in clause 12. If my memory serves me well, the terms in question were of three and six months respectively.

Mr Clarke: I am unsure in which order I should take those. The penalty in clause 12 was an amendment to the existing Adoption (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, which already includes a penalty for taking a child out of the jurisdiction. It introduces into the domestic Order the offence of bringing a child into the jurisdiction. The penalty in the existing Adoption (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 is stated at level 5 on the standard scale, or a prison term not exceeding six months. We decided to be

consistent with our own Order, since the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 in Great Britain has three-months imprisonment rather than a six-month term. The Committee has highlighted the issue of consistency. The three-month penalty in clause 1 reflects the position of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 in England and Wales. Therefore, there is the issue of consistency in terms of the maximum penalty.

The Chairperson:

I am looking at the Bill. In clause 1(3)(b), on line 12, it says

"provide that any person who contravenes any provision of the regulations is to be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three months".

Should that not read six months?

Mr Clarke: It is level 5 on the standard scale or six months in clause 12. That clause inserts the amendment to the 1987 Order. Six months is consistent with the offence that already exists in the 1987 Order — the taking of a child outside the country. It would appear slightly anomalous to differentiate between two provisions sitting alongside one other in the 1987 Order — one concerning the taking of a child out of a country in contravention of the law and the other bringing a child in.

Mr McFarland: Although those are small offences, three months is unlikely to deter anyone who is attempting to do that. The sort of person who will do it illegally will undoubtedly do it anyway. Six months makes a better stab at a deterrent. We should harmonise the prison term at six months, as that would stand a better chance of working as a deterrent.

Mr Clarke: That is a policy matter, but where is this coming from?

The Chairperson: If you use words like 'not exceeding six months,' it indicates that it could still be a maximum of six months.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate that those are all maximum sentences. However, courts are notorious for not issuing them fully.

Mr McFarland: If the Committee takes this view — that six months should be harmonised — can you make it happen, or are we introducing Committee amendments to the legislation once again?

Mr Clarke: I am quite happy to —

Mr McFarland: If the Committee wishes to raise the term to six months in clause 1, and harmonise that with the Bill, is the Department able to simply take it off, redraft it and solve the problem? Otherwise, are we introducing amendments before the House?

Mr Clarke: That is purely procedure. I have no problem with taking it away and changing the penalty.

Ms McWilliams: Will the Department do it?

The Chairperson: Will the Department do it, or will we do it? Do we want to do it?

Mr McFarland: It is easier for the Department to do it. We would have the whole rigmarole of introducing amendments.

Mr Clarke: I am a little uncertain about the procedures. However, I would have no problem with taking it away and doing what is necessary to make it consistent.

The Chairperson: If the Committee agrees, we can write to the Department, suggesting a change to “not exceeding six months”.

Mr McFarland: The view of the Committee is that the Department should consider the matter. When we spotted such anomalies in the past, the Department officials would ask us to leave it with them to sort it out. We would be happy to do that.

Mr Clarke: I shall not argue about the consistency point. I would, however, alert you to the fact that that penalty would be inconsistent with what applies other parts of the UK. We are already inconsistent in relation to the penalty for the other offence. We shall examine the matter.

The Chairperson: We shall write a letter. Is the Committee content that the Bill should read “six months” instead of “three months”?

Mr McFarland: Would there be any implications, if we were to change it to “six months”?

Mr Clarke: I cannot see any implications. It would still be a case for a Magistrate’s Court, and it would not cause any difficulty if we were to make that change. The only issue is that the provisions would be different from those that apply in the rest of the UK. The Bill is already different to the GB legislation in relation to the existing offence anyway.

The Chairperson: The Bill will read “not exceeding”.

Mr Clarke: Yes.

Question proposed:

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause as amended by the Department, put and agreed to.

Clause 5 (Annulment, etc., of Convention adoptions, etc.)

The Chairperson: The Committee felt that in the new paragraphs to be inserted into the 1987 Order, the words “habitually reside” should be defined.

Mr Clarke: Needless to say, we have been dashing around trying to see what others think about it. “Habitual residence” is defined only in case law. The House of Lords defines it as a person’s abode in a particular place or country which he has adopted voluntarily for settled purposes for the time being, whether long or short-term.

The meaning of “habitually resident” depends on a number of factors, including the person’s intention to continue to reside in a country. Having a fixed period that could be regarded as habitual residence would not work. A person could have been here for only a short time but have the obvious intention to reside here for a longer period or indefinitely. The term does not have a tidy definition, but there are reasons for that.

Mr McFarland: If there is case law on this, and the House of Lords described it in those terms, and that is the system, then I do not see why we should not use it.

Mr Clarke: It is subject to change.

The Chairperson: We could try.

Ms McWilliams: How much money have you got?

Mr Clarke: We will use their inherent discretion.

Rev Robert Coulter: The noble Lords can be rather abstract at times.

The Chairperson: They can, except when it comes to funds.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause as amended by the Department, put and agreed to.

Clause 7 (Adoption Service to include intercountry adoptions etc.)

The Chairperson: The Committee was concerned about the charging arrangements for intercountry adoption assessments. As agreed by the Committee, a letter was sent to the Minister on that subject. I remember that there were big variations.

Mr Clarke: The subject of the letter was the inconsistency. Apparently, two trusts do not charge at all at the moment. That might change.

The Chairperson: It was not that way about a year ago. I think that there were more trusts that did not charge.

Mr Clarke: Your previous letter mentioned a much higher level — about £10,000 or thereabouts. Or was it £3,000? However, two trusts, as I understand it, do not charge at the moment. Your letter touched on the inconsistency in the approach to that.

The Chairperson: That clause was agreed last time, so we do not need to agree it again. Is everyone happy with that?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 12 (Restriction on bringing children into the United Kingdom for adoption.)

The Chairperson: The Committee questioned the use of the term “British Islands” rather than “United Kingdom”, which is used elsewhere in the Bill.

Mr Clarke: It seems to be the result of a difference between draftsmen, draftsladies, as in the previous case.

This is an amendment to the 1987 Order, in which the term “British Islands” was used. The only reason why “British Islands” is used in this clause — which amends the 1987 Adoption Order — is for the sake of consistency. It would otherwise be inconsistent with the rest of the 1987 Order. “British Islands” is of course defined in this Bill.

Mr McFarland: I refer you to clause 7, which says:

“In Article 3 of the 1987 Order ... the United Kingdom the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man”.

In clause 8, it says:

“United Kingdom the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.”

Clause 9 of the Bill, which refers to article 13(4)(b) of the 1987 Order says

“United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man”.

Clause 11 of the Bill, which refers to article 2(3A) and (3B)(b) of the 1987 Order says

“United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man”.

Those references are also included at the end of the clause. Therefore, considering the argument that the Bill should be consistent with the 1987 Order, why should we suddenly change the term to “the British Islands” in the Bill?

Mr Clarke: The way the term is used is consistent. The different provisions that you are referring to relate to different concepts. On the one hand, we are talking about orders made in certain countries, and, in the other case, we are talking about the offence of bringing a child into a designated area, which is referred to as “the British Islands”.

Mr McFarland: There are four other articles in the 1987 Order that use the terms “United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man”, and those are referred to in clauses 7, 8, 9 and 11, of the Bill. Another article in the 1987 Order, which uses different terminology, is referred to in clause 12 of the Bill. In clause 13 of the Bill, the term has gone back to “United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man”. I have not gone any further than that to see where else in the Bill such references are made. It seems daft that, in the middle of the Bill, we should have one definition that is at variance with all the other definitions that have been used. We have an opportunity to make the terms consistent, so that there will be no doubt about what “British Isles”, “British Islands” does or does not include.

Rev Robert Coulter: Clause 12 of the Bill refers to a new article 58ZA(1) of the 1987 Order and refers to

“A person habitually resident in the British Islands who at any time brings into the United Kingdom for the purpose of adopting a child”.

Mr Clarke: We are endeavouring to make it an offence triable in Northern Ireland for a person to bring a child into what is defined as “the British Islands”. That is a different matter from the issues of adoption orders

made in other jurisdictions. The terminology is being used for a different purpose. The Bill uses the term “the British Islands” with reference to the commission of the offence of bringing a child into the Channel Islands. That offence could be brought to trial in Northern Ireland, if that person moved through the Channel Islands and came to Northern Ireland.

Ms McWilliams: Is the difficulty just about the nomenclature, or is it a legal issue?

Mr Clarke: It is a technical, drafting point and is there to cover the offence.

The Chairperson: So, there is a legal reason.

Mr Clarke: There is the issue of freedom of movement between the Channel Islands and the rest of the UK. I am not an expert, although I have dealt with this issue in previous legislation. For certain purposes, the Channel Islands are being treated as if they were in the UK, although they are not legally or technically part of the UK. That is what this provision addresses.

Mr McFarland: Let us follow the logic in this matter. Clause 12 of the Bill relates to article 58ZA(5) of the 1987 Order, which states that:

“the British Islands’ means the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man”.

We are talking about the “United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man”. The four clauses that we talked about earlier contained the phrase “United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man”.

I cannot understand why all the other articles mentioned refer to “the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man” but this article refers to “the British Islands”. Is it a draftsman’s foible? Nobody seems to have picked this up, which is a good reason for us to do so now. We should have some consistency through this. Someone living at the far end of the world and struggling with the Intercountry Adoption Act, trying to understand whether he or she can get in through the Isle of Man or not, should have absolutely no doubt about the matter.

The Chairperson: There may be a legal point, designed to get the culprits, or whatever. However, if that is not the case and it is just a lack of consistency in the terminology, it should be examined, otherwise we are going to go round and round again.

Mr Clarke: I am not especially hung up about it. I have been advised that the draftsman who drew up article 58 of the 1987 Order used the term “British Islands”. I have no hesitation in saying that the draftsman with whom I am dealing now would not use that terminology. It is for consistency with article 58, which deals with the removal of children from Northern Ireland. This clause deals with bringing children into Northern Ireland. It is a legal question whether you could use this Bill to make

general amendments to the 1987 Order. The purpose of the Bill is to deal with intercountry adoption.

Mr McFarland: Surely, the whole idea was to make amendments to the Order.

Mr Clarke: For the purposes of intercountry adoption.

The Chairperson: Should we leave it alone?

Mr Clarke: I can only advise. I do not know whether it is within the powers of a Bill that is supposed to be about intercountry adoption to make amendments to other aspects of adoption law.

The Chairperson: I would need a week to look into all of that. It is important, and Mr McFarland was right to raise it.

Mr Clarke: We have approached the draftsmen on the issue. Technically the legislation works, but it is a drafting matter.

Rev Robert Coulter: Are the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man part of the United Kingdom?

Mr Clarke: They are not, but, for many purposes they are treated as if they were. The Bill, as drafted, works. It is a drafting point whether we want to spell it out instead of using “British Islands”. To make it tidy, we would have to take the “British Islands” references from the Adoption Order 1987 and spell them out. As a layman, I cannot say whether this Bill can cover that.

Mr McFarland: I am not going to die in a ditch about this. I was trying to be helpful to the Department by pointing out that it would be confusing for a layperson,

trying to read this, that there are different definitions of a thing in the same document. We had a problem with the last Bill that we dealt with. It was not clear whether person A, B or C was telling C, A or D who was responsible. We asked the Department to clarify it, which they did. In the end, everyone could understand the Bill — even me. It is a drafting problem. It is slightly dangerous to have different definitions for something in two consecutive clauses.

The Chairperson: Did the legal draftsmen say that it had to be that way?

Mr Clarke: That would be putting it a bit strongly. He said that, in the 1987 Order, the preference would have been to use “the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands, and the Isle of Man”. Article 68 was couched in different terms. How far do we want to amend other legislation in the interests of consistency? I would be misquoting the draftsman if I were to say that he said that it was legally impossible to do that.

The Chairperson: I suppose that it is a bit late in the day to change that. Should we just leave it as it is?

Ms McWilliams: We should leave it. It has implications for clause 13 of the Bill.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause as amended by the Department, *put and agreed to.*

The Chairperson: I thank Mr Clarke, Dr Harrison and Mr Sharp for attending today.

Meeting ended at 4.55pm.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**FINANCE AND PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 27 February 2001

**DEFECTIVE PREMISES
(LANDLORD'S LIABILITY) BILL
(NIA 5/00)**

The Chairperson (Mr Molloy): I welcome Eithne Harkness from the Law Reform Advisory Committee (LRAC). Do you wish to open, Mrs Harkness?

Mrs Harkness: There may be some confusion about my role today. I am here as a member of the Law Reform Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland, which published a report on defective premises in 1998. I was a member of that committee as an academic lawyer and senior lecturer in the Faculty of Law at Queen's University. At that time the committee was made up of lawyers and some lay people who worked on a part-time basis and looked at particular aspects of civil law that were referred to the committee.

I am not quite sure what aspects of the report the Committee wanted to consider this afternoon. Are there any particular issues to which the Committee wanted to draw attention?

The Committee Clerk: The Committee received evidence from the Housing Rights Service and the Northern Ireland centre of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, and in both instances concerns were raised about the exemption in clause 3 for landlords of tenancies that were either restricted or regulated. The Office of Law Reform had previously indicated to the Committee that that decision was based on advice from the LRAC. We need to determine whether or the Committee is content to continue with that exemption, and it is that issue on which you have been asked to comment.

Mrs Harkness: When you say whether or not "the Committee" was content to continue with that exemption, do you mean this Committee as opposed to the LRAC?

The Committee Clerk: Yes.

Mrs Harkness: The LRAC has not addressed this issue since the report was published in 1998. This Bill comes from the Department and was not attached to our report.

We did consider exempting certain types of tenancies. On balance we decided to exempt restricted and regulated tenancies. We were influenced and persuaded by representations from the Housing Executive. What decided us was the fact that the rents payable, particularly on restricted tenancies but also on regulated tenancies, were so low that we did not think there was equity between imposing an extended liability on those landlords and the return they received from the rental income. The issue of equity was the main influence.

Mr Hussey: I will apologise now that I may have to leave the meeting early.

Landlords come to the Housing Executive looking for grant aid for upgrades, so does it have a vested interest? Landlords could expect a higher income from upgraded premises, and a person likely to be renting that accommodation would probably be claiming housing benefit, for which the Housing Executive has responsibility.

Mrs Harkness: That is a valid point. The LRAC felt persuaded by the Housing Executive argument in terms of the amount of the return. We looked at the issue in a narrow way. The committee's brief was not in the broad context of housing law reform but in the narrow context of the Defective Premises (Northern Ireland) Order 1975, which followed corresponding legislation in England — the Defective Premises Act 1972.

In our jurisdiction we did not repeat the contents of section 4, and by 1998 we were saying that the time had come for us to take on board the 1972 legislation. The Committee is probably aware that the reason given in 1974 was the number of bomb-damaged properties. We decided that that was no longer a consideration and that we could go some way towards making the reform. The issue of low returns was raised, and we were persuaded not to extend the liability to those premises.

I see the merit in the point being made about vested interests. As far as I remember, it was not something the committee addressed, although it was aware that the Housing Executive had its role to play.

Ms Lewsley: I cannot understand the argument that if a landlord is applying for a grant, it costs him nothing to upgrade a property and so it is irrelevant how much money he gets in the first place. However, if he re-let the property, he could ask for a higher rent. Most people living in these properties are elderly or disabled, the most vulnerable members of society.

The LRAC has not looked at this report since 1998. Would its advice at that time meet all current requirements on human rights and equality of treatment? Would the legislation stand up?

Mrs Harkness: The brief of the LRAC has to be set in the context of the time at which it was doing this work and the parameters of the issues it was examining. The members of the LRAC were not examining the

broader issue of housing rights and nor were we trying to improve the quality of the housing stock. Our brief was to assess the limits of the liability following an accident. We identified an anomaly between the Defective Premises Act 1972 and the Defective Premises (Northern Ireland) Order 1975. We endeavoured to remedy that anomaly.

Much broader social issues are, of course, involved. However, in 1998 that was not the concern of the LRAC.

Mr Leslie: I will have to reveal my ignorance of the meaning of “regulated” tenancies and “restricted” tenancies. If a tenancy or a protected low rent falls within the meaning of either a regulated tenancy or a restricted tenancy, is it the case that when the property is renovated, presumably by use of a grant, it then falls outside the scope of the regulation or the restriction, thereby enabling the rent to be increased or not increased? That is where my uncertainties stem from. If you improve a property and are able to raise the rent, it seems to me that there is no reason why you should not be made to do so.

If the rent cannot be increased, even though the property has been improved, that situation is materially different. I assume that this is the aim of clause 3. Can you enlighten us on that?

Mrs Harkness: I do not know if “enlighten” is the word. I think the point you are making is whether a regulated tenancy remains as such for ever, or whether it can come out of that category and therefore cease to be regulated. If I frame the question in that way, I do not think I can answer it — or at least I would not want to be bound by my answer. My understanding is that restricted tenancies are fixed at the minimal rent that is now payable.

In regulated tenancies, there is a procedure where the rent can be increased. However, my understanding is that even if it is increased, it will still be subject to a maximum that is below market rents. That would lead you to think that these tenancies will be exempted if this proposal goes ahead. If these tenancies are regulated, they will remain regulated until that process is changed.

Mr Leslie: I assume that when a 100% grant is awarded, the situation is marginal, depending on how far the rent can be increased. If the grant is less than 100% and the landowner has to put equity in as well, it is a material loss rather than a marginal one. How widespread is this, and what rent values are we talking about?

Mrs Harkness: At the time of the research restricted tenancies with a rent of about £1 per week were being discussed. Those were ancient tenancies. I do not have figures for regulated tenancies, but we were talking about rents that were below the Housing Executive’s equivalent property rents. Given that the Housing Executive’s rents were subsidised to some degree, the theory was that those were lower than market-rate tenancies. I do not feel qualified to answer your specific query with any authority.

Mr Weir: You said that you did not have the figures for this, but is there any information about the percentage of tenancies that would be either regulated or restricted?

Mrs Harkness: I can quote some figures for 1996 when the research was carried out. Although the figures are not in percentage terms, with over 500 registered tenancies there was reason to believe that the same number was unregistered.

Mr Weir: Are those restricted?

Mrs Harkness: Those are restricted, with tiny rents, of which there may be up to 1,000. Our figures indicated some 7,500 regulated tenancies. In terms of scale, that compares with Housing Executive tenancies at that time of 147,000. We were told that private tenancies were about 15,000. The other category was housing association tenancies, for which I do not have the figures.

Mr Weir: Are regulated and restricted tenancies an “overhang” of a past era, because new regulated and restricted tenancies do not come onto the market? You said there were some 7,500 regulated tenancies in 1996. Has there been any research on how that is changing over time? Do you have any figures for, say, five years earlier? Is this a disappearing market?

Mrs Harkness: I have no recollection of figures like that at the time. Regulated tenancies are thought of as a dying breed. However, I do not have figures to indicate that that happened before 1996.

Mr Weir: Nothing new is coming onto the market, although there is the potential for this because of grants. The flow will be one way in that regard, and my query concerns the scale of that flow.

Mrs Harkness: Many of the tenants of these properties were elderly people who may not have wanted the disruption of repair work. They may have been in a social position where they did not have many visitors who could have been injured. There was no demand from these people.

Mr Dodds: Did the Law Reform Advisory Committee do any work on the equivalent legislation in Great Britain? The legislation was changed on the mainland, and I wonder if any comparisons were made.

Mrs Harkness: No empirical research was conducted. However, the problem of low rents was no longer as relevant in Great Britain as it was here. Great Britain had an across-the-board procedure for setting fair rents. It had a readily available procedure for better rental income working. It did not have this specific problem.

Mr Dodds: You said that the LRAC dealt with restricted and regulated tenancies in narrow terms. The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum relies heavily on the LRAC report and refers to it repeatedly. Did you draw up the report in the knowledge that the Department

would use it as a basis for legislation? Are you comfortable with the conclusions that have been drawn from your work?

Mrs Harkness: I cannot speak for the LRAC, but I expect that it would be content to the extent that what the LRAC recommended is now being implemented. However, if you are asking whether the LRAC might have welcomed a broader brief — or might welcome such a broader brief now — I cannot answer that.

Mr B Bell: Was it the Defective Premises (Northern Ireland) Order 1975 that allowed landlords to increase rents by two and a half times the rateable valuation?

Mrs Harkness: No. That was the Rent (Northern Ireland) Order 1978. I was referring to the Defective Premises (Northern Ireland) Order 1975.

Mr B Bell: That clarifies the position.

Mrs Harkness: The increase came from the Rent (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, and that was the source of my statement that if there were an increase in rent, it would still be within a fairly low maximum figure.

Mr B Bell: You mentioned that the market for that type of house was dying. That was because many of the

houses were in redevelopment areas and were eventually demolished. However, the private rental market is thriving, and the situation is different now.

The Chairperson: Could there be a similar situation in a few years' time when the new rent rates come into being?

Mrs Harkness: Over time — potentially a long time — the problem of restricted and regulated tenancies will wither away. However, if we take positive action, the situation could be resolved more quickly.

The Chairperson: You mentioned the narrow brief given to the LRAC. What was the Advisory Committee's role? Was it to deal with the landlord and the repair, or with the tenant and the defectiveness?

Mrs Harkness: The LRAC was not starting off from the standpoint of one scenario or the other. It was neutral. The LRAC took the perspective of lawyers. It viewed it as a legal anomaly that was created by the Defective Premises (Northern Ireland) Order 1975. It examined whether it should be remedied. That might also be the root of the narrow brief.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**FINANCE AND PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 6 March 2001

**DEFECTIVE PREMISES
(LANDLORD'S LIABILITY) BILL
(NIA 5/00)**

The Chairperson (Mr Molloy): I welcome Mr Michael Foster and Mr Neil Lambe from the Office of Law Reform. Mr Percy Johnston, Assembly legal adviser, is also present.

Clause 1 (Landlord's duty of care by virtue of obligation to repair premises demised)

The Committee Clerk: I would like to remind members that clause 1 creates a landlord's duty of care, where his or her premises are let under a tenancy agreement and the landlord has a contractual obligation to maintain or repair the premises. The landlord's described duty extends to all persons who reasonably might be affected by the premises' defects including the tenant, visitors, passers-by, neighbours, et cetera. The clause requires the landlord to

"take such care as is reasonable in all the circumstances to see that they are reasonably safe from personal injury or from damage to their property".

The Housing Rights Service expressed concerns about a perceived lack of clear guidance, especially the way in which the draft Bill's Explanatory and Financial Memorandum defines "all persons who might reasonably be affected by defects". Paragraph 7 of the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum states:

"It will thus cover lawful visitors, the tenant, passers-by, neighbouring occupiers and their families and guests."

However, the specific commentary on clause 1(2) states:

"This may include the tenant himself, visitors, passers-by or neighbours."

Mr Foster: As I stated in a letter to the Committee, it is quite right to highlight the potential ambiguity of the definition at paragraph 7 of the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum and its comparison with the commentary and clauses. For the record, the correct version contains the word "may". The test as set down in the Bill is on the

standard of reasonableness, and it does therefore lay down a discretionary aspect. Technically speaking, the definition using the word "will" will probably be the case in practice. The word "may" will usually include such people, and lawful visitors will always fall within this ambit, as might passers-by, neighbouring occupiers and their families and guests. In theory, under the terms of the Bill all these groups could be called "trespassers", but it is highly unlikely that this would happen.

The test, as set out in this way, is designed specifically to not include trespassers, and there is a test for them to show in court that they would be reasonably affected. That is a difficult one for them to reach.

I also pointed out in the letter that in the 25 or so years of this particular test, which is worded in the same terms in the Defective Premises Act 1972, there has not been any case law unearthed to show that this test has worked in an unsatisfactory way.

The Chairperson: With regard to lawful visitors, there were some previous cases where people were unlawful visitors.

Mr Foster: An unlawful visitor by definition is a trespasser. The Occupiers' Liability (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 deals specifically with those cases and sets down a much less rigorous test on an occupier for a trespasser or, if you like, an unlawful visitor to his property. Within the remit of this Bill it is hoped not to include a trespasser. Trespassers should not be able to avail themselves of the wider test and the higher duty of care.

The Committee Clerk: There is no need for an amendment to the clause itself.

Mr Foster: No.

The Committee Clerk: The amendment will be to the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum.

Mr Foster: Yes.

The Committee Clerk: Therefore, subject to the Committee's agreement that it has no amendment to propose, it would be appropriate for the Committee to conclude that there would be a recommendation to the Assembly that clause 1 should be accepted.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 2 (Application of this Act where landlord has right of entry to carry out repairs)

The Committee Clerk: There is no issue in clause 2. Clause 2 further prescribes the scope of a landlord's duty of care as created in clause 1. It establishes that such a duty arises only where the landlord has an expressed or implied right of entry under a tenancy agreement to carry out maintenance or repairs as if he were under an obligation to the tenant to maintain or repair, as stated in subsection (1).

There were no matters raised with the Committee by witnesses, and the Committee has not raised any difficulty or issue regarding clause 2. Subject to that continuing to be the Committee's view, Chairperson, it would be a matter for the Committee to recommend clause 2 to the Assembly.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Clause 3 (Tenancies to which this Act applies)

The Committee Clerk: Clause 3 is probably the most significant issue as far as the Committee is concerned. I will not attempt to cover it all, because it is set out in the documents and also in the letter.

This clause sets out some exemptions in the way that the Bill will operate. For example, it exempts landlords of a regulated tenancy, landlords of a restricted tenancy, landlords of a tenancy granted a lease for a term of more than 50 years and landlords of a tenancy with a lease under which the rent payable is either a yearly amount of less than £1 or a peppercorn or other rent having no money value.

As far as the Committee is concerned, the issue is the exemption as it applies to restricted tenancies or regulated tenancies. This issue was raised by the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health and the Housing Rights Service. Both expressed concerns about the way in which this exemption would work.

These concerns have been relayed to the Office of Law Reform and there is, as members are aware, a very comprehensive response explaining why the exemptions were included. You may wish, Chairperson, to ask the Office of Law Reform to briefly rehearse that, but I think it is an issue that Members will wish to address.

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr Foster: When the Office of Law Reform was examining the issue relating to restricted and regulated tenancies it was initially faced with two arguments. First, the Law Reform Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland, whose report is implemented by this Bill, had concluded, based on its consultation process, that both regulated and restricted tenancies should be outside the scope of any extended ambit for a landlord and his liability. Largely speaking, the advisory committee formed this view following an analysis given to it by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The Housing Executive contended that to place a duty of care on landlords of regulated and restricted tenancies in these wider circumstances would provide them with an onerous duty.

There are two types of tenancies, and it is important to distinguish between them. They are both protected tenancies set out under the terms of the Rent (Northern Ireland) Order 1978. Restricted tenancy is the poor relative of the two.

Most restricted tenancies are in a fairly poor state of repair at the moment, and the landlords who own the properties are restricted in the amount of rent they can charge. The average rent for a restricted tenancy is £1 a week, although it varies by a small amount. These figures were set at 1978 levels and, under the terms of the legislation, are unable to be changed.

Regulated tenancies are in a slightly better position in that they allow for slightly higher rents. The level was set in 1978 at two and a half times the net annual value of the house, which would have taken into account the yearly rent. The cut-off point in determining whether a house had a regulated or restricted tenancy was a £60 net annual value. Therefore, in theory, the lowest amount of rent which a regulated landlord could charge would be two and a half times £60, which is £150 per year. There is scope for that to be increased. A landlord of a regulated tenancy can apply to a rent assessment committee to have it raised, but the upper limit for any increase is placed at those levels, which Housing Executive tenancies of a similar nature can charge.

The argument which the Housing Executive put forward in its response was that because its tenancies maintain a substantial subsidy there is no way that a regulated landlord could charge a rent which would come close to the market value. To impose a duty of care on landlords who already have only a very modest, or in many cases almost zero, financial interest in their properties could be construed as quite onerous.

When we looked at that, we felt that that was not reason enough to exempt landlords of such groups. We were familiar with the views espoused by the chief environmental health group, which, very valiantly, put forward the argument that there are financial inducements in place for regulated and restricted landlords to improve their properties.

A summary of the view of both the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health and Housing Rights Services is that there should be no financial impediment for such landlords to upgrade their property to levels of repair that might be considered to be more satisfactory than they currently are. However, several reasons emanated from that which led us to conclude that at this stage it would probably be inadvisable for us to adopt regulated and restricted tenancies within the ambit of the liability.

At the moment there is a review being initiated by the Department for Social Development (DSD). The proposal for that review is based on the fact that the private control sector, which regulated and restricted tenancies both fall into, is in a fairly poor state at the moment. There is a higher state of disrepair in that sector, especially when compared to the uncontrolled sector and, indeed, the social housing sector. There are difficulties with regard to the financial inducements available, which are outlined in the letter. In the context of the DSD review the point

has been made that, while there are financial inducements available to regulated and restricted tenancies, in many situations these will not be enough to repair a property correctly. In many cases a landlord will still be faced with quite a large capital contribution if the repairs are going to take it up to the levels required.

This has to be looked at in the context of the limited repair enforcement options available in this jurisdiction, as compared to England and Wales. The argument that the DSD is espousing in its review of this area is that the whole issue of regulated and restricted tenancies needs to be carefully redressed.

There has been quite a divergence in policy from that existing in England and Wales where there is a different system for protected tenancies and there are many different inducements and regulations in place. The divergence in policy is in relation not only to the repair issues which can be enforced upon a landlord but also to the fact that landlords of such properties can raise their rents up to market-rent levels. Therefore they have a very different set of circumstances from those faced by regulated and restricted landlords and tenants in this jurisdiction.

The issue concerning this Bill, from the perspective of the Department of Finance and Personnel and in particular the Office of Law Reform, is that we are faced with a situation where we have no ambit with regard to housing law *per se*. We cannot put forward a Bill that will impose repair obligations upon landlords. Nor can we put forward a Bill that aids in improving the financial situation, grants and other inducements that are available. In the absence of this, the net effect will be that if we were to extend liability to regulated and restricted tenancies we would be imposing an extra liability, but there would be no back-up enforcement powers to make sure it was done. Potentially, the result of this is an increase in insurance premiums for landlords of both regulated and restricted tenancies without any fair and proper mechanisms to enable them to get their properties to the correct state and level of repair.

It is an unusual situation in that private uncontrolled landlords, who can charge open-market rents, are going to be in a position whereby they can afford to subsume any small increase in insurance premiums that this extended ambit will possibly give to them. Most of their properties are in a better state of repair than those in regulated and restricted tenancies. On the other hand, you have a regulated or restricted tenant, or restricted landlord, whose rent in many circumstances will be barely sufficient to cover the existing insurance premium on the property. He will be faced with this extra liability. The insurance companies are going to factor that into their insurance premiums, and it is going to result in a rise in their insurance premiums but in the absence of any proper enforcement powers, and any proper and re-evaluated systems of grants and inducements for properties to be brought up to the correct standard.

The DSD review aims to look at and address all of those issues, and the Department hopes to issue a consultation paper in September of this year. A working group is currently being set up to deal with the various issues, and the Department has identified the various options and issues that the private control sector raises.

It was our assessment that it would be unwise for us to impose this extra liability on landlords of such properties in the context of a wider review of regulated and restricted tenancies generally. It may well be that the DSD review will ultimately lead to a radical overhaul of the regulated and restricted tenancy system, in which case one of the options is better systems of enforcement and more widely available grants. In that context this liability could be revisited and could be imposed at a further date.

The other option is that regulated and restricted tenancies will become a thing of the past, and there will be a completely different system of protected tenancies drawn up, possibly similar to that which currently exists in England and Wales, where there are better grants and opportunities for landlords to achieve a fair market rent. If that were the case, then this option would automatically fall outside the scope of the Bill. It was our assessment that we would not wish to impose liability on both groups at this time given the fact that there is a wider ongoing review of protected tenancies generally.

Mr Close: I have a couple of points to make. What about the tenant? This seems to be totally focused on the landlord's perspective. One could get the impression that landlords were a bunch of charitable institutions providing houses for people with no reward whatsoever, God help them.

The reality is somewhat different. We are talking about human beings living in houses that in most cases are substantially lacking. We have a responsibility to rectify those faults. To suggest that this may happen some time in the future is something I have difficulty with, because I recognise that there is a problem in the system.

We have a responsibility to our constituents to put right those faults. The mechanism for doing so is currently in front of us in this Bill, and to turn a blind eye to it or to put it on the long finger would be fundamentally wrong. Surely, from a socially conscious viewpoint, it would be wrong to look to the landlord first. We should look to the tenant first.

Mr Foster: First, this Bill is not specifically designed to deal with a landlord/tenant relationship. It is designed to deal with plaintiffs and defendants. The scope of this Bill is fairly and squarely set in the context of what happens when damage occurs. There is no mechanism within this Bill to enforce landlords to repair their existing property.

Mr Close: If the property is in a bad state of repair, is it more likely that there will be a plaintiff?

Mr Foster: Yes.

Mr Close: The plaintiff might not necessarily be the tenant. I accept that. However, the tenant will benefit from the faults or potential faults being put right.

Mr Foster: The net effect of this Bill will be in situations where there is an absence of enforcement and repairing obligations. It will probably not have effect in regulated and restricted tenancies. Landlords have already stated — both in the letter to you and in the oral evidence — that current financial inducements are in no way sufficient to get the properties up to the required standards. This is subject to the Chief Environmental Health Group's view of this. At the moment, whilst there are financial inducements and grants available in many cases, especially in the properties you have mentioned at the worst level of repairs, they are in no way sufficient to get the properties up to the required standards. There is a maximum of £5,500 set for a grant in any circumstances, and for many of these properties that is grossly insufficient.

You referred to the fact that landlords are not charitable organisations, which I fully accept. However, in respect of restricted tenancies they may argue that they are charitable organisations. They can command a rent of only £1 a week. They experience extreme difficulties in selling properties, not just on the basis of their disrepair but also because the tenants who live in those houses are very much protected. Landlords cannot sell properties with tenants in them. There is a right of survivorship, which lasts for three generations.

It could be argued that it is very much the thrust of this Bill that we are not coming from a landlord's perspective. We are dealing with perhaps 500 tenancies. The Bill will cover upwards of 200,000 tenancies. Those landlords could rightly argue that they are already under a fairly severe liability as it is, and to further increase this without any financial grants being available — when I say “without”, there are, of course, some financial grants available, but they are wholly unsatisfactory — would be onerous. At the moment this is part of the issue that the DSD review is aiming to address.

I am anxious to convey that we are not dealing there with landlords and tenants, enforcement responsibilities, grants, the systems or the whole issue of restrictions laws as they stand. We are dealing with a situation where damage has occurred and where a potential loophole currently exists.

Returning to the very basics of this Bill, at the moment there are four, possibly five, potential plaintiffs in any case where damages or injuries occur. There is a tenant, a lawful visitor, a passer-by, a neighbour and possibly a trespasser. Currently, a landlord of any property — and I am not just restricting this to the protected-tenancy sector — is favoured in law by a degree of immunity that he currently receives.

A good example is that a neighbour can only sue in the tort of private nuisance. The case law has shown quite categorically that it is not possible to claim damages for personal injury. Therefore, if someone is injured by a piece of masonry falling off the next-door neighbour's house, he does not have an action. The Bill will give him an action.

If a neighbour's guest or family member sustain an injury on that property, they have absolutely no action, whether it be damage to property or personal injury. A lawful visitor must show that a landlord had notice of the thing that caused the injury. That is being removed, and the test is being widened to include those times when he should have known, in all the circumstances of the case, of the defect.

To say that this Bill is coming from a landlord's perspective is not wholly inaccurate, but it is very much focused on giving extra rights and responsibilities not just to tenants, but also to the wide range of potential plaintiffs that currently exists under the law.

Mr Close: It is still excluding those properties that are most likely to cause the problem.

Mr Foster: Yes, I accept that point. However, even if we do impose that liability now, it is going to place landlords of such properties in an impossible situation. They do not currently have the incentive to get the properties into the full state of repair. They can barely afford the net increases in their insurance premiums, as it is. That gives some balance of the landlords' position.

We have appreciated that, in the wider sector, tenants would have been in a more vulnerable position, but it could be legitimately argued that many of the landlords are already in such a position.

Mr Hussey: Please accept my apologies for not being here at the beginning. I think that Mr Close has been reading my notes. Is there no duty of care to the tenant? What about the tenant's rights? Are they going to have to wait for the Department for Social Development review?

You mentioned that regulated and restricted selling might cause difficulty for landlords. How did those properties get into their present state of disrepair? We are now looking at payback — it is time that those properties are properly looked after by the landlords. To leave those two groups out would be an absolute scandal. I maintain that all landlords should be treated in the same way in that instance.

You mentioned the likelihood of higher premiums. That is tough luck, because people have a right to be properly covered in a proper way. The higher likelihood of damage or injury probably comes from those tenancies. Properties deserve the attention from landlords that will ensure that there is less likelihood of tenants, neighbours, passers-by

or visitors being injured. If we left them out, that would not happen.

Mr Foster: I can see the force in that argument, and that was, of course, one of our concerns. However, that does not take us away from the fact that there are no enforcement provisions coming from this.

The Department of Finance and Personnel and the Office of Law Reform have no ambit in relation to housing law. I accept the point about our bringing this forward at this stage if that is the case. It is because the protected controlled sector adds up to only a small portion of the tenancies available in Northern Ireland.

I take your point — it seems that our waiting for a DSD review of the controlled sector only perpetuates the problems that arise for tenants or any of the potential plaintiffs. My answer would be that, even with this Bill, we will not be much further — probably no further — down the road in getting proper housing for those types of people. If the remit of a landlord's liability were extended, it would not necessarily lead him to —

Mr Hussey: Earlier you talked about incentive. Where was the incentive? I would argue that because of a lack of incentive — perhaps because of the nature of the rents charged, et cetera — landlords did not pay as much attention as they should have done to those properties.

Where is the encouragement? Where is the incentive if they are kept out of the Bill that we are considering? The incentive would be there if they were included with the other types of tenancy — a block on tenancies and the responsibility of landlords. It is a bit like the voluntary wearing of seat belts. It was voluntary, and then it became enforceable. However, it was more easily enforced when it became a statutory requirement, because people had got used to it and had adapted to it. I would argue that the same would apply to the types of tenancies that you propose to exclude.

Mr Foster: Representatives of the insurance industry have indicated that they would see a modest increase in insurance premiums. If a landlord of a restricted tenancy charged a rent of £1 per week, an increase of £5 or £10 in insurance premiums per month could theoretically be quite an onerous rise.

I suggest that the incentive to repair property over £5 or £10 per month would pale into insignificance beside the amount of money required to get those properties into the necessary state of repair. In the absence of proper financial inducements —

Mr Hussey: Again, you are coming at it from the landlord's point of view. Could you look at it from the tenant's point of view?

Mr Foster: Absolutely.

Mr Hussey: I am sorry, but you are not.

Mr Foster: From a tenant's perspective, one of the other parts of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's argument was that many of the tenants of the restricted tenancies are elderly. A valid point is that they probably would not appreciate the extensive disruption to their lives which would be necessary to force landlords to get their properties up to the required level. In many cases it would result in the tenants' having to be rehoused.

Mr Hussey: Let us not forget the Housing Executive's vested interest as a grant-aiding body.

Mr Foster: I appreciate that.

Mr Hussey: There is the possibility that if rents were to be upped a wee bit the Housing Executive would have a vested interest in the housing benefit.

Mr Leslie: How can they be upped?

Mr Hussey: If there is an increase in rent.

Mr Foster: But they cannot be upped.

Mr Hussey: Can rent not be upped?

Mr Foster: No, it is set.

Mr Hussey: For those particular tenants?

Mr Foster: There can be no increase.

Mr Hussey: Can it be increased if, at a future stage, the tenant moves on?

Mr Dodds: I have just two questions, the first of which is fairly straightforward. You mentioned the DSD review. This discussion has proved how timely and welcome the review is, and the matter must be looked into extremely carefully. You said that it was possible for us to say that we should press ahead after the review, but also that we could return to the issue and deal with it. What mechanism do you envisage being employed? Would you do it with another piece of legislation? How would it be done?

Mr Foster: If the review under the Department for Social Development leads to a change, there will be a housing Bill. This could very easily be inserted into the Bill.

Mr Dodds: It would not be difficult to include issues relating to plaintiffs and defendants in a housing Bill, even though they are primarily the remit of the Office of Law Reform? I have noticed that when such issues arise between Departments there is always the cry that something is not in "our remit", but someone else's. Do you not see its inclusion in a housing Bill as an issue?

Mr Foster: No. Section 4 of the Defective Premises Act 1972, which this basically replicates, was included in a wider Bill relating to housing.

Mr Dodds: As you rightly say, this does not just deal with tenants, but covers passers-by and lawful visitors. You can understand the argument that, at present, tenants, some of them elderly or otherwise disadvantaged, are

benefiting from very low rents, so this type of landlords' liability may not be in their interest.

However, let us take the example of a passer-by who is injured by a piece of masonry which has fallen from a building. If it fell from number two, a property which does not come under such a tenancy, he would receive damages. However, if it fell off the house next door, he would not. The nature of the tenancy does not concern him, for he has been injured. It is pure chance that the masonry happens to have fallen from a house owned by someone who is exempted from liability. How do you explain that?

Mr Foster: Passers-by will not make use of this Act, since they already have much wider rights.

Mr Dodds: What about lawful visitors?

Mr Foster: One of the valid arguments against the proposals relating to restricted tenancies is that if they are accepted, and if an injury occurs to a lawful visitor, the injured party already has rights under the Occupiers' Liability (Northern Ireland) Act 1957. However, we are not creating any new rights, rather we are extending the current ambit of landlords' liability. It will therefore be easier for a lawful visitor to show his case. The key issue is actual notice. At the moment there is slightly more contention since, because actual notice has to be shown, a landlord might be able to claim he had not been informed of a defect.

Mr Dodds: But a lawful visitor or passer-by would still have to show actual notice in those cases?

Mr Foster: That is correct.

The Chairperson: My understanding is that this Bill deals with liability. It has nothing to do with the condition of houses.

Mr Foster: That is correct.

The Chairperson: You said that the landlords' insurance costs could increase. Surely, the tenants' insurance costs for normal contents cover would also go up. Is that correct?

Mr Foster: The Department for Social Development made the point in its review that tenants of such properties are finding it difficult to get property insurance at the moment. That is in the pot for the Department to look at. Perhaps I am not getting the point across to members particularly well, but, if and when the DSD review goes through, it will lead to a radical overhaul of the whole system. We might be putting the cart before the horse if we were to rush to impose liability on those people only for a review to radically reform the system or improve it so that the liability would be welcomed and would not be too onerous.

Mr Leslie: Are there any circumstances in which a regulated rent can be increased?

Mr Foster: No. For example, in England and Wales, there are regulated tenancies of a sort. They have different names but, in principle, they offer the same types of security of tenure and the same rights. The difference is that there can be an increase in the rent for a regulated tenancy in this jurisdiction, but it must be a one-off increase. The rent is set at the 1978 level, which is two and a half times the net annual value. However, a regulated tenant can go to a rent assessment committee and have the rent raised to Housing Executive level. The difficulty with that procedure, as it exists at present, is that there can be a waiting period of 12 to 16 weeks before the application is processed. During that time a landlord can only charge rent of £1 a week. Clearly, that constitutes a major lack of incentive for people to do this. That is one of the key criticisms arising from this review.

Mr Close: You said that the 1978 level is two and a half times the net annual value. When there is a revaluation of domestic properties, will the new net annual value be set at a figure applied by the landlord for the rent?

Mr Foster: I do not know.

Mr Close: Would that be a reasonable assumption?

Mr Foster: Yes. It is possible.

Mr Close: If a landlord found himself outside the scope of this rule, would he be getting a bigger rent?

Mr Foster: Yes.

Mr Close: Would he still be avoiding liability?

Mr Foster: Perhaps not.

The Chairperson: We will now hear the views of Mr Percy Johnston, one of the Assembly's legal advisers.

If the Committee were to recommend the removal of the exemption of restricted and unregulated tenancies, what would be the consequences?

Mr Johnston: First, to make such an amendment to the Bill would not constitute legislative incompetence. Secondly, it does not interfere with the text of the Rent (Northern Ireland) Order 1978. Mr Foster has spoken at length about the working of the Rent Order and its restrictive operation. The exclusion of restricted and regulated tenancies from the scope of this Bill would have no effect on the text of the Rent Order, and nor would their inclusion. I endorse what has been said about the practical difficulties that would be involved.

Mr Hussey asked how it is that these properties are allowed to deteriorate so badly. Some of the properties were inherited by people who did not want them. However, they were passed on to them by their families, with standard 1978-pegged rent rates. They now sit as liabilities. Some of the rents may not even be collected, because it is hardly worth doing so. Therefore the properties are left virtually abandoned. That might be a side issue, but, in textual terms, this Bill has no effect on the Rent Order.

The Chairperson: Would the removal of these exemptions have any other knock-on effects on this Bill or any other one?

Mr Johnston: No. Some members have pointed out that there are grants available to fix these wrecks. I have examined the levels of grants awarded. Since 1996, these grants have been reduced from a maximum figure of £5,500 and a minimum of £500.

The grant is classed in terms of the "eligible amount", and then an appropriate percentage of the relevant amount is awarded. Therefore you will not always receive the full "eligible amount"; you might receive a percentage of that amount.

The mandatory grants available are very small — in the lower hundreds of pounds — and that fact might influence the thinking of those who say "But the landlord can get grants".

Mr Foster: I am concerned that, if we were to include restricted and regulated tenancies in the Bill, we would be duty bound to stop this Bill and to carry out further consultation on the basis of this wider inclusion. We carried out consultation in the belief that regulated and restricted tenancies would be kept out of the loop, especially given the fact that we were aware, from quite an early stage, that the Department for Social Development would be reviewing the whole area.

On a practical level, this might allow us to catch up with the DSD review, but it would not address the position of the other 180,000 tenancies that this Bill hopes to encompass. Specifically, and perhaps crucially, we hope that one of the by-products of the Bill will be that private landlords who charge bigger rents, and who are in a better position to maintain and carry out the repairs, will be caught. If the Bill were stopped so that the DSD review could be taken into account, there might be a knock-on effect on the rest of the provisions. It could be a couple of years before the results of the review are incorporated into legislation.

The Chairperson: The benefits to the tenants in the larger stock would outweigh the restrictions?

Mr Foster: We hope so. This review is looking at issues that members raised about the condition of the private controlled sector, particularly in relation to the situations that tenants find themselves in. Unfortunately this Bill, even if it included regulated and restricted tenancies, would probably do very little on a practical level to alleviate that problem.

The Chairperson: Is it the case that the Bill only comes into play if somebody is injured and that it will have no effect on housing conditions?

Mr Foster: Yes. This Bill looks at the extent of landlords' liability after damage has occurred, rather than beforehand. We hope, of course, that this emphasis on liability might encourage certain landlords to buck up

their ideas and to improve their properties. However, given the grants available for regulated and restricted tenancies, it is highly unlikely that it is those landlords who will be "bucked up" by this change.

The Chairperson: If a landlord were to renovate a house with a restricted tenancy, could he then increase the rent?

Mr Foster: A restricted tenancy can be uplifted to a regulated tenancy, but the amounts of money involved are crucial. Restricted tenancies are held for those properties in the worst state of repair. The grants are so inadequate that there is little, if any, incentive to carry out renovations. In many cases landlords of restricted tenancies have a position similar to that of a ground landlord — they maintain very little control over the property, save for the fact that they actually own it. It would be very difficult for a landlord to sell such a property.

The Chairperson: What type of property are we talking about? Are you referring to old trusts?

Mr Foster: These properties date back to the end of the first world war, when the system of rent restriction was established. The right of survivorship lasts for three generations. Therefore many restricted tenancies are being phased out. For instance, in 1990 there were 1,200 restricted tenancies, and now there are only 500, so in 10 years' time there may be no such tenancies left. That said, the DSD review is welcome because there are radical problems with the private control sector at present. My point is that this Bill will do little, if anything — and probably nothing — to address those issues.

Mr Hussey: I do not like the inference in this debate that the greater good has to outweigh the other factors. A similar argument was tossed in front of us when we were discussing building regulations.

Mr Dodds: I was wondering where I had heard that argument before.

Mr B Bell: I would accept Mr Hussey's argument if it helped the tenants concerned. However, I do not see how it could make any difference. In the past, I have been on a rent assessment panel, and I could be responsible for striking some of those rents that you are talking about. It was a major advance for both landlords and tenants; it was the only time that they got repairs done.

Now there is no chance of getting repairs done. Mr Hussey and Mr Close were highlighting the fact that the tenant would not benefit from the Bill. However, this Bill is not intended to benefit the tenant; it is concerned with the liability of the landlord. It does not involve building regulations.

Approximately 15 years ago, there was one landlord who was very disgusted because he could not get his rent, and when he did get it the tenants wanted extra repairs to be carried out. He was at his wits' end, so he went down the Shankill Road to a homeless hostel in

Carrick Hill and asked one of the down-and-out tramps if he wanted a row of houses. He told the tramp that he simply had to collect the rent from the tenants. Then he took him to a solicitor and signed the houses over to him. That is how he got rid of them. It is a serious problem, and the Bill will not help the tenant.

Mr Foster: If the Bill could serve that purpose, we would not hesitate to include it.

The Chairperson: It is not concerned with housing policy; it deals with liability, and that is where the difficulty arises. One would hope that the landlord would not avoid carrying out repairs. I agree with Mr Hussey that if it would be different if it were aimed at improving the housing stock, but we need housing regulations to do that. The Bill deals only with landlords' liability, and if we try to include landlords of restricted tenancies within the scope of the Bill we could create difficulties.

Mr Close: What would they do if we were to exclude restricted tenancies?

The Chairperson: We have to carry this Bill through in the Assembly. We do not yet know if this is possible and whether there will be any knock-on effects. If it is unenforceable, where do we stand?

Mr Close: I am asking what these landlords are going to do.

Mr Foster: On a practical level, we have carried out consultation based on a policy that exempts regulated and restricted tenancies. If we are now going to include restricted tenancies in the scope of the Bill, we are duty bound to consult, for a second time, the groups concerned. We would have to tell them that we have reassessed the position at a scrutiny stage, the Bill has been put on hold and that we are minded to include regulated and restricted tenancies. We would also have to invite people to submit their views before going through the whole process again.

Mr Hussey: When did the original period of consultation take place?

Mr Foster: In 1998. This legislation would have been introduced in 1975 had it not been for the fact that a high number of properties were damaged as a result of the troubles. Since then, the concept has not changed, but, of course, there has been a radical change in social housing conditions and in the wider political context.

Mr Dodds: The Department of Finance and Personnel has told us before that, if the policy were changed, it would have to carry out consultation for a second time. Does this mean that the Committee is not in a position to make recommendations to the Assembly that are different from the Department's line? If there is a difference of opinion between the Committee and the Department, will there always have to be another consultation period lasting a year or whatever length is necessary?

Mr Foster: No, but this is a very substantial shift in policy. We have made it quite clear that we hoped to exempt regulated and restricted tenancies, and the Law Reform Advisory Committee's report also advocated such exemptions. Perhaps it would be unfair to impose liability on groups that are aware that they are currently exempted.

Mr Dodds: Unless we carry out the consultation?

Mr Foster: That would not take us much further in terms of the Bill's effect. We cannot enforce issues.

Mr Dodds: That is a different matter. With regard to consultation, if the Committee takes a different view on a proposal, the Department will argue that if the Committee wants to make a recommendation that differs from the Department's view, a new series of consultations will have to be carried out before the Bill can proceed. That would delay the whole process for a year. The Department would argue that it is better to proceed with the Bill as it stands and to address the issue in a different piece of legislation. That happened when we discussed the Government Resources and Accounts Bill and the building Regulations.

Can the Committee be restricted in that way? The Committee is part of the consultative process. It forms a view and, ultimately, the Assembly takes a view as a legislature. The way in which this argument is deployed worries me. It promotes the attitude that if we want to make a change, the passage of the Bill will be delayed, so it is better to proceed now and address the issue later. That argument could be deployed in regard to every potential major change.

Mr Foster: I accept that point.

Mr Dodds: Should the consultation process not involve seeking the view on whether restrictive and regulated tenancies should be exempt, rather than the Department giving its final view, with the result that consultation has to be carried out again if we take a slightly different view? Surely, the consultation should be focused on the issue involved?

Mr Foster: I accept that point. In this case, the Department of Finance and Personnel is taking the view that, because the DSD review is much wider and has greater practical ramifications for the private controlled sector, we would not want to step on anyone's toes by pre-empting the outcome of that review and enforcing liability on such groups. The Department of Finance and Personnel and the Committee members are unanimous in welcoming the DSD review because the level of disrepair among houses in the private controlled sector has created a grave situation. However, the basic tenet of this Bill is that, on a practical level, we can do very little to alleviate that situation.

The Chairperson: This Committee's concern is that, if the Department does not move the Bill, the process is

over. It is not our Bill. If it simply moves it, it is still wiped out in a sense. The Department decides whether or not to hold a consultation.

The Committee Clerk: On the question of whether a new round of consultation is needed, I agree with Mr Dodds. I do not quite understand the concept being put forward by the Office of Law Reform. A consultation is a consultation, and, as a result of that process, the Department will take certain decisions. Just because you make a particular decision, you should not have to carry out further consultation.

The Bill is the Minister's responsibility, and it is the Department's responsibility to carry out consultations. If the Committee recommended changes to the Bill — and a Committee can do no more than recommend — it would be for the Department and the Minister to decide whether to introduce the Bill for its Consideration Stage.

Mr Hussey: Further to that, there is almost a suggestion that, if the original consultation did not take into consideration the points that we are now discussing, it was restricted and, therefore, flawed.

The Chairperson: We have come to the point where we must make a decision. We can either take fresh evidence from other bodies, such as the Housing Executive, and from those who have already given evidence in the consultation process. Alternatively, we could simply put forward a recommendation that we do not exempt the two sections.

Mr Close: Do we know with whom the Law Reform Advisory Committee consulted?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Close: Do we know?

The Chairperson: I think so. We have a list of the bodies consulted.

Mr Dodds: We are here to take evidence and to ask questions, and, presumably, we have completed that process now. Perhaps we should reflect on this matter and come back to it next week rather than making a decision immediately. The folks who are here have given us the

benefit of their views and have answered questions. That is far as we can take it with them today.

Mr B Bell: Yes. I think so.

The Committee Clerk: Clauses 4, 5 and 6 are not the subject of any concern or dispute. Would members be happy to go through them quickly so that when we return to the Bill we are left with just one issue to deal with?

Clause 3 referred for further consideration.

Clause 4 (Interpretation)

The Committee Clerk: Clause 4 provides a definition of key terms and concepts used throughout the draft Bill. These definitions set down the breadth and scope of the Bill. No witness or any Committee member has raised any concern about this clause. The question is, Mr Chairman, are members agreed that the Committee recommend clause 4 to the Assembly.

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clause 5 (Application to the Crown)

The Committee Clerk: No issue has arisen in relation to clause 5. Clause 5 prescribes the Crown's liability under the draft Bill and states that the Crown is liable as a landlord to the full extent authorised or permitted by the constitutional laws of Northern Ireland and to the extent prescribed by the Crown Proceedings Act of 1947. Again, no concerns were raised by any witness or by any Committee member. Are Members content to recommend clause 5 to the Assembly?

Clause 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (Short title and commencement)

The Committee Clerk: Finally, clause 6 is, as usual, the short title and commencement clause. It states that it is the official citation of the statute and that the statute shall become effective 12 months after it receives Royal Assent. No concern was raised about this clause, either by witnesses or members, and it is, again, a matter of recommending clause 6 to the Assembly, if the Committee agrees.

Clause 6 agreed to.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 7 March 2001

**FAMILY LAW BILL
(NIA 4/00)**

The Chairperson (Dr Hendron): I welcome Ms Archbold and Mr Lambe from the Office of Law Reform. I apologise for keeping you waiting. Please make a short presentation on the Bill as you see it, following which my colleagues will ask questions. I then hope that we can look at the various clauses of the Bill.

Ms Archbold: Thank you for asking us to attend today's meeting. I am a senior legal assistant in the Office of Law Reform, and my field is family law, human rights and equality. My colleague, Neil Lambe, is in charge of this project, and he will address the Committee on the Family Law Bill.

I will clear up a matter that the previous witnesses referred to. The Belfast Family Proceedings Court Standing Committee was not consulted during the wide public consultation in July 1999. That committee said that it was formed recently — so in July 1999 we were not aware of its existence. However, we consulted with the Law Society, the Bar Council, all the solicitors' associations in Northern Ireland, including the Belfast Solicitors' Association, and all associations that represent the judiciary. We also contacted the Northern Ireland Court Service as part of our internal consultation.

I know that the previous witnesses are not aware of this, but we received submissions from the Law Society, the Bar Council and from a number of other individuals — including Mr Desmond Perry, who is the magistrate for Belfast and the chairperson of the Belfast Family Proceedings Court Standing Committee. Therefore, the people who are involved in the Belfast Family Proceedings Court Standing Committee were involved in our consultation, and we took careful note of the arguments that were put forward.

We would like to assure you that we were aware of the arguments that were put to the Committee today. The arguments were fed into the public consultation, and we took them into account when we advised Ministers on

the content of the Bill. Would it be of assistance if we briefly outlined the extent of parental responsibility?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Ms Archbold: Parental responsibility is not the same as residence, contact, custody or access. It gives a parent a legal relationship with his child. The law says that the person is the child's parent. I believe that the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 defines it as all the responsibilities, duties, powers and rights that a parent has with that child.

In cases where both parents have parental responsibility, a court can determine that one person should have residence of the children and that the other person should — or should not — have contact. That is a separate issue. The fact that another person, a stepfather or stepmother for example, gets parental responsibility does not mean that parental responsibility is taken away from anyone who already has it.

Married or unmarried parents who have parental responsibility for a child — even if the child has been taken into care — retain that responsibility unless and until that child is adopted. Parental responsibility is lost in our law in that way. I hope that explains exactly what parental responsibility is and lets us know the limits of this legislation.

Mr Lambe: It became clear during the Second Stage that the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee had an interest in the family law issues that are dealt with in this short but significant Bill. Officials from the Office of Law Reform have previously appeared before this Committee to speak more generally about the work that they do.

I would like to reiterate the respective roles played by the Department of Finance and Personnel officials, through the work of the Office of Law Reform, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, particularly in relation to issues that affect children. The Office of Law Reform is responsible for the development of policy for the private law aspects of family law. That covers issues dealing with the relationship between parents and children such as those dealt with by this Bill. The Office of Law Reform has a policy input, but not a policy lead, on issues such as adoption law.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is responsible for policy on care proceedings when dealing with the interface between family and the state authorities — the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Bill is already before the Assembly. Other more cross-cutting issues for which the Office of the First and the Deputy First Ministers may be responsible include the establishment of the Children's Commissioner, which was announced on 29 January 2001. That initiative is being carried forward by an interdepartmental working group, and the Office of Law Reform is represented on

that group to oversee any impact that the children's commissioner may have on the private law sphere.

As the Minister of Finance and Personnel said in debate during the Second Stage, the Family Law Bill deals with few, but significant, law reform issues. The Office of Law Reform issued a consultation paper in July 1999. The legal profession, the voluntary sector and health and other professions forwarded a substantial number of responses — the extent of that feedback is significant for Northern Ireland. These constituencies obviously have an interest in the welfare of children, which is the focus of the Bill. I ask the Committee to recognise that although the Bill deals with the rights of unmarried fathers, those rights are firmly rooted in the context of children's rights. As is made clear in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children should have a legal relationship with their parents, both mothers and fathers. The Bill deals with that legal relationship, not only with regard to who has parental responsibility for a child, but with the tests that a court can use to determine the biological parentage of a child.

The Committee should note that the consultation in Northern Ireland followed similar consultation in England and Wales by the Lord Chancellor's Department in March 1998. Similar consultation has also been undertaken in Scotland, and the Scottish Executive have announced to Parliament that they will take forward proposals similar to those in the Family Law Bill.

As the Minister of Finance and Personnel said during the Second Stage debate, instead of following the GB lead, Northern Ireland is ahead of the other jurisdictions in introducing legislation on this matter — the others will be catching up with us for a change.

Through the responses that we received to consultation, we have been alerted to the concerns of certain groups that the issue is a question of balancing rights among children, mothers and their fathers — whether their fathers are married or unmarried. Those responses reflect the concerns of many different constituencies that have conflicting interests in establishing what the content of the legislation should be. The draft legislation strikes the balance between those conflicting interests. As I briefly go through the clauses of the Bill, I will provide more up-to-date statistics on the number of unmarried fathers and on joint registration.

Clause 1 (Acquisition of parental responsibility by father or step-parent)

Mr Lambe: Clause 1 amends the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. It deals with two separate matters and is the real substance of the Bill. From the earlier evidence you can appreciate that there is much disagreement about what it should or should not do.

Clause 1 provides that unmarried fathers who jointly register the birth of a child along with the child's mother

will acquire parental responsibility for that child. In 1999, the year for which the most recent figures are available, some 6,957 children were born outside marriage. That represents 30.3% of all live births in Northern Ireland and is an increase on previous years. Of the births outside marriage, 4,487 were jointly registered by the unmarried mother and father. That represents 64.5% of all live births outside marriage. The figures are slightly lower than those for England, Scotland or Wales, but they are increasing annually. In the 1960s only 3% of children were born outside marriage. We now have significant numbers, so the Bill is attempting to address a social reality.

I hope that members appreciate that the Bill in no way attempts to undermine the institution of marriage. It simply tries to reflect the social reality that adults choose to live in different types of relationships and that children, by and large, should not be disadvantaged as a result. The Bill recognises changes in family structures over time and attempts to accommodate them.

Clause 1 also deals with the issue of step-parents. Step-parents can already acquire parental responsibility by applying under article 12 of the Children Order for a residence order. If a court confers that residence order on a step-parent, parental responsibility is automatically also conferred. The Bill offers a much more transparent process. Instead of artificially applying for a residence order in favour of a child who is living in your home, you apply to the court for what you really want — a parental responsibility order in your favour. As Ms Archbold pointed out, if a court grants a step-parent a parental responsibility order, that will in no way affect the parental responsibility of any other person who has it — be that an unmarried father who had previously applied for it or a former spouse of the husband or wife who has now remarried.

Enabling step-parents to acquire parental responsibility through a transparent process recognises that in many second marriages a strong bond is formed between a step-parent and a child. With so many marriages ending at an early stage in people's lives, quite often they will remarry, with very young children. Those children might lose contact with the birth parent, but this process enables a legal relationship to be established between a step-parent and his "new" children. That is important for practical reasons. For example, he can give consent for medical treatment and take decisions along with the mother on the child's welfare and education. The parental responsibility of both an unmarried father and a step-parent can be terminated by court order.

Clause 2 creates a statutory presumption of parentage in two circumstances. First, it provides that if a man has been married to a woman at any time between the conception and birth of the child, he will be presumed to be the father. That will be true in the vast majority of circumstances and is already a common-law presumption. What clause 2 seeks to do is simply put on a statutory

footing this common-law presumptions. The clause also provides that any unmarried man registered as the father of a child is presumed to be the father of that child. Such joint registrations include an implicit recognition and acceptance of the parentage of that child.

Clause 3 is a technical measure. It provides for the courts in Northern Ireland to have additional powers in the future where civil proceedings are ongoing which involve determining the parentage of a child. That includes determining whether someone was, or is, the mother or father of a particular child. Committee members are already aware that there is an interface between that provision and provisions in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act that the Committee has considered. The drafting and commencement of this clause is dependent on the child support measures being brought in. However, I am informed that it is intended that those provisions will come into force in April of this year.

Clause 4 provides for the commencement of the substantive provisions of the Bill, and clause 5 deals with the short title of the Bill. To conclude, this is a short Bill. Its effect, however, has implications for many families in Northern Ireland. It forms part of a wider review of family law that the Office of Law Reform is undertaking. We are also examining divorce law, matrimonial property and other related issues. Claire Archbold and I are willing to take any questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Members will now ask questions.

Ms McWilliams: I need to declare an interest. I have worked with the Office of Law Reform and commissioned a piece of research. In particular, I worked with Claire Archbold on pieces of family law and published research on them. I do not think that it will have much bearing on this discussion. You have heard some of the earlier submissions, particularly some of the case law that has been quoted. There is a particular case — the McMichael case — which raises some interesting issues. For our benefit, will you clarify why it is an important case in relation to these amendments?

Ms Archbold: I took some notes on the case law that the earlier witnesses cited. I noted that they did not cite McMichael. The importance of McMichael is that it is a case that the European Court of Human Rights specifically looked at. It has the advantage of being a United Kingdom case. An unmarried father — from Scotland, where the relevant law is similar — came to the European Court. Among other things, he asked whether his rights were being infringed by the fact that he did not have parental responsibility.

In that case — which was as recent as 1996, I think — the United Kingdom's representative argued that his right to family life was not absolute. Article 8.2 allows interference with that right, if it can be justified. Article 14 allows different treatment of people in different categories,

if it can be justified. The justification which was given in the McMichael case was that instead of just giving all fathers automatic parental responsibility, there had to be some test to protect mothers and children from unmeritorious fathers. The test was marriage. The married father got parental responsibility, and the unmarried father did not.

The court accepted that justification in the McMichael case. In subsequent domestic case law, Lady Justice Hale, who is one of the most eminent family judges in England, has said that the law in the United Kingdom — as it stands without the Family Law Bill — meets European standards. I note that the case B in the United Kingdom, which the earlier witnesses mentioned, appears to support that contention as well, although they said that B was manifestly wrong. That was a judgement of the European Court of Human Rights. Lady Justice Hale said that at present our law conforms to European human rights standards. However, that may not always be the case, because the European Convention is a living document, and it evolves as society evolves.

The Family Law Bill, therefore, goes beyond current European jurisprudence. It does more for equality and non-discrimination than the present law, while still trying to maintain a balance between those families whose private lives require protection, under article 8 of the European Convention, and other families, in less happy circumstances, who require protection from someone who is unmeritorious — for example, where a child is conceived as a result of rape. In such a case the mother and child have a right to life and to be free from torture, inhuman and degrading treatment under articles 2 and 3 of the Convention. Those rights also require protection. That is where we are coming from on a human rights perspective, and that is also why the McMichael case is so central to this argument.

Ms McWilliams: Do you argue that the Bill, as it currently stands, meets the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights?

Ms Archbold: Yes. It meets those requirements and, arguably, goes beyond them.

Ms McWilliams: That is contrary to evidence that we heard earlier which suggested that there are difficulties with regard to discrimination.

Ms Archbold: I do not want to comment on that. The phrase “per incuriam” refers to instances where a court takes a decision without having taken into account a relevant piece of law. I am simply wondering why the McMichael case was not mentioned earlier.

Mr Lambe: The consultation paper that we published in 1999 began by setting the context for human rights and equality issues. They were to the forefront of our minds from the very start of this process, and we were congratulated for taking such a positive and proactive approach to these issues.

Ms McWilliams: A good deal of the discussion so far has centred around the child's mother making an agreement, which is dealt with in clause 1(2)(b). The child's father and mother must make an agreement. Under paragraph (c), the court, on the father's application, can grant him parental responsibility. Can you clarify what happens when the court does that? We assume that in such a case the child's father and mother have not made an agreement and the child's mother has not given her consent.

Mr Lambe: Yes, that is the situation at present. However, the court will not make an order based solely on the application of the father; it will take into account full evidence relating to the interests and views of the child. The mother can disagree with the court's decision to make an application, and she can become a party to the proceedings. That is an existing provision; the Bill is not doing anything new in that respect. It is simply reformulating article 7 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to make it more comprehensible.

Ms McWilliams: We got the impression from earlier evidence that there was some dispute over whether a mother should be allowed to give permission. The evidence was that this was discriminatory and that, in the absence of the mother giving that permission, the father should have parental responsibility. What are your views on that?

Ms Archbold: At present, the law is that registration has no legal effect. If an unmarried father wishes to have parental responsibility for his child, he has to make a parental responsibility agreement with the mother, whose consent is obviously needed. Or, if her consent is not forthcoming, he can apply to a court to be granted parental responsibility. The mother will be a party to those proceedings, and she is able to put forward her own arguments to the court about why the father should not have parental responsibility.

However, at the end of the day, it is up to the court to decide. There was some discussion earlier about the criteria that the court uses to make that decision. Those provisions will still remain in place under this new law. This will provide an extra, more facilitative way by which the majority of unmarried fathers, who jointly register at present, will be able to get parental responsibility without having to take some extra step.

If there is an earlier child for whom there was no assertion of parental responsibility, they can make a parental responsibility agreement in respect of that child if they so wish. Then, in the difficult cases where the parents do not agree, the court can still come in and take a decision. It may be that there are also cases, such as after a one-night stand, where the father wants nothing to do with it, and he will not be making an order. In that case the mother will retain sole parental responsibility. That is the range of situations which will be covered under the new law.

Ms McWilliams: The Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) proposes that before simply granting

automatic parental responsibility some tests might be advisable, among them a residency test. The organisation also sees that that could be problematic, however.

Ms Archbold: Families in Northern Ireland live in a wide range of situations. I know that a new term for families is those who are "living apart together", where perhaps one partner is living with an elderly parent and the other partner and the children are living at another address. People who are in that situation would not meet a residency test. Nor would those whose relationship has ended but who are agreed that they should both continue to have an input into the life of their child. A residency test would count some people in, but it would also count some people out. So that is an interesting proposal, but perhaps it would catch fewer of those who might want to avail of an easier way of doing things.

Mr Lambe: I have the figures for joint registration by unmarried parents who are not living at the same address. I mentioned earlier that there were 6,957 live births outside marriage in 1999. Of those which were subject to joint registration, 2,038 were registered to parents who had the same address, and for 2,449 the registration reflected different addresses. That is a fairly even split. What the figures do not show is why the unmarried parents are not living in the same household.

Ms McWilliams: I have brought this up because the CAJ makes the point that equality is not being promoted if a woman carries all the burden of carrying and caring for a child but only half of the authority to take decisions on behalf of the child.

Mr Lambe: That reveals a misunderstanding of what it is to have parental responsibility. Even if more than one person has parental responsibility, that authority can be exercised singly or jointly. You do not have to reach agreement with every person who has parental responsibility for a child before you can make a decision. Conferring parental responsibility on an additional person does not take away the strength of what a person with existing parental responsibility can or cannot do in relation to that child.

Ms Archbold: If, for example, someone had parental responsibility and were to leave the jurisdiction and never be heard of again, that would not prevent the mother taking decisions on her child's schooling, her child's religion or hospital treatment — all the big issues. It is unfortunate that some people do not wish to be associated in the upbringing of their children, but perhaps that is an issue for wider family law.

Ms McWilliams: So your response to the CAJ is that the parent with parental responsibility who has custodial care on a daily basis can still go ahead and make major life decisions.

Ms Archbold: Absolutely.

Ms McWilliams: Thank you. That clears up many of the points which were made in that submission.

Ms Ramsey: I have some questions on the consultation exercise. Monica McWilliams's questions have covered some points which were very confusing. You talked earlier about consultation, and the memorandum says that the consultation paper was sent out to 185 individuals and organisations representing local community and voluntary organisations. Do you have a list of them?

Ms Archbold: We have a list of those who responded. The Office of Law Reform has a consultation data base, and all those registered on it as having an interest in family law received a copy of the consultation paper — that is who the 185 are.

Ms Ramsey: Can we get a copy of who it was sent to? I know that you will not have that with you, but perhaps you could forward it to us.

Ms Archbold: I have checked this with our administrator, who says that, while it is possible to generate a list of the entire database, it is not possible to break it down by subject matter. That is an administrative problem.

Mr Lambe: The reason is that we are constantly adding new names and addresses to the database. From July 1999 it has been considerably expanded. If I look through the files, I might be able to generate the pool.

Ms Ramsey: It would be helpful if you could break it down to show the level of consultation with women's groups and children's organisations.

Ms Archbold: In the explanatory and financial memorandum we specifically mention that we consulted with groups representative of men. We also consulted with groups representative of women and children, and we received some very useful comments from, among others, Women's Aid and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. We apologise for the typographical mistake.

Mr Lambe: Gingerbread also made a response.

Ms Ramsey: What are your views on the recommendation that children should have a right in the decision making process in relation to blood tests and DNA testing? Should there be an inbuilt requirement to take account of the views of the child, particularly of an older child, in relation to the proposals for parental responsibility by step-parents?

Mr Lambe: We have been considering this issue. We thought that it might come up today, as it did during the debate on the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill. We are not entirely convinced that it is necessary to impose that requirement on the legislation. A court making a declaration of parentage would take that type of consideration on board, especially in view of the age and understanding of the child.

Ms Archbold: This is one of the factors that the court takes into account under article 3 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 in any case regarding the upbringing of children — it is called the "best interests" test for short. The child being consulted is first on that list. Article 3(3)(a) of that Order says that when dealing with the "best interests" test the court shall have regard, in particular, to the ascertainable wishes and feeling of the child concerned, considered in the light of his age and understanding.

Where the "best interests" test is used is in orders under the Children Order. It is part of general child law jurisprudence and something that a family judge would be aware of. If there is a desire to include it in this Bill, it might be best to do so in the context of the "best interests" test to allow the jurisprudence to develop in a coherent way. We looked at this previously — particularly in the light of the proposed amendment to the earlier child support legislation. This legal issue is not specifically about the upbringing of a child — it is a different legal issue. It may be that the "best interests" test is relevant, but it is a different issue, and that was our decision.

Mr Lambe: Just as a child under the UN Convention has a right to know who his or her biological father and mother are, parents also have an interest in determining who their children are, especially in view of the fact that they have significant financial obligations to those children.

Ms Archbold: In some pieces of legislation, such as the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, the child's best interests are paramount. In other legislation the child's best interests are a factor but are not paramount. In other pieces of legislation the interests of the child are not specifically considered but simply fall within all the circumstances of the case.

Ms Ramsey: What about taking into account the views of the children or their step-parents?

Ms Archbold: We would see that as part of the "best interests" test.

Mrs I Robinson: I want to look at the acquisition of parental responsibility by a step-parent. There is concern that giving parental responsibility to step-parents may cause difficulties for the natural parents of the child. In some cases parental responsibility might be given to three or more people. This could be destabilising and potentially cause emotional damage to the child. Do you agree therefore that we should be very cautious about extending parental responsibility to step-parents without the agreement of the natural parents?

Mr Lambe: When a step-parent applies for parental responsibility, any other person who has parental responsibility will be a party to the proceedings and can alert the court to any objections that they have, and the court will take those on board. We do not regard this provision

as being one that is going to have a significant impact — we just think it is slightly more transparent than applying for a residence order for your spouse's children.

Mr McFarland: This is very confusing. We have received the same submissions that presumably you received. We seem to have as many, or more, arguments than there are clauses. I want to discuss some of the key aspects that the Belfast Family Proceedings Court Standing Committee talked about. First, there is the fact that the Bill gives mothers a veto over unmarried fathers. Parental responsibility can be withdrawn from unmarried fathers, yet it cannot be withdrawn from mothers or married fathers. Is this inherent discrimination against unmarried fathers?

Secondly, there is the question of discrimination between legitimate and illegitimate children. How does the Bill square with articles 7 and 8 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognise the rights of children to be known and cared for by their parents and their right to respectful family life? Finally, none of this is retrospective. If, for example, I was a wayward young lad, I might have two older children who would not be affected by this Bill, and I might have a couple of younger children who would. Therefore, I would have four children — two of whom I could have responsibility for, and two for whom I could not.

There are many anomalies, and it strikes me that there is a degree of comfort in that some things seem to fit into other legislation easily. However, there are more fundamental issues involved. We must do what is right and not necessarily what is comfy for lawyers or the Office of Law Reform. It should not be about what fits easily into a Bill or what would cause more work than it is worth. We need to examine the Bill with a view to doing what is right for the children, because that is the object of the exercise. How does all of this square with what is in the Bill?

Ms Archbold: I agree that there are complex issues. Although we are amending the law in small ways we are dealing with serious matters that will affect many people's lives. The key to this must be balance, because people find themselves in many different situations.

You referred first to the discrimination between married and unmarried fathers and then to discrimination between, as you termed it, legitimate and illegitimate children. Those terms no longer exist in law; the terms used now are "marital" and "non-marital" children.

Mr McFarland: Wonderful, I am getting too old.

Ms Archbold: I do not mean to correct you.

Ms McWilliams: Do. It is important.

Ms Archbold: When you examine human rights in families, you must look at every right that everybody has. We try to maintain a child focus and keep the child in the centre when we deal with this. However, we also

look at all the rights that every family member has in every situation that he might find himself in.

An unmarried father's right to family life is undoubtedly something that we were addressing. We have already noted that that right is not absolute. The state can interfere with that right if it does so proportionally and for one of a number of legitimate aims — one being to protect others' rights. Therefore, there may be situations in which rights must be balanced — for example, in the case of a woman who conceives a child as the result of rape. Automatic parental responsibility that treated unmarried fathers equally would not protect her or her child's right to safety.

We received many submissions. Some emphasised the rights of fathers, and others stressed the needs of mothers and children who found themselves in less than ideal situations. Some submissions requested us to major on children's rights. We tried to find a balance among all of those, and the one that we arrived at meets, and goes beyond, the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights.

You also mentioned "retrospectivity". Take the case of a man who fathered two children early on in his career and now has a second family to whom this law might apply. He might not have jointly registered the earlier children with the intention of securing parental responsibility. It would be unfair to impose obligations on him that he was unable to take into account at the time when he registered them. We considered "retrospectivity", but it is a legal principle to avoid it if at all possible. With regard to earlier families, it may help you to know that it is possible to make a parental responsibility agreement that gives all your children the same status.

We can have law that is comfy for lawyers, but it will not affect people until we tell them about it. That is why a major information campaign, which Mr Durkan referred to in the Second Stage debate, is part of our strategy. With the help of the General Register Office we will undertake to give leaflets to people registering the births of children and run a media campaign.

The Chairperson: I want to ask a question in relation to the evidence that Ms Fox and Ms Bowman-McAlister gave. Did you say that Mr Desmond Perry had made a presentation to the Office of Law Reform?

Mr Lambe: Yes, he responded to the July consultation.

The Chairperson: The reason I ask is that Ms Fox and Ms Bowman-McAlister said that they did not speak to you. I understand your explanation.

You heard the points they made. Mr Perry feels passionately about these matters. He wrote to us on at least two occasions when we were conducting our investigation into children in care. As chairperson, Mr Perry signed the document that was passed on to us. In his paper to the Office of Law Reform does he make the

same points as are in the document that was passed on to us today?

Mr Lambe: I do not have magistrate Desmond Perry's response before me, and I cannot recall off hand what his views on the consultation proposals were. However, the Committee staff should have a copy.

The Chairperson: I understand that. Reference has been made to some of these points. The ladies from the Belfast Family Proceedings Court Standing Committee stated that they had talked to a number of legal organisations — but did not specify which organisations — and gave the impression that most informed people, especially lawyers, would be in agreement with them. I am not saying whether that is right or wrong — I do not know — but I am sure that they said that in good faith. I presume that Mr Perry made the same points to you. What comment have you to make about those points, apart from the fact that you have explained that you did not consult them because they were not available as an organisation at that time?

Mr Lambe: The comments made by the witness earlier this afternoon are not reflective of the broad swathe of responses which we received to these proposals back in the summer of 1999. There was recognition that there was a need for some change in the law, but people differed as to the extent of that change.

The Chairperson: Concern has been raised by some organisations that the Bill, as currently worded, does not link the acquisition of parental responsibility with any requirement by unmarried fathers to provide emotional or practical care for the child. Some advocate redefinition of parental responsibility in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to achieve a greater balance in relation to the caring and controlling aspects of parenting. The Scottish approach in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 has been cited as a substantial improvement on the Children Act 1989 for England and Wales. What are your views on this? Would the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 be the proper legislative vehicle to carry this out?

Ms Archbold: We have a copy of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. We have given thought to the English and Scottish definitions of parental responsibility and also the recent Australian legislation. It seems that there are strong arguments on both sides. When faced with a major social problem, or social issues, it can be easy to try to solve everything at once. One other area of the Office of Law Reform's work which is relevant to encouraging parents to be good parents is the family information and support provision, which we discussed in our 1999 consultation document 'Divorce in Northern Ireland: a better way forward'.

There are strong arguments on both sides for having a legislative definition of parental responsibility. It may be that this is not the right legislative vehicle because it will have knock-on effects outside the remit of this small

piece of legislation. Legislation is one thing, but giving people practical help where they need it enables them to be better parents rather than merely stating that they must be better parents.

Mr Lambe: The issue of whether parental responsibility should be more closely defined was raised by Mr Nigel Dodds during the Second Stage debate. The Minister responded that he was concerned that legislating on what a person with parental responsibility can or cannot do in relation to a child would be unduly restrictive. No list of decision-making powers would ever be exhaustive. It was therefore felt that it would be better to keep the legislation flexible and to let the courts — the experts in this area — take the matter on board and develop the law.

Ms Archbold: A senior professional whom we know has described legislating as putting something that is developing into aspic — you are freezing it at the point in time when you write the definition down. There are arguments on both sides.

Mr McFarland: The numbers of children born outside marriage are increasing fairly rapidly. It is becoming the norm in society. Our children are being targeted by magazines which encourage them to experiment — you ought to see what my daughters are reading. Your defence against having an automatic right concerns rape cases.

What would happen if there were to be an automatic right subject to a court objection by the mother? A case involving rape or a violent husband could, of course, prevent that right. The Child Support Agency is spending a fortune chasing after errant young men who are not living up to their responsibilities. It finally gets hold of them and tells them to get their money out for the next 18 years. The young men are then expected to dole out the money to support the children, without having any rights at all. They do not even have a say in hospital treatment, yet they are paying for it. It is right that they pay, but I am uneasy about this. I am uneasy about the defence that somebody might get raped or that somebody might be violent, when there are thousands of people who are living in perfectly happy relationships. They may be living together in a stable relationship, but the right is still not automatic. Why not have a system whereby there is an automatic right? In specific cases a mother could stop matters by saying "No. I was raped, I'm not prepared to have this" or "He is a violent git."

Mr Lambe: We believe that the law as it stands — and as it would be improved by this Bill — creates a mechanism whereby every unmarried father can acquire parental responsibility for his child. That can be done through joint registration, which will cover most cases. It can be done by agreement with the mother — which rarely happens because people do not know about it — or by applying to a court. Where the mother does not agree to joint registration, or opposes an application to a court, you are, in those circumstances, creating systems

whereby a decision can be made. That decision will reflect the best interests of the child, not the best interests of the unmarried father or mother.

The joint registration of a child's birth can only take place if the mother consents to it. There is a 42-day waiting period in which the registration can take place. A married father has gone through a process — he has gone through a marriage ceremony — and he has publicly demonstrated a commitment to his wife, subsequently the mother of the children. An unmarried father who jointly registers the birth of the child is also making a public commitment. An unmarried father who enters into a parental responsibility agreement with the mother — which has to be lodged with the High Court — or who makes the decision to apply to a court for an order is going through a process.

Mr McFarland: But you are entering the realm of moral judgements about who is fit or unfit. A mother could be a wayward young lady, yet she is automatically absolutely fit. We are trying to encourage young people who have children out of wedlock to accept some responsibility. You chase a young man through the courts to get his money and deliberately encourage him not to take any responsibility for his child. There is an argument that if you say to him "Hang on, old chap, we want your money, and you are responsible for this" he is more likely to react by accepting some responsibility than if you simply take the money. One could argue about "taxation without representation", the basis of modern democracy, numerous laws and the American constitution.

Ms McWilliams: I feel that there is a heavy duty on us to protect the best interests of the child. That duty should not mean that the woman has to go to court first to contest a decision in every case — otherwise you put the onus on that person. As far as I am aware, where there are issues of abuse, or where the woman wishes protection, she does not have to declare the other parent's identity, meaning that he need not make any child support payments. I am concerned that you have not written the best interests of the child into paragraph (c), although you have spent considerable time talking about the question. The Belfast Family Court Proceedings Standing Committee has also spent some time discussing it. Would you support an amendment reading "The court, on his application, orders that he shall have parental responsibility for the child where this is in the best interests of the child."? If you wish to make a cross-reference to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, so be it. I am not sure that we can automatically take it for granted as things stand — and, indeed, in view of the concerns raised in the submission — that the court takes the best interests of the child into account.

Mr Lambe: It is important to bear in mind that clause 1 of the Family Law Bill inserts that amendment into the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, so proceedings would be brought not under the Family Law

Act 2001 but under article 7 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Article 3 of the Order automatically kicks in, and the child's best interests will be determined during the proceedings.

Ms McWilliams: Are you saying that it can be taken as read? I am concerned that it leaps out as being very cold as it stands. I take what you say about its being in relation to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. However, what is to stop our repeating that "The court, on his application, orders that he shall have parental responsibility for the child"? I am arguing that we should add "where this is in the best interests of the child."

Ms Archbold: We certainly hear the argument you are making, and if you would like us to return to that at a later date we can. We would appreciate the opportunity to consider it in some detail.

The Chairperson: I take your point that this amends the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, but surely what Ms McWilliams is suggesting to strengthen it is reasonable.

Mr McFarland: If the child were older and able to reason, he might well wish his natural father to have some responsibility for his upbringing. What is the objection to that? I appreciate that, as that is not possible, we are trying to determine what is in the child's best interests. I fully understand your defence in relation to rape and violence, and the need for a mechanism to exclude fathers in those categories. However, aside from that, if the natural father is expected under the law to provide for the upkeep of the child and the mother under the child support system, why should he not, as well as the natural mother, have parental responsibility for that child? What is the argument that says that that is wrong?

Ms Archbold: Several submissions during the consultation period made that point. Several made the point that it is necessary to have strong, active measures so that a victim of abuse is not expected to go to court first. Other submissions came from different points of view. Our advice to Ministers — and it is in the Family Law Bill — is a balance. All unmarried fathers in Northern Ireland have some mechanism by which they can have legal recognition of their relationship to their child. We have reached that balance from the many arguments received. Your argument was one which we took into account. We are aware that the European Court of Human Rights accepted the necessity not to have automatic parental responsibility for all unmarried fathers, because of the need to protect in situations of abuse. In facilitating unmarried fathers, we have gone beyond what was deemed to be acceptable. It is a balancing act, and society is in a state of evolution.

Mr McFarland: A balancing act! I might believe you should have your head cut off, whereas Sue Ramsey might not believe that. A balance would be to half chop it off.

Ms Archbold: We will balance it in accordance with human rights.

Mr McFarland: Forget the balance for a moment — is this something that is right to do? The argument is again being clouded by the question of abuse. I am slightly worried. In how many of the 4,000 cases you mentioned — 2,000 living together and 2,000 not — is abuse taking place? I understand there are rapes and abuse, but I suspect that most of those cases are young people getting together for one reason or another and producing a baby. Abuse or rape is not part of the vast majority of those issues. Is that correct?

Ms Archbold: I am sorry that we cannot help you on that. We do not have statistics.

Mr McFarland: On the balance of probability, given the level of abuse and rape cases before our courts, would you say that the majority of babies born out of wedlock were the products of rape situations?

Ms Archbold: I would welcome the chance to check, but the international statistics show that between one in four and one in 10 relationships have domestic violence. Prof McWilliams may be able to assist with more accurate statistics than we can provide, but my understanding with regard to levels of domestic violence here — whether they come before our courts or not — is that in 1999 3,000 non-molestation orders were sought in the Northern Ireland courts. Fifteen thousand violent incidents were reported to the police. We cannot therefore say that this is a world in which the majority of unmarried parents are teenagers who got together after a disco. Occasionally there is a stranger rape among those cases.

I know that it is rare for conception to occur after rape — at least I believe that to be the case from the research. However, there is evidence from other jurisdictions, England, for example, that while there is a high rate of teenage pregnancy in the UK, there is also a high rate of unmarried women in their thirties having children — many of them in stable, unmarried relationships and some without there being a father around. I do not know what the position in Northern Ireland is, but I think that it is complicated. People in these statistics have many different life stories. It is very hard to get a “one-size-fits-all” rule which will cover all of them.

Mr McFarland: We are legislating for what is clearly a problem but, I would argue, a minority problem. We are taking a worst case scenario and saying that all the unmarried fathers who are not involved in abusive relationships or rapes are to be penalised on the basis that some are. That seems to be a very dodgy basis upon which to start legislating.

Ms Archbold: It may help to focus on the majority of cases. In the majority of cases, parents will be aware of what they are doing because of the publicity campaign. The parents who are together in a relationship and are

trying to make things work will say “We will jointly register the birth. This is our baby. We are both taking responsibility for it.” The fathers who are not getting parental responsibility by taking that step are the unmarried fathers who cannot agree with the child’s mother that they are to have parental responsibility. In other words, you are filtering out the easy cases and leaving the hard cases for the courts to determine.

Ms Armitage: I have a brief question. Alan McFarland seems to be concerned that the natural father pays maintenance and then is denied parental responsibility. Do we have any evidence that that actually happens, Mr McFarland, or are you just assuming that it does? Perhaps I have misunderstood you — and that is your fault because you have not explained it well enough. You say that some people are chased for their money and then have no parental responsibility. Are you assuming that that happens or do you have evidence?

Ms Ramsey: It does happen.

Mr McFarland: Our big problem in Northern Ireland is that we have got all these young men who go out and have a “wahoo” and a few drinks with a few young ladies who have a few drinks as well, and you end up with teenage pregnancies.

Ms McWilliams: No, you do not.

Mr McFarland: You do in a lot of cases. For a long time the solution to this was that the young gentleman took the Holyhead boat, or went off to Heysham in England for a while until things were sorted out. The Child Support Agency system is designed to get these young men and say “You have a responsibility. This is your responsibility. You have been involved in this relationship. There is a baby — you take responsibility for it.” We chase them through the courts. The message going out is that you have absolutely no responsibility as a parent unless you want to. If you want responsibility, you go to court. If most of them do not want it, we are saying that that is all right. I am saying that we are chasing them for their money. We should be giving them responsibility. Many of them would accept the responsibility if they were given it, but they will not accept it unless someone says “Listen, you have been responsible for this” —

Ms McWilliams: It is a myth that that is a major cause of teenage pregnancy. We had the ‘Myths and Realities’ report in front of us, which says that most unmarried mothers are not the very young, and that pregnancy is not the consequence of one night.

Secondly, a lot of research shows that even where they are paying — particularly if they are paying — the issue of responsibility is there. We are talking about extending this, not restricting it. All married fathers have it automatically. We are extending that right to all unmarried fathers in the future, where there is joint registration.

The Chairperson: Are you agreeing with Alan McFarland?

Ms McWilliams: No, I am not.

Mr McFarland: But it is only if they apply. If a father does not want to accept his responsibility, then he simply does not bother to apply and the mother is left with it.

Ms McWilliams: May I suggest that we will learn from the future monitoring and evaluating of those who choose to exercise their parental responsibility? As a result of your information campaign will there be a decrease or increase in joint registration? An individual now has authority over the property of a child, as stated in the Children Order. That might be a frightening future aspect of this, as he will not just be responsibility for upkeep. The mother may say that this person will also be able to make decisions about any property that this child has, or inherits, or that the mother buys for it.

The information campaign will be crucial, because at the moment most people do not know what this legislation will entail. Fathers may choose to opt in or out, and mothers may do likewise. That will then leave research to ascertain whether cases go through the courts. In future, those parents may be divested of responsibility or may seek it. At this stage we do not have the answers. Given all that we have heard and seen in submissions, you think that this is the way forward for meeting the criteria of the European Convention on Human Rights and addressing some of the concerns and fears that are around.

I do not like the view, taken by some, that this is a compromise. Legislation is never good if it is a compromise. If we do not legislate now, we may be found guilty of discriminatory clauses in relation to the Convention on Human Rights. This Bill may meet some of that, so some of the proposals should be based on the best interests of the child.

The Chairperson: Before that is replied to, has Ms Armitage finished?

Ms Armitage: I think so. I am not any wiser, but I think I will leave it for the moment.

Ms Ramsey: Can you give me the figures again for the live births outside marriage, and within that number, how many were jointly registered?

Mr Lambe: First, 22,957 children were born in Northern Ireland in 1999. Of those, 6,957 were born to parents who were not married to each other. Of those 6,957 births, 64.5% were jointly registered by the mother and the unmarried father, either to the same address or to a different address.

Mrs I Robinson: The ratio is therefore about one to three in relation to children born to married couples?

Mr Lambe: Of all children born, 30.3% are born outside of marriage.

Mrs I Robinson: I asked that because the other group of witnesses implied that the number of children being born within marriage was dwindling.

Ms Ramsey: I want to go back to a point made earlier by Mr Lambe and to something that came from the Belfast Family Proceedings Court Standing Committee witnesses. Mr Lambe said that the courts are the experts who will develop the law. If these people deal with these issues daily, why do you think that they have a lot of problems with this Bill?

Ms Archbold: The people who submitted that report take that view. We have had other views from elsewhere in the legal profession and the judiciary.

Ms Ramsey: Yes, but it is a Standing Committee from Belfast Family Proceedings Court. Unless I am wrong, they are dealing with those issues day and daily. If you are saying that the courts will develop the law, why do those people, who are developing the law, have such problems?

The Chairperson: That is why I asked the question about Desmond Perry. He is the chairperson of that group, as you know.

Ms Archbold: Belfast Family Proceedings Court, located in Belfast Magistrates' Court, represents the people who practise and the magistrates who sit on family proceedings in the magistrates' court. It says that that is an issue on which people have different views — even in the legal profession there are different views. We have attempted to strike a balance and take people's concerns into account — not by way of compromise but by having a law that will fit the many diverse situations in which people find themselves.

Ms McWilliams: It is your understanding, as it is my understanding, that there is a diversity of views within the group. Since Desmond Perry, the magistrate, signed off on that document, we have obtained views from others who would not sign up to the entire document.

Ms Ramsey: That was not the impression given by the people who made the submission. They said that although there were different views within their group, they are all agreed on the document.

The Chairperson: They did emphasise the number of people for whom they were speaking — within the legal profession and beyond.

Ms McWilliams: However, it is important to add that in their earlier submission they said that they were satisfied that the legislation should be amended to give parental rights to both fathers and mothers, whether married or otherwise, and, equally, that the Children Order should be amended to allow the court, on application of either parent, to divest a parent, whether father or mother, of the same. Despite all their concerns, they came to that conclusion. That seems to read itself into the amendments that are proposed.

Mr Lambe: Permitting the removal of parental responsibility from mothers or married fathers is not a proposal that was put forward when we consulted.

The Chairperson: It is a complicated matter. Of the five clauses, clause 1 is obviously problematic. We, as a Committee, are faced with a time-factor problem — and not just for this evening. We have to respond to the Finance Committee by the end of March. Perhaps we could look at clauses 2, 3, 4, and 5 to see whether we can pass or amend them. I do not think that we will agree on clause 1 as it stands — it may have to be amended.

Ms McWilliams: For the record, I understand that we were going to return to clause 1(2)(c).

The Chairperson: Yes, that point was made earlier.

Ms McWilliams: I think that there could be agreement on the rest of the Bill.

Mr McFarland: We need to examine clause 1, in its entirety, more slowly. Our researchers have advised us that there are a number of matters in clause 1 that need to be looked at. We should aim to tie up the rest of the clauses, if possible.

Clause 1 referred for further consideration.

Clause 2 (Presumption of parentage)

The Chairperson: Clause 2 deals with the presumption of parentage. Colleagues have had time to study it. Mr Lambe and Ms Archbold agree that there is nothing very controversial in clause 2.

Mr Lambe: Yes. Clause 2 puts an existing common law presumption onto a statutory footing — that a man, married to a woman at any time between the conception and birth of the child, will be presumed to be the father of that child. It goes further by creating a new statutory presumption that we think mirrors what most people would think in practice — that if a man agrees to have his name put on the birth certificate of the child, that is an acknowledgement of parentage. These provisions mirror provisions that are already in place in Scotland.

Mr McFarland: Clause 2 says:

“any presumption under this section may be rebutted by proof on a balance of probabilities”.

If you are tested, can that be rebutted? Or does it mean that someone was not in the country at the time?

Mr Lambe: In those circumstances a scientific test would not always be needed to be able to rebut that presumption.

Mr McFarland: Does it have the safeguard that it can be rebutted if there is a balance of probability?

Mr Lambe: Yes. The scientific tests that determine parentage can be used in proceedings.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put to and agreed to.

Clause 3 (Tests for determining parentage)

The Chairperson: This clause amends the Family Law Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. It enables courts to direct the taking and testing of bodily samples for the purpose of resolving questions of parentage. At present courts are confined to directing the taking and testing of blood only. Other amendments to this legislation are contained in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act. Is there anything that you would like to draw our attention to?

Mr Lambe: Clause 3 seeks to implement in Northern Ireland provisions which have been on the statute book in England and Wales for some years but which have never been brought into force. It will allow courts who are directing and dealing with parentage disputes to enable the testing to be done not on blood but on other bodily samples. It is generally regarded as a much less invasive procedure from the point of view not only of the child but of the mother and putative father.

Ms Archbold: Mouth swabs can be taken.

Mr McFarland: Who should pay for this? There is a school of thought that says that if you demand a parentage test you should pay for it — particularly if it comes up negative. With regard to the rights of the child recently there have been cases in England where there has been some doubt over whether a child is of the parents that it thought were its natural parents. The psychological effects of discovering that your daddy is not your daddy and that uncle Jimmy is your daddy can be serious. What rights do children, particularly teenagers, have to object to this sort of testing? It may turn out that the person whom they have known and loved as their father all their life is not their father. In some cases they may prefer not to know that. There are moral issues.

Mr Lambe: As a child gets older and a question of parentage arises in civil proceedings, the court will take into account the child's views if the child is adamant that he does not want to know whether someone is his parent. The court would take that into consideration when deciding whether to direct under the Family Law Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 that tests be carried out.

Mr McFarland: Should a child have the right to object or to be consulted?

Mr Lambe: A child has the right to be consulted on all occasions when his views are relevant.

Ms Ramsey: Children were not consulted about the Bill.

Mr Lambe: With regard to payment, the vast majority of cases where parentage is in dispute are taken by the Child Support Agency. It very rarely occurs in other proceedings relating to children.

Ms McWilliams: Who pays in those cases?

Mr Lambe: I attempted yesterday and this morning to find out accurate information about that. My understanding is that if the Child Support Agency takes the case and successfully proves parentage, the cost falls to the unsuccessful defendant. However, I cannot be sure that that is what happens.

Ms McWilliams: We have received a submission saying that that is not the case. We do not know what the answer is. One group which made a submission to us said that in all cases the parents pay — successful or unsuccessful — and they feel that this is unfair.

Mr Lambe: I am happy to check that out and get back to the Committee in writing with the answer.

Ms Ramsey: I have to place on record that I have a concern for kids. We are all aware of a lot of cases where the children might not want to know and where they are not asked for their consent. Will the samples be destroyed right away?

Mr Lambe: In most cases a sample directed to be taken by the court will be taken and tested by accredited

laboratories. At present only two organisations carry out court-directed tests in Northern Ireland. I imagine that that will continue. I do not have the operational information on how long individual samples are kept. However, I can make enquiries again.

The Chairperson: We cannot move on clause 3, so we will have to come back to it.

Ms Archbold: It is possible that because those are operational matters, they are not contained in the wording of the clause. Members may wish to have assurances before they agree the clause. It may be that those matters can be talked about without their affecting the substance of this section.

The Chairperson: Colleagues might want to put an amendment down at a later stage. There are a couple of small queries about this clause so we will leave it for the moment.

Question, That the clause be referred for further consideration, put to and agreed to.

Clause 4 and 5 agreed to.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. We look forward to returning to clauses 1 and 3 at a future meeting.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND
PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE**

Wednesday 7 March 2001

**FAMILY LAW BILL
(NIA 4/00)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Armitage
Mr Berry
Ms Hanna
Mr J Kelly
Mr McFarland
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey
Mrs I Robinson

Witnesses:

Ms K Fox) Belfast Family
Ms C Bowman-McAlister) Proceedings Court
Standing Committee

The Chairperson: I welcome Ms Colette Bowman-McAlister and Ms Karen Fox of the Belfast Family Proceedings Court Standing Committee. I invite you to begin your presentation.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: We feel that the written submissions are relatively straightforward and, as we said to a member of Dr Hendron's staff, the 10-minute presentation may not be necessary. However, if you prefer, we shall give a summary.

The Chairperson: We need a summary for the record.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: With the passage of the Children Act 1989 in England and Wales and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, the legislators sought, among other things, to move from the old concept of parental rights to that of parental responsibility. That means that parents not only have rights over their children but responsibilities and duties towards them as well. Few people would disagree that that is an ideal upon which the family should be grounded.

We need to safeguard and protect the best interests of the children and to encourage parents to think and act responsibly towards them. Parents should also realise that they have a duty to ensure that their children are brought up to be responsible citizens and parents.

Under article 6 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which we shall refer to now as the 1995 Order, parental responsibility means all the rights, duties, powers and authority that, by law, a parent of a child has in relation to that child and his property.

Under article 5 of the 1995 Order, unmarried fathers do not automatically have parental responsibility, but they can acquire it in one of two ways, which are laid out in article 7. Any father who is married to the child's mother at the time of the birth has parental responsibility.

By article 7 of the Order, an unmarried father can acquire parental responsibility either by entering into a parental responsibility agreement with the mother or by making an application to the court to which the court accedes. It is also noteworthy that under article 7(4), parental responsibility, acquired by either means, may be brought to an end by a court order. That can be made on the application of any person who has parental responsibility for the child or, with the leave of the court, on the application of the child himself.

All mothers and married fathers automatically vested with parental responsibility can only lose that responsibility where a child is made the subject of an adoption order. There is no mechanism in the Order to divest them of that. The end result is that, unlike the mother's and married father's responsibility, where an unmarried father acquires parental responsibility, it is not indefeasible.

Application can be made at any time, most probably by the mother seeking to remove that which was granted to her by the court.

An unmarried father may have to go through the demeaning process of proving to the court that he is the father and therefore a suitable person to acquire parental responsibility. He may have to go through the process a second time to ensure that he does not lose that which was so dearly acquired.

The thoroughly unworthy married father, or for that matter mother, does not have to face such a prospect. On any reading of the Order, unmarried fathers are treated differently from mothers on the grounds of gender. Equally, unmarried fathers are treated differently from married fathers on the grounds of their marital status. Perhaps, and this is most important, the children of unmarried fathers are treated differently from legitimate children on grounds that are completely beyond their control, namely the fact that their parents are not married. We are of the view that that is threefold discrimination that has no reasonable justification. Any body enacting legislation and any court interpreting that legislation

must now ensure that it is acting compatibly with the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom, which was given effect by the Human Rights Act 1998.

Within the area of family law, it is primarily article 8 — everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence — that is of concern. Family life has been considered by the European Court on many occasions, and it is clear that an ever widening interpretation has been given to it. In *Soderback versus Sweden*, 1998, an unmarried father and his child were found to enjoy family life, notwithstanding the fact that they never lived together or had regular contact. In *Boughanemi versus France*, 1996, the court held that the concept of family life on which article 8 is based embraces, even when there has been no cohabitation, the tie between a parent and his or her child regardless of whether or not the latter is legitimate. In *X, Y and Z versus United Kingdom*, a case relating to a transsexual couple, the court said that

“when deciding when a relationship can be said to amount to family life a number of factors may be relevant, including whether the couple live together, the length of their relationship and whether they have demonstrated their commitment to each other by having the children together or by any other means.”

The European Court of Human Rights recently considered the issue of parental responsibility in the case of *B versus United Kingdom*, 2000. In that case, an unmarried father was seeking to compel the return of his child from Italy, where the mother had gone. He failed before the domestic courts, which considered the case before the Human Rights Act was given effect. As an unmarried father without parental responsibility, he did not have the right to custody.

On appeal, the Strasbourg court concluded that

“the different treatment under domestic law of the applicant and a father with parental responsibility did not disclose an appearance of the violation of article 14 in conjunction with article 8 of the convention.”

Put simply, had B been married to the mother and therefore vested with responsibility, the court could have required the mother and child to return to the United Kingdom. Since he was not a married father he had to be treated differently, but, by some sleight of hand, this different treatment was not discrimination or denial of his article 8 right to family life.

In coming to this decision the court said that

“the relationship between unmarried fathers and their children there is from ignorance and indifference to a close stable relationship indistinguishable from the conventional family-based unit.”

It is not clear on what basis the court came to make that statement, but any family law practitioner would, we are sure, agree that the characteristics of paternity described by the court are as commonly found in married as in unmarried fathers.

The decision in *B versus United Kingdom* is manifestly wrong, and we are by no means alone in having that view. If it is the correct interpretation of the law and that incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom, we have to ask why the Assembly is seeking to amend article 5 of the Order at all. We are further led to believe that an identical amendment is being effected to the Children Act 1995. If we are correct in concluding that article 5 of the Order is discriminatory and in breach of the article 8 rights to private and family life, does the proposed change to be effected by the Family Law Bill remedy things?

The change proposed by the Family Law Bill, contained in clause 1(2), is that an unmarried father should acquire parental responsibility if

“he becomes registered as the child’s father”.

That would mean that the existing means of acquisition, namely by parental responsibility agreement or application to a court, are preserved.

At present, registration of birth has no great significance, save to say that it is a statutory requirement. If the law is amended in that way, the new importance of registration will have to be brought to the attention of the public and kept there. Thus, both prospective unwed mothers and fathers will have to be aware that the act of jointly registering the birth of their child has consequences for them and they will have to be in agreement on that.

If the mother, knowing that the father will want to have parental responsibility, refuses to allow joint registration or goes behind his back and registers the child herself, will the position of the unmarried father have been improved to any degree? Without that amendment, he has to get her consent for a parental responsibility agreement, as described earlier. Either way, an unmarried father is dependent on the consent of the mother for acquiring parental responsibility for his child.

Since the legislation will not have retrospective effect all manner of anomalies will be created: the pre-amendment unmarried father who does not have parental responsibility; the pre-amendment unmarried father who jointly registered the birth with the child’s mother but still has no parental responsibility; the post-amendment father who is prevented by the mother from registering the birth or who is otherwise unable to register the birth and therefore does not have parental responsibility; and so on. Perhaps, worst of all, is the unmarried father of a number of children who has always registered the births of his family, some of those children being pre-amendment and some post-amendment.

Where the courts deal with an application for the acquisition of parental responsibility the test is threefold. First, is there a degree of attachment between the father and the child? Secondly, has the father shown a commitment to the child? Finally, is there evidence of an improper motive on the part of the father?

That is a demeaning process for any father because all he is being asked is to prove to the court that he is a worthy parent. A married father, no matter how awful a scoundrel, has nothing to prove. His marriage vows somehow invest him with all that is desirable as a parent. This is a palpable nonsense, as any judicial officer or practitioner in our family court will testify.

At present, the chief objection raised by mothers over an unmarried father's application to the courts for parental responsibility is that it will be used as a means of objectionable interference with the way in which they bring up their children. That may not prove to be the case with married fathers who automatically have parental responsibility and, where there is inappropriate meddling by any parent, the courts are well equipped to deal with that by way of specific issue orders and prohibitive steps orders. We are satisfied that the amendment to the Order contained in clause 1(2) of the Family Law Bill is an unfortunate halfway house that fails to rectify a glaringly discriminatory piece of pre-Human Rights Act legislation. We are satisfied that the legislation should be amended to give parental responsibility to both fathers and mothers, whether they are married or not.

Equally, the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 should also be amended to allow the courts, on application of either parent, to divest a parent of the same responsibilities — whether that is the father or the mother. Clearly, it is undesirable that a convicted rapist should be clothed with parental responsibility for a child, which is an offence created. Should it not be equally so for the mothers or fathers who abandon their children and take no interest in them, preferring instead to sit at home with another partner and, in many cases, with that person's family? Do they deserve the privilege of parental responsibility? Clause 1(3) of the Bill states that

"a child's step-parent shall acquire parental responsibility for the child if the court, on application of the step-parent, orders that he shall have parental responsibility for the child."

We are divided on this amendment. Some of our number welcome it as conferring parental responsibility on married partners who have entered into marriages accepting not only responsibility for their new partners, but also responsibility for those people's children. Frequently such newly-wed partners are fully deserving of being vested with parental responsibility.

Equally, there will be exceptions. Others take the view that this is an inherently dangerous route to take. Practitioners and judges are all too familiar with the scenario in which a parent with residence of the children seeks to marginalize the other parent in favour of the new partner. We take the view that applications by step-parents under that provision will be made with the full support of the natural parent with whom the children are living. The opposition is most likely to come from the non-resident parent, but he or she will not be best placed to challenge the united front of step-parent and

spouse with whom the children are resident. There is a real possibility of ridiculous anomalies, such as where an unmarried mother with residence of the children marries, and her new partner and stepfather both apply for parental responsibility. What about the unmarried father without parental responsibility? What happens if he applies for contact with his children and for parental responsibility? Not having all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority that, by law, the married parent of a child has, has he the right to object to the stepfather's application? The only person to have those rights is the mother, and she is consenting to the new husband's application.

The unmarried father without parental responsibility may find himself being no more than a novice party to such proceedings — an interested but impotent spectator to a process that further undermines his position as the children's father. If the courts apply the same test to the granting of step-parental responsibility as those previously established, few of those applications will fail. In the example cited above, it is doubtless that the mother will give glowing testimony about his credentials. We have only to wonder how we can hope to establish the children's wishes and feelings on the matter and whether those applications will be in their best interests. On balance, we as a body are opposed to this amendment.

In conclusion, both of the proposed amendments to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 are flawed. They fail to recognise that significant numbers of people are choosing not to marry and that for those who do, the failure rate by way of separation and divorce is growing year each year. They seek to suggest that those who make a public gesture in recognition of their children, namely registering their births, are in some way more responsible and committed than those who, for whatever reason, do not. The amendments will simply add to the discrimination against unmarried fathers. Amending legislation to give some greater status to those who go through the ceremony of marriage — now largely without religious significance and all too often without a degree of permanence — is failing to meet the challenge of a changing society.

The Assembly has an opportunity in the Bill to meet that challenge and to assert that both parents of a child are entitled to be regarded equally as parents, irrespective of protocol or bureaucratic actions. Despite having a superficial attractiveness, the second amendment has the potential to prove that an unmarried father is truly a second-class citizen and not worthy of our further consideration. It will compound the injustice done by article 5 of the 1995 Order. Finally, that proposed amendment levels itself to the supplanting of the natural father, whether married or not, by the mother's latest choice of mate.

The Chairperson: Certainly it is a complex problem, but it is important. Have you or your people discussed this subject with the Office of Law Reform?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: We have not discussed it with the Office of Law Reform.

The Chairperson: Have you plans to do so?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: No date has been arranged as yet. I suppose we could if that were found to be necessary. The timescale within which we were told to make these submissions was relatively short — only five days.

Ms Fox: The first notification that we got about this was when we received the Family Law Bill from this Committee. Thereafter we submitted our written representations on the Bill.

The Chairperson: Were you or your organisation consulted by the Office of Law Reform?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: No, I do not believe that we were.

The Chairperson: It said that it consulted widely, but you were not part of that consultation.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: No. I spoke to Ms Archbold from the Office of Law Reform this afternoon and it seems that it was in contact with the Court Service, which did not forward our name. We are a relatively new group in the family proceedings court process, so it may just have been through an oversight that we were not referred to it.

The Chairperson: There is much detail in your document, which is very important. I would appreciate it if you could give us, in your own words, the main points in the Bill which you object to or with which you have difficulty.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: Unmarried fathers are treated differently from mothers on the grounds of their gender; that unmarried fathers are treated differently from married fathers on the grounds of their marital status; and that children of unmarried parents are treated differently from legitimate children on grounds of their parents' marital status, which is completely beyond their control. Those are our three points.

In relation to gender, it appears on our reading — and we are subject to correction — that if an unmarried father seeks to have parental responsibility, he has to get the permission of the mother. We cannot see any great distinguishable grounds for allowing that difference other than the fact that she is female and we know that she is the mother. We do not think that that is a good enough reason to disbar — and we hope that the Committee agrees with us — what may well be a very good father from having a right to a say in his child's life.

The Chairperson: That is a fair point.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: The next point deals with being treated differently on the grounds of marital status. An unmarried father has to seek the permission of a court, or at least the permission of the mother, to acquire

parental responsibility. Only when he receives parental responsibility does he have a say. However, there are situations in which a mother goes off, finds a new partner and decides that the new partner should take on the everyday practical duties of fatherhood and have a say in the child's life. The natural father is, by and large, sidelined. In that instance, we have a father who, having acquired parental responsibility, may be in the position of having to justify that each time the mother changes partner.

A married father's position is different — simply because of his band of gold there is an impression that he will be a perfect father. In most cases I am glad to say that he is. However, unfortunately, there are cases in which a married father does not accept the everyday practicalities of bringing up his child and does not carry out the normal duties of care, control, love and concern. Nobody can divest him of his parental responsibility, even if he behaves in the most shameless fashion. We have a married man who does not have to justify his position at all, as opposed to an unmarried man who seems to be constantly having to persuade people to let him get parental responsibility and, if he gets it, to let him keep it.

The Chairperson: That is a very fair point. I shall open the discussion up to my Colleagues.

Mr McFarland: I am not well up on legal matters. You are a committee from the family proceedings court in Belfast?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: Yes.

Mr McFarland: Is this a democratically elected standing committee brought into being by all those involved in the court? Is it official and recognised?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: We are a group that was set up by the resident magistrate in the family proceedings court, Mr Desmond Perry, about 18 months to two years ago. Legal practitioners, social workers, members of the Court Service and various lay panel members are all represented on the group and all views are expressed.

This document in front of the Committee is based on the type of thing that we see daily in practice. Ms Fox and I are practitioners with a large children/matrimonial practice. Our views have been compiled through discussion with our colleagues in the group, which is a concentrated version of the great number of practitioners out there, and the same views are expressed over and over again, given what we see daily, particularly in the area of parental responsibility.

Mr McFarland: Therefore, it is the view of the family court, which would normally deal with this sort of matter?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: Yes.

Mr McFarland: I am very confused about how we have got to this stage. A Bill is produced by the Office of Law Reform. It has given us a list as long as your arm

of the people it has consulted on this, yet your organisation was somehow left out of the loop. Were you aware that it was drafting such a Bill? If you were aware of this, and it has been going on for some time, was it not reasonable to expect your organisation to have made a submission? My understanding is that you did not, although the Court Service itself was invited to do so. Do you know if it made a submission?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: No, I am not aware of that.

Mr McFarland: I am confused about how we have come so far down the road, and yet only now does the Belfast Family Proceedings Court Standing Committee suddenly come over the horizon full-tilt at the Bill. The Bill is very far down the road.

The Chairperson: This is its Committee Stage.

Mr McFarland: Is there a ready explanation for that?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: No, I do not have a ready explanation. We made our submission upon invitation. We have been voicing concerns among ourselves for a long time. We did not make a submission until we were invited to do so. I cannot say why, but it is apparent that we were not invited to do so before February.

The Chairperson: We shall, certainly, be asking the Office of Law Reform why your organisation was not included in the consultation.

Mr J Kelly: That is the question I was going to ask. What are you proposing to do to counteract this?

Ms Bowman McAlister: The view of the group is that this is an all-or-nothing situation. Everyone — mothers and fathers, married or unmarried — should receive parental responsibility. The legislation allows for that, with a clause that allows for an unreasonable parent to have that parental responsibility taken away following application from any interested party. Or, alternatively, absolutely no one gets it — mothers, fathers, married or unmarried alike — although if circumstances prove to be exceptional, an application can be made to a court for parental responsibility.

Mr J Kelly: I agree that the natural father ought to have rights over a child that he has fathered.

Ms Fox: Or responsibility.

Mr J Kelly: Yes, responsibility in addition to rights. Responsibility is perhaps the overriding issue.

Ms Fox: Yes, we would take that view.

Mr J Kelly: I agree also that where there is responsible unmarried parent, he should have a right in law. I wonder how that would be developed? For example, I understand that there is no difficulty with a natural child's having succession rights, even if he was born outside of wedlock. How would you approach the issue mechanically? It is an important issue.

Ms Fox: Let us consider the matter from the child's point of view. A child has a right to family life, and that right needs to be protected and safeguarded. It includes a right to a legal relationship, not only with his or her mother but with his or her father. At the moment, legislation is discriminating against illegitimate children, which is unacceptable. Children are being penalised because of the behaviour or the status of their parents.

The human rights legislation is now in force, and we must remember that the legislation applies to children as well as to adults. The main focus and purpose of the 1995 Order is to look after the welfare of the child, and to safeguard and protect his best interests. The only way in which the child's right can be safeguarded is by granting parental responsibility to his natural parents.

Mr J Kelly: Should an unmarried natural father have equal rights to the mother? Would you go so far as to say that in cases of pregnancy termination, for example, the natural father should have an equal say in the matter?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: Why not? If we succeed in introducing legislation and operating the courts in the interests of our children — who have the right to their identities and to as much love, care and concern in their upbringing as can reasonably be expected from people who, we hope, will behave like adults — why should a father be excluded from a child's existence? I know that there are plenty of arguments about when exactly a child comes into existence, but let us be general about it and consider that period from pre-birth stage until after the birth. Care and concern for a child does not start the moment it is in *rerum natura*: it can be part and parcel of how a child is looked after during pregnancy as well. If that caring includes an argument about whether a child should exist, why should an unmarried father — or a married father — not have a say in that?

Ms Ramsey: I wish to follow up Mr McFarland's point. I am shocked that the Belfast Family Proceedings Court Standing Committee did not have any input into the consultation exercise.

Can you estimate how many of those cases you deal with? I suppose you deal with the majority of them?

Ms Bowan-McAlister: On a slow day in the family proceedings court we might have 10 cases — that would be exceptional. On the other hand, we could have as many as 50. Not all those involve parental responsibility. We have never done an exact headcount. I can only base that figure on my experience in my practice. As I move further away from the inception of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order, I see more and more applications for parental responsibility.

Ms Ramsey: I am trying to get this into perspective. Is Belfast one of the main courts?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: Yes, although I am fortunate enough to work in Newtownards, Belfast, Lisburn,

Craigavon and Newry. I must say that Newry and Newtownards, in particular, can compete with Belfast in applications numbers; it is not purely a Belfast phenomenon.

Ms Ramsey: Are there standing committees in Newtownards or Newry?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: There is a committee in Newtownards. I am not aware of one in Newry. I can only speak for those groups of which I am a member, and I am not in any other group.

Ms Ramsey: Are you aware whether the other groups are going to ask for an input into the Bill?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: No, I am not aware of that.

Ms Ramsey: I am shocked that you did not have an input. I am sure that we are all aware of different cases in which a small percentage of fathers, whether married or unmarried, could use legislation to their advantage. I am starting to agree with what you say, whereas previously I argued against it. I can understand that, whether a father is married or not, he should have the same rights and responsibilities. Why should unmarried fathers have to provide proof of emotional or practical care for a child, when married fathers do not have to? There is no requirement in the Bill, and I am concerned about that.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: If you are married you are immediately invested with parental responsibility. You will never have to prove anything to a court. If, on the other hand, you are unmarried you can only get parental responsibility with the leave of a court.

Ms McWilliams: You hope that the many people who come through your courts will act as adults. I am very taken by that view. Given the number of people whom I have supported in relation to parental responsibility and its abuse, I must dispute it. I am sure that you would not dispute the figure of 15,000 incidents of domestic violence, and at least 3,000 cases of common assault. Many of those never get near your courts. This is a very contentious issue. Mature adulthood tends to go out the window, and there is so much litigation as a consequence. We have heard from other solicitors, who would probably take a somewhat different view.

One issue that comes up in the research literature is that of care and responsibility versus authority. Have you anything to say on that? Or do you believe that authority has to be written into legal statute for care and responsibility to follow? Can there not be care and responsibility without authority's being attached through a legal statute?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: If all couples — married or unmarried — were able to agree, I would be out of business. I was being facetious when I said, "if adults could behave in an adult fashion". I represent adults who act like children, and I see children who have become adults because of their parents behaviour. They become

older than their years. That is entirely unnecessary; a child should always have his or her childhood.

Prof McWilliams asked whether we did not experience any difficulty in a situation in which one parent felt obstructed by the other and therefore required an order for parental responsibility. I believe I also speak for my colleague, Ms Fox. Perhaps I have misunderstood, but in many instances, and in my experience, parental responsibility does not mean asserting authority over a child; it is merely a matter of being involved, to be known to the child as a parent. That is what it is really about in our courts.

Ms McWilliams: If I could take you a step further, is it your experience that where marriages have ended — or in the case of an unmarried mother who has severed her relationship — there may be abuse if there is an attempt to exert authority where no responsibility has been taken?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: We had anticipated a question of that nature. Having spoken to my friend, and to other practitioners specifically before this meeting, I should tell you that it is our common experience that once a parental responsibility matter has been settled, which, in nine out of ten cases, I assure you is heatedly fought, it never returns to court. The argument that somehow parental responsibility is only an excuse for you to abuse me as an adult, and that it is not really about the children at all, seems to disappear into thin air.

From my experience of practice and that of those colleagues whom I have asked, I am not so sure of the notion that seeking parental responsibility is merely an attempt by one adult to continue what might loosely be described as a programme of harassment against a former partner. I do not believe that to be so.

Ms McWilliams: I am very surprised to hear that. Perhaps we deal with two different sets of cases. In my experience, based on a great many interviews, people will grasp any attempt to exert authority, particularly if they can use the courts to do so. Perhaps they do not come back to you through the courts, or you cannot follow through the aftercare — in other words, the evaluation and monitoring.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: That is possible. I can only speak for my own practice, but I usually find that clients return to me. A matrimonial break-up is not something resolved in a single court appearance. I am sure it is your experience also that a matrimonial — or, indeed, non-matrimonial — break-up can pan itself out over anything between a year and two years. On some extreme occasions, it may extend to three. People return to court and fight all the time, and I find I am constantly representing the same client. As we attempt a settlement or a particular course of action only for it to break down, he or she returns to court, and I get brought back into the case. My experience is that matrimonial clients have a

degree of loyalty to their representatives, and return to the same solicitors and barristers.

Ms Fox: We must remember that parental responsibility defines a relationship between a parent and a child, not between the parents. That is something that should not be forgotten. It is a matter of parental responsibility towards that child rather than a matter of authority or rights. If a parent abuses parental responsibility, there should be provision in the legislation to divest him or her of it, whether it be the mother, a married father, or an unmarried father.

The Chairperson: Is it correct that the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 does not define parental responsibilities clearly? In front of me I have the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, which does so. Were it possible, which I am sure it is, would it be helpful if an amendment were made to give a fuller definition of parental responsibilities to the 1995 Order? Are you familiar with the Scottish legislation?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: No. I have only spoken to my friends.

Ms McWilliams: The final question may already have been addressed. There have been conflicting representations to the Committee on this issue. If a stepfather has parental rights, which the natural father also pursues, do you not envisage a great deal of litigation as a consequence?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: Yes. We are concerned that if the draft legislation is passed it will create nothing but litigation. There will be many arguments, and we have pointed out to you in our document the number of anomalies that we feel have been created by the legislation as it stands. That can only increase the workload and add to the burden of stress that families may already be under. Undoubtedly, it can only affect the relationships that children have with their parents. It will ultimately cause an undue amount of distress to children.

Ms McWilliams: On which side do you come down?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: As we have said, our opinion is that either everyone should get parental responsibility or no one. As it stands, the format will only create an extra caseload.

In answer to the specific question about a stepfather and a father competing, that is covered in our document. Families go to court with a clean slate, because the court knows nothing about them. The view presented to the court by the mother and the step-parent — who are obviously demonstrating a united front to make the application — will be wonderful. However, the natural father in this instance is waiting once again for the mother of his child to give her permission and say either, “All right, we will work with you” or “We are going to sideline and exclude you”.

Ms Fox: We are all aware that children are born into a wide variety of family circumstances. The situation is

no longer one of only married parents or even of children being with either parent. We must deal with that situation, and my colleague and I deal with it every day. We want to ensure that no matter what decision is taken, it is taken in a child’s best interests.

I would go further and say that, where appropriate, an application should be made by any third party for parental responsibility. I come across many examples of children who are not with either parent but are perhaps with members of the extended family. In those circumstances, it would be appropriate to grant parental responsibility to the main carer in order to safeguard the child’s interests. We must deal with the situation as we find it on ground level. Unfortunately, it is no longer the case that children are born into a secure family unit — that is what we must deal with.

The Chairperson: Ms Hanna is next. If you could quickly direct — *[Interruption]*.

Mr J Kelly: I just wanted to clarify something, but you can go ahead.

The Chairperson: I shall take Ms Hanna first and then return to you.

Ms Hanna: Thank you for your submission. In it you discuss the acquisition of parental responsibility and the threefold test: the degree of attachment between father and child; the father’s showing commitment to the child; and evidence of improper motive. Is that not reasonable for any father who is seeking to acquire parental responsibility? You do not think that it is a fair test for an unmarried father. I think that it is a fair test for any father — married or unmarried.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: That is exactly the point that we are making — it would be all right if it were a test for every parent, and not just fathers. I am stepping out on a limb and giving my own opinion, but we are coming to the stage at which the word “parent” is becoming a definition of behaviour and not necessarily a matter of right first because a person fathered or gave birth to a child.

Ms Hanna: However, you say that it is a demeaning process.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: Yes. When you compare the existing legislation, an unmarried father must go to court and say, “Please give me this, and I will prove the following things to you”. He must convince the court. However, it does not matter if a married father is the greatest scoundrel on earth. He retains his parental responsibility as a right, and no one can take it away from him. Why is that?

Ms Fox: That applies to mothers also. Believe it or not, there are bad mothers about too.

Ms Hanna: I do not think that it is demeaning for a father or a mother to be asked that, whether married or unmarried.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: We do not suggest for a second that they should not be asked that. If every parent must ultimately demonstrate that he or she behaves as a parent should, I have no objection. However, it is unfair to say that somebody must prove it because he is unmarried yet another does not have to prove it because he is, or that somebody else must prove it because he is male yet the mother has to prove nothing because she is female.

Ms Hanna: You should not take good conditions away because you think that they are unfair. The good conditions should apply to the married and the unmarried.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: I want to be absolutely clear. We do not object to this test. However, we feel that if those questions are going to be asked, they should be asked across the board.

Ms Hanna: Before you move on, are you aware of what consultation took place with women and children?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: I am not aware of that.

The Chairperson: Sorry, Ms Hanna. What was that question?

Ms Hanna: It was about consultation with women and children. Most of this seems to deal with unmarried fathers.

The Chairperson: We shall definitely ask about that next time.

Ms McWilliams: Perhaps I could partly answer that by referring to a related issue. I want to deal with the point about married fathers having automatic parental responsibility — you might say until they are divested of it.

It is a contentious issue because Northern Ireland law differs from that in England, Scotland and Wales in that an article was written into our Children Order to the effect that where there is proof of domestic violence, the mother does not have to allow access to the father. We recently had a conference on that issue, and the point was made that not many people in the judiciary know that that article is part of the Children Order. It was for that reason that many women ended up being charged with contempt of court because of their refusal to allow access. That is a difference in our law that means that fathers do not always have automatic parental responsibility.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: That seems to assume that, in the greater number of cases, domestic violence is being cited as the reason for a person's not having parental responsibility. It is not my experience in my practice or in my colleagues' practices that the reason for not allowing parental responsibility is the allegation of domestic violence. In court it seems to be a blanket, "No, I do not want you to have a say. I do not feel that you should have a say because you would use that as an opportunity to harass me as the mother of this child".

Ms McWilliams: Why do you think they say that? Do you think that they are not telling the truth when making accusations about the possibility of harassment?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: I am not going to comment on whether my clients tell me the truth or otherwise. It is a suspicion that I cannot have throughout a case. Whatever facts they present to me, I shall represent those facts. In every single case I have taken the opportunity to ask, where a mother has cited the possibility of harassment by the father, whether she means violence. I always take the precaution of asking that question because recent case law in Northern Ireland says that any allegation of domestic violence has to be heard at the outset of a case before any other issues pertaining to the child are looked at.

When I ask, "Do you mean violence?", frequently the answer is "No". The problem is that the father wants to be reconciled with the mother, and that is not violence. The relationship is over. The father cannot accept that fact, and the mother wishes to be out of the relationship.

Ms Ramsey: In the absence of hitting someone a dig on the nose, is it playing mind games?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: Possibly, and I am in no doubt that there are cases like that. I accept Ms McWilliams's statistics, but I am commenting on the cases that I am seeing day and daily. It is shocking and scandalous that there is domestic violence and that there are people who do abuse parental responsibility. I do not believe, however, that we can tar everyone with the same brush. If someone is responsible for domestic violence, he will not get a parental responsibility order. Unless a person can prove that he is not committing domestic violence and that he is worthy to know the child, he will not get a parental responsibility order.

Ms McWilliams: I am not suggesting that we are following that line of thinking. Rather I make the point that Ms Hanna introduced that the father has three tests, which seem to us to be reasonable.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: As a group we do not object to those tests.

Ms Fox: I can assure the Committee that the practice in the Belfast court is that where there is an allegation of domestic violence and where a mother has issued non-molestation proceedings, initially that may come before the domestic proceedings court. If there are also going to be issues of contact with children, the two sets of proceedings are heard by the one court — the family proceedings court. The court decides whether there has been violence, and if there has been, the court's attitude towards the father's application for contact — if in that particular instance it is the father — is different from what it would be if it had not so decided.

However we are diverging from the main issue before us which is that of looking at parental responsibility.

Ms McWilliams: No, we are not really diverging. This returns to the point that Ms Hanna raised about the three tests, which we think are reasonable. It was the

issue of parental responsibility's always being assumed in married or unmarried cases.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: We do not object to those tests. We simply say that they should apply to everyone.

Mr J Kelly: I want to clarify that point. I presume that we are still talking about the issue of unmarried fathers as distinct from marital break-ups and the responsibilities that arise from that.

Ms Fox: The situation is that, given the provisions contained in the 1995 Order, a father who is married to the mother of his children, or a mother, automatically has parental responsibility and cannot be divested of it. An unmarried father at present has to make an application to the court for parental responsibility in the absence of a parental responsibility agreement being signed by both parties.

Mr J Kelly: Thank you for that clarification. This is an important issue for unmarried fathers. We find in society that we have a growing number of people who have a relationship that is not formalised and that can break up at any stage.

We now have unmarried fathers around the neighbourhood. I agree that if an unmarried father has to make pleadings over and above those of a stepfather, it is unfair. I take your point that there should not be tests.

We are not talking about seeking authority for the sake of seeking authority and without taking responsibility. We are not talking about unmarried fathers saying, "I want to have authority over my child because I am the natural father, but I do not want to have any responsibility". We are not talking about that situation at all, are we?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: No, we are not.

Mrs I Robinson: I come from a different angle as a Christian, because it is viewed as being good for a child to have married parents. Some people may say that one is living in fairyland if he or she even expresses the view that the family unit is — as God intended it — a man and a woman who first get married and then have children. I know that in the real world this does not always happen.

However, how can you convince me that a father in a relationship in which a child has been born but in which there is no marriage should have rights equal to those of a father who has gone through the conventional route and is married despite all the ramifications? Marriage is on the increase — thank God! We are seeing more and more couples committing to wedlock. That is the best structure in which to bring up a child. How would you convince me that the father outside of wedlock has as much right as the father who goes through marriage?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: Marriage — the ceremony — is on the increase. However, the average life of a marriage today is an astounding seven years. That is the married life into which we are bringing our children.

The number of second marriages is also on the increase, which, as I understand it, is being counted in with the number of overall marriages.

It would be wonderful — and nobody would disagree with this — if a happy marriage with 2·4 lovely children who behaved beautifully and grew up to have lovely jobs could be achieved. I am not being facetious. I do not think that anyone around this table, including me, would say that that is not our ideal and that we do not want to achieve that. Happy relationships, wonderful children: who would turn them down?

However, we are talking about legislation for a situation in which that ideal does not exist. Marriages break down, and we are trying to cater for the acrimony that frequently results from that. Are married relationships any more stable than unmarried relationships? I could not say.

The Chairperson: Are you posing the question?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: I am asking myself, and I could not answer.

The Chairperson: As long as you are not asking me to answer.

Ms Fox: It is preferable that children are born into secure family units, but unfortunately that is not happening.

Discrimination does happen between married and unmarried fathers. If unmarried fathers are not given the same position as married fathers, the child is penalised. There is no justification in continuing to discriminate between illegitimacy and legitimacy. Ultimately, it is the children who suffer. If we focus on their right to family life, and protect and safeguard that right, we can focus on the amendments to the legislation that are required.

Mrs I Robinson: I am very blessed. I have been married for 31 years and would not change it for the world. I may just be one of those rare cases; I shall be an old fossil at the end of it all.

Children are born as a result of one-night stands. In some of those cases there is ignorance and indifference from the young father. However, you say that they should have the same rights as responsible fathers. I return to the status of the married fathers who should have equal standing in the law.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: The Belfast Family Proceedings Court Standing Committee did not look at the situation from the adults' viewpoint, but from the view of the child. We were unconcerned with the configuration of the relationship. It could be married or unmarried, heterosexual or homosexual. The standing committee took the view that a child should be brought up in a monogamous, loving, caring and considerate atmosphere rather than in a marriage with bickering and arguments in the background. Having to grow up in that atmosphere must be devastating for any child. I am not

certain that married couples achieve better loving and caring relationships than unmarried couples. However, the relationship probably lasts longer if it is a marriage.

The average life span of a marriage is seven years, and a great many do not last that long. There are already children who, aged three and four, are part of a separated family. Where do we go from there? What is done for those children for the next 12 years of their lives until they are 16? What will they see in their short lives? That is the situation that the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Family Law Bill will cater for. The ultimate prize is happy and content children who are kept away from bickering.

Married fathers are not necessarily responsible or unmarried fathers less responsible. I could not say that married fathers behave in a more adult fashion than unmarried fathers.

Mrs I Robinson: I accept that.

Ms Armitage: You say that you want to protect the interests of the child, Ms Bowman-McAlister. How can you be sure that when a father seeks parental responsibility he is doing so because he wants to love and care for that child? Do you ever think that there is another reason? Perhaps the father does not give a hoot for the child and his seeking responsibility only makes life more difficult for the mother. Ultimately, the child may not benefit one iota. The child may be much happier with a loving mother with no interference from a difficult father. That may not be case, but it is a possibility. Have you looked at that?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: We have looked at it, and it is a possibility. There are people who make applications for parental responsibility to the bane of someone else's life who is not the child of the family whom we are talking about in court. However, we cannot tar everyone with the same brush. If someone claims parental responsibility by painting himself with a halo and wings, we are taken in by it in court, and he turns out to be someone who is less than acceptable as an adult, let alone a parent, there must be an opportunity to return to court. We should be able to tell him that he is no longer entitled to parental responsibility because he has abused the very trust that has been placed in him. We have also placed a child's trust in him, but he has abused that either because he ignores the child or he uses parental responsibility to upset what is a stable situation.

When parental responsibility is awarded we are not saying that it must continue for ever. It can only be awarded to deserving people, and it can only be kept by deserving people. That is how we foresee the effects of the new legislation.

Ms Armitage: You should ascertain the damage before you give parental control back to the parent. You have said that you can go back to court, but it is a bit

late — the child may start to feel insecure, and there may be problems at home. As I read it, you would give every father the right to parenthood, and then you would decide whether he was a good father.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: We said that you either give it across the board or you give it to no one. I can foresee, from the reasonable point that you have just made, that if a father has been given parental responsibility, as of right, at the beginning of the child's life but he abuses that, it is a bit late in the day to come back to court — it is closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. If we do not give parental responsibility and someone feels that he is being excluded from a person's life, he should come to court to ask for parental responsibility, to have his say in the child's life or alternatively to exclude someone else from having a say. That would cater equally for everyone.

I shall compare it to adoption. Thankfully, we have grown in wisdom and we no longer think that adopted children must completely forget about their backgrounds. We are even talking about adopted children maintaining contact with their natural parents in certain circumstances, so that they are not completely cut off from their backgrounds. A child needs to know who he is, where he came from, who his parents are, and who the new person is in his mother's life. A child is aware of the people who enter his life and his home. What about the people who are excluded from that home? Does a child have the right to know about that? If that is part and parcel of his development, should he not be able to find out about his roots? That is the stance that we take.

Ms Fox: That viewpoint is also expressed by the European Court. I refer the Committee to a case before the European Court — *Marckx versus Belgium*. In that case the court made a number of findings, including the fact that the right to respect for family life under article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights applies, as was stated previously, to illegitimate as well as legitimate families. That article means that right to respect for family life may impose positive obligations on a state pursuant to respect for the family. In other words, to do nothing at all is not enough. There is an obligation on the state to protect a child's right to family life and to protect a child's right to his identity. That means formalising the relationship of a child with both parents. Most important of all, and this point has been raised by members of the Committee, is the desire of a state to protect a child from the custody and authority of someone who may have no inclination to care. That does not justify breaching article 8, which gives the right to respect for family life, or article 14, which gives the right to non-discrimination. That is something that the Committee should also take on board.

Ms McWilliams: We read about a Swedish case in which the ruling was different. Representations have been made to us about what constitutes privacy and how

that can put a question mark over cases. In the Swedish case the court ruled — *[Interruption]*

Ms Bowman-McAlister: Are you referring to our paper?

Ms McWilliams: I am not referring to your paper. The case was in one of our papers.

Ms Fox: Do you remember the name of the case?

Ms McWilliams: I have no doubt that the Clerk or someone will remind me of it. I was trying to find it but the gist of it is that the ruling was the opposite. The absent parent was pursuing that issue and the ruling was that the privacy of family life was to be protected. The child knew the identity of the father — to return to the adoption issue. In this case it was simply ruled that the parent did not need to have parental authority. Therefore, the courts in Europe have been ruling differently.

Ms Fox: There may have been particular circumstances in that case. However, we cannot say because we do not know the name of the case. We would have to examine it. There may have been particular circumstances that made the court decide that it was appropriate for the father not to have a say.

Ms McWilliams: I have just been reminded that the case is from one of your papers, but not the paper that you have presented today. The paper says that

“In *Soderback v Sweden* [1998] an unmarried father and his child were found to enjoy family life notwithstanding that they had never lived together or had had regular contact”

and that

“‘family life’ is being given an ever-widening interpretation.”

I think that this is from the paper that you originally presented to the Committee.

Ms Fox: It is clearly well established by European case law that family life exists between unmarried fathers and their children. We are saying that there is a positive obligation on the state to recognise that by granting parental responsibility and, therefore, according legal status to the relationship.

Mr Gallagher: I apologise for arriving late and missing some of the very interesting submission. I have only one question about parental responsibility and entitlements, and I hope that it does not apply to many cases. Are you satisfied that parents of school-going age are not at any disadvantage in the Family Law Bill?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: I am sorry but I do not understand your question.

Mr Gallagher: Will parents who attend school be at a disadvantage over entitlements because they are still of school-going age?

Ms Fox: We still must consider the child’s point of view. In such a case we would consider the child of the

teenage mother. A child has the right to his identity and to have his family life respected regardless of the circumstances in which he was born. We can see what the issues are if we focus on the child.

Ms Bowman-McAlister: All decisions that are taken on the behalf of children under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 are taken with the best interests of the child, as they are presented to us in court, in mind. The best interests of a child vary from one year of his or her life to another. We do not propose that the position should be static. Most people begin as acceptable parents but any mother or father can, unfortunately and for many reasons, become an unacceptable parent.

I am not certain that a teenage parent will be disadvantaged in any way other than by age. The standing committee did not discuss that point in detail — we took a wide-angle view of the matter and looked at it from the child’s perspective. I agree with my colleague that if it is found to be in the interests of a child that he or she know his or her identity, the age of the father should not be a barrier, whether he be 35-years-old or 15-years-old.

Ms Ramsey: Page 3 of the explanatory memorandum says that an unmarried father who registers the birth of his child jointly with the child’s mother will have parental responsibility for the child. Your submission says that

“unmarried fathers are treated differently to the mothers of their children...on the grounds of gender.”

It also says that

“Equally, unmarried fathers are treated differently to married fathers on the grounds of their marital status. Perhaps most importantly, the children of unmarried parents are treated differently”.

It seems to me that if the parents jointly register the birth of the child, they will both have parental responsibility. However, your submission also says that

“prospective unwed mothers and fathers will have to be aware that the act of jointly registering the birth has consequences for them and they will have to be in agreement on that.”

That is confusing.

Ms Fox: The Family Law Bill will not change the present situation. The mother’s consent is required if an unmarried father is to be registered on the birth certificate. There are such things as parental responsibility agreements, but they are also subject to the mother’s consent. An unmarried father can obtain parental responsibility only with the consent of the mother. That situation will not be changed.

Ms Ramsey: Will it be a happy medium?

Ms Fox: No, it will not, because the consent of the mother will still be required. I frequently act on behalf of mothers in cases in which there have been applications from unmarried fathers for contact orders. A mother can agree to substantial contact between an unmarried father and the child, but may have objections as far as parental

responsibility is concerned. That happens in many cases, including cases in which it would be appropriate to grant parental responsibility to an unmarried father who has already proved himself to be a responsible father. Mothers may object if they perceive, wrongly, that parental responsibility will give the father authority above them.

Ms Ramsey: The submission refers to a situation in which

“the mother, knowing that the father will acquire parental responsibility, refuses to allow joint registration or goes behind his back and registers the child herself”.

Are we talking about cases involving unmarried parents who have been together up until the children’s births, or are we dealing with cases in which the fathers do a runner, after finding out that their partners are pregnant and, having left them to register on their own, come back on the scene later?

Ms Bowman-McAlister: We are dealing with both types of case. We frequently discover that a father is named on the birth certificate, that he was aware that the mother was pregnant and that he was in the hospital during the labour. However, it is after that that the dispute arises. Any amount of contact can be agreed, but when it comes to parental responsibility, there are objections. If we publicised the idea that parental responsibility was granted the moment that both parents registered a baby’s birth, would a woman think differently about going to register with her boyfriend? It is our suspicion that a great many women would think differently about that.

Ms Fox: That is supported by the fact that, at present, there are very few parental responsibility agreements in existence.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms Bowman-McAlister and Ms Fox for your time. You have raised some very important points.

Written Answers

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 2 February 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Support for Victims of Terrorist Violence

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to (a) outline Government programmes for the support of victims of terrorist violence and (b) detail how these compare to programmes for ex-offenders in terms of finance and number of activities.

(AQW 1356/00)

Reply: The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has committed £320,000 in the current financial year to assist victims. Final decisions on the allocation of these resources have yet to be made, but it is likely that the emphasis will be on providing practical help and support by contributing to the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, commissioning research on victims' needs and supporting specific projects undertaken by the trauma advisory panels and victims' organisations.

Further significant support to victims will continue to be available through the mainstream programmes run by each of the Departments in the devolved Administration in such important areas as health and trauma support, retraining and reskilling, housing and social security.

The Victims Unit in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is currently in the process of finalising a strategic programme designed to meet the needs of victims which will supplement the commitments contained in the draft Programme for Government. The strategic programme will be published in due course.

The devolved Administration has no plans at the moment to implement specific ex-offender programmes. Ex-offender groups will be entitled to apply for support from mainstream and European sources along with other groups aiming to promote social inclusion.

Under the Peace II European programme, victims of violence and ex-prisoners will be regarded as target groups for assistance. The programme will also include a specific

measure for victims, with funding of approximately £6.67 million.

Young People: Consultation

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what plans are in place to consult young people about the impact on them of Government policies; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1387/00)

Reply: Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires Departments to have due regard to the promotion of equality of opportunity between a number of social categories including people of different age. As well as covering older people this category includes children and young people. Departments fulfil their equality obligation through their equality schemes, which incorporate the commitments detailed in schedule 9 to the Act. The Act requires Departments to assess and consult on the impact their policies may have on the promotion of equality of opportunity. Departments are committed in their equality schemes to consult widely with all interested parties on the broad range of their policies.

Departments have made a particular commitment to consult with young people as part of this process. Discussions with groups representing children's interests have already been held as to how this consultation might take place. In addition, the forthcoming consultation paper on a commissioner for children and strategy for children will consider how best to consult with children and young people.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Pig Farmers' Representatives: Meetings

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what meetings she has held with pig farmers' representatives in the last month.

(AQW 1318/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I am taking the reference in your question to "the last month" to mean the 30-day period ended 12 January 2001, which was the date on which your question was tabled. That being the case, I did not have meetings during that period. However, in November past I met with a number of political representatives accompanied by delegations from the pig industry. I am in regular contact with representatives from the farming unions, who regularly raise issues relating to the pig industry.

During the specific time in question, my officials had a number of meetings with the farming unions and other

interested parties regarding the operation of the pig industry restructuring scheme (PIRS). You will, I am sure, now be aware that my officials, in conjunction with the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association, are currently holding a series of public meetings on the scheme.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the effectiveness of testing cattle over 30 months old for evidence of bovine spongiform encephalopathy. (AQW 1333/00)

Ms Rodgers: At present the only available tests for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle are carried out on the brain or spinal cord tissue of dead animals. Testing is carried out using an EU-approved rapid test, which has been shown to be both sensitive and specific. The level of testing has been set by the EU and is dependent upon the cattle population of each region. As BSE has a long incubation period, older animals present a greater risk of BSE and therefore such animals are being targeted for testing. In Northern Ireland animals aged over 30 months are slaughtered, the carcasses rendered and the resultant material incinerated.

Cattle Smuggling

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the steps she is taking to curtail the smuggling of cattle from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 1341/00)

Ms Rodgers: My Department's Veterinary Service police the movement of cattle.

The checks carried out include:

- Checks on the animal and public health information system (APHIS) of calf births for correlation between the number of recorded births and the number of breeding cattle in a herd.
- Checks at all ports to ensure that cattle from Great Britain are not transiting Northern Ireland to the Republic
- Surveillance operations at markets
- Liaison with the veterinary authorities in the Republic of Ireland and the RUC.

Where irregularities are found, these are investigated and appropriate enforcement action taken.

Representatives of the Fishing Industry: Meetings

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the date of her last

meeting with representatives of the fishing industry and (b) the matters discussed. (AQW 1363/00)

Ms Rodgers: I last met with representatives of the fishing industry when I attended the Fisheries Council in Brussels on 14 and 15 December, when 2001 total allowable catches were discussed.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans to increase the proportion of common agricultural policy expenditure allocated to rural development. (AQW 1364/00)

Ms Rodgers: Under the Agenda 2000 reform of the common agricultural policy (CAP), the concept of rural development has been widened and has assumed greater prominence. New European legislation governing the next round of structural funds now encompasses initiatives such as agrienvironment schemes, support for less favoured area (LFA) farmers, forestry, assistance for processing and marketing, restructuring and capital investment as well as areas which we would have traditionally termed "rural development". This was negotiated at EU level, and it is at this level that any future refocusing of broad agricultural policy will be determined.

Plans for the period up to 2006 in respect of agri-environment, private afforestation of agricultural land and LFA support are contained within the Rural Development Regulation Plan (Accompanying Measures) for Northern Ireland, which received its formal approval from the EU Commission at the beginning of December. Expenditure under this plan will total £266 million between 2000 and 2006, representing a significant increase on previous expenditure levels.

Details of proposals for agriculture/rural development under the transitional Objective 1 programme are currently under negotiation with the European Commission. It is expected that funding will be available for processing and marketing, forestry and training, as well as a continuation of the Department's rural development programme. For the 2000-06 period, the rural development programme will promote comprehensive and integrated action towards the sustainable and equitable development of rural areas and, in doing so, contribute to the economic, environmental, social and cultural well-being of the rural community for the benefit of the whole community of Northern Ireland.

Further funding for agriculture/rural development will come through the Peace II programme, LEADER+ and INTERREG III. Most of these European programmes (with the exception of the rural development plan) are yet to be agreed with the European Commission and, therefore, I cannot yet quantify the level of assistance that will be available.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the current timescale for the countryside management scheme and to make a statement regarding its implementation. (AQW 1366/00)

Ms Rodgers: The countryside management scheme opened for an initial round of applications between 24 May and 30 July 1999, but the EU empowering legislation lapsed on 31 December 1999 before contracts could be offered to any of the initial applicants. This scheme was then resubmitted to the EU Commission as a component of the Northern Ireland rural development plan 2000-06 (NIRDP), which only received formal approval from the EU Commission on 4 December 2000. In anticipation of that approval, the draft legislation to give effect to this part of the NIRDP had previously been the subject of consultation with relevant interests. As required by Assembly procedures, a memorandum on the draft countryside management scheme legislation will have to be considered by the Assembly Agriculture and Rural Development Committee.

Subject to the view of the Committee and the making of the legislation necessary to bring the scheme into effect, successful applicants from the original round may enter into agreements with the Department, and steps can be taken to open a further application period during the summer and on an annual basis thereafter.

Agricultural Colleges: Student Numbers

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of students who have completed courses at agricultural colleges in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years for which figures are available and outline the breakdown of these students by course and by country of origin.

(AQW 1367/00)

Ms Rodgers: Placed in the Assembly Library are student statistic tables detailing numbers of students who have completed a full-time or part-time course at one of the Department's colleges in Northern Ireland.

The information has been broken down to show the individual courses and the nationality of the students enrolled.

Farm Diversification

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the steps she is taking to encourage farm diversification. (AQW 1408/00)

Ms Rodgers: The Department encourages farmers to consider farm diversification as one option when examining strategies for the future development of the family farm.

Agrifood Development Service (AFDS) rural enterprise advisers are available to assist farmers in the consideration and development of potential diversification projects.

Greenmount, Loughry and Enniskillen Colleges provide education and training to develop the competences of farmers undertaking farm diversification projects through their lifelong learning courses.

On 20 November 2000 I announced the allocation of up to £150,000 to promote diversification by improving the Department's farm diversification information, including an enhanced web site and producing an advisory booklet. This work is proceeding and information is also being obtained by providing financial support to a small number of farm businesses and farmers' groups to investigate aspects of their farm diversification projects to provide practical and relevant case studies for future use.

Presently the Department is considering options for the provision of financial and technical support for diversifying farm businesses under the Peace II and the LEADER+ programmes to be launched later this year.

Imported Meat

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of meat imported into Northern Ireland in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1409/00)

Ms Rodgers: Under EU trade rules there is no requirement to maintain data on the imports of meat and meat products entering Northern Ireland. However, as charges are placed on products coming from third countries the details for this trade are available as follows:

Tonnes	
1995	39.3
1996	134.3
1997	109.0
1998	103.9
1999	59.2
2000	45.9

Figures include fresh meat and poultry meat imports.

Fishing Industry

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her arrangements for representing the fishing industry in discussions within the European Union. (AQW 1411/00)

Ms Rodgers: I attend European Union Fisheries Councils where there are particular issues of importance to the Northern Ireland fishing industry. An example

would be my recent attendance at the December Fisheries Council when 2001 total allowable catches were the main topic for consideration.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

United Kingdom: Bicentenary

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any plans to celebrate the bicentenary of the United Kingdom. (AQW 1362/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): My Department launched the first in a rolling programme of events to commemorate the bicentenary of the United Kingdom in 2001, in the Ards arts centre/town hall on Monday evening, 22 January 2001 – exactly 200 years after the United Parliament of Great Britain and Ireland first met at Westminster.

The first event featured an inaugural lecture entitled, ‘Castlereagh and the making of the Irish Act of Union’ by Dr Patrick M Geoghegan, author of the recently published academic book ‘The Irish Act of Union: A Study in High Politics 1798-1801’ (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1999). Monday evening also witnessed the launch of the Royal Historical Society’s ‘Transactions’ publication – the volume contains papers delivered at the Society’s British-Irish Union of 1801 conference, 9 to 11 September 1999, held at the Queen’s University of Belfast and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

A centrepiece exhibition (with a travelling offshoot), a one-day conference, and education workshops for A level students are to follow. These events will be held in venues throughout the British Isles in 2001. A more detailed outline of the rolling programme is set out below.

Programme of Events

1. Inaugural lecture and reception in the Londonderry Room, Ards arts centre/town hall, Newtownards: Monday 22 January 2001 (as noted above).
2. A PRONI-Ulster Museum/MAGNI centrepiece exhibition will be on display in the Ulster Museum from 21 May to 24 August 2001.
3. A one-day academic conference is to be held in the new Millennium Complex, Londonderry in the autumn of 2001.
4. Education workshops for A level students are to be held in the NTL Studio, Belfast Waterfront Hall on Tuesday 16 October 2001.
5. The travelling exhibition will be on display at the Bank of Ireland’s Arts Centre, Foster Place, Dublin 2 from 27 August to 10 September 2001.
6. It is expected that the travelling exhibition will be hosted by a number of district councils (Newry and Mourne, North Down and Larne have already indicated their interest) and that it will tour local venues either concurrently with the centrepiece exhibition and/or in the autumn of 2001 depending on the demand.
7. A bicentenary event is to be held in Mount Stewart, Ccounty Down (at the home of one of the main architects of the Union, Viscount Castlereagh) in late summer 2001. The travelling exhibition is to be on show at the same time.
8. A Castlereagh lecture will be delivered on Tuesday 30 October 2001 in the Palace of Westminster, London. It is expected that the speaker will be the First Minister, David Trimble.
9. Efforts are still ongoing to arrange for the travelling exhibition to be displayed in Westminster Hall, Palace of Westminster, London, in the autumn of 2001.

NB: It should be noted however that a number of the arrangements at this stage are tentative.

Sporting and Cultural Events

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what high profile sporting and cultural events he hopes to bring to Northern Ireland in the years 2002-04. (AQW 1370/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The only event which is currently organised is the World Masters Judo Championships in Templemore leisure complex, Londonderry, from 20 to 23 June 2002.

In addition the Department is actively considering a number of other ideas, as follows:

- Hosting the BBC Young Musician of the Year;
- Looking at the possibility of the Belfast Festival being enhanced to feature regularly arts performances or events of at least national significance, marketed and promoted to attract optimum attendances and media coverage; and
- Developing a programme of international exchanges, possibly promoted through the offices of the Arts Council and the British Council which could provide a vehicle for bringing unique artistic and cultural experiences to Northern Ireland.

The Events Company is also considering funding support for the following events in the period 2002-04:

- a) Senior British Open Golf Championship
- b) Belfast Festival at Queens
- c) Cinemagic 2002
- d) Northern Ireland Festival of Racing

The company is also negotiating for the:-

- Staging of a Tour of Ireland cycle race
- Options for developing a regular summer event at Stormont.

The board of the Events Company will be reviewing its future events portfolio for the period 2002-05 at its March 2001 meeting. This debate will be informed by input from various other bodies, such as Sports Council for Northern Ireland, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Belfast City Council.

Soccer Strategy

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm that the football task force is representative of all football interests in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1384/00)

Mr McGimpsey: From the outset, my initiative 'Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland', has been an open and inclusive one, and I can confirm that all football interests in Northern Ireland have been, and continue to be, involved in the process.

This process has involved widespread consultation with key football interests and the general public and has included:

- key informant interviews with a range of organisations involved in running the game
- workshop sessions with district councils, education and library boards, the voluntary youth sector, the media and senior club chairmen
- focus group discussions with supporters, coaches and managers
- postal surveys of clubs, players and other interested bodies
- both a street survey of the general public and a series of five open forums held in different locations across the province.

In addition, a conference workshop is planned for 10 to 12 February 2001, at which some eighty participants, again representing all the key interests in football, will take part.

I also established the advisory panel, detailed membership of which is set out in the attached appendix, to oversee the process of developing a strategy. It brings together a number of people with a wide range of expertise and experience in football, both locally and further afield. In inviting the members to serve, I considered it important that they should do so as individuals rather than representatives of any specific interest they may have.

APPENDIX I: MEMBERS OF THE SOCCER STRATEGY ADVISORY PANEL

GERRY ARMSTRONG

Former player for Spurs, Watford and West Bromwich Albion. An ex-Northern Ireland international, and capped by Northern Ireland 63 times, he scored the winning goal in the 1982 World Cup game against Spain and in the same year was presented with the Golden Boot Award. Played for Real Majorca from 1983-85. Is currently the Spanish football analyst and commentator for Sky Television.

PROF ALAN BAIRNER

Professor in Sports Studies at the University of Ulster. He is co-author of a book entitled 'Sport Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland' and co-editor of a book entitled 'Sport in Divided Societies'. He is involved with the IFA through its community relations programme.

HILARY BRADY

Former Irish hockey player and ex-member of Northern Ireland Women's football team. President of Pegasus Hockey Club. Head of Development Services in Newtownabbey Borough Council with responsibility for the development of various services, including tourism, sport and the arts. A member of the Sports Council for Northern Ireland.

IAIN DOWIE

Played for Luton Town in 1998 before going on to play for West Ham, Southampton, Crystal Palace and, finally, Queen's Park Rangers. He has been assistant manager at QPR for the last two and a half years. He has been capped 59 times by Northern Ireland, captained the team on 11 occasions and is the second highest goal scorer for his country.

JIM FLANAGAN

Has been deputy editor of the Belfast Telegraph for approximately the last five years. He is a member of the Northern Ireland football writers' association and attends local games as often as possible.

BILLY HAMILTON

Has played and managed in the Irish League, mainly for Distillery Football Club, from 1990 to 1995. He has been capped 42 times by Northern Ireland and was one of Northern Ireland's World Cup 1982 heroes in Spain. He also played in the World Cup in Mexico in 1986.

BRYAN HAMILTON

He has had a 37-year association with football in a variety of capacities. Capped by Northern Ireland 50 times, he succeeded Billy Bingham in 1994 as manager and coach of the Northern Ireland international teams. He has played for Ipswich and Everton and managed teams at every level in the English league. He was recently manager of Norwich City Football Club.

JOHNNY JAMESON

He has had a distinguished career at both Glentoran and Linfield Football Clubs and was a member of the Northern Ireland squad in the 1982 World Cup. He maintains an interest at all levels in the local game.

FELIX McCROSSAN

Played junior football for Strabane and several local teams. Was an Irish League referee and linesman from 1976, and still referees junior football. He organises youth football around the Strabane area and continues to work with the Strabane Intermediate League team. He is also one of the attendants involved with the County Tyrone Milk Cup team.

SAMMY McILROY

Former Manchester United player and Northern Ireland team captain. In January 2000, he succeeded Lawrie McMenemy as manager of Northern Ireland.

NADINE NICHOLL

Currently a PE teacher at Belfast Royal Academy and a former member of the Northern Ireland women's football team. A past development officer with the Irish Football Association and involved in coaching.

MARTIN O'NEILL

Martin had a long and distinguished playing career in the English league and Northern Ireland's national team. On retirement he entered management and enjoyed success with Wycombe and Leicester City before moving on to his current position as boss of Glasgow Celtic.

JIM PRICE

Jim Price is a lifelong supporter of Crusaders and an ardent supporter of Northern Ireland, travelling abroad as much as possible in support of the international team. (He is chairman of the official amalgamation of Northern Ireland supporters' clubs.) Mr Price, who lives in Newtownabbey, is a health and safety instructor with the Construction Industry Training Board.

JIM RODGERS

A Belfast city councillor and currently vice-chairman of the Belfast Education and Library Board. Former chief scout and youth development officer of Glentoran Football Club between 1975-1994. Played soccer for both Bangor and Portadown as well as several junior clubs. Keenly interested in Association Football and has worked closely with several Irish League sides to obtain better training facilities.

PROF ERIC SAUNDERS

Chairman of the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and a former Professor of the School of Leisure and Tourism at the University of Ulster where for over 28 years he headed staff involved in sport and PE. He

played a key role in establishing the Northern Ireland Institute of Coaching.

MARTY TABB

Outstanding servant to Irish League football with an exemplary record. Has a great knowledge of the local game and local clubs. Currently youth development officer with Cliftonville Football Club.

STEPHEN WATSON

Sports presenter and commentator with the BBC for just over one year (formerly with UTV for seven years). Football commentator and great supporter of Irish League football. As well as commentating on local matches, attends as a spectator as often as possible.

Field Sports

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any recent representations he has had relative to the pursuit of country sports; and to make a statement. (AQW 1395/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland, which has responsibility for the development and promotion of sport in the Province, does not recognise the classification "country sports". The generic term, which would be more normally used is "field sports", which includes fishing, fox-hunting, hare coursing and game shooting, amongst others. I have not received any recent representations from any of these sports. If there is any specific issue regarding these sports, it should be brought to the attention of the Sports Council for Northern Ireland.

EDUCATION**Raising School Standards Initiative**

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the names of schools that have taken part in the raising school standards and improving schools initiatives in each of the last five years for which figures are available; (b) how much additional financial support has been given to each school; (c) what this money has been spent on and (d) the evidence that demonstrates that school standards have been raised as a result of this expenditure. (AQW 1358/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The information available for the raising school standards initiative (RSSI) and, from September 1998, its successor, the school support programme (SSP), is set out in the table below.

Individual schools are required to prepare action plans for improvement which are considered by the SSP

steering group for the education and library board area. Boards provide professional support to participating schools together with modest additional resources to support each school's approved action plan. Details of the expenditure for every school, other than the totals shown in the table, are not held centrally. Typically, schools use the additional resources to release staff for planning, co-ordinating and implementing the school's action plan.

The aim of the programme is to enable schools to become self-sustaining in terms of improvement and in due course this is expected to lead to raised attainments in end-of-Key-Stage assessments and public examinations, improved attendance rates, fewer suspensions and expulsions, et cetera. Each school's progress towards self-sustaining improvement is determined taking account of professional advice from the Education and Training Inspectorate, the relevant education and library board and, as appropriate, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

By the end of the 1999-2000 school year, 89% of RSSI schools had made sufficient progress to graduate from support. Although improvements are not expected to be reflected immediately in better results, all 14 post-primary RSSI schools which left support in 1998 had, by 1999, shown improvements in at least one key GCSE measure and nine showed improvement in three key measures compared to the position when they joined the programme. The cohort of new schools admitted to SSP from September 1998 will have their progress reviewed towards the end of the current school year and further schools are expected to graduate from the programme.

School Name	95/96 Expend- iture (£)	96/97 Expend- iture (£)	97/98 Expend- iture (£)	98/99 Expend- iture (£)	99/00 Expend- iture (£)
Schools in the Raising School Standards Initiative					
BELB					
Avoniel PS 1	12,622	65,855	46,373	1,867	7,674
Blythefield PS 1	6,672	55,165	36,833	1,469	0
Botanic PS 2	13,917	58,168	29,310	14,066	11,013
Grove PS 2	9,587	74,346	46,470	16,556	15,517
Knocknagoney PS 1	3,841	61,510	52,654	8,700	6,141
Lowwood PS 1	12,974	70,586	48,485	9,935	11,578
Mersey Street PS	10,732	63,902	38,564	17,337	55,409
Nettlefield PS 2	10,946	60,439	33,511	24,628	18,181
Strand PS 2	16,725	67,054	37,991	23,906	19,793
Sydenham Infants PS 1	20,624	59,485	36,974	12,387	6,767
Donegall Road PS 3	33,123	59,353	61,297	20,000	52,422
Glenwood PS 1	65,702	105,312	34,371	11,409	6,621
Malvern PS 3	65,926	72,143	45,764	9,773	49,131
Springhill PS 1	44,910	84,410	27,709	12,604	7,000
Suffolk PS 1	82,096	56,791	28,648	11,260	6,706
Vere Foster PS	85,780	82,284	63,901	33,523	53,952

School Name	95/96 Expend- iture (£)	96/97 Expend- iture (£)	97/98 Expend- iture (£)	98/99 Expend- iture (£)	99/00 Expend- iture (£)
Schools in the Raising School Standards Initiative					
Holy Trinity Boys PS 1	11,764	77,074	43,400	8,074	7,472
Holy Trinity Girls PS 1	15,255	86,458	50,290	7,088	4,023
St Mary's Girls PS 1	7,751	76,871	42,467	14,961	9,238
St Oliver Plunkett Boys' PS 1	16,668	79,400	47,915	9,457	9,155
Holy Cross Boys' PS 1	63,437	42,048	44,693	11,818	6,598
St Aidan's PS	74,738	80,164	29,541	23,421	20,250
St Vincent de Paul PS 2	44,296	74,964	17,622	10,737	11,544
St Kevin's PS 1	74,942	71,482	29,132	1,002	5,223
Ashfield Boys HS 1	2,415	66,312	63,968	14,474	9,105
Castle HS	40,408	25,932	45,504	24,989	39,380
Orangefield HS 2	5,860	57,632	57,211	5,870	15,212
Larkfield (Balmoral) HS 3	63,093	37,897	34,938	10,163	40,242
Mount Gilbert Community College	13,858	73,390	24,843	17,000	44,227
Christian Brothers SS 3	5,875	56,931	115,506	26,525	58,927
St Rose's Girls HS 3	7,790	50,145	63,079	15,912	32,328
St Gabriel's College	45,422	64,097	51,352	20,000	73,560
Corpus Christi College	100,018	111,259	53,272	19,748	58,851
WELB					
Donemana PS 2	15,733	22,699	19,739	9,132	20,332
Sion Mills PS 1	13,863	49,885	84,021	37,539	3,740
Strabane PS 1	20,295	48,606	106,275	38,553	470
Christ the King PS, Omagh 1	36,668	45,867	57,637	32,934	3,951
Glendermott PS, Ballyshasky 2	25,664	88,919	71,961	14,582	30,189
Holy Child PS, Creggan, Londonderry 3	33,762	77,143	75,717	3,035	17,149
Holy Family PS, Shantallow, Londonderry 1	27,871	77,295	108,349	52,123	13,014
Lenamore PS, Londonderry 1	35,596	71,360	74,122	38,385	7,489
Longtower PS, Londonderry 1	18,219	59,065	105,915	50,718	1,145
Rosemount PS, Londonderry	49,269	58,031	100,595	4,014	7,855
Slievemore PS, Londonderry	20,128	100,753	84,399	3,913	27,889
St Mary's PS, Killyclogher 1	28,086	80,101	75,122	16,622	21,850

School Name	95/96 Expend- iture (£)	96/97 Expend- iture (£)	97/98 Expend- iture (£)	98/99 Expend- iture (£)	99/00 Expend- iture (£)
Schools in the Raising School Standards Initiative					
St Oliver Plunkett's PS, Strathfoyle 1	21,183	45,315	49,886	41,991	7,316
Trench Road PS, Waterside, Londonderry 1	66,151	102,529	119,131	36,500	4,112
Strabane HS 2	33,689	52,077	70,608	0	24,691
St Breacan's HS, Waterside, Londonderry 1	22,983	81,140	158,847	23,925	5,761
St Brigid's HS, Carnhill, Londonderry 1	110,257	177,177	99,683	38,781	9,202
St Joseph's HS, Creggan, Londonderry 1	67,841	72,021	36,147	41,589	5,930
St Patrick's HS, Omagh 1	63,029	116,277	63,199	27,321	5,639
St Peter's HS, Southway, Londonderry	35,112	79,097	55,289	2,142	127,486
NEELB					
Abbot's Cross PS, Newtownabbey 1	14,660	69,396	49,536	9,071	7,970.95
Ballee PS 2	11,026	54,154	28,255	13,494	23,182
Ballykeel PS, Ballymena 2	43,953	71,019	34,919	15,407	3,056.04
Ballysally PS, Coleraine 1	27,317	96,267	38,001	7,502	7,685.78
Harpur's Hill PS, Coleraine 1	25,580	39,483	50,202	10,337	6,272
Rathcoole PS, Newtownabbey 2	34,441	81,228	37,642	17,318	11,526
St Brigid's PS, Ballymoney 1	33,573	59,971	40,446	13,096	9,825
St Ciaran's PS, Cushendun 1	10,115	27,290	14,251	7,048	5,560
St John's PS, Carnlough 1	7,899	18,385	28,135	14,287	2,174
St John's PS, Coleraine 1	30,737	50,030	43,519	5,187	8,342
St Malachy's PS, Coleraine 1	3,779	27,973	46,028	9,777	8,970
St Mary's PS, Cushendall 1	12,649	16,747	13,074	7,767	954
St Patrick's PS, Loughguile, Ballymena 1	10,024	57,728	36,452	8,357	8,850
St Patrick's PS, Rasharkin 1	11,171	80,788	36,402	7,764	8,875
Ballee Community HS 1	36,054	93,499	29,281	9,929	9,717
Coleraine Boys' SS 2	2,841	105,601	52,789	19,590	15,239
Newtownabbey Community HS 3	56,365	75,316	44,668	9,557	10,109

School Name	95/96 Expend- iture (£)	96/97 Expend- iture (£)	97/98 Expend- iture (£)	98/99 Expend- iture (£)	99/00 Expend- iture (£)
Schools in the Raising School Standards Initiative					
Our Lady of Lourdes HS, Ballymoney 1	53,194	111,136	53,823	10,756	8,909
St Aloysius' HS, Cushendall	6,466	27,206	32,692	26,569	23,525
St Joseph's HS, Coleraine 1	19,517	63,969	30,117	9,072	6,541
SEELB					
Brooklands PS, Dundonald 1	35,136	49,184	74,290	32,781	5,716
Cregagh PS 1	42,427	69,862	50,159	25,375	3,044
Killyleagh PS 2	30,604	65,725	34,965	9,375	29,363
Largymore PS, Lisburn 2	51,345	40,050	44,560	26,686	27,547
Old Warren PS, Lisburn 1	53,891	58,159	51,384	21,233	6,000
Redburn PS, Holywood 1	52,840	65,690	48,836	6,306	4,000
Tullycarnet PS 1	66,373	73,613	74,949	34,165	7,722
St Kieran's PS, Poleglass 1	60,403	157,963	76,769	61,842	6,416
St Luke's PS, Twinbrook 1	20,765	108,026	77,240	24,828	8,953
Down Academy, Downpatrick 1	20,583	186,946	114,862	96,796	2,387
Dundonald HS	30,770	56,012	74,803	49,318	31,512
Priory College 2	37,752	53,878	77,967	34,585	5,857
Lisnagarvey HS, Lisburn 1	54,028	107,021	53,579	21,816	7,248
Lisnasharragh HS	51,455	46,339	46,829	32,212	57,171
St Colm's HS, Twinbrook 1	75,270	5,825	80,232	51,020	5,951
SELB					
Drumgor 1	52,348	84,744	47,643	13,245	5,026
Armagh Christian Brothers' PS 1	58,384	72,304	27,782	23,833	3,819
St Colman's Abbey PS, Newry 1	47,241	61,751	44,517	19,417	0
St Colman's PS, Kilkeel 1	42,151	68,022	41,198	2,311	8,336
St Joseph's Infants PS, Lurgan 1	53,765	122,098	44,423	0	8,643
St Patrick's PS, Armagh 1	44,238	101,979	57,356	9,155	0
St Patrick's Boys' PS, Newry 1	40,952	53,463	43,467	29,310	0
St Patrick's PS, Dungannon 1	46,063	109,924	54,075	21,551	0
St Peter's PS, Lurgan 1	45,585	87,791	52,413	6,024	0
Tannaghmore PS, Lurgan 1	45,030	70,340	42,007	26,236	4,084
Brownlow College, Craigavon 3	21,907	154,118	47,226	21,685	40,919

School Name	95/96 Expend- iture (£)	96/97 Expend- iture (£)	97/98 Expend- iture (£)	98/99 Expend- iture (£)	99/00 Expend- iture (£)
Schools in the Raising School Standards Initiative					
St Brigid's HS, Armagh 2	31,061	92,920	21,202	43,174	20,600
St Columban's College, Kilkeel 1	114,251	133,272	73,758	10,130	2,335
St Joseph's Boys' HS, Newry 1	87,349	177,353	58,840	31,500	0
St Patrick's Boys' HS 1	81,009	75,003	52,950	0	14,292
St Paul's Junior HS, Lurgan 3	76,237	199,783	37,762	35,871	25,432
Schools admitted to the School Support Programme September 1998					
BELB					
Beechfield PS				12,000	55,433
Harmony PS				10,000	48,422
St John's Girls' PS				5,000	55,898
St Mary's Boys' & Girls' PS	Withdrawn Dec 98				
St Bernadette's Girls' PS				16,000	27,470
St Paul's Boys' PS				9,000	58,129
St Paul's PS				7,000	51,613
St Comgall's PS	Withdrawn Dec 98				
St Patrick's College				17,000	38,598
St Gemma's HS				19,000	60,198
St Francis de Sales Special School				14,000	37,685
WELB					
Newtownstewart Model PS				2,561	19,202
St Tierney's PS				5,582	19,234
Barrack Street Boys' PS				7,805	43,222
Templemore SS				3,855	7,028
St Patricks & St Brigid's HS				2,846	18,164
NEELB					
Sunnylands PS				22,351	51,722
Ballycraig PS				4,237	48,990
Antiville PS				12,049	48,171
Rathenraw Integrated PS				22,825	27,240
St Comgall's HS				7,916	48,788
Edmund Rice College				6,325	46,598
SEELB					
Derryboy PS				3,463	24,511
Tyrella PS				40,421	6,137
Derriaghy PS				0	31,125
St Joseph's PS				4,794	26,995
St Colmcille's PS				8,551	49,218
Donaghadee HS				5,460	58,296
Dunmurry HS				10,458	57,554

School Name	95/96 Expend- iture (£)	96/97 Expend- iture (£)	97/98 Expend- iture (£)	98/99 Expend- iture (£)	99/00 Expend- iture (£)
Schools in the Raising School Standards Initiative					
SELB					
Killylea PS				7,696	25,869
Tullygally PS				9,529	35,271
St Michael's PS				4,649	17,285
Craigavon Senior HS				2,064	31,961
St Joseph's HS				2,327	14,454
St Patrick's College 3				17,900	69,020
Fallowfield Special School				0	0
Schools admitted to the School Support Programme September 1999					
BELB					
Edenbrooke PS					15,431
St Gall's Monastery PS					11,415
Edmund Rice Christian Brothers' PS					5,883
St Patrick's PS					13,614
Jaffe Special School	Withdrawn Jan' 01				7,217
WELB					
Langfield PS					1,443
Ashlea PS					1,495
Gortin PS					1,258
Fountain PS					7,182
St Brigid's PS					1,502
St Joseph's PS					762
Bunscoil Cholmcille PS					689
Faughan Valley HS					8,446
NEELB					
Hollybank PS					3415
Ballyduff PS					10,491
Earlview PS					672
St Joseph's PS					8,594
Larne HS					928
Maghera HS					13,971
St Malachy's HS					17,655
SEELB					
Kilcooley PS					8,246
West Winds PS					13,061
St Mark's PS					4,841
Comber HS					12,391
Gransha HS					3,792
De La Salle SS					7,174
SELB					
Aughnacloy HS					0
Donard Special School 3					0

School Name	95/96 Expend- iture (£)	96/97 Expend- iture (£)	97/98 Expend- iture (£)	98/99 Expend- iture (£)	99/00 Expend- iture (£)
Schools in the Raising School Standards Initiative					
Schools admitted to the School Support Programme September 2000					
BELB					
Taughmonagh PS					
SEELB					
Lakewood Special School					

1: schools which exited programme June 1998

2: schools which exited programme June 1999

3: schools which exited programme June 2000

Public-Private Partnership Projects

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Education to report on the progress of all the public-private partnership projects currently in hand in the provision of education capital investment, including details of (a) the cost of tendering for each project; (b) the rate of return for investors; (c) what contracts have been entered into with regard to servicing buildings; (d) the revenue implications of such contracts for the relevant education and library boards and schools over the next 25 years; and (e) who owns the buildings currently and who will own the buildings when the service contracts come to an end.

(AQW 1359/00)

Private Finance Initiative

Mr M McGuinness: Of the original six private finance initiative (PFI) pathfinder projects commenced in 1996, four relate to schools and are the responsibility of the Department of Education, the remaining two now being the responsibility of the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment. Contracts have now been completed on all four schools projects, by the relevant education authority, with the following consortia (the Wellington College/Balmoral High Schools were procured under a single contract):

	School	Authority	PFI Company	Planned Date of Operation of New School
1.	Drumglass High School	Southern Education and Library Board	Campus Ltd	September 2000
2.	St Genevieve's High School	Trustees	BES Ltd	March 2002
3.	Wellington College/Balmoral High School	Belfast Education and Library Board	Northwin Ltd	January 2002

The further information requested is as follows:

- The tendering costs incurred by the various private sector consortia bidding for each project are not known to, nor available to, the relevant education authority, nor the Department.
- I am advised that the contracts for these projects contain clauses on the non-disclosure of such commercial in confidence information.
- Service contracts have been entered into as follows:

Drumglass High School	Martin FM Ltd
St Genevieve's High School	Building and Property Ltd
Wellington College/Balmoral High School	Graham & Maybin Ltd
- Each school management authority has one contract with the provider to cover all elements of serviced accommodation by means of a monthly unitary payment over 25 years. The annual expenditure, as part of the unitary payment and subject to indexation, for each school and education authority during the period of the contract is as follows:

School	Contribution by Schools	Contribution by Education Authority
Drumglass High School	£81,000	£116,000
St Genevieve's high School	£165,000	£233,000
Wellington College/Balmoral High School	£205,000 (covering both schools)	£296,000 (covering both schools)

- The private sector operators are providing buildings and services, under licence to the relevant school authorities. The buildings are legally owned by the relevant school authorities, and the school authorities will continue to own the buildings when the service contracts come to an end.

General National Vocational Qualifications

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Education to detail each grammar and secondary school with a sixth form and outline (a) the number of pupils in upper and lower sixth; (b) the proportion of pupils that have enrolled directly into sixth form from another school; (c) the number of General National Vocational Qualifications and other non-A level courses offered, and; (d) the average class size.

(AQW 1360/00)

Mr M McGuinness: From the annual school census, the information for (a) is as follows:

Grammar Schools	LOWER 6TH	UPPER 6TH
Abbey Grammar School	123	97
Antrim Grammar School	93	90

Grammar Schools	LOWER 6TH	UPPER 6TH
Aquinas Grammar School	111	91
Assumption Grammar School	133	113
Ballyclare High School	128	140
Ballymena Academy	162	146
Banbridge Academy	191	141
Bangor Grammar School	106	104
Belfast High School	115	94
Belfast Royal Academy	183	183
Bloomfield Collegiate	105	90
Cambridge House Boys' Grammar School	55	24
Cambridge House Girls' Grammar School	57	60
Campbell College	107	100
Carrickfergus Grammar School	90	98
Christian Bros' Grammar School	137	134
Coleraine Academical Institution	95	74
Coleraine High School	93	91
Convent Grammar School	162	142
Convent Grammar School	54	49
Dalriada School	94	93
Dominican College	127	131
Dominican College	56	46
Down High School	119	102
Enniskillen Collegiate	75	67
Foyle & Londonderry College	126	110
Friends School	122	116
Glenlola Collegiate	131	120
Grosvenor Grammar School	145	125
Hunterhouse College	95	88
Larne Grammar School	79	86
Limavady Grammar School	131	110
Loreto College, Coleraine	90	94
Loreto Grammar School, Omagh	145	141
Lurgan College	79	91
Methodist College	262	251
Omagh Academy	92	90
Our Lady and St Patrick's College	152	157
Our Ladys Grammar School	121	117
Portadown College	187	159
Portora Royal School	54	46
Rainey Endowed School	84	89
Rathmore Grammar School	181	161
Regent House School	173	162
Royal Belfast Acad Institute	125	113
Royal School Armagh	91	60
Royal School Dungannon	79	88
Sacred Heart Grammar	128	111
St Colman's College	77	104
St Columb's College	237	217
St Dominic's High School	116	122
St Joseph's Convent Grammar School	53	56

Grammar Schools	LOWER 6TH	UPPER 6TH
St Louis' Grammar School, Kilkeel	120	111
St Louis' Grammar School, Kintullagh	88	70
St Macnissi's College	73	71
St Malachy's College	122	116
St Mary's Cb Grammar School	135	145
St Mary's Grammar School	134	133
St Michael's College, Enniskillen	95	97
St Michael's Grammar School, Lurgan	114	109
St Patrick's Academy For Boys	111	92
St Patrick's Academy For Girls	115	104
St Patrick's Grammar School, Armagh	90	90
St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick	93	83
Strabane Grammar School	52	55
Strathearn School	103	93
Sullivan Upper School	134	142
Thornhill College	225	203
Victoria College	110	112
Wallace High School	156	144
Wellington College	93	89

Secondary Schools	LOWER 6TH	UPPER 6TH
Ashfield Boys' High School	41	8
Ashfield Girls' High School	34	21
Ballee Community High School	18	7
Ballycastle High School	21	21
Ballyclare Secondary School	55	27
Banbridge High School	20	3
Bangor High School	92	59
Belfast Boys' Model School	87	38
Belfast Model School for Girls	96	57
Brownlow College	7	0
Carrickfergus College	54	37
Castle High School	5	0
Castlederg High School	18	9
City of Armagh High School	31	15
Clondermot High School	17	11
Cookstown High School	77	71
Corpus Christi College	38	10
Cross and Passion College	69	35
Cullybackey High School	22	20
Dean Brian Maguire College	15	17
Donaghadee High School	7	0
Downshire School	37	19
Drumcree College	17	35
Drumglass High School	0	7
Drumragh College	41	0
Duke of Westminster High School	9	10
Dunclug College	23	18
Edmund Rice College	54	18

Secondary Schools	LOWER 6TH	UPPER 6TH
Enniskillen High School	33	26
Erne Integrated College	18	11
Faughan Valley High School	10	13
Fivemiletown High & Community College	53	40
Forthill College	13	9
Glastry College	27	18
Glengormley High School	72	62
Hazelwood College	54	28
Holy Trinity College	78	51
Kilkeel High School	59	54
Knockbreda High School	0	13
La Salle Boys' School	91	86
Lagan College	80	37
Larne High School	41	16
Laurelhill Community College	37	23
Limavady High School	10	8
Lismore Comprehensive School	100	57
Lisnasharragh High School	7	0
Lisnaskea High School	0	5
Little Flower Girls' School	63	45
Meanscoil Feirste	17	15
Monkstown Community School	18	15
Newtownabbey Community High School	18	11
New-Bridge Integrated College	26	0
Newry High School	46	52
Oakgrove College	41	30
Omagh High School	9	13
Orangefield High School	19	0
Our Lady of Mercy Girls' School	60	24
Sacred Heart College	54	17
Shimna Integrated College	25	33
St Aloysius' High School	0	3
St Breacan's High School	26	10
St Brigid's High School	51	14
St Catherine's College	120	103
St Cecilia's College	100	62
St Ciaran's High School	94	59
St Colm's High School	12	11
St Colman's High School, Ballynahinch	140	82
St Colman's High School, Strabane	23	0
St Columba's High School	9	0
St Comgall's High School	19	0
St Comhghall's High School	18	18
St Eugene's College	17	23
St Fanchea's College	37	25
St Gemma's High School	35	19
St Genevieve's High School	81	70
St Joseph's College, Belfast	39	8
St Joseph's College, Londonderry	59	43

Secondary Schools	LOWER 6TH	UPPER 6TH
St Joseph's High School, Coleraine	26	19
St Louise's Comprehensive College	159	149
St Malachy's High School	54	51
St Mary's College, Londonderry	84	57
St Mary's High School, Belleek	4	15
St Mary's High School, Downpatrick	14	6
St Mary's School	44	18
St Patrick's College, Ballymena	18	0
St Patrick's High School	36	18
St Patrick's High School	47	70
St Patrick's College	183	178
St Patricks College	18	19
St Paul's High School	47	52
St Peter's High School	12	10
St Rose's High School	25	13
St.Joseph's College, Enniskillen	16	7
St.Patrick's High School	31	22
Templemore Secondary School	26	8

The information requested at (b), (c) and (d) is not held by the Department.

Schools in West Belfast

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of teaching establishments in West Belfast that are voluntary and private pre-school education centres, grant-aided schools, independent schools and post-primary schools; (b) the cost to the Department of each establishment; (c) the numbers of pupils and teachers in each of the schools and (d) the pupil/teacher ratio. (AQW 1373/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The following information has been provided by education and library boards, or is directly available to the Department:

(a) **NUMBER OF TEACHING ESTABLISHMENTS IN WEST BELFAST 2000/2001**

Type of School	Number
Voluntary and Private Pre-School Education Centres	15
Nursery Schools	18
Primary Schools	32
Post Primary Schools	12
Special Schools	2
Hospital Schools	1
Independent Schools	2

(b) Under the pre-school expansion programme the Department funds places in 15 pre-school settings in the voluntary and private sectors in the West Belfast area, at a rate of £1,160 per place in the current academic year.

Information obtained from funding authorities shows the following local management of schools (LMS) formula funding allocations for the current financial year, together with allocations from centrally held funds for items such as contingency, substitute cover, et cetera. up to 31 December 2000.

NURSERY SCHOOL FUNDING

School	Total Funding (£)
Denmark Street Nursery School	64,573
Good Shepherd Nursery School	129,456
Holy Child Nursery School	119,953
Malvern Street Nursery School	137,879
Matt Talbot Nursery School	128,483
Shaftesbury Nursery School	121,289
St Bernadette's Nursery School	134,547
St Kieran's Nursery School	128,151
St Luke's Nursery School	132,089
St Maria Goretti Nursery School	119,591
St Martin's Nursery School	158,366
St Michael's Nursery School	133,464
St Oliver Plunkett Nursery School	124,116
St Paul's Nursery School	120,218
St Peter's Nursery School	123,381
St Teresa's Nursery School	137,215
St Therese Nursery School	71,500
The Cathedral Nursery School	114,395

PRIMARY SCHOOL FUNDING

School	Total Funding (£)
Blackmountain PS	377,729
Bunscoil An Tsleibhe Dhuibh	285,369
Bunscoil Phobal Feirste	702,136
Forth River PS	343,656
Gaelscoil Na Bhfal	461,100
Harmony PS	629,494
Holy Child PS	1,427,484
Holy Trinity PS	1,988,369
Malvern PS	443,424
Scoil Na Fuisgeoige	227,033
Springfield PS	321,571
Springhill PS	642,686
St Aidan's Christian Brothers PS	764,129
St Bernadette's PS	679,077
St Catherine's PS	371,689
St Gall's Monastery PS	568,924
St John The Baptist Boys' PS	1,125,035
St John The Baptist Girls' PS	993,931
St John's Girls' PS	351,152
St Joseph's PS	851,252
St Kevin's PS	1,032,656

School	Total Funding (£)
St Kieran's PS	1,399,563
St Luke's PS	719,479
St Mark's PS	1,377,202
St Mary's PS	386,962
St Oliver Plunkett PS	1,415,712
St Paul's PS	917,650
St Peter's PS	1,100,995
St Teresa's PS	1,101,458
Suffolk PS	434,217
The Good Shepherd PS	1,100,090
Vere Foster PS	577,142

POST PRIMARY SCHOOL FUNDING

School	Total Funding (£)
Balmoral High School	1,472,277
Christian Brothers' Secondary School	2,282,745
Corpus Christi College	3,216,323
La Salle Boys' School	3,550,458
Meanscoil Feirste	954,904
Mount Gilbert Community College	1,803,706
St Colm's High School	2,048,633
St Dominic's High School	2,776,036
St Genevieve's High School	2,695,322
St Louise's Comprehensive College	6,562,687
St Mary's CB Grammar School	3,331,968
St Rose's High School	1,770,750

SPECIAL SCHOOL FUNDING ⁽¹⁾

School	Total Funding (£)
St Francis De Sales	193,756
St Gerard's Education Resource Centre	1,732,220

HOSPITAL SCHOOL FUNDING ⁽¹⁾

School	Total Funding (£)
Belfast Hospital School	523,987

¹. Special and hospital schools are funded outside LMS arrangements.

(c) and (d)

FULL TIME EQUIVALENT (FTE) PUPIL AND TEACHER NUMBERS AND PUPIL:TEACHER RATIOS IN NURSERY SCHOOLS

School	FTE Pupils	FTE Teachers	Pupil: Teacher Ratio
Denmark Street Nursery School	17	1.0	17.0
Good Shepherd Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0

School	FTE Pupils	FTE Teachers	Pupil: Teacher Ratio
Holy Child Nursery School	52	3.0	17.3
Malvern Street Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0
Matt Talbot Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0
Shaftesbury Nursery School	51	2.0	25.5
St Bernadette's Nursery School	52	3.0	17.3
St Kieran's Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0
St Luke's Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0
St Maria Goretti Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0
St Martin's Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0
St Michael's Nursery School	52	1.0(2)	52.0(2)
St Oliver Plunkett Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0
St Paul's Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0
St Peter's Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0
St Teresa's Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0
St Therese Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0
The Cathedral Nursery School	52	2.0	26.0

² The count of full time equivalent teachers excludes substitute teachers. At the count date there was one substitute teacher at this school making a total of two teachers, which would give a pupil/teacher ratio of 26.0.

FULL TIME EQUIVALENT (FTE) PUPIL AND TEACHER NUMBERS AND PUPIL:TEACHER RATIOS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS (INCLUDING NURSERY AND RECEPTION PUPILS)

School	FTE Primary	FTE Teachers	Pupils: Teacher Ratio
Blackmountain PS	128	7.0	18.3
Bunscoil An Tsleibhe Dhuibh	150	8.0	18.8
Bunscoil Phobal Feirste	342	15.0	22.8
Forth River PS	181	9.0	20.1
Gaelscoil Na Bhfal	169	7.0	24.1
Harmony PS	224	12.0	18.7
Holy Child PS	720	30.0	24.0
Holy Trinity PS	655	35.0	18.7
Malvern PS	141	9.0	15.7
Scoil Na Fuisgeoige	115	7.0	16.4
Springfield PS	119	7.0	17.0
Springhill PS	370	16.0	23.1
St Aidan's Christian Brothers PS	324	19.0	17.1
St Bernadette's PS	311	17.0	18.3
St Catherine's PS	200	11.0	18.2
St Gall's Monastery PS	248	13.0	19.1
St John The Baptist Boys' PS	590	24.0	24.6
St John The Baptist Girls' PS	541	24.0	22.5
St John's Girls' PS	144	8.5	16.9

School	FTE Primary	FTE Teachers	Pupils: Teacher Ratio
St Joseph's PS	293	15.0	19.5
St Kevin's PS	538	26.0	20.7
St Kieran's PS	669	33.6	19.9
St Luke's PS	331	16.6	19.9
St Mark's PS	656	30.0	21.9
St Mary's PS	83	7.0	11.9
St Oliver Plunkett PS	674	34.0	19.8
St Paul's PS	273	15.0	18.2
St Peter's PS	478	25.0	19.1
St Teresa's PS	580	26.0	22.3
Suffolk PS	168	9.0	18.7
The Good Shepherd PS	556	28.6	19.4
Vere Foster PS	180	10.0	18.0

FULL TIME EQUIVALENT (FTE) PUPIL AND TEACHER NUMBERS AND PUPIL:TEACHER RATIOS IN POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS

School	FTE Pupils	FTE Teachers	Pupil: Teacher Ratio
Balmoral High School	400	26.0	15.4
Christian Brothers' Secondary School	736	52.3	14.1
Corpus Christi College	796	58.0	13.7
La Salle Boys' School	1,196	84.2	14.2
Meanscoil Feirste	332	21.0	15.8
Mount Gilbert Community College	344	28.0	12.3
St Colm's High School	692	49.0	14.1
St Dominic's High School	997	68.0	14.7
St Genevieve's High School	947	65.0	14.6
St Louise's Comprehen College	2,206	152.5	14.5
St Mary's CB Grammar School	1,149	77.0	14.9
St Rose's High School	561	44.4	12.6

FULL TIME EQUIVALENT (FTE) PUPIL AND TEACHER NUMBERS AND PUPIL:TEACHER RATIOS IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS

School	FTE Pupils	FTE Teachers	Pupil: Teacher Ratio
St Francis De Sales Special School	24	3.0	8.0
St Gerard's Ecuation Resource Centre	212	42.7	5.0

FULL TIME EQUIVALENT (FTE) PUPIL AND TEACHER NUMBERS AND PUPIL:TEACHER RATIOS IN HOSPITAL SCHOOLS

School	FTE Pupils	FTE Teachers	Pupil: Teacher Ratio
Belfast Hospital School	126	18.6	6.8

FULL TIME EQUIVALENT (FTE) PUPIL AND TEACHER NUMBERS AND PUPIL:TEACHER RATIOS IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

School	FTE Pupils	FTE Teachers	Pupil: Teacher Ratio
Gaelscoil An Ghleanna	10	1.7	5.9
Gaelscoil An Lonnain	15	2.0	7.5

Special Needs Strategy

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to outline the strategy for special needs within the pre-school education system. (AQW 1413/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The legislation on children with special educational needs taking part in pre-school education is set out in articles 17 to 33 of the Education (NI) Order 1998 and the Pre-School Education in Schools (Admissions Criteria) Regulations (NI) 1999. Further information is contained in my Department's booklet 'Investing in Early Learning', the 'Pre-School Education - what parents need to know' leaflet and circular 2000/11 'Open Enrolment in Nursery Schools'. Such children are also subject to my Department's code of practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs.

The Department has encouraged nursery schools to give priority to children with special needs within the admissions arrangements. If a child has a statement of special educational needs which specifies a nursery placement, he or she can be admitted over and above a school's pre-school enrolment number. Many children with special needs will in any event be admitted to nursery education under the general criteria.

It is also intended that similar provision should be available in pre-school playgroups. To assist with this process, my Department has made available copies of the code on request to those playgroups which wish to have them, and education and library boards are required to consider arrangements to ensure appropriate support. Advice and support are also available from my Department's Inspectorate. Wherever possible, provision for children with special educational needs within nursery schools, nursery classes in primary schools and pre-school playgroups should be integrated.

Under special education legislation, boards may make statements of special educational needs on children from age two and in certain instances on those under two.

They may place children with statements of special educational needs from age two in nursery schools and from age three in nursery classes in primary schools, in which case they are not subject to the normal admissions arrangements. Provision may also be made for them in nursery classes at special schools, in special education units attached to primary schools and in toy and book libraries at special schools. Home teaching and advice to parents may be provided by pre-school peripatetic teachers or by pre-school teachers from special schools.

The overall intention of the strategy is that a choice of provision should be available for pre-school children with special educational needs, as it is for those of primary and secondary school age.

Pre-School Places

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pre-school places currently provided by (a) his Department, (b) voluntary groups and (c) community groups in each education and library board area. (AQW 1415/00)

Mr M McGuinness: In the 1999-2000 school year, the latest for which complete figures are available, the Department of Education funded places in the statutory sector as follows:

Board Area	No. of Places
BELB	2,884
WELB	2,096
NEELB	2,344
SEELB	2,271
SELB	2,724
Total	12,319

In addition, in the 1999-2000 school year under the pre-school education expansion programme, the Department funded the following places in the voluntary and private sector:

Board Area	No. of Places
BELB	521
WELB	842
NEELB	910
SEELB	554
SELB	580
Total	3,407

In addition to those places funded under the expansion programme, many of the playgroups will offer additional places for which parents will pay. Some of the voluntary playgroups receiving funding may be community-based groups, but the Department does not hold records on that basis.

Bullying in Schools

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to confirm the number of bullying incidents that have taken place in each of the state controlled, Catholic maintained and integrated school sectors in the years 1998-99 and 1999-2000. (AQW 1460/00)

Mr M McGuinness: As I indicated in the Written Answers Booklet for Tuesday 12 December 2000, data on incidents of bullying are not collected by my Department nor by the education and library boards. The information requested is therefore not available.

Special Schools

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of the impact of specialist schools on improving standards in education; and to make a statement. (AQW 1526/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Under the law, parents of children with statements of special educational needs may name the school in which they wish their child to be placed. Many name a mainstream school, but others prefer their children to be placed in a special school where expertise has been developed in working with children with similar types of special educational needs. Educational provision in special schools is generally of a high standard and most teaching, by far, is satisfactory or better. I believe that there is a wealth of experience and expertise in our special schools, which could usefully be shared more widely with other mainstream schools; and I will be encouraging this as resources permit.

Youth Services

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Education to detail expenditure on youth services, excluding capital spending and European moneys, for the years 1990 to present in the parliamentary constituency of West Belfast. (AQW 1540/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is not recorded by constituency. An approximate spend for the area provided by the Belfast Education and Library Board, on youth services, in the last 3 years is as follows:

	£
1997/98	800k
1998/99	840k
1999/2000	900k

The information in respect of earlier years is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Development of the Gas Industry

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the progress made to provide natural gas for industry in the south-east region of Northern Ireland. (AQO 628/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I am continuing to encourage the development of the gas industry outside the Greater Belfast area, including the south-east region. This development is, however, primarily a matter for the private sector.

Tourism Company

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if, pursuant to AQO 472/00 on 11 December 2000, he will outline how he intends to ensure that Northern Ireland will receive fair and equal treatment in the new island-wide tourist body. (AQO 615/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The new Tourism Company is owned jointly by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Bord Fáilte. Half of its board, including the chairman, are Northern Ireland nominees. There will also be clear guidance that the company's promotional efforts should 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.

Economic Development Agencies

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if, further to his statement of 19 December 2000 (Official Report 19/12/2000, page 172), any progress has been made towards restructuring of economic development agencies. (AQO 614/00)

Sir Reg Empey: A project implementation team has been now established to take this work forward. Work has commenced on the drafting of the necessary legislation and the process of appointing board members and recruiting a chief executive designate will begin as soon as possible.

Natural Gas

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what progress has been made to bring natural gas into Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 627/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I have had initial discussions with Bord Gais Éireann about its interest in bringing gas to Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland.

Male/Female Wage Differential

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if, in view of the fact that the difference between adult male and adult female wages has decreased by only 2% since 1995, he will detail the steps he is taking to increase the rate at which the gap between men's and women's wages is closed. (AQO 623/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Success by my Department in promoting economic growth will improve wage levels overall; but Departments need to work together to ensure that men and women benefit equally. My Department will be fully involved in developing cross-departmental policies to tackle gender inequality as set out in the Programme for Government.

North-West Gas Pipeline

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the viability of a north-west gas pipeline with a North/South inter-connection; and to make a statement. (AQO 603/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The viability of such pipelines can only be assessed if and when fully costed private sector projects are submitted.

Illegally Imported Tobacco and Fuel

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the loss to Northern Ireland businesses resulting from the purchase of illegally imported tobacco and fuel. (AQO 633/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment has no figures relating to the loss to Northern Ireland business resulting from the purchase of illegally imported tobacco and fuel. Responsibility for controlling illegal imports lies with HM Customs & Excise.

'Best of Northern Ireland' Exhibition

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the forthcoming 'Best of Northern Ireland' exhibition at the House of Commons, Westminster; and to make a statement. (AQO 613/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I would like to offer my thanks to Mr Roy Beggs MP who secured the opportunity to host a 'Best of Northern Ireland' exhibition.

This provides an excellent opportunity to promote Northern Ireland and in particular to emphasise examples of innovation and excellence drawn from all aspects of Northern Ireland life.

Department: Web Site Update

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail when his Department's web site will be operational. (AQO 609/00)

Sir Reg Empey: DETI's website is currently being updated, and it is expected that the initial design and construction work will be complete by mid-February. The web site will include extensive links through to existing agency web sites and ultimately to the new single agency web site.

Industrial Landholdings

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the availability of land in Greater Belfast for industrial use; and to make a statement. (AQO 624/00)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department owns 906 acres of land in the Belfast metropolitan area of which 404 acres remain available for development by IDB and LEDU client companies.

There are also significant industrial landholdings not in DETI's ownership; including the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' land and the Harland & Wolff land at Queen's Island and the former Howden Sirocco site at Short Strand.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Rebate for Road Hauliers

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment to outline when the rebate for road hauliers will be paid. (AQW 1323/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): Vehicle excise duty (VED) is an excepted matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

However, collection of VED, including the administration of any associated rebates are carried out in Northern Ireland by Driver and Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland, an agency within DOE, under the terms of a formal agency agreement between my Department and the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions.

In Northern Ireland approximately 9,000 hauliers were eligible for rebates. An invitation letter, incorporating an application form, has been issued to all those identified as eligible.

As at 22 January 2001, applications had been received from 86% (7,741) of those eligible, and rebate payments had been made to 82% (7,416). Payments to the remainder will be dispatched within 10 working days of receipt of their application.

Recycled Material

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his plans to support investment in infrastructure to provide additional processing capacity for recycled material; and to make a statement. (AQW 1390/00)

Mr Foster: I am pleased that my Department has been given an extra £3.5million for waste management in the 2001-02 Budget.

In November 2000 I wrote to all district councils indicating that most of this additional funding would be made available to assist them with the implementation of their waste management plans. The precise amounts and mechanism for distribution will depend on the proposals presented.

My officials are in the process of completing the arrangements for the appointment of the Waste Management Advisory Board. The board will play a key role in guiding the market development programme set out in the Northern Ireland waste management strategy.

The programme, which will involve my Department, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and other key stakeholders, will assist eligible projects designed to develop sustainable markets for recycled materials and products.

EC Bathing Water Directive

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the steps he is taking to inform and seek the views of local councils on the revision of the 1976 European Community Bathing Water Directive. (AQW 1416/00)

Mr Foster: The European Commission has recently sought views through a communication on the Internet about its plans for the revision of this Directive.

Once my Department has assessed the initial implications it will write to all district councils within the next few months to inform them about the Commission's proposals and to seek their views.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Regional Rate Increase

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give his assessment of the increase in the rates bill next year for (a) domestic ratepayers and (b) non-domestic ratepayers following the 8% increase in the regional rate. (AQW 1296/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):

It is not possible to give a final assessment of the increase in the rates bill next year, until the regional rate increase is confirmed by the Assembly in March and the district rate struck by each district council becomes known, sometime after 15 February. However, given the proposed 8% and 6.6% regional rates increases for domestic and non-domestic ratepayers respectively, it is possible to provide a projection of the likely increases in regional domestic and non-domestic rate bills. The estimated increases are £16 for domestic regional rate bills and £299 for non-domestic regional rate bills. Domestic ratepayers on low incomes may be eligible for housing benefit to offset their bills in whole or in part.

Impact of Aggregates Tax

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if, pursuant to AQW 1025/00, he will give his assessment of additional costs on the Northern Ireland Budget across all Departments of the proposed introduction of an aggregates tax with effect from 1 April 2002; and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1346/00)

Mr Durkan: It is not possible to assess precisely the impact of the aggregates tax on departmental budgets and capital programmes from April 2002 and beyond as these have only been set inductively. The future price of aggregates is also uncertain. However, based on current spending patterns I have been advised that the greatest impact would fall on the Department for Regional Development where the initial assessment is that the tax would impose additional costs of about £7 million per annum. Most of these costs would be borne by the Roads Service maintenance and capital programmes where the introduction of the tax is expected to increase costs by 7.5% (£5 million to £6 million). It is further estimated that the Water Service will face additional costs of some £1 million.

Other Departments with significant capital programmes including Education and Health, Social Services and Public Safety expect their total construction costs to rise by less than 1%. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development estimates that the Rivers Agency will incur additional costs of around £80,000 per annum. The remaining Departments do not expect a significant increase in their costs.

Land Registry

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total number of all outstanding Land Registry registrations as at 31 December 1999 and 31 December 2000. (AQW 1347/00)

Mr Durkan: Information regarding work stocks is based on the financial year rather than the calendar year. Unfortunately, therefore, information is not available on the outstanding registrations at these dates. However, there were 13,603 outstanding registrations as at 31 March 2000 compared to a current figure of 18,850 as at 17 January 2001.

Suicide Rates

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of suicides recorded in each district council area in each of the last 10 years and to provide a breakdown of the figures by age and gender. (AQW 1422/00)

Mr Durkan: The numbers of suicides recorded in each local government district area between 1990 and 1999 are given in the table below. The more detailed information requested has been placed in the Assembly Library.

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Northern Ireland	158	129	107	129	138	122	124	120	126	121
Antrim	6	5	2	5	5	4	4	4	1	1
Ards	4	6	5	4	9	6	3	4	8	4
Armagh	2	0	8	3	2	0	5	5	3	4
Ballymena	7	2	1	2	6	7	6	4	6	4
Ballymoney	1	1	2	3	6	1	3	2	2	1
Banbridge	4	2	3	1	4	3	5	3	5	2
Belfast	32	25	20	16	24	26	21	23	22	35
Carrickfergus	5	5	5	2	3	3	4	1	2	2
Castlereagh	7	5	3	6	2	2	4	9	6	4
Coleraine	2	4	3	3	2	4	2	2	5	4
Cookstown	2	3	1	6	2	2	0	4	0	1
Craigavon	8	1	2	6	5	2	8	7	9	5
Derry	10	9	7	10	11	8	6	3	9	7
Down	4	5	5	3	7	7	11	4	1	5
Dungannon	2	1	1	6	7	2	1	5	2	0
Fermanagh	7	8	3	7	9	5	4	2	7	1
Larne	1	4	2	4	0	4	2	0	1	2
Limavady	3	2	4	4	2	3	2	1	4	3
Lisburn	6	8	6	5	4	8	6	7	5	2
Magherafelt	1	3	0	5	1	1	1	0	3	0
Moyle	2	1	1	0	1	0	1	2	0	2
Newry & Mourne	11	8	2	5	5	5	6	10	7	5
Newtownabbey	13	2	4	6	7	3	5	4	2	7

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
North Down	12	10	13	7	9	9	11	10	7	10
Omagh	3	6	3	6	3	4	1	2	5	9
Strabane	3	3	1	4	2	3	2	2	4	1

European Union Regional Aid

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give his assessment of trends in European Union regional aid for Northern Ireland over the last five years. (AQW 1432/00)

Mr Durkan: European Union regional aid to Northern Ireland over the last five years has been primarily channelled through the 1994-99 Northern Ireland single programme, worth some £930 million. In addition, assistance was provided through the European Union special support programme for peace and reconciliation (EUSPPR) and nine Community initiatives. These were worth almost £300 million and some £97 million respectively.

During the next round of funding – 2000-06 – it is anticipated that the total assistance available will be approximately some £866 million encompassing the transitional Objective 1 programme, Peace II programme and the Community initiatives (respectively £540 million, £258 million and £68 million).

Judicial Review: Maternity Services

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cost of the two judicial reviews into the merger of the Royal Maternity Hospital and the Jubilee Hospital. (AQW 1439/00)

Mr Durkan: I refer you to my answer to AQW1252/00, and in particular to paragraphs (c) and (d).

Rate Assistance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to introduce rate assistance and reduction for rural and village shops similar to the White Paper (Cm. 4909) in Great Britain. (AQW 1533/00)

Mr Durkan: I will ensure that the relevance to Northern Ireland of the proposals in the White Paper 'Our Countryside: The Future, A Fair Deal for Rural England' are fully considered in the context of the wider rating policy review to which Programme for Government commits us.

Energy Efficiency

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm he has met the target of a 20%

reduction in energy costs within his departmental buildings last year. (AQO 705/00)

Mr Durkan: The departmental office estate is the responsibility of Accommodation and Construction Division of the department of Finance and Personnel.

The Department has been pursuing the target set for all Government buildings of a 20% improvement in energy efficiency by the end of March 2000, judged against 1990-91 levels. Over that period, performance by the departmental office estate improved by about 8%.

This result, while disappointing, has been achieved against a background of constantly rising demand, in particular for electricity arising from the vastly increased use of IT equipment – often accompanied by air conditioning – and other forms of office equipment.

Senior Civil Service Review

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any progress in the review of the Senior Civil Service, which is considering issues such as nationality requirements. (AQO 733/00)

Mr Durkan: In January I announced that Sir Herman Ousely has agreed to chair the review team. Other nominations to the review team have been contacted as to their availability and membership is now being finalised. I will be bringing proposals back to the Executive Committee before making a public statement on the arrangements for the review, terms of reference and composition of the review team. It is my intention that the review will commence in early March and be complete in approximately six months.

The proposed terms of reference of the review have been cast relatively broadly to maximise the opportunity which the review provides. The review provides an opportunity 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 Civil Service Commissioners and other issues such as perceived obstacles to participation including nationality requirements

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charges Regulations (NI) 1989

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she intends to change the

regulations for travel expenses for husband, wife or partner travelling to visit their partner on the grounds of therapeutic benefit and to confirm that at present travel expenses are only granted for actual health treatment.

(AQW 1328/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I have no proposals to amend the Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charges Regulations (NI) 1989 to provide travel expenses for a husband, wife or partner visiting their partner on the grounds of therapeutic benefit. These Regulations provide for the payment of travelling expenses incurred by patients attending hospital and by relatives visiting patients who are receiving hospital treatment in Great Britain or the South of Ireland.

The reimbursement of relatives' travel costs to local hospitals is a matter for the Minister for Social Development.

Níl moltaí ar bith agam na Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charges Regulations (NI) 1989 a athrú le costais taistil a íoc d'fhear céile, do bhean chéile nó do pháirtneir ag tabhairt cuairte ar a pháirtneir as cúiseanna tairbhe teiripí. Cuireann na Rialacha seo íocaíocht chostais taistil ar fáil a tharraing othair orthu féin agus iad ag freastal ar an otharlann agus a tharraing gaolta orthu féin agus iad ag tabhairt cuairte ar othair atá ag fáil chóireáil otharlainne sa Bhreatain Mhór nó i nDeisceart na hÉireann.

Is ceist don Aire Forbartha Sóisialta í aisíoc chostais gaolta as a dtaisteal chuig otharlanna áitiúla.

Sure Start Programme

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her plans for the delivery of the Sure Start programme. (AQW 1335/00)

Ms de Brún: In July last year I announced the allocation of £2million to introduce the Sure Start programme for families with young children in 15 areas of social disadvantage, with £4million for full-year costs of these projects from April 2001. I am, however, conscious that there are still areas of high disadvantage with no Sure Start project, so I intend to make available an additional £1.8million from April 2001 to allow some new projects in these areas. I shall shortly be considering recommendations for allocation of this additional funding from the local childcare partnerships, who have considered bids from projects in areas where there are gaps.

I mí Iúil anuraidh, d'fhógair mé dáileadh £2m le tús a chur leis an chlár Sure Start do theaghlaigh le páistí óga i 15 cheantar de mhíbhuntaiste sóisialta, agus £4m do bhliain iomlán costas do na tionscadail seo ó Aibreán 2001. Aithním, áfach, go bhfuil ceantair de mhíbhuntaiste ard ann go fóill gan tionscadal Sure Start ar bith. Mar

sin de, tá rún agam £1.8m breise a chur ar fáil ó Aibreán 2001 le roinnt tionscadal nua a cheadú sna ceantair seo. Beidh mé ag meas, gan mhoill, moltaí le haghaidh dháileadh hna maoinithe breise seo ó na páirtíochtaí áitiúla chúram páistí a bhfuil tairiscintí ó thionscadail i gceantair a bhfuil bearnaí iontu.

Ambulance Service: Response Times

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the contingency plans that have been made since November by the ambulance service to ensure that the standards for attendance times are maintained. (AQW 1336/00)

Ms de Brún: It has been the policy of the Ambulance Service Trust for a number of years to engage extra resources at specific times throughout the year to allow for situations such as major public events, Christmas and New Year. For the 2000-01 Christmas and New Year period, extra resources were employed and special arrangements put in place. The four area health boards have also funded additional patient care service resources to assist with winter pressures. All of these initiatives help the Ambulance Service Trust meet its aim of achieving the standards on response times agreed with the four boards.

Is é polasaí Iontaobhas na Seirbhíse Otharcharr le roinnt blianta acmhainní breise a ghlacadh ag amanna ar leith i rith na bliana le himeachtaí ar nós príomhócáidí poiblí, na Nollag agus na Bliana Úire a chur san áireamh. Do thréimhse na Nollag agus na Bliana Úire 2000/01, baineadh feidhm as acmhainní breise agus cuireadh socruithe speisialta i bhfeidhm. Mhaoinigh na ceithre bhord sláinte ceantair breisacmhainní seirbhíse chúraim othar le cuidiú le brúnna an gheimhridh. Cuidíonn na tionscnaimh seo uilig le hIontaobhas na Seirbhíse Otharcharr a chuspóir, na caighdeáin ar amanna freagartha aontaithe leis na ceithre bhord a bhaint amach, a chomhlíonadh.

General Practitioners

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of general practitioners who retired due to ill health in each of the last five years for which figures are available, before the age of retirement of (a) 60 years and (b) 65 years. (AQW 1337/00)

Ms de Brún: This information for the last five calendar years is detailed in the table below.

Age	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Less than 60	3	6	4	5	6
60 - 65	0	0	0	0	1
Total	3	6	4	5	7

Mionléirítear an t-eolas seo do na cúig bliana caileandair seo caite sa tábla thíos.

Aois	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Níos lú ná 60	3	6	4	5	6
60 - 65	0	0	0	0	1
Iomlán	3	6	4	5	7

Hospital Beds to Population Ratio

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if, pursuant to AQW 1018/00, she will detail the proportion of extra beds in ratio to the population of (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the residents in each board area; (c) the residents in the area covered by Altnagelvin Hospital; and (d) the residents in the area covered by Sperrin Lakeland Trust; and if she will make a statement. (AQW 1342/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on the population of the area covered by Altnagelvin Hospital and Sperrin Lakeland Trust is not available.

Information on the ratio of beds to the populations of each of the health and social services boards and to the overall population is detailed in the table below. The allocation of beds reflects the need assessed by each board for additional bed capacity during the winter.

	Extra Beds	Population	Rate per 100,000 population
EHSSB	169	673,300	25.1
WHSSB	33	281,400	11.7
NHSSB	51	427,700	11.9
SHSSB	38	309,400	12.3
Total	291	1,691,800	17.2

The higher figures for the Eastern Board reflect the regional specialties located there.

Níl aon eolas ar fáil ar an daonra sa limistéar a chlúdaíonn Otharlann Alt na nGealbhan agus Iontaobhas Loch-cheantar Speirín.

Tá eolas ar chóimheas leapacha le daonra de gach ceann de na boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta agus leis an daonra foriomlán á shonrú sa tábla thíos. Léiríonn dáileadh na leapacha an gá a mheas gach bord a bhí de dhíth ar thuilleadh breise leapa i rith an gheimhridh.

	Tuilleadh Leapacha	Daonra	Ráta de réir gach 100,000 daonra
BSSS Thoir	169	673,300	25.1
BSSS Thiar	33	281,400	11.7
BSSS Thuaidh	51	427,700	11.9
BSSS Theas	38	309,400	12.3
Iomlán	291	1,691,800	17.2

Léiríonn na figiúir is airde de Bhord Oirthir na sainghnéithe réigiúnacha aimsithe ansin.

Winter Pressures

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the allocation of the additional £15 million for winter pressures to the health and social services boards; and if she will make a statement.
(AQW 1344/00)

Ms de Brún: The additional £15 million that has been invested in providing additional services over the winter period, has been allocated to the health and social services boards as follows:

	£000s
Northern Health and Social Services Board:	4,186
Southern Health and Social Services Board	2,708
Eastern Health and Social Services Board	3,851
Western Health and Social Services Board	1,469
	12,214
Additional Allocation of October Monitoring Money	2,875
	15,089

This has been used to finance a range of activities including:

- An extra 10 intensive care beds;
- Another 11 high dependency beds;
- Up to 300 additional medical beds during the winter months;
- Additional community nursing services;
- Around 1,000 extra community care packages;
- More flu vaccinations;
- Extra out-of-hours GP and pharmacy services.

Dáileadh an £15 mhilliún breise, a infheistíodh le seirbhísí breise thar tréimhse an gheimhridh a sholáthar, ar na boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta mar leanas:

	£000s
Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Tuaiscirt:	4,186
Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt:	2,708
Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir:	3,851
Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair	1,469
	12,214
Dáileadh breise d'Airgead Monatóireachta Mhí Dheireadh Fómhair	2,875
	15,089

Úsáideadh é seo le réimse gníomhaíochtaí a mhaoiniú lena n-áirítear:

- 10 leaba bhreise dianchúraim;
- 11 leaba eile ardspleáchais;

- Suas le 300 leaba bhreise míochaine le linn míonna an gheimhridh;
- Seirbhísí breise altranais phobail;
- Thart fá 1,000 beart breise cúraim phobail;
- Níos mó vacsaínithe fliú;
- Seirbhísí breise liachleachtóirí agus cógaslainne as uaireanta oibre.

Midwives

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of midwives there were in 1998, and (b) how many there are now or at the latest date for which figures are available.
(AQW 1352/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

MIDWIVES AS AT 30 SEPTEMBER 1998 & 30 SEPTEMBER 2000

	September 1998		September 2000	
	Headcount	W.T.E	Headcount	W.T.E
Midwives	1,320	1,015.50	1,329	975.48
Student Midwives	36	36.00	50	50.00

Mionléirítear an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

MNÁ CABHRACH AR AN 30 MEÁN FÓMHAIR 1998 & 30 MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2000

	Meán Fómhair 1998		Meán Fómhair 2000	
	Líon	C.A.I.	Líon	C.A.I.
Mná Cabhrach	1,320	1,015.50	1,329	975.48
Ábhar Ban Cabhrach	36	36.00	50	50.00

Wastage in Nursing Staff

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail by trust the level of wastage in employment amongst nursing staff and to outline the expenditure incurred on recruitment of nursing staff in each of the last five years.
(AQW 1368/00)

Ms de Brún: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil go réidh sa dóigh ar iarradh é agus níorbh fhéidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Protection of Children

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps she is taking to protect children from violent parents. (AQW 1378/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department provides a framework for the inter-agency handling of child abuse, including physical abuse, in the publication entitled 'Co-operating to Protect Children'. Where a child is considered by a multi-disciplinary team of professionals to be at risk of abuse, a child protection plan is drawn up and the child's name is placed on the child protection register to ensure that the plan is implemented and kept under review.

The guidance in 'Co-operating to Protect Children' is currently being revised in the light of experience to ensure that it remains fully appropriate and effective.

Cuireann mo Roinn creatlach ar fáil do láimhseáil idir-ghníomhaireachtaí ar mhí-úsáid páistí, lena n-áirítear mí-úsáid fhisiciúil, i bhfoilseachán faoin teideal 'Co-operating to Protect Children.' I gcás ina measann foireann ildisciplíneach gairmithe páiste a bheith i gcontúirt mí-úsáide, leagtar amach plean cosanta páiste agus cuirtear ainm an pháiste ar an chlár cosanta páistí lena chinntiú go gcuirtear an plean i bhfeidhm agus go gcoinnítear faoi athbhreithniú é.

Tá an treoir i 'Co-operating to Protect Children' faoi athbhreithniú faoi láthair de bharr taithí lena chinntiú go bhfanann sé lánfhoiristeanach agus lánéifeachtach.

Cholesterol-Lowering Drugs

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her policy on the availability of the statin class of drugs to those with a high cholesterol rate but no history of coronary heart disease. (AQW 1385/00)

Ms de Brún: The level of total cholesterol, by itself, is a poor predictor of disease. Every effort should be made to identify those people at risk but who have not developed symptomatic coronary heart disease. The prescribing of medication is ultimately a matter for the clinical judgement of the clinician responsible for managing the care of the patient. Using a recognised coronary risk prediction chart for the primary prevention of coronary heart disease can assist clinical judgement.

Where appropriate, lipid-lowering drugs, including statins, should be prescribed. Treatment of cholesterol should be part of a holistic approach to risk factor intervention. The main ways of lowering population levels of risk factors for vascular disease include control of tobacco, reduction in fats, calories and salt in the diet, and encouragement of physical exercise.

Is olc an réamhaithriseoir ar ghalar a bheith ann leibhéal an cholaistéaróil iomláin leis féin. Is ceart gach

iarracht a dhéanamh na daoine sin a aimsiú atá i bpríacal ach nár tháinig galar corónach croí siomtómach go fóill orthu. I ndeireadh na dála tá an réim cógas a fhorordaítear ag brath ar bhreith chliniciúil an chliniceora atá freagrach as cúram an othair a bhainistiú. Má bhaintear úsáid as cairt le haghaidh príacal aitheanta galar corónach a thuar chun cosc príomhúil a chur ar ghalar corónach croí, féadfaidh sin a bheith ina chuidiú nuair a dhéantar breith chliniciúil.

Nuair is cuí, is ceart drugaí a íslíonn lipídí, agus staitíní san áireamh, a fhorordú. Is ceart go mbeadh cóireáil in éadan colaistéaróil mar chuid de chur chuige iomlánaíoch i leith príacail a láimhseáil. Is iad na príomhdhóigheanna le líon na ndaoine a laghdú a bhfuil príacal galair shoithíoch orthu caitheamh tobac a rialú, saillte, calraí agus salann a laghdú san aiste bia agus cleachtadh fisiciúil a spreagadh.

Human Papilloma Virus Testing

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her plans to introduce human papilloma virus testing as part of the national cervical screening programme. (AQW 1386/00)

Ms de Brún: The national screening committee has approved a pilot project to consider the possible role of human papilloma virus testing in the cervical screening programme. The pilot is due to commence in March this year and is expected to run for one year. Following evaluation the national screening committee will make recommendations on whether or not such testing should be included in the cervical screening programme.

Thug coiste náisiúnta an scagtha cead tionscnamh píolótaíochta a dhéanamh le machnamh a dhéanamh ar an ról arbh fhéidir a bhaint as an tástáil don víreas daonna paipileoma sa chlár scagtha ceirbheacsach. Tá an tionscnamh píolótaíochta le tosú i Márta na bliana seo agus meastar go mairfidh sé bliain amháin. I ndiaidh a mheasúnaithe, molfaidh coiste náisiúnta an scagtha ar cheart do thástáil dá leithéid bheith san áireamh i gelár scagtha ceirbheacsach nó nár cheart.

Alcohol Abuse

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her policy to combat alcohol abuse in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1388/00)

Ms de Brún: Last September, following extensive consultation, I launched a new strategy for reducing alcohol-related harm. The strategy encourages responsible drinking, promotes effective treatment services, sets out proposals to protect individuals and communities from alcohol-related harm and announces the development of an information and research programme.

Work is currently under way to put in place the necessary structures to implement the strategy through co-ordinated action involving a wide range of organisations and agencies.

I Meán Fómhair na bliana anuraidh, i ndiaidh comhairliúcháin leathain, sheol mé straitéis úr leis an dochar a bhaineann le halcól a ísliú. Molann an straitéis ólachán ciallmhar, cothaíonn seirbhísí éifeachtacha cóireála, legann amach moltaí le daoine aonair chomh maith le comhphobail a chosaint ar an dochar a bhaineann le halcól agus fógraíonn forbairt cláir eolais agus taighde.

Tá obair ar siúl faoi láthair leis na struchtúir riachtanacha a chur in áit leis an straitéis a chur i bhfeidhm trí ghníomhaíocht chomhordaithe i gcomhar le réimse leathan eagraíochtaí agus gníomhaireachtaí.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse: Impact on Crime Levels

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment has been made of the impact of drug and alcohol abuse on levels of crime and disorder. (AQW 1389/00)

Ms de Brún: As Health Minister, I am responsible for the development and implementation of the Executive's strategies on drug and alcohol misuse. Both of these are based on the broad assessment that drug or alcohol misuse is associated with a wide range of social problems.

Officials in my Department's Drug Information and Research Unit are not aware of any scientific research into the impact of drug and alcohol abuse on levels of crime and disorder here. However, research commissioned by the Home Office has explored the link between drug misuse and criminal behaviour in England and Wales. One study, in a community-based clinic for drug misusers, found that 85% of 221 opiate users had been offending to help fund their drug use. Studies into under-age drinking have found a tendency for young people to engage in various forms of anti-social behaviour during or after drinking but have also concluded that it is not possible to quantify any causal connections between drinking and crime.

Mar Aire Sláinte, tá mé freagrach as straitéisí an Fheidhmeannais ar mhí-úsáid drugaí agus an Alcóil a fhorbairt agus a chur i gcrích. Tá an dá rud bunaithe ar an dearcadh leathan go bhfuil baint ann idir mí-úsáid drugaí nó alcóil agus réimse leathan fadhbanna sóisialta.

Ní feasach do na hoifigigh in Aonad Eolas agus Taighde Drugaí mo Roinne aon taighde eolaíoch a bheith ann maidir le tionchar mhí-úsáid drugaí agus an alcóil ar leibhéil choirpeachta ná an anoird anseo. Bíodh sin mar atá, d'fhiosraigh taighde a choimisiúnaigh An Roinn Gnóthaí Baile an nasc idir mí-úsáid dhrugaí agus iompar coirpeach i Sasana agus sa Bhreatain Bheag. Fuair staidéar amháin, a bhí bunaithe i gclinic phobal-bhunaithe do mhí-úsáideoirí drugaí, go raibh 85% de 221 úsáideoir codlaidíneach ag ciontú lena n-úsáid dhrugaí a mhaoiniú. Fuair staidéir ar an ólachán faoi aois go bhfuil claonadh ag daoine óga bheith páirteach i gcineálacha éagsúla

iompair fhrithshóisialta le linn nó i ndiaidh an ólacháin, ach tháinig siad ar an chonclúid fosta nach féidir cainníocht a dhéanamh ar aon nascanna cúisí idir an ólachán agus an choirpeacht.

Alzheimer's Disease

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the impact of the over-prescribing of drugs for patients with Alzheimer's disease. (AQW 1391/00)

Ms de Brún: Medication is one component of the management of patients with senile dementia of the Alzheimer's type. It is recommended that patients suspected of suffering from Alzheimer's disease should be referred for specialist assessment prior to commencement of medicines for this disease. The purpose of this is to confirm the diagnosis and to ensure that appropriate arrangements for care are put in place for the safe prescribing and monitoring of the medicine, as well as ensuring that only patients who will derive maximum benefit are prescribed the specific medicines for Alzheimer's disease.

The prescribing of medication is ultimately a matter for the clinical judgement of the clinician responsible for managing the care of the patient. Given the range of conditions involved and other therapies that might be prescribed, it is not possible to make an assessment of over-prescribing of drugs for people suffering from dementia, including Alzheimer's disease.

Gné amháin de bhainistiú othar a bhfuil néaltrú seanaoise de chineál Alzheimer orthu atá i réim cógas a fhorordú. Moltar go gcuirfear othair a shíltear go bhfuil galar Alzheimer orthu ar aghaidh le measúnú speisialtóra a fháil sula dtosóidh siad ar chógaí a ghlacadh don ghalair sin. Is é an chúis atá leis seo go ndaingneofar an fáthmheas agus go gcinnteofar go ndéanfar na socrúithe cuí cúraim sa dóigh go bhforordófar an cógas agus go ndéanfar faireachán air go sábháilte agus go gcinnteofar lena chois sin go bhforordófar na cógaí shonracha in éadan ghalair Alzheimer do na hothair sin amháin is mó a bhainfidh leas astu.

I ndeireadh na dála, tá an réim cógas a fhorordaítear ag brath ar bhreith chliniciúil an chliniceora atá freagrach as cúram an othair a bhainistiú. Ós rud é go bhfuil réimse riochtaí i gceist agus teiripí eile a d'fhéadfaí a fhorordú, ní féidir measúnú a dhéanamh ar ró-fhorordú drugaí do dhaoine a bhfuil néaltrú agus galar Alzheimer san áireamh orthu.

Medicinal Properties of Cannabis

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the medicinal properties of cannabis. (AQW 1392/00)

Ms de Brún: Research has indicated that cannabis use can have different psychical effects. On the one hand, there are clear adverse effects ranging from temporary distress, through transient psychosis, to the exacerbation of pre-existing mental illness. Regular use can lead to psychological dependence, increased heart rate and lowered blood pressure. Moreover, smoking cannabis, like smoking tobacco, will increase the rate of respiratory illness. On the other hand, there is also some indication of potential benefits of cannabis for the treatment of certain medical conditions.

The House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology addressed this issue and in its report entitled 'Cannabis, the Scientific and Medical Evidence', concluded that there was not enough rigorous scientific evidence to prove conclusively that cannabis itself has or has not medical value of any kind, though anecdotal evidence led it to the view that it does have genuine medical applications, especially in treating multiple sclerosis.

Further trials are under way into the therapeutic use of cannabis. Until the quality, safety and efficacy of a medicinal form of the drug have been scientifically established and a marketing authorisation issued, as is the requirement for all prospective new medicines, it would be inappropriate to comment further.

Taispeánann taighde go dtig le húsáid an channabais éifeachtaí éagsúla síceacha a bheith aici. Ar láimh amháin, tá drochéifeachtaí soiléire ann ag síneadh ón anacair luaineach, tríd an tsíocóis neamhbhuán, go dtí géarú meabhairghalair a bhí ann cheana. Tig le neamhspleáchas síceolaíoch, ráta croí níos gaiste agus brú fola níos ísle a bheith mar thoradh ar an úsáid rialta. Lena chois sin, méadóidh caitheamh an channabais, chomh maith le caitheamh an tobac, ráta na ngalar riospráide. Ar an láimh eile, tá comharthaí air chomh maith gurbh fhéidir leis an channabas dul chun sochair i gcóireáil riochtaí áirithe míochaine.

Thug Roghchoiste Theach na dTiarnaí ar an Eolaíocht agus an Teicneolaíocht faoin cheist seo agus ina dtuairisc dar teideal 'An Cannabas, Fianaise na hEolaíochta agus an Mhíochaine' tháinig siad ar an chonclúid nach raibh go leor fianaise crua eolaíochta ann le cruthú gan dabht go bhfuil nó nach bhfuil aon luach míochaine de chineál ar bith ag an channabas, cé go bhfuair siad an dearcadh ó fhianaise scéaltach go bhfuil fíorfheidhmeanna míochaine aici, go háirithe i gcás ilscléaróis.

Tá níos mó trialacha ar siúl ar úsáid theiripeach al Channabais. Go dtí go socráítear cáilíocht, sábháilteacht agus éifeachtacht fhoirm mhíochaine an druga de réir na heolaíochta agus go n-eisítear údarás margaíochta, mar atá riachtanach le hábhar cógais ar bith atá nua, ní bheadh sé fóirsteanach níos mó a rá.

ENT Waiting Lists

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average outpatient waiting time for an ear, nose and throat consultation in the West Tyrone area in the last twelve months for which figures are available. (AQW 1393/00)

Ms de Brún: It is not possible to provide the information in the form requested. The table below provides details of the number of patients waiting for first outpatient appointments in the Ear, Nose and Throat specialty for WHSSB Trusts as at September 2000.

	Time Waiting (months)								
	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+
Altnagelvin	682	542	388	238	126	25	14	9	18
Sperrin Lakeland	651	388	140	7	1	1	1	2	0
Total	1333	930	528	245	127	26	15	11	18

Ní féidir an t-eolas a chur ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh. Tugann an tábla thíos sonraí ar líon na n-othar ag fanacht ar chéad choinní eisothair sa speisialtacht Cluaise, Sróine agus Scornaí d'Iontaobhais Bhord Shláinte agus sheirbhísí sóisialta an Iarthair mar a bhí i Meán Fómhair 2000.

	Am Ag Fanacht (míonna)								
	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+
Alt na nGealbhan	682	542	388	238	126	25	14	9	18
Speirín Lochanna	651	388	140	7	1	1	1	2	0
Iomlán	1333	930	528	245	127	26	15	11	18

Primary Care Groups

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the progress made in involving patients in primary care groups. (AQW 1394/00)

Ms de Brún: On 11 December 2000 I published a consultation paper entitled 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care', which invites comments on proposals for new arrangements in primary care. My proposals envisage the creation of local health and social care groups in all areas, bringing together groups of primary care professionals to work with local communities to improve the delivery of services and to contribute to the commissioning of services. I am proposing that these groups should have strong input from local communities and from service users. Subject to the outcome of the consultation exercise, it is my intention to start implementing the new arrangements during the next financial year.

Since April 1997 my Department has supported a number of pilot projects, involving groups of primary care professionals, to test various models for arrangements in primary care. The pilot sites were chosen following the submission of expressions of interest by groups of primary care professionals. All the pilots have been, or are being, evaluated. Examining the extent of service user and community involvement at each pilot site was an integral part of the overall evaluation study and the evaluation findings have reported varying degrees of progress in this area. Most of the pilot groups have established task groups dedicated to developing user and community involvement. Copies of the first-year evaluation of the primary care commissioning groups pilots have been placed in the Assembly Library. Many of the lessons learned from the pilots have contributed to the proposals that I have published for consultation.

Ar an 11ú Nollaig 2000 d'fhoilsigh mé páipéar comhairleach dár teideal 'Ag Tógáil an Bhealaigh chun Tosaigh i bPríomhchúram', a iarrann tuairimí ar mholtaí do shocruithe nua i bpríomhchúram. Molann mo mholtaí cruthú grúpaí aitiúla sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta i ngach ceantar, ag tabhairt grúpaí de ghairmithe príomhchúraim le chéile le comhoibriú le pobail áitiúla chun soláthar seirbhísí a fheabhsú agus chun cuidiú le coimisiúnú seirbhísí. Tá mé ag moladh gur chóir do na grúpaí seo ionchur láidir bheith acu ó phobail áitiúla agus ó úsáideoirí seirbhísí. Ag brath ar thoradh an chleachtaidh chomhairligh, tá sé ar intinn agam cur i bhfeidhm na socruithe nua a thosú le linn na chéad bhliana airgeadais eile.

Ó Aibreán 1997, thacaigh mo Roinn le roinnt tionscadal píolóta lena mbaineann grúpaí de ghairmithe príomhchúraim, le creatlacha do shocruithe i bpríomhchúram a scrúdú. Roghnaíodh na suímh píolóta i ndiaidh suime a chuir grúpaí de ghairmithe príomhchúraim iontu. Measadh nó tá na tionscadail píolóta á meas. Bhí scrúdú méid na bainte a bhí ag úsáideoirí seirbhísí agus ag an phobal leis na suímh píolóta mar chuid riachtanach den mheasúnacht iomlán agus léirigh torthaí na measúnachta céimeanna éagsúla de dhul chun cinn sa réimse seo. Bhunaigh an chuid is mó de na grúpaí píolóta tascgrúpaí tiomnaithe d'fhorbairt bhaint úsáideoirí agus an phobail leo. Cuireadh cóipeanna den chéad bhliain de mheasúnacht thionscadail píolóta ghrúpaí coimisiúnaithe príomhchúraim i Leabharlann an Tionóil. Cuireadh a lán ceachtanna a foghlaimíodh ó na tionscadail píolóta leis na moltaí a d'fhoilsigh mé do chomhairliú.

Delivery of Health and Social Care

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) detail which models of service she is currently studying as suitable for Northern Ireland and (b) confirm that she has read the recommendations of the World Health Organisation, which advocate

decentralisation as set out in the National Health Service plan for England. (AQW 1398/00)

Ms de Brún: My objective is to ensure arrangements for the delivery of services, which meet the needs of service users here. I am aware of a range of models for the delivery of health and social care, including those published by the World Health Organisation and the Department of Health in England. I shall be assessing their relevance and value for the situation here, as I continue to develop my proposals for the health and personal social services.

Is é is cuspóir domh socruithe do sholáthar seirbhísí a riarann ar riachtanais úsáideoirí anseo a chinntiú. Is feasach domh réimse samhlacha do sholáthar cúraim sláinte agus sóisialta a bheith ann, lena n-áirítear iad sin a foilsíodh ag an Eagraíocht Dhomhanda Sláinte agus ag an Roinn Sláinte i Sasana. Beidh mé ag measúnú ar cé chomh hábhartha luachmhar agus a bheadh siad anseo, de réir mar a leanaim ar aghaidh ag forbairt mo mholtaí do na seirbhísí sláinte pearsanta agus sóisialta.

General Practitioner Fundholding

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) detail the numbers of staff currently employed in general practitioner fundholding and (b) outline the contingency arrangements should GP fundholding be abolished. (AQW 1399/00)

Ms de Brún: Currently, around 220 staff are employed to manage the funds of practices which belong to the GP fundholding scheme. The majority of these staff have existing posts within their practice and work only part of their time on fund management duties. Around 100 staff are employed solely on fund management work.

Recent guidance issued by my Department instructs health and social services boards to examine how staff likely to be affected by the ending of fundholding might be retained permanently in general practice. I will be providing additional resources for primary care to allow boards greater flexibility in managing the ending of fundholding.

My Department is exploring the possibility of extending a redeployment facility, which already exists within the HPSS, to include staff who have been employed in fundholding.

Faoi láthair, tá thart faoi 220 den fhoireann fostaithe leis na cistí cliantachta, ar leis an scéim cisteshealbhaíochta carthóireachta na ngnáthdhochtúirí iad, a stiúradh. Tá an mhórchuid den fhoireann seo agus poist eile acu ina geliantachta agus ní oibríonn siad ach go páirt aimsire ar dhualgais a bhaineann le bainisteoireacht cistí. Tá thart faoi 100 den fhoireann ar obair bhainisteoireachta cistí amháin.

D'eisigh mo Roinn treoir ar na mallaibh, mar chomhairle do bhoird shláinte agus seirbhísí. Tá siad le hamharc ar an fhéidearthacht atá ann le hoibrithe, a dtiocfadh leo bheith thíos le deireadh na scéime cisteshealbhaíochta, a choinneáil go buan i gcliantacht ghinearálta. Beidh mé ag cur acmhainní breise ar fáil don chúram phríomhúil le tuilleadh solúbachta a thabhairt do bhoird agus iad ag riar dheireadh cisteshealbhaíochta.

Tá mo Roinn ag scrúdú na féidearthachta d'áis athchóirithe fhostaíochta a leathnú, rud atá ann cheana féin taobh istigh den SSSP, le foireann a bhí fostaithe sa scéim cisteshealbhaíochta.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area requiring magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) who have been (a) offered scans in the Irish Republic, (b) accepted these offers of MRI scanning, (c) rejected the offer and (d) how long it will take to clear the backlog. (AQW 1403/00)

Ms de Brún: No patients within the Northern Health & Social Services Board area have been offered MRI scans in the South of Ireland. It is anticipated that the current backlog of scans will be cleared by the end of March 2001.

Níor tairgeadh scanta íomháu athshondais mhaighnéadaigh d'othar ar bith igceantar Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Tuaiscirt i nDeisceart na hÉireann. Meastar go réiteofar an riaráiste reatha scanta faoi dheireadh mhí an Mhárta 2001.

Waiting Lists: Inpatient Treatment

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the number of patients and the percentage who have been waiting for over one year for inpatient treatment in hospitals in the Northern Board area as compared to other health boards. (AQW 1404/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on the number and percentage of persons waiting for inpatient treatment who had been waiting for more than one year at 30 September 2000 is detailed in the table below.

	Total waiting	Total waiting more than 1 year	% waiting more than 1 year
NHSSB	6,336	888	14.0
EHSSB	30,938	7,716	24.9
SHSSB	7,334	1,673	22.8
WHSSB	5,576	324	5.8
Total	50,184	10,601	21.1

Mionléirítear eolas ar líon agus ar chéatadán na ndaoine ag fanacht ar chóireáil othair chónaithigh, agus a bhí ag fanacht níos mó ná bliain amháin ag an 30ú Meán Fómhair 2000, sa tábla thíos.

	Líon ag fanacht	Líon ag fanacht níos mó ná bliain amháin	% ag fanacht níos mó ná bliain amháin
BSSST	6,336	888	14.0
BSSSO	30,938	7,716	24.9
BSSSD	7,334	1,673	22.8
BSSSI	5,576	324	5.8
Iomlán	50,184	10,601	21.1

Human Papilloma Virus Testing

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any representations she has received concerning the need for human papilloma virus testing as part of improvements to the national cervical screening programme. (AQW 1405/00)

Ms de Brún: I have received no such representations.

Ní bhfuair mé uiríll ar bith dá leithéid.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Universities and Colleges Admission Service

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the number of applications from overseas citizens to attend Northern Ireland universities have been received in each year since 1998. (AQW 1338/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): The number of applications made through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to the Northern Ireland universities by domicile was as follows:

		Home	EC	Other Overseas	Total
The Queen's University of Belfast	1998	16,869	3,026	403	20,298
	1999	16,781	2,353	285	19,419
	2000	17,754	2,171	316	20,241
University of Ulster	1998	27,696	6,641	142	34,479
	1999	28,301	4,818	115	33,324
	2000	26,474	3,942	151	30,567
Total	1998	44,565	9,667	545	54,777
	1999	45,082	7,171	400	52,653
	2000	44,228	6,113	467	50,808

Note:

- (1) Home domicile refers to all UK domiciled students.
- (2) Each applicant can make up to six applications.

New Deal

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the number of people who have benefited from the New Deal in each of the last three years for which figures are available. (AQW 1365/00)

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.

Action for Community Employment Scheme

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the number of (a) Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme jobs lost with the withdrawal of ACE and (b) long-term unemployed placed in full-time employment through New Deal. (AQW 1421/00)

Dr Farren: The number of participants on ACE fluctuated significantly over the years, but in December 1998, when recruitment ceased and the rundown of the programme was announced, the number was 3,838. All participants had left by June 2000.

Comprehensive statistical data on New Deal participants are not currently available from the Department's new client management system 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 for publication of detailed information will be drawn up.

However, as an indication of the impact of New Deal on long-term unemployment, it may be noted that since the New Deal 25+ was introduced, unemployment in the target group has fallen by 10,748, from 19,042 in May 1998 to 8,294 in December 2000.

Higher Education Colleges: Capital Funding

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline his plans for capital investment programmes for higher education colleges within the East Londonderry constituency for the years 2001 to 2004. (AQO 604/00)

Dr Farren: The three colleges in the constituency, in line with all FE colleges, receive an annual allocation of capital funding to remedy estate deficiencies, improve disabled access, create more adult ambience and upgrade and replace equipment, including ICT infrastructure. Limavady College has also received permission to conduct an economic appraisal addressing its overall accommodation requirements.

National Vocational Qualifications

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to explain why trainees resident in Northern Ireland but employed in the Republic of Ireland are denied access to national vocational qualification at level 3; and to make a statement. (AQO 646/00)

Dr Farren: Employees of a Republic of Ireland company, irrespective of where they live, can access national vocational qualifications. However, Republic of Ireland employers do not receive Jobskills programme funding in respect of their employees. Jobskills has no remit to subsidise the training costs of businesses that are based outside Northern Ireland.

Springvale Campus

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the progress he has made on the development of the Springvale university campus. (AQO 620/00)

Dr Farren: Since ministerial approval for Springvale was announced at February 2000, grant conditions have been met by the institutions and a Departmental letter of grant will issue shortly; a PFI project board is being established for the main campus; building work has commenced on the community outreach centre; and; an OJEC for the applied research centre is imminent.

Student Drop Out

Mr Hay asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the extent of student drop out due to financial hardship. (AQO 644/00)

Dr Farren: On the extent of student drop out, I would refer the Member to my answer to AQO/625/00. The Department does not hold information on the reasons why students do not complete.

'Status Zero' Report

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline the steps

he is taking to further progress work on the issues identified in the 'Status Zero' report. (AQO 655/00)

Dr Farren: The 'Status Zero – Four Years On' Report was the subject of a major Conference held in December and attended by approximately 200 people. The findings of the conference, which are currently being collated, will provide further insights and inform the development of policy. Current departmental activities to prevent exclusion amongst young people include the Access strand of the Jobskills programme; the work of the Basic Skills Unit recently established by the Department; and the New Deal.

Higher Education Funding

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the planned levels of higher education spending in real terms per student over the next three financial years.

(AQO 626/00)

Dr Farren: Following the outcome of the 2000 spending review, the process of determining the individual programme budgets which are supported by my Department and also the student population which can be accommodated within these programmes is still underway. It is, therefore, not possible to provide details of the planned level of higher education funding on a per student basis at this time.

Walsh Visa Programme

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline if any changes are being implemented in the administration and operation of the Walsh visa programme. (AQO 642/00)

Dr Farren: Following the scheduled review of the Walsh visa programme the T&EA and FAS are engaged in the re-development of the recruitment and selection process and the pre-departure training (PDT). These developments will address important issues regarding the suitability and their preparation for the reality of living and working in the USA.

In the second phase of the programme hub locations have been selected on the basis of their suitability in terms of availability of jobs, accommodation and transportation and also the quality of participant support.

DHFETE Web Site

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail when his Department's web site will be operational.

(AQO 608/00)

Dr Farren: The web site for my Department has been operational since devolution. My Department is currently working on improving and developing this site. It is hoped that these new improvements and developments will be operational in March 2001.

Walsh Visa Programme

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the total amount spent implementing the Walsh programme.

(AQO 602/00)

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
2000/2001 (to end Dec)	£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 United States.

Student Drop-Outs

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the drop-out rate at higher education institutions; and to make a statement. (AQO 625/00)

Dr Farren: Amongst full-time students starting first degree courses in 1997-98 there is a lower percentage of students finishing with neither an award nor transfer (drop out) in NI institutions than the UK average of 16%. The value for the University of Ulster is 12% compared to an expected value (benchmark) of 16% while the figure for QUB is 10% compared to an expected value (benchmark) of 9%.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Roads Infrastructure Funding

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of funding allocated for renewal of disadvantaged areas in the current financial year; and if he will make a statement. (AQW 947/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): I understand that your question relates to roads infrastructure funding that is allocated for the renewal of disadvantaged areas. My Department's Roads Service does not allocate funding on that specific basis.

You will be aware, however, that Roads Service is currently assessing potential major works schemes for possible inclusion in its 10-year forward planning schedule.

The assessments are on the basis of the five key criteria of integration, safety, economy, environment and accessibility in accordance with the Department's Northern Ireland transport policy statement, 'Moving Forward' published in November 1998. The process takes into consideration the objectives of the Department's New Targeting Social Need policy, primarily under the accessibility criterion. Consultants, appointed in December 1999, have reviewed the assessment methodology used by Roads Service and have confirmed that it provides a practical means of addressing New Targeting Social Need policy considerations.

Public Water Supply (Strabane)

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development if it is his intention to undertake a study to identify the number of properties in Strabane District Council area not connected to mains water supply; and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1203/00)

Mr Campbell: Based mainly on census information, Water Service estimates that there are approximately 6,000 properties in Northern Ireland not connected to the public water supply. It is not yet possible to establish an accurate figure for Strabane District Council area. Water Service is, however, engaged in a pilot study of the number of properties not connected in the Omagh District Council area. This pilot study is nearing completion and further studies are proposed in a number of other council areas, including Strabane. The Strabane study is expected to be completed in June of this year when more accurate figures should be available.

Bleach Green Railway Line

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that commuter rolling stock will be made available so that a passenger service may immediately operate on the Bleach Green line. (AQW 1226/00)

Mr Campbell: Translink has advised that it is currently considering what rolling stock it will operate on the Antrim to Bleach Green line immediately it re-opens. For the longer term, Translink is seeking to acquire two new trains to operate scheduled passenger services along this line. Translink hopes to place an order for 23 new trains, including these two additional trains, in 2001-02 using part of the additional £19.6m allocated to the railways for 2001-02, to meet the initial part of the acquisition costs. Translink is currently preparing an investment appraisal for this acquisition project.

Integrated Ticketing System

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to introduce a fully integrated ticketing system throughout Translink train and bus services. (AQW 1277/00)

Mr Campbell: The Budget approved by the Assembly on 18 December 2000 included a provision of £3.1m in 2001-02 and an indicative allocation of £3.2m in 2002-03 to enable the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company to introduce a fully integrated ticketing system throughout Translink train and bus services. My Department has given approval to the company to proceed with this major project involving the complete replacement of Translink's existing ticketing equipment. A project board has been established to manage the project, and the tendering process is currently under way, in accordance with normal public service procurement procedures. Translink has advised that the first part of the new system should be introduced and operational by April 2002. In addition to improving management-related information this should facilitate arrangements to provide free travel for elderly people. The second part of the system involves the introduction of the Smartcard technology for all passengers. This should be completed during 2003. Among other benefits, this will improve integration between transport modes, help reduce boarding times and provide for more flexible payment methods, as well as giving further marketing flexibility.

Road Accidents

Ms Armitage asked the Minister for Regional Development to (a) detail the number of road accidents occurring at the intersection of the Doagh Road and the main Belfast to Larne dual carriageway in each of the last five years for which figures are available and (b) outline his plans to improve road safety at this junction. (AQW 1294/00)

Mr Campbell: The provision of information in relation to road accidents is a matter for the Northern Ireland Office, and I have therefore asked that Department to respond directly to you on this issue.

During the past six months or so, my Department's Roads Service has endeavoured to improve access and road safety at the junction of Doagh Road and the A8 Belfast to Larne road by realigning the kerb line at the south-east leg of the junction and by extending the existing 40mph speed limit on Doagh Road to the junction. As part of its plans to carry out a package of road improvements to the A8 route, Roads Service proposes to construct a roundabout at this junction. The roundabout should make access from Doagh Road easier and safer. The package of improvements is subject to the satisfactory completion of the necessary statutory procedures and the future availability of funds.

Severe Weather Conditions

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he is taking to ensure that his Department is prepared for severe weather conditions

similar to those experienced between Christmas and the New Year 2000-01. (AQW 1325/00)

Mr Campbell: In my statement in the Assembly on Monday 15 January 2001, I announced that I was initiating a review of my Department's current policy on the salting of roads. Among other things, the review will consider what further steps Roads Service might take to prepare for severe weather conditions similar to those experienced towards the end of last month. The nature of the review will be discussed with the Regional Development Committee, which will be invited to play a full part in it.

Salting of Roads

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) if he has a standby list of private contractors available to provide road-gritting services and (b) if he will consider a review of that section of his Department. (AQW 1326/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service does not have a standby list of private contractors who would be available to carry out salting operations.

As I indicated in my statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly on Monday 15 January 2001, I have initiated a review of my Department's current policy on the salting of roads. The review will examine arrangements for dealing with extreme weather conditions and for using private contractors.

Water Supply (Spelga Reservoir)

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of complaints registered during the period 1 December 2000 to 12 January 2001 with the relevant district councils regarding the quality of the water supply from Spelga reservoir. (AQW 1334/00)

Mr Campbell: Water Service does not have access to the records held by district councils. However, councils normally contact Water Service if they receive complaints about drinking water quality.

During the period 1 December 2000 to 12 January 2001, Water Service received no complaints from district councils about the quality of water supplied from Fofannybane water treatment works, which treats water from both Spelga and Fofanny impounding reservoirs.

During that period, the Water Service received 194 complaints about water quality from customers supplied from Fofannybane water treatment works. The operation of the works at its peak capacity following a large number of bursts in water mains and in customers' pipework resulted in some temporary deterioration in the taste and colour of the drinking water. A new water treatment

works which will increase output capacity and enhance water quality is planned, with completion in 2004.

Priority Services for Disabled and Elderly

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he is taking in co-operation with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure the elderly and disabled receive priority service in extreme weather conditions. (AQW 1351/00)

Mr Campbell: Both my Department's Roads and Water Services meet regularly with officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety as members of the infrastructure emergency planning group. This group considers how its member organisations can best co-operate in the event of emergency incidents, including severe weather conditions.

As regards elderly and disabled, care of these people is usually administered within the community and, arising from the work of the infrastructure emergency planning group, contact numbers of local Roads Service offices have been distributed for use by local care managers. These managers can contact Roads Service staff in the event of emergency incidents.

If water services are likely to be interrupted for a prolonged period, my Department's Water Service would implement its major incident plan. The plan includes specific contingency arrangements for dealing with interruptions to the public water supply caused by extreme weather conditions. These include liaison with health officials to identify special needs customers, such as the disabled and those who are immunocompromised, to ensure that they receive alternative water supplies.

Infrastructure Deficit

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the recent report published by the Confederation of British Industry on Monday 8 January 2001, entitled 'Addressing Northern Ireland's Infrastructure Deficit'; and to make a statement. (AQW 1372/00)

Mr Campbell: I welcome and support the broad thrust of the CBI report highlighting, as it does, the need to secure higher levels of investment for infrastructure, particularly in the strategic road network, road maintenance, public transport services and water and sewerage services. The report is, of course, wide-ranging and includes many issues which are the responsibility of other Ministers. I will therefore restrict my comments to those matters which fall within the broad remit of my Department.

The Report suggests that an additional investment of £900m will be required over the next 10 years in our strategic road network, road maintenance and public transport services. This understates the position. As you will be aware, I have on several occasions referred to the need for an additional £2 billion over the next 10 years to achieve the stepped change that is required to achieve a modern, integrated transportation system. In reality, this would necessitate a doubling of the existing investment in transportation in the region.

I also welcome the recognition of the significant investment needed for water and sewerage services. Indeed, an asset management plan, scheduled for completion in 2002, will likely indicate that close to £3 billion will be required over the next 20 years in addition to the existing level of investment. Also, the 80% quoted for compliance relates to waste water treatments works discharge standards, not water treatment discharge standards.

The report refers to the need to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public expenditure. For my part, I am committed to improving efficiency and effectiveness throughout my Department. For example, the following wide-ranging agency reviews are under way, 'Roads Service: Delivering Excellence' and 'Water Service: Moving Forward'. Water Service is also engaged in an efficiency programme which includes benchmarking, market testing and contracting out. In 1999 Roads Service obtained ministerial approval to adopt best value as a means of achieving its own continuous improvement. During 2000-01, the first year of a five-year programme, Roads Service is carrying out a number of best value reviews, including development of internal and external benchmarking.

I note the strong advocacy in the report for public-private partnerships (PPPs) and the private finance initiative (PFI) arrangements, and I am familiar with the CBI's paper on this topic. Inevitably, it will not be possible to address the serious deficiencies in our infrastructure by solely relying on public expenditure. As is the case in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, we must proactively examine the options for securing the involvement of the private sector. Within my Department, officials are exploring ways in which the private sector could play an appropriate role in developing our infrastructure in the future.

The issue of contributions from developers is raised in the report, and in my Department these are being considered as part of the above-mentioned agency reviews. I generally support the proposition that developers should provide for the infrastructure, including transportation, necessary to support their development proposal. It is, however, recognised that the current approach to provision of infrastructure is either "piecemeal" or "opportunistic" due to the incremental development of land. My officials are actively exploring ways of ensuring

that developers in future make a full and realistic contribution to associated infrastructure costs.

With regards to the comments on congestion charging et cetera, these are matters which will be fully explored within the formulation of the 10-year regional transportation strategy, a process which I initiated earlier this month by way of a consultation paper. My officials involved in the development strategy will shortly be meeting with the CBI to discuss transportation investment and other related issues.

The report also suggests a number of possible methods of enhancing existing resources, and my Department is already investigating many of them. I endorse the view that innovative and radical new funding sources need be considered to raise additional money for transportation investment.

I plan to meet with the CBI on 14 February 2001.

Road Gritting

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to enable businesses to collect sand and grit using their own transport in order to keep their businesses operating in times of extreme weather.

(AQW 1377/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service normally uses rock salt to treat roads in wintry conditions. On occasions, sand or grit may be used along with rock salt to give better grip on snow-covered roads.

It is not Roads Service policy to make such materials available for collection by businesses as these materials can all be purchased at outlets across the country.

Trunk Roads (North Antrim)

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount spent on trunk roads in North Antrim in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available compared to the other 17 parliamentary constituencies.

(AQW 1446/00)

Mr Campbell: Information in the form requested is not available. My Department's Roads Service does not maintain details of expenditure on trunk roads on a parliamentary constituency basis.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Bridging Funding

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) how the £2 million "bridging funding"

was allocated, (b) the criteria for receipt of bridging assistance, (c) the organisations that received financial assistance, (d) the number of organisations that were successful in their application that came from West Belfast and (e) the number of unsuccessful applicants that came from West Belfast. (AQW 1190/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow):

The funding was allocated on a pro-rata basis across funders, based on the amount of funding requested and then prioritised using agreed scoring criteria.

The criteria were:

1. extent of the adverse impact on the community were the project to end at this time;
2. the track record of the organisation in meeting the aims and objectives of the project and its financial and management responsibilities;
3. whether the project has a strategic support role in relation to other voluntary and community groups;
4. the existence of any similar project or services in the same geographic area;
5. evidence of insufficient financial reserves to continue funding in the interim;
6. evidence of a strategy for sustainability beyond April 2001.

Details of the successful applications are appended. Repeat entries on the list indicate assistance from separate funding sources in respect of different projects.

Thirty-one projects from West Belfast were funded, while 78 were unsuccessful.

ORGANISATION/PROJECT

Action Mental Health/ACCEPT NI
An Crann
Andersonstown Traditional & Contemporary Music School
Ardmonagh Family and Community Group
Ardmonagh Playgroup
Armagh Confederation of Voluntary Groups/Armagh City & Distr
Armagh Confederation of Voluntary Organisations
Armagh District Leader
ASCERT (Action on Substance through Community Education and Training)
Augher Clogher Community Partnership
Ballinderry Playgroup
Ballybeen Women's Centre
Ballycastle Community Development Association
Ballyclare Community Concerns
Ballymagroarty Hazelbank Community Partnership
Ballymore Open Centre
Ballymurphy Women's Centre
Ballynahinch/Drumaness/Spa Community Group
Banbridge District Community Network

Bann Community Project
Beechmount
Belfast Community Circus
Belfast Travellers Sites Project
Bloody Sunday Trust (Bogside HC)
Bunscoil Luraigh
C.A.L.M.S (Community Action for Locally Managed Stress)
Cairde Bunscoil Phobal Feirste
Canopy
Carntogher Community Association - Youth Project
Carrickfergus Community Forum
Castlelough
Central Mourmes Community Association
Children's Law Centre Group
Chrysalis Women's Centre
Chrysalis Women's Centre
Citizens Advice Bureau
Citywise Education Project
Claudy Rural Developments Ltd.
Coiste na n-Irchimi
Community Care Advocacy Project
Community Development Centre North Belfast (CDCNB)
Community Empowerment Larne
Community Network Portadown
Conway Community Enterprises Ltd
Cookstown & District Women's Group
Creggan Early Years Network
Creggan Health Information Project
Creggan Neighbourhood Partnership
Currynerin Community Association
Dairy Farm Training Services New Voices
DEAF/Hard of Hearing Users Group
Derry Media Access
Dervock Comm Playgroup, Ballymena
Devenish Partnership Forum
Devenish Partnership Forum
Down Advocacy Movement
Downe Residential Projects
Draperstown
E Force/CSV Media
East Belfast Community Development Agency
ECONI
Embarc
Embarc
Embarc REAP
EPIC Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre
Erne East Community Umbrella Partnership
Eurolink
European Unit (NICVA)
Family Farm Development
Family Information Group
Farset

Feile an Phobail
Fermanagh Local Action Group
Fermanagh Trust
Fermanagh Women's Network
Fintona Development Association
First Steps Community PG
FOCUS
FOCUS
Footprints Women's Centre
Forthspring
Forthspring Afterschools Inter-Comm Gp
Foyle Basin Council
Foyle Down's Syndrome Trust
Gae Laim
Gae Laim Project, Prisoners Aid & Post Conflict Resettlement
Galbally Afterschools Club
Genesis
Glenward
Glor na NGael
Gort Kids
Gortgonis Community House
Gortin / Greysteel Playschool
Greater Shankill Alternatives
Greater Twinbrook and Poleglass
Greater Twinbrook and Poleglass Community Forum
Green Elves Playgroup
Greencastle Creche, Newtownabbey
Greencastle Play Focus, Newtownabbey
Habitat for Humanity
Happy Days Newry
HARPS Project
Helping Young People Help Themselves - Bridge Youth Centre, Monkstown
Home-Start Armagh
Home-Start Colin/Lisburn
Home-Start Craigavon
Home-Start Down District
Home-Start North Belfast
Home-Start North Down & Ards
Home-Start, NI
Inner East Youth
Ionad Uibh Eachach
Irvinestown Community Partnership
Irvinestown CP
Keady Afterschools Club
Kidz Lodge
Kilcoo
Kilcooloe Community Forum
Killesher Community Development Association
Lagan Valley Education Project
Larne Volunteer Reserve
Lavey Community Playgroup

Ligoniel Community Playgroup
Ligoniel Family Centre
Linc Resource Centre
Lisbellaw Community Playgroup
Lisburn Inter-Church
Lisburn Prisoners Support Project
Lisnaskea
Little Acorn's Community Playgroup
Little Doves/Westwinds
Ligoniel
Loughgeil
Lower North Belfast Community Council
Lurgan Council for Voluntary Action
Magherafelt Women's Group
Mater Hospital
Meanscoil Dhoire
Mediation Resource Centre
Mencap
Mid-Ulster Women's Network
Milestone Training Initiative Project
Mind Yourself
Mourne Derg Regeneration Initiative
Mourne Youth Committee
N.I. Council for Ethnic Minorities
Naiscoil an Loiste Uir
Naiscoil an tsratha Bain
Naiscoil na Rinne
New Horizons Partnership/Branching Out Project
New Lodge Forum
New Start Foyle Women's Aid
Newcastle Y.M.C.A
New-life Counselling Service
Newry & Mourne Carers' Association
Newry & Mourne Enterprise Agency/Newry & Mourne Territorial Emp Pact
Newtownards Road Women's Group
NI DEAF
North Fermanagh - Donegal Partnership
North West Community Network
Old Warren Community Association (Lisburn)
Omagh Forum
Omagh Womens Aid
Omagh Women's Area Network (O.W.A.N)
Opportunity Youth
Pinocchio Playgroup, Pomeroy
Plumbridge Community Toy Library
Pomeroy Resource Group
Portglenone Enterprise Group
Princes Trust
Prince's Trust Volunteers
Prisoners Enterprise Project (South Belfast)
Promote Action
Right to Hope (Derry)

Rostrevor Women's Group
Rural Down Partnership
S.P.R.I.N.G.
S.P.R.I.N.G. (Youth)
Schools Out (Castledawson)
Schools Out (Larne)
Sense
Shankill
Shankill Community Arts Network
Shankill Lurgan Community Projects
Shankill Women's Centre
Shankill Women's Centre - Young Women's Project
Simpson Family Centre
Sliabh Beagh Cross-Border Development Association
South Armagh Rural Women's Network
South Tyrone Area Partnership/STAP E
Stepping Stones Project, Larne
Strabane & Lifford Women's Centre
Suffolk Community Forum
Sunningdale, Torrens and Westland Steering Group
Tar Anall
Teacht na Failte (Prisoners & Defendants Welfare Assoc
The Bridge Project
The Dry Arch Centre - The Warehouse
The Link Youth Programme
The Nest
The Pathways Project
The Wheelworks Project
The Women's Centre
Tiny Toons Playgroup
Traveller Movement NI
Triangle Training (Ireland) Ltd Project
Tullygally PlayGroup
Tumble Tots Playgroup, Tamlaght O'Crilly
Ulster Peoples College (Peoples Histiry Project)
Ulster Peoples College (Reconciliation for Reconstruction)
Upper Andersonstown
Valley Training
Wave Ballymoney
West Tyrone Rural
Windsor
Wishing Well Family Centre
Women Into Politics
Women We'ans & Work
Womens Aid
Workers Educational Association
Young Adult Development Programme - Holy Trinity Youth Club
Young Men's Development Project - Youth Action NI
Zest

Administrative Data

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Social 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 1263/00)

Mr Morrow: Administrative data sets are held by the Department for Social Development as detailed in the attached list. However, the data available is in quantitative form only. The Department does not hold data on a qualitative basis.

The Department, including the Social Security and Child Support Agencies, also maintains a range of records on its staff for the purposes of carrying out its functions as an employer. Many of the records for individual members of staff are held on computerised systems, which are managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel. These records include personnel, payroll and training records. Such records are not managed in a way which routinely provides data sets by enumeration district, electoral ward, district council or parliamentary constituency.

ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Child Benefit
Retirement Pension
Widows Benefit
Income Support
Jobseeker's Allowance
Unemployment Benefit
Incapacity Benefit
Severe Disablement Allowance
Disability Living Allowance
Attendance Allowance
Child Support Agency
Maternity Allowance
Family Credit
Disability Working Allowance
Housing Benefit (Rent)
Invalid Care Allowance
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit
Rent Register
Revenue Funding to Housing Associations
Register of Housing Associations Eligible for Grant Aid
Housing Association Development Programme
Housing Association Schemes
Support for the Regional Voluntary Infrastructure
Support for Regional Advice Organisations and Community Work Education
Community Volunteering Scheme
Volunteer Bureau Initiative
Third Age Volunteering

District Councils' Community Service Programme
EU Community Infrastructure Measures of the Physical and Social Environment Sub-Programme as part of the Single Programme (1994-1999)

Note:

- (1) Quantitative data sets only.
- (2) Quantitative data sets on enumeration district, electoral ward, District Council and Parliamentary Constituency is available for the Social Security data sets listed.

Independent Case Examiner

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the date of reference of the earliest case which was referred to the Independent Case Examiner of the Child Support Agency in Northern Ireland where the initial review has yet to begin. (AQW 1300/00)

Mr Morrow: There are no cases outstanding an initial review by the Independent Case Examiner of the Child Support Agency in Northern Ireland.

When the Independent Case Examiner's office receives a complaint, the initial review by the agency must be completed within three working days. The agency has achieved this target in all cases to date.

Fraudulent Claims

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the steps he is taking to reduce the Department's expenditure through the elimination of fraudulent claims. (AQW 1305/00)

Mr Morrow: My Department's fraud policy statement provides a high-level framework for the development, throughout the Department and its agencies, of policies and measures to counter fraud.

Within this framework, the following measures have been implemented at operational level:

The Social Security Agency has a comprehensive fraud strategy designed to secure the gateway to benefits and to detect and eliminate fraud. The agency has agreed to reduce the level of fraud and error within benefit expenditure by 5% per year for each of the next three years. Steps taken to reduce fraud include:

- working with the Inland Revenue and Housing Executive for closer co-operation and sharing of information to improve joint effectiveness;
- an improved training package for all staff; and
- discussions with the press office to improve media coverage.

The Housing Executive, which administers housing benefit on behalf of the Department, has in place a security strategy aimed at preventing fraudulent claims from entering the benefit system, and for ensuring that

when fraud is detected, it is rigorously investigated. Extensive use is made of data matching facilities to identify discrepancies in the information provided for benefit purposes, and fraud awareness is being promoted throughout the Housing Executive to increase the number of cases referred for investigation. The Housing Executive and Social Security Agency work together closely in the investigation of fraudulent claims.

The Child Support Agency has introduced a fraud strategy to address fraud in both Northern Ireland and the Eastern Business Unit. A fraud team has been established, and an early objective will be to introduce effective risk management aimed at preventing fraud from entering the system. Legislative changes and the introduction of new sanctions from 31 January 2001 will strengthen the agency's powers in relation to future counter-fraud activity.

Core Department. Systems of financial control are an integral part of all of the programmes administered by the core Department. Procedures currently in place to counter fraud include:

- letters of offer forming the basis of a contract between the Department and funded bodies;
- 5% post-payment check of all European funded projects;
- independent visits of randomly selected projects;
- a rolling audit programme of funded housing schemes; and
- performance standards verification visits to housing associations.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to give his assessment on the impact of means testing on the take-up of incapacity benefit.

(AQW 1306/00)

Mr Morrow: The information requested could only be provided at disproportionate cost. Incapacity benefit is an income replacement benefit, entitlement to which depends on the satisfaction of contribution conditions and I can confirm that there are no plans to introduce means-testing.

From April this year, incapacity benefit recipients who are also receiving an occupational or personal pension will have the amount of their incapacity benefit reduced by 50 pence for every £1 by which their pension exceeds £85. Those in receipt of incapacity benefit at 5 April 2001, and people with the most severe disabilities who receive the highest rate of the care component of disability living allowance, will not be affected by these changes.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average cost in administration of (a) reviewing life awards for disability living allowance and (b) appeals against the outcome of reviews of disability living allowance in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1322/00)

Mr Morrow: The agency does not maintain records on the average cost in administration of reviewing life awards for disability living allowance. Compiling and maintaining such information would require a major work programme at disproportionate costs.

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 1999-2000 year. The cost of obtaining the indirect costs would be disproportionately high.

Housing Executive Maintenance (Craigavon)

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of public funding invested in the maintenance of the Housing Executive's housing stock in Legahory Court and Burnside in Craigavon since the development was completed. (AQW 1348/00)

Mr Morrow: Legahory Court and Burnside in Craigavon were built by the former Craigavon Development Commission in the early 1970s. Since the Housing Executive took on responsibility for both areas, in Legahory, approximately £560,000 has been invested on pre-paint repairs, painting and the removal of town gas. No maintenance details are available prior to 1994. However, approximately £58,000 has been spent on routine maintenance since then.

In the Burnside estate, approximately £1.68 million has been invested in pre-paint repairs, painting, external cyclic maintenance, electrical work, kitchen improvements, provision of porches and the removal of town gas. As with Legahory, no maintenance details are available prior to 1994. However, approximately £417,000 has been spent on routine maintenance since then.

Overpayment of Benefits to the Elderly

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of elderly people over 75 years of age who have received overpayment of benefits for the years 1998-99 and 1999-2000. (AQW 1349/00)

Mr Morrow: In 1998-99, 358 people over 75 years of age received overpayments of benefit. In 1999-2000, the volume increased to 1,334.

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if he will make it his policy not to seek reimbursement

of benefits inadvertently overpaid to elderly persons over 75 years of age. (AQW 1350/00)

Mr Morrow: My Department's policy in relation to overpayments of benefit is that, where an overpayment occurs as a result of an official error and it is considered that the benefit recipient would have been aware of the overpayment, recovery of the amount overpaid is requested from the recipient but if he does not reply or refuses to repay, further recovery action is not pursued.

In those cases where a request for repayment is made to a person over 70 in respect of an amount inadvertently overpaid, it is standard practice to do so by way of explanation at a personal interview, rather than by letter, to avoid causing undue distress. Once again, if no response to a request for repayment is received or it is met with a refusal, no further action is taken.

Where benefit is overpaid as a result of official error to a person aged over 70 whose capital does not exceed £500, no request for repayment of the amount overpaid is made.

Benefit Expenditure

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how much was spent per head of population by social services in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available. (AQW 1353/00)

Mr Morrow: The spend per head of population by the Social Security Agency in each of the last 10 years is detailed in the table attached.

TABLE OF BENEFIT EXPENDITURE PER HEAD OF POPULATION BY THE SOCIAL SECURITY AGENCY FOR THE LAST 10 YEARS.

Financial Year	Social Security Benefit Public Expenditure (£ millions)	Estimated Population* (Thousands)	Benefit Expenditure per Head of Population (£)
1990-1991	1,707.7	1,595.6	1,070
1991-1992	1,951.1	1,607.3	1,214
1992-1993	2,211.6	1,624.6	1,361
1993-1994	2,469.8	1,638.3	1,508
1994-1995	2,621.6	1,647.9	1,591
1995-1996	2,796.5	1,654.9	1,690
1996-1997	2,975.4	1,669.1	1,783
1997-1998	3,046.5	1,680.3	1,813
1998-1999	3,169.5	1,688.6	1,877
1999-2000	3,325.8	1,691.8	1,966

* The population estimates are produced on a calendar year basis and relate to the mid-year position ie June of the year in question.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of reviews of life awards for disability living allowance that have been conducted in each of the last five years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1354/00)

Mr Morrow: The Social Security Agency does not maintain records on the number of reviews of indefinite awards (formerly life awards) for disability living allowance. Compiling and maintaining such information would be at disproportionate costs.

However, the agency does record the total number of all reviews carried out for disability living allowance and the figures for the last five years are shown in the table attached.

TABLE OF THE NUMBER OF ALL THE REVIEWS THAT WERE CARRIED OUT FOR DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE IN THE LAST 5 CALENDAR YEARS.

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
January	2,108	1,867	1,953	1,197	1,465
February	1,866	1,875	1,668	1,388	2,926
March	1,544	2,027	1,610	1,548	2,062
April	1,533	2,892	1,222	1,193	1,218
May	1,460	1,398	1,396	645	1,749
June	1,920	2,035	1,567	868	1,680
July	1,825	2,582	749	1,323	1,222
August	2,240	1,590	943	1,206	1,428
September	2,136	1,440	1,519	1,697	1,428
October	1,994	2,184	1,266	1,442	1,419
November	2,244	1,822	1,471	963	1,543
December	1,365	1,381	922	722	978
Total	22,235	23,093	16,286	14,192	19,118

Housing Executive House Sales

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that some Housing Executive property has been sold to developers who, after moderate repairs, have sold on at inflated prices; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1371/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, whose chief executive has advised me that individual houses, groups of houses, or blocks of flats may be sold at market value to private sector developers. This has occurred in circumstances where it would not be cost effective to undertake substantial repairs and where there are flats that have been hard to let.

The Housing Executive has no evidence of developers selling properties at inflated prices after modest repair expenditure.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how he intends to extend the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES), to cover central heating and other measures within a £5 million budget.

(AQW 1375/00)

Mr Morrow: The funding for the first year of the new Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme has been set at £4 million. If additional funding is required because of a higher level of uptake than anticipated, and if work can be undertaken by installers, a bid for extra funds will be made during the financial year.

Fuel Poverty

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how he proposes to tackle fuel poverty in Upper Bann as promised in the draft Programme for Government.

(AQW 1376/00)

Mr Morrow: I am introducing a new Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES), which will cover all of Northern Ireland. It 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 from 1 July 2001.

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 Agency Accommodation (Strabane)

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to give his assessment of the accommodation for the Social Security Agency in Strabane.

(AQW 1380/00)

Mr Morrow: The Social Security Agency's accommodation in Strabane is maintained and improved on an ongoing basis and the agency is satisfied that it meets current needs. In the longer term, under the welfare reforms and modernisation programme, needs will change and accommodation will be improved on that basis. Plans are currently being pursued by the Department of Finance & Personnel.

Fuel Poverty

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that he proposes to eradicate fuel poverty within five years, as promised in the draft Programme for Government. (AQW 1381/00)

Mr Morrow: The draft Programme for Government states that “from 2001, we will help householders suffering from fuel poverty by introducing a new energy efficiency grants scheme designed to improve the insulation and heating standards of their dwellings”.

Given the numbers involved, and the fact that some householders will continue to move into fuel poverty, it would be unrealistic to set a target date of five years to eradicate the problem.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (Foyle Constituency)

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that £250,000 per year has been spent under the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES 1) in the Foyle constituency representing one of the highest need areas in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1382/00)

Mr Morrow: Based on information provided by the scheme manager for the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme, over £250,000 has been spent in Foyle. However, my Department does not fund DEES on a constituency basis, as the scheme is demand led. It would be wrong, therefore, to assume that Foyle has a higher need for energy efficiency measures in comparison with other constituencies. The level of expenditure under the current 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 much more comprehensive range of energy efficiency measures and will target the most vulnerable groups in our society.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (Lagan Valley)

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that only £25,000 has been spent under the DEES 1 scheme in Lagan Valley, representing the lowest in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1383/00)

Mr Morrow: In the three years to 31 December 2000, a total of £126,486 was spent on the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme in the Lagan Valley constituency. Over the stated period, this does not represent the lowest in Northern Ireland.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (East Belfast)

Dr Adamson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the annual allocation of funding to the East Belfast constituency under the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES 1). (AQW 1400/00)

Mr Morrow: Funding for the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme is not allocated on a constituency basis. The existing DEES is very much demand led. Funding is provided to the scheme manager who responds to requests from individual clients for the installation of energy efficiency measures in their properties.

Based on information provided by the scheme manager, the level of spend on DEES in East Belfast in the past three years (to 31 December 2000) was £546,789.

Fuel Poverty (East Belfast)

Dr Adamson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the steps he is taking to eradicate fuel poverty in East Belfast. (AQW 1401/00)

Mr Morrow: I am introducing a new Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES), which will cover all of Northern Ireland. It 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 from 1 July 2001.

In addition, my Department, in partnership with a number of organisations, has been operating fuel poverty pilot schemes in various parts of Northern Ireland, including the Willowfield/Bloomfield area of East Belfast where there is severe social and economic deprivation. Whilst reducing fuel poverty in these areas, the schemes have enabled the Department to pilot 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.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in Northern Ireland

who have previously been awarded a life award of disability living allowance and who have had their disability living allowance (a) discontinued or (b) downgraded, following a review and thereafter reinstated following an appeal, in each of the last five years for which figures are available and to specify how this compares with figures in the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 1402/00)

Mr Morrow: The Social Security Agency does not maintain records of the number of indefinite awards (formerly life awards) that were discontinued or downgraded following reviews. However, Table 1 attached provides details of all disability living allowance cases that have been discontinued or downgraded following review. It also shows comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom.

New Deal Programme: Single Mothers

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the latest figures for referral, uptake and throughput of the New Deal programme for young, single mothers in the Antrim and Newtownabbey Council areas.

(AQO 635/00)

Mr Morrow: Although these figures are not available by council area, they are available by Social Security Office area. The total number of referrals for single mothers to the New Deal programme, as at 31 December 2000, was 1,207.

There were 666 referrals in the Antrim area, 164 agreed to join the programme, and 73 people have since found work.

TABLE (1) OF THE NUMBER OF REVIEWS OF DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE CASES AND THE NUMBER OF THESE WHICH WERE DISCONTINUED AND DOWNGRADED, AND HOW THESE COMPARE WITH THE UNITED KINGDOM, IN EACH OF THE LAST 5 YEARS.

Reviews							
Year	Total Reviews	Number Discontinued	% Discontinued	% Discontinued in UK	Number Downgraded	% Downgraded	% Downgraded in UK
95/96	21,261	3,563	16.8	1.6	78	0.37	0.75
96/97	22,486	3,270	14.5	1.6	87	0.39	0.75
97/98	22,555	2,421	10.7	1.5	102	0.45	0.71
98/99	15,188	1,441	9.5	1.9	88	0.58	0.81
99/00	16,512	911	5.5	2.5	97	0.59	0.97
00/01*	12,665	609	4.8	4.3	126	0.99	1.89

In relation to the number of cases reinstated following appeal, again the Agency does not hold records on indefinite awards. However Table 2 attached shows the number of all disability living allowance cases reinstated, the number increased on appeal and how these compare to the United Kingdom.

There were 541 referrals in the Newtownabbey area, 135 agreed to join the programme and 49 of these people have since found work.

TABLE (2) OF THE NUMBER OF APPEALS OF DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE CASES AND THE NUMBER OF THESE WHICH WERE AWARDED AND INCREASED, AND HOW THESE COMPARE WITH THE UNITED KINGDOM FOR EACH OF THE LAST 5 YEARS.

Appeals							
Year	Total Appeals	Number Awarded	% Awarded	% Awarded GB	Number Award Increased	% Award Increased	% Award Increased GB
95/96	2485	578	23.3	39.7	741	29.8	18.6
96/97	2933	600	20.4	35.8	483	16.5	20.7
97/98	3022	558	18.5	32.2	588	19.4	17.7
98/99	2397	461	19.2	32.0	481	20.0	14.3
99/00	1753	289	16.5	32.7	303	17.3	12.1
00/01*	3141	257	8.2	28.2	201	6.4	10.3

* NI figures for 200/01 cover up to and including December 2000 & GB figures cover up to and including September 2000

Ministerial Resignation

Mr Taylor asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to resign as Minister; and to make a statement. (AQW 1435/00)

Mr Morrow: None.

Public Sector Housing (Mid Ulster)

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development to give his assessment of public sector housing provision in Mid Ulster. (AQO 649/00)

Mr Morrow: A recent review of housing need in the Cookstown and Magherafelt District Council areas, undertaken by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, indicates that, in general terms, the supply of social housing through re-lets is broadly sufficient to meet most housing needs in the Mid-Ulster area.

Several small schemes have been programmed to augment supply in areas where re-lets are considered insufficient to meet general or supported housing requirement.

Housing Executive Technical Consultants

Mr Poots asked the Minister for Social Development if the Northern Ireland Housing Executive will maintain the services of "in house" building surveyors. (AQO 601/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for Northern Ireland Housing Executive whose chief executive has advised me that his organisation uses both 'in house' and external technical consultants. Following competitive tendering, design services are currently provided 'in house' to the level which the staffing complement can support. This is augmented by a framework of external consultants under contracts gained through competitive tendering. Those contracts come to an end during this year, and the Housing Executive is evaluating future arrangements through a best value review.

Pending the outcome of the review, preliminary findings suggest that a mixed provision of internal staff and external consultants is likely to continue.

Income Support

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the benefit take-up by case-load and expenditure in percentage terms for income support and income-based jobseeker's allowance according to the following categories (a) pensioners, (b) non-pensioners, (c) couples with children and (d) lone parents; and to make a statement. (AQO 599/00)

Mr Morrow: Information on benefit take-up is not available for Northern Ireland.

Detailed information on income levels, resources and financial circumstances of individuals and households is required to calculate benefit take-up. This information is obtained in Great Britain through the family resources survey (FRS). While the FRS is not currently undertaken in Northern Ireland, my Department is seeking to introduce the FRS to Northern Ireland in April 2002. I will, however, write to Mr McGrady with details of the numbers of Income Support and income-based jobseeker's allowance claimants.

Nevertheless, my Department is concerned to ensure take-up of benefit, and the Social Security Agency has introduced a number of initiatives in order to maximise take-up of benefits, including income support.

A major publicity campaign aimed at elderly people, drawing attention to the minimum income guarantee, was launched in March 2000. As a direct result of this campaign, an extra 3,300 pensioners now receive it. This has resulted in an extra payment of £2 million in the hands of elderly people, with an average extra payment of £25 a week.

In addition to the national publicity campaign, the agency has:

- launched the take-up campaign locally in Social Security Offices in conjunction with local branches of Age Concern
- produced and distributed poster/leaflets regarding the campaign to Social Security Offices, Post Offices, libraries, et cetera; and
- held a joint conference with voluntary groups representing elderly people to discuss benefit take-up.

Waiting Time: House Adaptations

Mr Hay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current waiting time for house holders awaiting adaptations in the Derry City Council area from the time of initial application. (AQO 645/00)

Mr Morrow: 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 (DHSS&PS), for assessment. The chief executive of the Housing Executive has advised that it measures 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 time for the public sector tenant in the 30 months to the end of September 2000 for the Derry City Council area is approximately 35 weeks. In the case of the private sector, the average waiting time is 16 weeks.

For Housing Executive tenants the period measured is to the date the contractor takes possession of the property (starting work) and for private sector grant applicants, to the issue of a schedule of works for tendering purposes. The times stated under public and private sector are therefore not comparable.

The length of time people are having to wait for adaptations is a matter for concern. DHSS&PS 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.

Replacement Grants

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how the Housing Executive replacement grant criteria are being applied for older houses in rural areas and to make a statement. (AQO 638/00)

Mr Morrow: The Housing Executive can consider replacement grant for any isolated, unfit dwelling in a rural area, where the dwelling is not capable of being renovated on technical grounds, or where replacement is considered to be the cost effective solution. A decision on a replacement grant is informed by an investment appraisal and a consideration of the possibility of meeting an individual's housing need through social housing. The investment appraisal takes account of the longer term benefits to the public purse that result from a new house compared to one that is renovated.

The grant is available to owner-occupier applicants who have lived in the house for two years prior to the date of application. It is also available for applicants who propose to acquire an unfit house, so long as they can satisfy statutory conditions, which are, that they meet the Housing Executive's urgent housing need criteria and have strong social and economic ties to the area.

Demolition of the old dwelling is a condition of replacement grant.

Home Adaptations

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that the current social housing policy addresses the needs of homeowners whose homes are not equipped to meet disabled needs. (AQO 597/00)

Mr Morrow: I can confirm that means-tested grant aid is available, through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, for homeowners who need help in adapting their homes to meet the needs of a disabled occupant.

House Repossessions

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of homes that were repossessed in Northern Ireland since 1995 and to list the number of repossessions by parliamentary constituencies. (AQO 632/00)

Mr Morrow: My Department does not collect or analyse this type of information. I am advised by the Northern Ireland Court Service that it collects information on writs and originating summonses issued in respect of mortgages in Chancery Division of the Northern Ireland High Court. This covers mortgages from private lenders and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and relates to domestic and commercial properties. I am further advised that information is collected on a Province-wide basis and it is not possible to provide a more detailed geographical breakdown of the data.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the different levels of expenditure in the 18 constituencies under the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme. (AQO 607/00)

Mr Morrow: I wish to make it clear that the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme is not funded on a constituency basis, because it is demand led. However, the scheme manager has produced a table setting out expenditure on the constituency basis over the last three years, and I have placed a copy of this in the Assembly Library.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 9 February 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Peace Process

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the peace process. (AQW 1433/00)

Reply: The peace process, being a dialogue between the Northern Ireland political parties and the Governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland, relates to matters that are not devolved to this Administration.

Head of the Office of the Executive in Brussels and Washington

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the number of applications received to head up the Northern Ireland representation in (a) Washington and (b) Brussels. (AQW 1448/00)

Reply: Nine applications have been received for consideration for the post of Head of the Office of the Executive in Brussels.

There are no vacancies to be filled in the Washington office.

Civic Honours List

Mr Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to advise of any progress in the development of a new Civic Honours List. (AQW 1509/00)

Reply: We have not considered a proposal to establish a new Civic Honours List.

New Targeting Social Need

Mr Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to

ensure objective measures of deprivation for the purposes of New Targeting Special Needs (TSN). (AQO 715/00)

Reply: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency has commissioned Mike Noble of the University of Oxford to develop new indicators of multiple deprivation which Departments will use to identify deprived areas for New TSN targeting purposes.

These indicators will be based on administrative data routinely collected by Departments and so it will be possible to update them.

Wherever possible, the focus will be on electoral wards, thus taking account of small areas of deprivation – the indicators will also take account of rural and urban deprivation.

These new indicators will replace the Robson Indicators which are now rather dated.

They will be available in summer 2001. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will work with Departments on the implementation of the new indicators.

Executive Programme Funds

Ms Lewsley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the progress made on the Executive programme funds and in particular, the Children's Fund and to make a statement. (AQO 690/00)

Reply: At its meeting on 25 January, the Executive agreed the process for assessing bids for Executive programme funds and reaching decisions on allocations. Departments have been provided with guidance on preparing bids for projects that might receive support through Executive programme funds and have been asked to submit proposals by mid-February. Following assessment of proposals, the Executive will reach and announce a decision on allocations.

In relation to the Children's Fund, the Executive have agreed to put in place special measures to allow voluntary sector projects to benefit from the fund. An inter-departmental working group is being established to consider and implement the arrangements needed for this.

North / South Ministerial Council Nominations

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to give an assessment of the success of the policy to exclude Sinn Féin Ministers from participating in North/South Ministerial Council meetings and list what other sanctions he is considering. (AQO 660/00)

Reply: It is not appropriate to comment on the question of NSMC nominations in view of the current

appeal against the recently published judgement on the judicial review proceedings brought by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Education.

Decommissioning of Terrorist Weapons

Mr Savage asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail any further discussions with the Prime Minister or Secretary of State on the decommissioning of terrorist weapons and to make a statement. (AQO 721/00)

Reply: We have not jointly discussed these matters with the Prime Minister, the current Secretary of State or his predecessor. Our respective parties have, however, met them to discuss these issues.

Future of Policing

Mr J Wilson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline any discussions with the Prime Minister or Secretary of State on the future of policing and to make a statement. (AQO 720/00)

Reply: We have not jointly discussed these matters with the Prime Minister, the current Secretary of State or his predecessor. Our respective parties have, however, met them to discuss these issues.

NI Bureau in Washington

Mr A Doherty asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline its intention as expressed in the draft Programme for Government to strengthen and reorganise the structure of the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington DC to better serve Northern Ireland. (AQO 731/00)

Reply: The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, is currently reviewing the future role of the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington. The review will look at how the bureau might best represent the interests of the Executive in North America. The review will include recommendations on staffing levels and location and consider how its activities might be co-ordinated with those of other organisations. We will then take a decision on the bureau's future role and advise the Assembly and the Committee of the Centre.

Victim Support

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what programmes are in place to support the victims of terrorist violence. (AQO 685/00)

Reply: The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has committed £320,000 in the current

financial year to assist victims. Final decisions on the allocation of these resources have not yet been made, but the emphasis will be on providing practical help and support by contributing to the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, commissioning research on victims' needs and supporting specific projects undertaken by the four trauma advisory panels and victims organisations.

Further significant support to victims has been and will continue to be available through the mainstream programmes run by each of the Departments in the devolved Administration in such important areas as health and trauma support, retraining and reskilling, housing and social security.

The Victims Unit in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister is currently in the process of finalising a strategic programme designed to meet the needs of victims which will supplement the commitments contained in the draft Programme for Government. This programme will be announced in due course.

The Peace II European Programme will include a specific measure for victims, with funding of approximately £6.67 million.

Discussions with French and German Governments

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail any discussions with the French and German Governments. (AQO 724/00)

Reply: During the course of the European Marketing Campaign last week, we had discussions with President Chirac and with Pierre Muscovici, the French Minister for European Affairs, in Paris. The First Minister also met Joska Fischer, the German Foreign Minister, in Berlin. These meetings provided the opportunity to bring President Chirac, Mr Muscovici and Mr Fischer up to date with political developments and to highlight the progress made towards a stable and peaceful Northern Ireland with a growing and dynamic regional economy. We took the opportunity to emphasise that as a region Northern Ireland was determined to develop strong relations with other regions of the EU and in other parts of the world.

The visit also included a number of other meetings with politicians and industrialists in both countries, the purpose of which was to demonstrate to French and German investors the extensive and profitable business opportunities, which exist in Northern Ireland.

NI Executive Office in Brussels

Mr Fee asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the progress made in

establishing the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe and to make a statement. (AQO 727/00)

Reply: It has been taken that the question relates to the opening of the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels. The new head of office takes up post in March with his or her deputy recruited shortly afterwards. Meanwhile, work is continuing on fitting out the premises for the office. A wide range of consultations have taken place to ensure the facilities provided by the office meet the needs of the Executive and fulfil all requirements. Officials are now waiting for the managing agents to produce tenders and costings for each aspect of the work, based on a comprehensive schedule of requirements provided to them. The fitting out of the office should be completed by May at which time the office will be fully operational.

Civic Forum

Ms E Bell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the programme of work agreed with the Civic Forum. (AQO 708/00)

Reply: We understand that the membership of the Civic Forum has already put a considerable amount of work into developing their programme of work and has identified the following areas for initial consideration: poverty, peace building (culture and citizenship), education and training, and public policy.

In addition, at our request, the Forum has produced a substantial response to the draft Programme for Government.

As required by the Northern Ireland Act 1998, proposed arrangements for obtaining views from the Civic Forum on social, economic and cultural matters will be put to the Assembly for approval.

RUC Widows

Mr B Bell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail any representations that have been received from groups representing widows of Royal Ulster Constabulary officers murdered before 1982 and to make a statement. (AQO 723/00)

Reply: These matters do not fall within the competence of the devolved Administration. However the First Minister has privately received several representations from groups representing widows of the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Funding for Victims' Organisations

Mrs Nelis asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the allocation of resources to victims' organisations and detail the criteria for the allocation of resources to these groups. (AQO 666/00)

Reply: A provision of £320,000 has been made for the Victims Unit this year. No decisions have yet been taken on the allocation of these funds but in general terms it is likely that moneys will be directed towards the work of the four trauma advisory panels, capacity building, the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund and research into the level of services provided to victims.

Applications from individual organisations will be judged primarily on the basis of their ability to provide practical help and support for victims, with due regard for equality.

Mourne Sheep Farmers

Mr Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to put in place, under the Executive programmes fund, a support scheme to alleviate the short-term and long-term problems imposed upon the Mourne Sheep farmers as a result of the grazing ban at Silent Valley and to make a statement. (AQO 663/00)

Reply: We understand that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has met a number of deputations about this issue and has obtained additional information from the farmers affected. The Minister is currently considering the position, in light of these contacts, with a view to reaching a decision on the way forward, including the appropriateness of offering assistance.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural Development Programme

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the report of the Public Accounts Committee into the rural development programme and the problems identified therein and if she will outline the steps she is taking to address these difficulties and to make a statement. (AQW 1445/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I fully recognise the responsibilities of the Public Accounts Committee in the protection of public funds and welcome the report on the rural development programme. In particular I welcome the Committee's acknowledgement of the value of the programme and the remarkable contribution of the rural community.

The first phase of the rural development programme was breaking new ground in engaging rural communities. The recommendations made by the Public Accounts Committee will be taken into account for the next rural development programme 2001-2006 and my officials

and I will be ensuring that the administration of the programme is in accordance with best public sector practice.

The Department of Finance and Personnel will formally respond to the report by means of a memorandum of reply. It would not be appropriate for me to comment any further in advance of this response.

Seed Potato Producers

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if, in relation to seed potato producers, she will detail (a) the level of assistance she can offer to offset their current marketing problems and (b) market research findings that will be of benefit for future seasons.

(AQW 1507/00)

Ms Rodgers: I am very conscious of the difficulties facing seed potato producers in Northern Ireland at present. I am aware that the very wet autumn and the recent snow and frost have affected harvesting and that there may be damage to the crop still in the ground or tubers in uninsulated storage. I also appreciate that the strength of sterling has made trading difficult and that there is no EU support for potatoes.

At part (a) of your question, you asked me to detail the level of assistance I can offer to offset the current marketing problems.

Current Assistance in respect of Marketing Strategy

In October 1999, my Department set up a seed potato strategy group, involving key industry players, to examine opportunities for supporting and developing the industry. My Department continues to liaise closely with the industry to advise on best practice and to explore what can be done to improve the competitiveness of the seed potato industry in Northern Ireland, both for home and export markets.

The measures currently being taken forward by my Department in assisting the seed potato industry include:

- The development of a seed potato marketing strategy
- The establishment of a seed potato export group
- Missions to seed potato export outlets
- Amendments to current Seed Potato Marketing Regulations
- The establishment of seed potato development groups
- Improvements in seed potato quality standards
- Development of business planning.

We will also be reviewing, as a matter of policy, the current promotion and marketing arrangements within the industry.

Marketing Development Scheme

Further assistance is available through marketing development scheme support. The marketing development

scheme is a non-capital grant scheme which aims to help the industry develop efficient marketing structures and seeks to improve marketing and commercial expertise. Support is available for projects which encourage greater integration and collaboration between producers and others in the supply chain. Under the scheme 50% funding is provided towards the costs of setting up, recruiting members and the salaries of key staff. Projects in the seed potato sector may benefit provided they comply with the scheme rules.

At part (b) of your question, you asked me to detail market research findings that will be of benefit for future seasons.

Market Intelligence

My Department is in regular contact with the commercial desks within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the major countries that import seed potatoes from Northern Ireland merchants. While the commercial activities are the responsibility of the trade in Northern Ireland, our contacts are a valuable source of market intelligence in relation to, eg, climatic conditions in that region, industry outlook and competitor activity. Information from these sources is available to exporters of Northern Ireland seed potatoes from my officials. Information disseminated complements market information available to the trade from journals, import agents and from bespoke reports commissioned through private sector marketing specialists.

Market Research

The commissioning of specific commercial market research within new or existing markets would be the responsibility of either individual exporting merchants or the trade in collaboration with Seed Potato Promotions (Northern Ireland) Ltd (SPP). This commercial activity would best be undertaken by companies within the private sector specialising in conducting specific market research. My officials will assist where requested with the interpretation of appropriate data gathered by the industry from these marketplaces. Notwithstanding these commercial arrangements, Seed Potato Promotions (Northern Ireland) Ltd (SPP) are the grower levy funded body that is responsible for promoting the image and product of the seed potato sector.

My Department is actively supporting the efforts of local exporting companies to sustain their business through establishing networks of contacts within importing countries through participation at trade fairs at Potato 2000 Emmeloord, Holland and the demonstrations in Portugal and Morocco.

Insurance Against Flooding

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has recently had discussions with insurance representatives on the subject of flooding and to make a statement. (AQW 1519/00)

Ms Rodgers: I have not had discussions with insurance representatives on the subject of flooding.

I am conscious of the damage caused by recent flooding incidents in Northern Ireland, and the need for property owners to have access to adequate and appropriate insurance cover against flood risk. I therefore recognise the legitimate interest of the insurance industry in flooding issues in Northern Ireland. To this end officials in Rivers Agency, within my Department are prepared to provide information as far as is reasonable and practical on flood risk and to meet insurance representatives in response to recent correspondence from them on the subject.

Relaxation of the Beef and Live Animal Export Ban

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the action she is taking to persuade the European Commission and other European Union member states to lift the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) related ban on the export of live calves from Northern Ireland and to make a statement.

(AQW 1520/00)

Ms Rodgers: I remain fully committed to obtaining a relaxation of the beef and live animal export ban as soon as the timing is conducive. The current adverse climate in Europe over BSE, and beef in general, does not lend itself to submitting a formal case to the European Commission now or in the immediate future. After taking account of concerns expressed by other member states about an approach from Northern Ireland, it became clear that if I were to press ahead with negotiations it might not be in the best interests of farmers or producers and indeed could prove counterproductive.

I will continue to monitor developments throughout the Community with a view to submitting a proposal to the Commission and member states when they are likely to be more receptive.

Gosford Castle

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if in relation to Gosford Castle, she will outline her plans for (a) the lease on the building (b) the prevention of any further deterioration to the building (c) the restoration of the building, which is of national architectural importance and (d) the protection and preservation of the conservation area in which the castle is set.

(AQW 1535/00)

Ms Rodgers:

- (a) The lease on the building — the Department is drafting an advertisement, which will invite development proposals.

- (b) The prevention of any further deterioration to the building — the Department has secured the building to the best of its ability. The castle is inspected regularly to “block up” areas where vandals have forced entry.
- (c) The restoration of the building, which is of national architectural importance — the Department will consider development proposals against the qualities of the building.
- (d) The protection and preservation of the conservation area in which the castle is set — proposals will have to be in harmony with the other Forest Service activities and business needs at Gosford and in particular with the continued use as a forest park to the general public.

Salmonid Enhancement Programme

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if, in relation to the salmonid enhancement programme, she will detail how tranche 3 of the fund has been allocated by river and district council area.

(AQW 1560/00)

Ms Rodgers: The salmonid enhancement programme (SEP) was launched in December 1995 and was aimed at improving the economies of rural communities and fostering reconciliation by encouraging the development of game angling. Most of Northern Ireland’s fishing rights for salmon and trout are controlled by angling clubs, which have, however, limited resources to develop the fisheries. This programme offered angling clubs the opportunity to implement projects to improve fish populations, access and angling facilities. While most of the funding came from European and national resources, the clubs contributed voluntary labour and importantly committed themselves to make available enhanced numbers of angling permits at reasonable cost to visiting anglers.

Tranche 3 was launched in 1999 with 40 clubs and associations awarded funding of £1.7 million. The majority of the applications under tranche 3 have been aimed at improving in-river habitats, increasing salmonid stocks and some coarse angling development, and in providing much needed publicity, a key element in the water based tourism measure. The Programme is due to complete in June 2001.

For your assistance I have placed a table in the Assembly Library, outlining the clubs awarded funding under tranche 3, the rivers on which they carried out improvement works and the district council areas concerned.

Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what discussions she has had with the Anglo-Irish Fish Producers Association

about the future of the sea fishing industry in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1569/00)

Ms Rodgers: I met with representatives of the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation, when I attended the Fisheries Council in Brussels on 14 and 15 December. Previously I had met with them at a pre-council meeting chaired by Mr Morley, in London on 13 December and also during my visit to Kilkeel on 6 December. The main item of discussion was the 2001 total allowable catches which are obviously relevant to the future of the local industry.

I have not received a request from the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation for a further meeting since the December Fisheries Council.

Imported Beef

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail discussions she has had with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to protect Northern Ireland beef producers from the effects of beef imported from outside the United Kingdom. (AQW 1571/00)

Ms Rodgers: I have both regular and ad hoc meetings with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food at which we frequently review the beef market situation, though not specifically the issue of imports. I must point out, however, that it would be illegal under EU law, and contrary to the ideals of an open, internal EU market, to ban imports from elsewhere in the EU on the grounds that they are cheaper than the domestically produced equivalent. Similarly, imports from outside the EU are controlled by common EU rules and not by individual member states or regions.

Import restrictions introduced on the basis of a perceived threat to the health status of the domestic beef herd would need to be supported by evidence of the existence of such a threat, and there are EU mechanisms to facilitate this. I am unaware of any such current threat.

Protection of consumers is a matter for the Food Standards Agency.

Decommissioning of Fishing Vessels

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any compensation or decommissioning schemes currently under consideration for fishermen and fishing boat owners in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1572/00)

Ms Rodgers: Currently work is ongoing on developing the detail of a decommissioning scheme for fishing vessels which forms part of a range of measures in the Northern Ireland Transitional Objective 1 Programme currently with the European Commission for approval. I

am however unable to make any announcement until this programme has been agreed in Brussels.

Labelling of Imported Meat

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline discussions she has had with the Minister of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) in connection with the labelling of meat imported from the European Union and processed in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1573/00)

Ms Rodgers: I have had no discussions with the Minister of Agriculture Fisheries and Food about the labelling of meat imported from the EU and processed in Northern Ireland as general responsibility for food labelling lies with the Food Standards Agency which, the Member should be aware, reports to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I understand that last year guidance was issued to the food industry about labelling of food which was intended to ensure that consumers were not misled about the origin of food products.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Football TaskForce

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the contribution of football clubs at intermediate, junior and youth levels to the Football Task Force. (AQW 1479/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): Last October I announced plans for an initiative, 'Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland'. This involved the setting up of an advisory panel to help guide the process along the way and the appointment of business advisors to undertake an extensive consultation exercise across the province, to take the views of a wide range of interested groups and individuals on the issues facing the game of football in Northern Ireland today.

From the outset, the process has been an open and inclusive one and I can confirm that all football interests, have been, and continue to be, involved in the process.

The consultation exercise, carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers on behalf of the Department, involved widespread consultation and so far has consulted over 2,500 people including:

- a postal survey of senior, intermediate, junior and women's clubs which involved a total of some 600 questionnaires.

- a postal survey of players at senior, intermediate, junior and youth levels as well as female players. This involved some 900 questionnaires.
- a survey of league bodies, 18 at intermediate and junior level and 15 at youth level.
- in-depth, as well as telephone, interviews across the different levels.
- key informant interviews with a range of organisations involved in the administration of the game at all levels.
- focus group discussions with managers and coaches. This included participants from each senior, intermediate, junior and youth levels.
- workshop sessions with district councils, education and library boards, the voluntary youth sector, the media and senior club chairmen.
- both a street survey of the general public and a series of five open meetings held in different locations spread across the Province.

The next and vital stage in the process is a conference workshop planned for 10 to 12 February 2001, to which some 80 participants have been invited, again representing all the key interests in football. Those taking part in the conference workshop will have every opportunity to debate the issues facing soccer in Northern Ireland and develop ideas and recommendations for the future.

It is anticipated that further work will be necessary after the conference to develop these ideas, working with those involved in the conference and others. It is hoped that a draft strategy document will be available for public consultation by this summer.

Digital Terrestrial Television

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any representations he has made to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in relation to statutory requirements for the provision of subtitling, signing and audio description services on digital terrestrial television. (AQW 1523/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Last month the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published the report of its review of the statutory requirements for the provision of subtitling, sign language and audio description services on digital terrestrial television (DTT). The report concluded that:

- the target for the provision of subtitling on DTT should be raised from 50% of programmes by the tenth anniversary of the start of the service to 80% by the tenth anniversary;
- the targets for sign language and audio description services should remain unchanged, but will be kept under regular review as part of the two yearly reviews for the switchover to digital; and

- the requirements on DTT should be extended to digital cable and satellite services when legislation permits. The regulator should have the power to exempt certain categories of channels (for example, new/niche channels until they have built up audience share/revenue).

In July 2000 a consultation paper was sent directly by DCMS to 39 organisations including the ITC, broadcasters, those who provide subtitling, signing and audio description services and consumer groups representing people with sensory impairments. There was a two month deadline for responses. Prior to issuing the consultation paper, DCMS held a series of meetings with key groups, including: the Independent Television Commission; those broadcasters who provide DTT programme services; the companies who provide subtitling, signing and audio description services; and organisations representing viewers with sensory disabilities.

Given the extensive consultation undertaken by DCMS, neither I nor my Department made any representations to the Secretary of State during the review.

EDUCATION

Pre-School Funding

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to list the schools that receive funding from Pre-School Education Advisory Groups. (AQW 1412/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The following nursery schools/units have been established under the pre-school education expansion programme which is planned at local level by pre-school education advisory groups (PEAGs):

BELB	Greenwood Infants Primary School
	St Annes's Primary School, Finaghy
	Holy Child Primary School
	Hazelwood Integrated Primary School

WELB	Ballykelly Primary School
	Omagh County Primary School
	Strabane Controlled Primary School
	St Michael's Boy's Primary School
	Termoncanice Primary School
	St Canice's Primary School
	St Colmcille's Primary School
	Steelstown Primary School
	St Brigid's Primary School
	Christ the King Primary School
	Hollybush Primary School
	St Eugene's Primary School
	Enniskillen Integrated Primary School
WELB	Omagh Integrated Primary School
	Oakgrove Integrated Primary School
NEELB	Harryville Primary School
	Moyle Primary School
	Mount St Michael's Primary School
	St Mary's Primary School, Cushendall
	St Joseph's Primary School, Crumlin
	St Patrick's and St Brigid's Primary School
	Braidside Integrated Primary School
	Steeple Nursery School
	Ballyclare Nursery School
SEELB	Comber Primary School
	Donaghadee Primary School
	Bloomfield Road Primary School
	Abbey Primary School
	Kilmaine Primary School
	St Joseph's Primary School, Carryduff
	St Patrick's Primary School, Ballynahinch
	St Aloysius Primary School, Lisburn
SELB	Orritor Primary School
	St Colman's Abbey Primary School
	St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge
	Windmill Integrated Primary School
	Saints and Scholars Integrated Primary School

In addition the following nursery schools/units, established under other initiatives are receiving recurrent funding under the expansion programme:-

	Nazareth House Primary School
	St Paul's Primary School, Slievemore

Pre-School Places for 2001-05

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the pre-school places planned for 2001-05 by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1414/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Details of the number and location of pre-school places to be funded by my Department's pre-school education expansion programme may be found in the annual plans drawn up by the pre-school education advisory group in each education and library board and approved by my Department. The programme commenced in 1998 and the current expansion phase during which new places are identified for funding will run to the end of the 2001-02 financial year. The ultimate aim of the programme is to provide one year of pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it, with places for at least 85% by 2001-02.

Planning figures for new statutory nursery places and funded places in the voluntary and private sector for 2001-02 are as follows:

Board	
BELB	972
WELB	2,220
NEELB	2,450
SEELB	2,156
SELB	1,658
Total	9,456

Copies of approved plans may be obtained from the Boards' PEAGs. The 2001-02 draft plans submitted by the Belfast, North Eastern and South Eastern Board PEAGs have been approved: those for Western and Southern boards are still under discussion with their PEAGs, but I anticipate that they will be approved shortly.

Mathematics Teaching Vacancies

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of permanent specialist mathematics teaching vacancies in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area since 1990 as compared to the other education and library boards. (AQW 1420/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is not held by the Department of Education nor collated by the relevant employing authorities.

Pre-School Education Expansion Programme

Ms E Bell asked the Minister of Education to outline his targets for the provision of pre-school education in Northern Ireland and to detail how current provision meets these targets. (AQW 1465/00)

Mr M McGuinness: In October 1997 there were funded pre-school places for 45% of all children in their final pre-school year. As a result of my Department's investment of £38 million in the pre-school education expansion programme over four years from 1998-99, I expect that, by 2001-02, over 9,000 new pre-school

education places will have been secured, making places available for at least 85% of all children in their final pre-school year. The additional pre-school provision is being created by the establishment of new statutory nursery units and, for the first time, the funding of places in existing voluntary/private settings which meet the standards of the programme. In the current academic year places are available for some 75% of children in their final pre-school year.

The ultimate long-term aim of the programme is to provide one year's pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it.

School Transport

Mr D McClarty asked the Minister of Education to outline his current policy in relation to the funding of school transport for pupils living within the Western Education and Library Board. (AQW 1470/00)

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.

Education and library boards provide transport assistance, under arrangements approved by my Department, 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 a suitable school relates to the established educational categories of controlled, Catholic maintained, Irish-medium and integrated and, in the grammar sector, denominational and non-denominational schools.

These arrangements were introduced from the beginning of the 1997-98 school year and apply equally to all five education and library boards. They also permit boards to exercise discretion in exceptional circumstances in relation to the rule governing statutory walking distance.

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Education to confirm that a uniform policy exists in relation to school transportation assistance across all the education and library boards and to make a statement. (AQW 1471/00)

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.

Education and library boards provide transport assistance, under arrangements approved by my Department, 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 a suitable school relates to the established educational categories of controlled, Catholic maintained, Irish-medium and integrated and, in the grammar sector, denominational and non-denominational schools.

These arrangements were introduced from the beginning of the 1997-98 school year and apply equally to all five education and library boards. They also permit boards to exercise discretion in exceptional circumstances in relation to the rule governing statutory walking distance.

School Rolls

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to outline the data he collects on the numbers and circumstances of children who are not on school rolls. (AQW 1473/00)

Mr M McGuinness: A pupil's name may not be removed from a school roll unless the school is advised that the pupil has registered at another school, has died, moved to another country or been expelled. The responsibility for pursuing such cases and ensuring that the individual receives efficient education lies with the education welfare services of the education and library boards. My Department does not collect data on the numbers and circumstances of children who are not on school rolls.

Temporary Teachers

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of temporary teachers used in the North Eastern Education and Library Board schools as compared to the other area boards in each of the last ten years for which figures are available. (AQW 1474/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The table below gives details of the number of temporary teachers who were employed in the education and library boards during each of the last ten years.

Where in any year, a temporary teacher was employed in more than one education and library board, he or she is included in the number shown for each board in which he or she worked.

Board Year	NEELB	BELB	WELB	SEELB	SELB
1991	1182	1193	955	1239	1101
1992	1102	1015	901	1110	1107
1993	1165	1094	941	1229	1226
1994	1245	1174	989	1279	1324
1995	1214	1211	1058	1311	1341
1996	1150	1235	1065	1281	1377
1997	1178	1193	1050	1216	1244
1998	1241	1176	1014	1212	1355
1999	1322	1176	1103	1304	1441
2000	1319	1117	1115	1303	1389

Average Class Sizes

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the average class size in (a) primary schools (b) post primary schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area as compared to the other area boards in each of the last ten years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1475/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information for (a) is only available in the same form from 1993/94, as follows:

	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	TOTAL
1993/94	24.9	24.0	24.7	24.2	23.8	24.3
1994/95	24.8	24.0	24.4	24.1	23.5	24.1
1995/96	24.6	24.0	24.3	24.3	23.3	24.1
1996/97	24.4	23.9	24.4	24.6	23.3	24.1
1997/98	24.3	23.1	23.8	24.9	23.3	23.9
1998/99	24.2	24.2	24.2	24.7	23.4	24.1
1999/00	24.0	23.8	24.3	24.6	23.1	24.0
2000/01	24.5	23.6	24.5	24.3	22.8	23.9

The information requested at (b) is not held by the Department, and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Primary and Post-Primary School Teachers

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers who were employed in primary and post primary schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area as compared to the other area boards in each of the last ten years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1476/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The following table details the numbers of permanent teachers employed in primary and

post primary schools in the five education and library boards during the month of October in each of the last ten years.

Fluctuations in the permanent workforce throughout the year would be minor.

Science Teaching Vacancies

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of permanent specialist science teaching vacancies in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area as compared to the other education boards in each of the last ten years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1477/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is not held by the Department of Education or collated by the relevant employing authorities.

Glaskermore Primary School

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of the procedures adopted by the Southern Education and Library Board in the sale of Glaskermore Primary School since 24 November 2000.

(AQW 1481/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Responsibility for the disposal of Glaskermore Primary School rests with the Southern Education and Library Board. The board used the services of the Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA) to handle the sale of Glaskermore and two other school properties. The agency appointed an agent to advertise the properties and to receive offers by private treaty sale. I understand that the procedure regarding the precise time for the submission of offers was not followed and that all interested parties had to be advised of an extended deadline for receipt of bids. The board has advised my Department that it will be consulting the VLA about

	NEELB		BELB		WELB		SEELB		SELB	
	Primary	Post-Primary	Primary	Post-Primary	Primary	Post-Primary	Primary	Post-Primary	Primary	Post-Primary
1991	1668	2107	1368	1997	1578	1716	1535	1657	1780	2015
1992	1683	2135	1402	2019	1598	1750	1548	1661	1833	2035
1993	1716	2178	1433	2051	1632	1785	1583	1686	1868	2059
1994	1740	2182	1490	2094	1652	1833	1605	1721	1915	2106
1995	1871	2231	1528	2122	1659	1924	1713	1764	2067	2197
1996	1850	2249	1525	2197	1679	1983	1699	1777	2057	2227
1997	1856	2234	1490	2167	1677	2000	1667	1742	2048	2218
1998	1799	2212	1466	2217	1577	1985	1660	1771	2014	2245
1999	1771	2228	1411	2257	1541	1986	1673	1794	2015	2280
2000	1718	2250	1364	2269	1518	2000	1682	1820	1986	2298

appropriate action to ensure that its agents issue precise details to prospective bidders in future cases.

Nursery School Places

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to detail the progress achieved in increasing the number of nursery school places since May 1997. (AQW 1483/00)

Mr M McGuinness: As the table below shows, at the time of the 1996-97 school census there were 8,522 pre-school children in nursery schools and nursery units attached to primary schools. As a result of the pre-school education expansion programme and other initiatives such as Making Belfast Work, the Londonderry Regeneration Initiative and the EU Special Support programme for Peace and Reconciliation, this figure had increased to 9,999 in 1999-2000 (the last year for which complete figures are available). The table also shows that in 1999-2000 there were 2,330 reception pupils, and in addition the expansion programme had provided for the funding of 3,407 places in voluntary and private settings.

	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Funded places in Pre-School Centres	Not applicable	Not applicable	1,945	3,407	Not yet available
Nursery schools	5,496	5,533	5,501	5,952	5,965
Nursery Classes in Primary Schools	3,026	3,008	3,349	4,047	5,966
Reception	2,544	2,575	2,521	2,330	1,990
Total	11,066	11,116	13,316	15,736	Not yet available

After - School Clubs

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps he is taking to improve the regulation and funding of after-school clubs. (AQW 1486/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Many schools offer a wide range of activities in after-school clubs which they may fund from within their budget allocations. Apart from the normal requirements regarding the vetting of staff and volunteers involved in any activities in schools, my Department has no specific regulations governing their operation and I have no plans for any changes to the arrangements for the regulation and funding of after-school clubs.

Resources to support a range of out of school hours learning activities are available to schools from the New Opportunities Fund; the amounts of these awards and the conditions and requirements relating to them are determined by the Fund.

My Department allocates resources to the education and library boards for summer literacy and numeracy schemes in each board area. Such schemes operate in

accordance with working guidance issued by my Department.

Support for Young Mothers

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Education to detail the support available for young mothers to return to education or training courses. (AQW 1491/00)

Mr M McGuinness: All post-primary schools with female pupils have been advised that pregnant school-girls and school age mothers should be supported to complete full-time mainstream education and to continue beyond the age of 16 if they wish. The school's education welfare officer, acting as 'lead' worker, will work with the young woman, her carers and the school staff to prepare an education plan covering the later stages of pregnancy, the immediate post-natal period and the longer term. Support may also be available before and after the birth through her school, through home tuition, group tuition or participation in a School Age Mothers Project.

Results in English and Mathematics in Key Stage 3 at Level 5

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to give a breakdown of results in English and Mathematics in Key Stage 3, at Level 5 for each individual education and library board in the years 1996-97, 1997-98, 1998-99 and 1999-2000. (AQW 1498/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Data for 1996-97 are not available. The data for 1997-98, 1998-99 and 1999-2000 are as follows:

KEY STAGE THREE TEST RESULTS 1997/1998 - 1999/2000

		1997/1998	1998/1999	1999/2000
		% Achieving	% Achieving	% Achieving
Northern Ireland	Level 5 or above			
	English	70.6	67.7	68.7
	Mathematics	66.2	70.1	67.0
BELB	Level 5 or above			
	English	74.7	70.6	68.5
	Mathematics	65.2	68.0	65.4
WELB	Level 5 or above			
	English	68.2	63.1	67.4
	Mathematics	64.5	67.4	65.3
NEELB	Level 5 or above			
	English	71.1	68.7	70.8
	Mathematics	67.4	72.3	69.3

		1997/1998	1998/1999	1999/2000
		% Achieving	% Achieving	% Achieving
SEELB	<i>Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	67.2	65.3	68.1
	Mathematics	65.9	71.3	66.3
SELB	<i>Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	71.5	70.0	68.3
	Mathematics	67.4	71.3	68.3

		1997/1998	1998/1999	1999/2000
		% Achieving	% Achieving	% Achieving
SELB	<i>Grammar - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	98.3	98.2	98.0
	Mathematics	97.8	98.0	98.1
	<i>Secondary - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	62.8	60.9	58.9
	Mathematics	57.6	62.7	58.9

KEY STAGE THREE TEST RESULTS BY SCHOOL TYPE 1997/1998 - 1999/2000

		1997/1998	1998/1999	1999/2000
		% Achieving	% Achieving	% Achieving
Northern Ireland	<i>Grammar - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	98.6	96.9	97.7
	Mathematics	98.0	98.6	98.5
	<i>Secondary - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	55.6	52.3	53.4
	Mathematics	49.1	55.2	50.5
BELB	<i>Grammar - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	98.6	97.2	97.9
	Mathematics	97.1	98.4	98.0
	<i>Secondary - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	52.0	47.0	43.5
	Mathematics	34.8	41.1	37.5
WELB	<i>Grammar - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	98.1	95.4	98.0
	Mathematics	98.7	98.6	99.1
	<i>Secondary - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	54.0	47.8	52.0
	Mathematics	48.4	52.6	48.3
NEELB	<i>Grammar - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	98.8	96.0	97.2
	Mathematics	98.5	99.0	98.8
	<i>Secondary - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	54.6	52.9	55.6
	Mathematics	49.0	56.9	52.5
SEELB	<i>Grammar - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	98.9	98.1	97.9
	Mathematics	98.3	98.7	98.8
	<i>Secondary - Level 5 or above</i>			
	English	51.1	49.1	53.6
	Mathematics	49.4	57.9	50.5

School Funding

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding paid to schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area compared to other board areas and to give a breakdown of spending per head on pupils in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area compared with other board areas.

(AQW 1521/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The table below details allocations to schools under the local management of schools (LMS) formulae by the five education and library boards in the 2000-01 financial year in total and on a per pupil basis. It excludes voluntary grammar and grant maintained integrated schools which are funded directly by the Department.

Board	Total LMS Allocation to Schools £	LMS Allocation Per Pupil £
Belfast	98,224,327	2,121
North Eastern	124,561,898	2,022
South Eastern	107,283,992	1,969
Southern	132,073,748	2,051
Western	106,256,918	2,069

The figures do not include funds provided to schools during the year, from resources retained centrally by the Boards, to meet expenditure on substitution and other centrally met teacher costs, maintenance, the school improvement programme and other initiatives. They also exclude additional in-year allocations for specific purposes such as those recently announced for repairs and maintenance, reading books and assistance towards increased energy costs.

Youth Organisations

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail any discussions he has had with youth organisations about the future development of his policy on education.

(AQW 1522/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Since taking office I have met a wide variety of youth organisations, including the Youth Council, and while the main focus of such discussions is normally on the youth service, organisations may of course raise with me other issues from the wider education sector.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of teacher recruitment and retention and to make a statement. (AQW 1524/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Teacher recruitment is a matter for the various employing authorities and I have received no formal representation about difficulties in recruitment.

The proportion of teachers leaving employment through resignation in the last school year was 1.6% of the total teaching workforce.

Performance Related Pay for Teachers

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of performance related pay for teachers and to make a statement. (AQW 1527/00)

Mr M McGuinness: On 23 January both sides of the Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Committee (Schools) reached agreement on a revised pay structure for teachers here. The agreement is most welcome and covers new threshold assessment arrangements, a new leadership group salary spine and a performance management system. This is not directly analogous to a performance-related pay scheme.

Under the agreement, teachers at the maximum of the main pay scale for one year, who choose to apply for threshold assessment and who are successful, have access to a new upper pay spine. Other teachers will continue to progress up the main scale each year unless they are subject to the unsatisfactory teachers' procedure. The leadership group restores vice-principals to the same salary spine as principals and introduces a new post of assistant vice-principal. The performance management scheme will support all teachers to agree and review objectives for improvements within the context of school development plans and inform decisions on progression up the pay scales for post-threshold teachers and leadership group posts.

Urgent steps to implement the agreement are now being taken by management side in consultation with teachers' side.

Expenditure on Education

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Education to detail expenditure on education, excluding capital spending and

European monies, for the years 1990 to present in the parliamentary constituency of West Belfast.

(AQW 1538/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is not recorded by constituency. Expenditure by schools, as recorded in local management of schools outturn statements published by the Belfast Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board for financial years 1991-92 to date, is as follows:

	£
1991/92	35,202,677
1992/93	39,731,913
1993/94	41,575,990
1994/95	43,164,100
1995/96	48,191,603
1996/97	51,862,526
1997/98	52,281,436
1998/99	53,381,198
1999/00 (provisional)	56,430,146

As the local management of schools scheme was first implemented in April 1991 the information in respect of 1990-91 is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. It should also be noted that expenditure figures in respect of those funds retained centrally by boards and provided in-year to schools for central teacher substitution costs, special initiatives etc are only available and included from 1995-96 onwards.

Hearing Impairments

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Education to detail, by education and library board, the number of (a) children with hearing impairments attending mainstream schools and (b) interpreters available for those children.

(AQW 1559/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Figures are currently available only for hearing impaired pupils in secondary schools. The situation at October 2000 in those schools was as follows :

Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	All Boards
24	35	21	13	31	124

I will write to you again when the figures for nursery and primary schools become available.

My Department is not aware of any sign language interpreters being employed to support hearing impaired pupils in mainstream schools. The only local school to use sign language on a regular basis is Jordanstown Special School (for the hearing and visually impaired) where signing is provided by the teachers and classroom

assistants. This would also be the case for any pupils requiring signing in mainstream schools.

Teacher Training

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of recruitment levels for teacher training and to make a statement. (AQW 1566/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Places on initial teacher training courses are usually oversubscribed and attract sufficient higher calibre candidates so that almost all are filled by the higher education institutions. The outcome of the annual recruitment process, now under way for the 2001-02 academic year, is monitored by my Department, which sets the intakes at levels based on a statistical forecast of teacher vacancies.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

HM Forces in Northern Ireland

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the gross financial benefit to the economy of having armed forces based in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1430/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The stationing of HM Forces in Northern Ireland has been associated with an injection of resources into the local economy in terms of wages and salaries and associated expenditures on supplies and sub-contracting work. As the expenditure on the armed forces comes out of Ministry of Defence expenditure, any reduction in the military presence in Northern Ireland will lead to a reduction in expenditure from this source.

Assessing the gross impact of the military presence in Northern Ireland is difficult to do with any precision due to difficulties in measuring the related expenditure and multiplier effects. However various attempts at estimating the impact of military and related expenditures in Northern Ireland have been made. For example, Bew, Patterson and Teague (1997) cite figures from the House of Commons Library which suggest that, in 1996 prices, the cost of military operations rose from a negligible amount in the early 1970s to around £500m in 1994-95. To this needs to be added associated expenditures on law and order, other protective services and compensation. However, due to the improvements in the security situation since then, this injection into the local economy has fallen back. Furthermore, the scale of this inflow needs to be set against the overall scale of the 'subvention' from the GB taxpayer to the local economy equal to £3.5 billion (as measured in 1993-94).

Likewise, the Northern Ireland Economic Council (1995) suggests that the expenditure associated with maintaining law and order and defeating terrorism together — the law and order and protective services budget (LOPS) — in Northern Ireland was equivalent in total to 12.7% of total public expenditure in Northern Ireland between 1988-89 and 1994-95. This made law and order and security related expenditure the fourth largest element of local public expenditure after social security (27%), health and personnel social services (19%) and education, arts and libraries (18%). The NIEC suggested that 40% of the total LOPS budget would be incurred in Northern Ireland in any case under more normal levels of security. Therefore NIEC estimated that security related expenditure to counteract terrorism accounted for 60% of the law and order and protective services budget or 7% of total public expenditure in 1994-95. These figures are broadly consistent with those suggested by Teague above and give an indication of the gross benefits of the stationing of UK military personnel in Northern Ireland.

As a consequence, while there has been, and remains to a lesser extent, a significant injection of resources into the Northern Ireland economy as a result of the stationing of armed forces here, this is only a minor element in the overall level of public expenditure in the Province. At the same time, even allowing for a settled security situation, there will always be an ongoing necessity, as there is elsewhere in the UK, for military personnel to be based in Northern Ireland.

Against this needs to be set the adverse impact that the stationing of large numbers of military personnel have had on the perception of Northern Ireland to tourists and inward investors. While it is difficult to place a figure on this it is highly likely that a significant military presence, in conjunction with the terrorist threat, has reduced the appeal of Northern Ireland as a place to visit or do business. As a result, any reduction in terrorist activity and the associated military presence, is likely to yield longer-term benefits to the development of the local economy.

Electricity Charges

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to explain the difference between the current rate of inflation and the ongoing increases in charges for industrial and domestic electricity supplies. (AQW 1480/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Following privatisation, responsibility for ensuring electricity prices are cost reflective rests with the independent regulator. NIE announced in November 2000 that domestic tariffs would increase by up to 9% from January 2001 as a direct consequence of rising world fuel prices feeding through into higher generation costs. The costs of generating fuel have risen by an average 33% over the past eighteen months. The recent tariffs

increase, which the regulator accepted was unavoidable, is the first since April 1996.

Removing the effects of inflation, prices are estimated to have fallen by 23% in the four years since April 1996. Following the opening up of the electricity market in July 1999 large industrial users are no longer obliged to purchase electricity from NIE but are eligible to choose from competing suppliers. It is estimated that such customers have seen on average a 10% reduction in electricity prices since market opening.

Company Training Grants

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of expenditure by his Department on company training grants by company.

(AQW 1517/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Attached is a list of those companies that are currently receiving company development programme investment support, and the maximum amount of support available to each over the lifetime of the agreements.

Name of Company	Location	Max Grant
3dfx	Belfast	211,860
Abbey National plc	Belfast	859,841
ABP Lurgan	Craigavon	187,672
ABP Newry	Newry	330,379
ABSEC Ltd	Bangor	55,396
Adair Brothers Ltd	Belfast	62,732
Adamsez (NI) Ltd	Belfast	11,623
Adria Ltd (Charnos Lingerie Division)	Londonderry	197,764
Adria Ltd (Charnos Hosiery Div)	Strabane	202,596
Advanced Precision Tooling Ltd	Dungannon	22,840
Aepona Ltd	Belfast	393,650
AFA Dart (NI) Ltd	Antrim	16,680
Allied Bakeries NI Ltd	Belfast	70,319
Allpipe Engineering Ltd	Londonderry	46,784
Amphion (Integrated Silicon Systems Ltd)	Belfast	111,067
AMT Sybex Ltd	Belfast	47,902
Amtec Medical Ltd	Antrim	24,760
Analog Devices (BCO Technologies (NI) Ltd)	Belfast	64,600
Anderson Manning Associates	Bangor	79,213
Andronics Global Data Communications Ltd	Londonderry	54,903
Anorra Holdings	Coleraine	1,010,148
Apion Ltd	Belfast	534,500
Applied Card Technologies	Belfast	114,614
Arca Technologies (Digital Engineering Ltd)	Newtownabbey	31,831
Architectural Glass Products	Castledawson	30,553

Name of Company	Location	Max Grant
Armstrong Steel	Belfast	26,000
Arntz Belting	Londonderry	239,244
Aromet Group Ltd	Lisburn	181,278
ATC Systems Ltd	Belfast	30,770
Atcheson & Son (Derry) Ltd	Londonderry	13,076
Audio Processing Technology	Belfast	10,150
Aunt Mollies Foods Ltd	Belfast	27,103
AVX Ltd	Coleraine	758,250
Balcas Ltd	Enniskillen	30,000
Ballygally Castle Hotel	Ballygally	7,702
Bass Ireland Ltd	Belfast	84,228
Bay Street Trading Ltd	Londonderry	24,873
BE Aerospace (UK) Ltd	Kilkeel	229,875
Beam Vacuum Systems	Castledawson	22,447
Bedeck (Broomhill Home Furnishings)	Magheralin	52,260
Beechill Country House Hotel	Londonderry	3,163
Belart Ltd	Newtownabbey	122,615
Belfast Hilton International	Belfast	470,355
Belleek Pottery Ltd	Belleek	128,086
Bespoke Shirt Company Ltd	Lisburn	21,629
BIC Systems Ltd	Belfast	255,000
Bio-Kinetic Europe Ltd	Belfast	69,589
BKS Surveys Ltd	Coleraine	60,234
Blair Neill Ltd	Newtownards	40,319
Bohill Hotel & Country Club	Coleraine	50,999
Boomer Industries Ltd	Lisburn	9,728
Boxmore Healthcare Packaging (Ire)	Belfast	153,969
Bradfor Ltd	Rostrevor	24,120
British Airways	Belfast	157,492
Bruce Engineering	Cookstown	14,093
BS Tooling	Newtownabbey	167,000
Burrendale Hotel	Newcastle	13,726
BWF (NI) Ltd	Maghera	99,220
Cabragh Engineering	Dungannon	35,994
Camco Products & Services	Newtownabbey	64,942
Canal Court Hotel	Newry	95,390
Cantrell & Cochrane (Belfast) Ltd	Belfast	69,339
Capemist Gloves	Ballymena	21,421
CardBASE Technologies (NI) Ltd	Belfast	212,500
Carlton Hotel	Belleek	16,086
Cartoncare Ltd	Newry	105,987
Causeway Coast Hotel	Portrush	6,687
CCC Technology Ltd	Belfast	65,310
Celeritek Northern Ireland	Belfast	104,750
Central Laundries	Cookstown	8,892
Channel Systems Ireland Ltd	Belfast	12,000
Charles O'Doherty & Sons Ltd	Strabane	13,280
Chimney Corner Hotel	Newtownabbey	35,032

Name of Company	Location	Max Grant
Civil & Structural Computer Services Ltd	Newtownabbey	27,616
Classic Marble (Showers) Ltd	Ballygawley	64,830
Classic Mineral Water Company, The	Lurgan	31,072
Colorite Europe Ltd	Dunmurry	125,339
Cooneen Textiles Ltd	Fivemiletown	210,824
Copeland Ltd	Cookstown	1,312,500
Cordiners Kitchens & Bathrooms Ltd	Bangor	19,679
Corporate Wardrobe, The	Bangor	21,476
Corrs Corner Hotel	Newtownabbey	3,093
Cottage Catering Ltd	Dromore	24,073
Courtaulds Lingerie	Portadown	49,267
Crannburn Software Ltd	Belfast	23,723
Crossen Engineering & CNC Pressings	Newtownards	12,609
Crossgar Poultry Ltd	Crossgar	158,816
C-Teq (Crepe Weavers Ltd)	Newtownards	57,805
Culloden Hotel	Holywood	12,850
Cunningham Covers	Maghera	43,403
CV Home Furnishing Ltd (Maydown)	Campsie	356,248
CV Home Furnishings (Randalstown)	Randalstown	11,977
Da Vincis Hotel	Londonderry	110,849
Daewoo Electro Components	Carrickfergus	125,000
Daewoo Electronics UK Ltd	Antrim	112,305
DART (NI) Ltd	Antrim	112,500
David Hull Promotions Ltd	Belfast	8,422
Davison Fresh Foods Ltd	Portadown	9,749
DCW Software		24,000
Decora Window Blinds Ltd	Lisburn	34,573
Delta Print & Packaging Ltd	Belfast	222,320
Desmond and Sons Ltd	Londonderry	652,957
Diagnology Ltd	Belfast	27,394
Diamond Corrugated Cases Ltd	Londonderry	57,737
Doherty & Gray	Ballymena	21,271
Donard Hotel	Newcastle	10,500
Dromona Quality Foods	Belfast	40,865
Du Pont (UK) Ltd - Lycra ®	Londonderry	486,704
Dukes Hotel	Belfast	47,294
Dunadry Hotel and Country Club	Dunadry	92,982
Dungannon Meats	Dungannon	449,542
Duralay Ltd (Airstep)		22,646
Duromould Ltd	Londonderry	13,433
E & I Engineering Ltd	Londonderry	105,070
E-Coat Ltd	Lisburn	24,845
Edge	Antrim	56,503
Edgewater Hotel	Portstewart	7,892
Electrical & Security Systems	Dungannon	18,311

Name of Company	Location	Max Grant
Electro Mechanical Services Ltd (Bemac)	Lisburn	190,460
Elite Electronic Systems Ltd	Enniskillen	58,296
Environmental Techniques Ltd	Lisburn	22,088
eTranslate		240,000
Europa Hotel	Belfast	33,386
European Components Corporation	Belfast	73,800
Everglades Hotel	Londonderry	6,699
Evron Foods Ltd	Portadown	156,397
Ewart Liddell	Craigavon	52,486
Extract Solutions Ltd	Belfast	29,415
F C Robinson Ltd	Ballyclare	101,722
F G Wilson (Engineering) Ltd	Larne	2,900,000
Ferne Foods	Lisnaskea	159,510
Figure Retail Software Solutions	Holywood	21,980
Fir Trees Hotel	Strabane	49,544
First Derivatives Ltd	Newry	52,260
Fisher Engineering Ltd	Enniskillen	22,098
Fleming Agri Products Ltd	Londonderry	39,651
Flexibox (NI) Ltd	Ballymena	145,066
Footprint Television Facilities Ltd	Belfast	10,996
Ford Motor Company	Belfast	130,450
Fortress Doors Ltd	Newtownabbey	95,000
Fortress Pro-tec (Protective Coatings)	Templepatrick	19,736
Foyle Meats	Campsie	354,324
Frederick Jones (Belfast) Ltd	Belfast	40,489
Freeza Meats Ltd	Newry	26,111
Fruit of the Loom Manufacturing Co Ltd	Londonderry	203,586
Fujitsu Tele (Ireland) (Belfast)	Belfast	271,000
Fujitsu Telecommunications Engineering Ireland (FTEL)	Belfast	2,775,000
Fujitsu Telecommunications Software Ltd	Belfast	1,125,000
Galen Holdings PLC	Craigavon	208,406
Galgorm Manor	Ballymena	73,115
Gallagher Ltd (R & D Division)	Ballymena	464,532
Glen Electric	Newry	76,335
Glen Oak Fisheries (Processing) Ltd	Crumlin	17,036
Glenavon House Hotel	Cookstown	24,766
Glendermott Enterprises Ltd	Londonderry	25,058
Gort (Engineering) Ltd	Magherafelt	27,335
Gray & Adams (Ireland) Ltd	Newtownabbey	48,255
Haldane Fisher Ltd	Newry	57,820
Halfpenny Gate Meats Ltd	Moirra	6,183
Halifax Group plc	Belfast	1,977,544
Harland & Wolff Ltd	Belfast	900,000
Hastings Hotels Group Ltd	Belfast	23,964
Herdmans Ltd	Sion Mills	216,690

Name of Company	Location	Max Grant
Hicks, Bullick & Co Ltd	Belfast	32,270
Hilton Meats	Cookstown	130,000
Holiday Inn Express	Belfast	15,136
Hospital Services Ltd	Belfast	23,410
Huco Lightronics NI Ltd	Limavady	38,220
Humax Electronics Co Ltd	Newtownards	271,880
Hynds Architectural Systems Ltd	Belfast	19,173
IAS PLC		152,300
IDS Media Group Ltd	Newry	37,473
Impro Printing	Belfast	18,470
IMRglobal (NI) Ltd	Belfast	431,000
Indicators International Ltd	Magherafelt	21,396
Insilco Technologies (NI) Ltd	Larne	105,750
International Computers Ltd (ICL)	Belfast/L'derry	337,500
Irish Linen Company	Belfast	10,309
J M Engineering Ltd	Derrylin	7,188
John Cleland & Son Ltd	Belfast	89,921
John Graham (Dromore) Ltd	Dromore	119,556
Jurys Belfast Inn	Belfast	250,000
Kathrina Fashions Ltd	Belfast	18,884
Kernan Timber Products Ltd	Gilford	40,685
Keystone Lintels Ltd	Cookstown	176,397
Kilco Chemicals Ltd	Newtownabbey	33,936
Killyhevlin Hotel	Enniskillen	84,446
Lagan Technology Ltd	Belfast	112,714
Lamont Holdings plc	Belfast	145,609
Langford Lodge Engineering Co Ltd	Crumlin	162,941
LB Meats Ltd	Belfast	34,097
Leading Edge Research	Lisburn	8,581
Leaf Technologies Ltd	Newtownabbey	219,066
Leslie Stannage Design	Belfast	15,108
Liberty Information Technology Ltd	Belfast	562,000
Linden Foods	Dungannon	740,928
M & G Glass	Draperstown	35,875
M & M Software Gmbh	Belfast	25,000
M M Group Ireland Ltd	Bangor	295,512
MacMillan Media	Belfast	33,503
MacNeice Brothers	Portadown	9,584
Madison Hotel	Belfast	41,393
Magee Clothing Ltd	Ballymena	165,000
Magowan Originals Ltd	Portadown	15,785
Mahons Hotel	Irvinestown	48,921
Mallaghan Engineering Ltd	Dungannon	54,229
Mallon Technology NI Ltd	Cookstown	46,925
Malone Lodge Hotel	Belfast	7,368
Manor House Hotel	Killadeas	80,693
Marnish Plant Engineering Ltd	Magherafelt	14,870
Masterscreen International Ltd (T/A Nordberg Masterscreen Ltd)	Dungannon	122,225

Name of Company	Location	Max Grant
McAllister Brothers Ltd	Newry	15,019
McAvoy Group (Greenline) Ltd	Newtownabbey	13,118
McCausland Hotel	Belfast	140,749
McColgan's Quality Foods Ltd	Strabane	187,859
McDowell & Service	Belfast	58,342
McKeown Turkeys	Rasharkin	24,431
McMullen Architectural Systems Ltd	Moirra	46,000
MDF (Engineering) Ltd	Antrim	80,934
Michelin Tyre plc	Ballymena	275,758
Millennium Three Solutions Ltd	Londonderry	18,322
Minprint Ltd	Belfast	20,785
Minprint Ltd	Belfast	5,380
Mivan Ltd	Antrim	100,000
MJM (Northern Ireland) Ltd	Dungannon	20,530
Montupet (UK) Ltd	Belfast	12,816,241
Moore Concrete Products	Ballymena	47,491
Mopack Systems Ltd	Strabane	146,834
Morrow Communications	Holywood	34,342
Moyola Precision Engineering	Magherafelt	77,634
Moypark Ltd	Craigavon	998,481
MSCS	Lisburn	68,824
MSO Cleland	Belfast	69,733
Multi Media Info-Tec	Belfast	327,830
Musketeer Engineering Ltd	Lisburn	13,826
Naturelle Consumer Products	Omagh	113,185
NC Agricultural Engineering Ltd	Hamiltonsbawn	38,788
Nevada tele.com	Belfast	350,000
Nicholson & Bass	Newtownabbey	9,913
Nichrome Ltd	Newtownabbey	20,568
NI-CO Ltd	Belfast	16,192
Norman Emerson & Sons Ltd	Lurgan	111,880
North West Joinery	Portrush	34,590
Northbrook Technology (NI) Ltd	Belfast	797,880
Northern Hydraulics	Coalisland	22,367
Northland Computer Services Ltd	Londonderry	83,544
NTL Group Ltd	Belfast	312,000
Nugent Engineering Ltd	Dungannon	43,798
Nu-Print Fabric Converters	Londonderry	23,645
Oakwood Door Design	Magherafelt	26,229
Octopus Sportswear Manufacturing Ltd	Strabane	129,184
O'Kane Poultry Ltd	Ballymena	100,000
Old Bushmills Distillery Co Ltd, The	Bushmills	65,527
Omagh Meats	Omagh	291,649
Openwave (Phone.com NI)	Belfast	225,000
Ormeau Bakery Ltd	Belfast	99,344
Outsource Laboratories Europe Ltd	Belfast	115,500

Name of Company	Location	Max Grant
P & O European Ferries (Irish Sea) Ltd	Larne	38,743
P F Copeland Ltd	Newtownabbey	63,214
Paramount Textiles Ltd	Eglington	12,506
Parc Computing Ltd	Antrim	38,148
Parity Solutions (Ireland) Ltd	Antrim	195,000
Park Applications Computer Engineering Ltd (PACE)	Craigavon	108,560
Parthus (Silicon Systems (NI) Ltd)	Belfast	195,000
Patrick McCaul (Environmental Consulting Engineers)	Omagh	25,809
Penn Nyla (Nottingham Project) (Courtaulds Jersey)	Lurgan	47,035
Perfecseal	Londonderry	825,000
Phoenix Print & Packaging	Belfast	14,694
Pivotal Corporation		302,500
Pneutrol Ireland Ltd	Randalstown	24,804
Posthouse Belfast Hotel	Belfast	188,612
Power Action Ltd	Lisburn	17,291
Precision Cleaning Group	Londonderry	31,993
Precision Industrial Services Ltd	Eglington	238,657
Precision Polymer Services Ltd	Londonderry	81,384
Premier Woodlands	Magherafelt	3,209
Pre-Press Publishing Systems Ltd	Belfast	36,010
Print Factory, The	Enniskillen	44,335
Print 'n' Press	Londonderry	19,346
Pritchitt Foods	Newtownards	124,947
Project Planning International	Ballynahinch	19,068
Prudential Assurance Co Ltd	Belfast	340,938
Punjana Ltd	Belfast	31,153
Quality Hotel	Carrickfergus	62,781
QuChem Ltd	Belfast	54,247
Quinn Glass Ltd	Derrylin	660,000
R Beveridge Engineering Ltd	Coleraine	14,981
Radix Telecom Ltd	Craigavon	11,800
Raytheon Systems Ltd	Londonderry	300,000
Regal Processors Ltd	Craigavon	55,468
Relay Business Software	Belfast	71,004
Renshaw's Hotel	Belfast	23,734
RJC (Glass) Ltd T/A Toughglass	Kilkeel	284,708
Robert Hall Ltd	Belfast	79,149
Robert Wright & Son Ltd	Ballymena	439,896
Rooney Fish	Kilkeel	17,688
Rubber and Plastics Ltd	Belfast	18,835
Rusch Manufacturing (UK) Ltd	Lurgan	152,274
Rye Valley Foods	Enniskillen	1,194,991
Ryobi Aluminium Casting (UK) Ltd	Carrickfergus	279,279
S H Watterson (Engineering) Ltd	Magherafelt	31,253
Saintfield Yarns	Saintfield	35,417

Name of Company	Location	Max Grant
Savile Row Shirt Co Ltd - 40 Savile Row Project	Castledawson	51,583
SCA Packaging Ireland	Warrenpoint	59,543
Schrader Electronics Ltd	Antrim	76,900
Scottish Seafoods	Kilkeel	246,788
Seagate Technology (Manuf)	Londonderry	865,150
Seagate Technology (R & D)	Londonderry	714,000
Seagate Technology Media (Ireland)	Limavady	98,260
Seagoe Advanced Ceramics	Portadown	87,127
Seagoe Technologies Ltd	Portadown	44,807
Sean Quinn Group	Derrylin	192,325
Sean Timoney & Sons Ltd	Enniskillen	61,183
Segue Software Inc		178,750
Sensor Systems Watchman Ltd	Lurgan	137,300
Sherwood Systems Ltd	Belfast	72,471
Short Brothers plc	Belfast	2,663,000
Silverwood Golf Hotel & Country Club	Lurgan	25,545
Singularity	Londonderry	518,019
Slieve Donard Hotel	Newcastle	21,311
Sloan Molyneaux & Co Ltd	Belfast	49,970
SMTEK International	Lurgan	236,949
Smurfit Corrugated Cases	Lurgan	150,000
Soletron NI Ltd	Carrickfergus	399,425
Source Supplies Ltd	Belfast	51,156
Spanboard Products	Coleraine	29,669
Spectrum Premier Services	Belfast	49,332
Spirent Systems (Western Pacific Data Systems Inc - WPDS)	Belfast	130,000
Stakis Park	Templepatrick	375,752
Steam Plant Engineering Services NI Ltd	Carrickfergus	51,640
Step 2 Company (NI) Ltd, The	Coleraine	69,675
Stitchwell Ltd	Larne	23,716
Stormont Hotel	Belfast	86,443
Stream International	Londonderry	1,037,923
SX3 Ltd (Services & Systems Solutions Ltd)	Belfast	400,730
T W McDonagh Ltd	Portadown	4,540
Task (Software) Ltd	Antrim	38,738
Tenderlean Meats Ltd	Derrylin	24,814
Thales Air Defence systems Ltd (Shorts Missile Systems)	Belfast	131,884
TK - ECC Ltd	Belfast	125,580
Top Glass Designs	Maghera	23,873
Total Engineering	Londonderry	37,579
Tracey Concrete Ltd	Enniskillen	29,269
Trans Tec Automotive (Campsie) Ltd	Londonderry	54,865
Trinity Hotel	Londonderry	189,000
TriVirix International Ltd	Belfast	276,660

Name of Company	Location	Max Grant
TRW (Lucas Aerospace)	Belfast	358,500
Turkington Engineering Ltd	Cookstown	22,712
Typerite Ltd	Warrenpoint	14,596
Tyrone Crystal	Dungannon	85,153
Tyrrell Tanks Ltd	Portadown	42,285
Ulster PVC Ltd	Lisburn	8,051
Ulster Weavers Apparel Ltd	Armagh/Belfast	18,201
Ulster Weavers Apparel Ltd	Castlewella	14,201
Ulster Weavers Apparel Ltd	Belfast	34,896
Uniplas Ltd	Portadown	68,053
Unit Inspection Services	Belfast	5,025
Unitas Software Ltd	Ballycastle	18,711
UPU Industries Ltd	Dromore	59,049
UTA Enterprise Solutions Ltd	Belfast	330,000
Valley Dyeworks Ltd, The	Rostrevor	31,631
Variety Foods (NI) Ltd	Belfast	15,077
Viasystems EMS-UK Ltd (Marconi)	Ballynahinch	251,041
Vincent's Manufacturing Services Ltd	Belfast	55,678
Vision Information Consulting	Belfast	37,215
W D Irwin & Sons Ltd	Portadown	39,078
W D Meats	Coleraine	338,447
W P Trussworld Ltd	Belfast	23,016
Webforia	Belfast	63,000
Wellington Computer Systems	Belfast	41,290
Wellington Park Hotel	Belfast	31,197
Western Connect Ltd	Londonderry	36,806
White Horse Hotel, The	Londonderry	35,362
William Clark & Sons Ltd	Maghera	147,538
Wilson's Country Ltd	Portadown	24,793
Wishart Scientific	Ballyclare	32,227
Woodland Furniture	Rasharkin	21,294
Woodlock Joinery Ltd	Omagh	40,673
Yardmaster International Ltd	Draperstown	33,080
Yates APD Ltd	Bangor	15,983
Yates IT Ltd	Bangor	19,355
Yates T R Ltd	Bangor	64,684
Yates Traction Plus	Bangor	5,503

Regulatory Impact Assessments

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the financial impact on small businesses of European Commission Regulations and Directives in each of the last three years for which figures are available and to make a statement. (AQW 1550/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Since 1998 Departments have been required to undertake regulatory impact assessments for any regulatory proposal likely to impose a cost on business,

charities or the voluntary sector. These assessments do not disaggregate the costs between groups, nor do they differentiate between large or small businesses. This information would only be available at disproportionate cost.

Future of Textile Industry

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment on the prospects for future employment in the textile industry and to make a statement. (AQW 1551/00)

Sir Reg Empey: A major review has been completed and the action plan for the future of the industry developed from that has received broad support from employers. I am confident that if implemented as recommended up to 13,000 higher value jobs could be sustained.

Productivity Performance of Manufacturing Industry

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the recent performance of the manufacturing industry and to make a statement. (AQW 1552/00)

Sir Reg Empey: A key feature of the Northern Ireland economy over the past decade has been the strong improvement in the output and labour productivity performance of the manufacturing sector compared to that for the UK as a whole.

During the year to September 2000 manufacturing employment in Northern Ireland (-1.9%) and the UK (-2.3%) has remained fairly stable. However, over the same period Northern Ireland manufacturing output (+7.3%) and labour productivity (+8.9%) have outperformed the UK (+0.9% and +3.6% respectively).

Prospects for the Manufacturing Industry

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail consultations he has had with the First Minister about the prospects for the manufacturing industry in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1554/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I brief the First Minister and Deputy First Minister regularly regarding the prospects for the manufacturing industry in Northern Ireland. This covers prospects for our important traditional industries such as food, engineering, textiles and clothing.

In addition, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister also take a keen interest in the development of newer technology related to industries.

This was clearly demonstrated in their strong endorsement for the recent European marketing campaign in France and Germany.

The Orange Order

Mrs Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the Orange Order is mentioned in the Northern Ireland Tourist Board web site.

(AQW 1555/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I recently launched NITB's redeveloped consumer web site www.discovernorthernireland.com and trade guide on Friday 12 January 2001. The web site includes details of all key events in Northern Ireland throughout the year including the Twelfth of July parades. This entry makes specific reference to the Orange Order

and can be located by using the search facility in the events section of the web site.

Visiting Tourists by District Council Area

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of tourists, from outside Northern Ireland, visiting each district council area in each of the last five years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1557/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Tourism performance data are produced by combining a suite of surveys primarily designed for analysis at national level. Due to small sample sizes the number of visitors from outside Northern Ireland is not reported separately at local authority level. Details presented in this reply relate to combined out-of-state and domestic visits.

ANNEX A - REGIONAL / LOCAL AUTHORITY TOURISM ESTIMATES 1999

	(Thousands) Trips	%	(Thousands) Nights	%	(£ Million) Spend	%	Tourism Employment*
Belfast	526.4	22.5	2,271.6	21.4	79.7	24.8	4,213
Derry	101.6	4.3	538.0	5.1	17.2	5.3	908
Fermanagh Lakelands	156.9	6.7	647.6	6.1	20.2	6.3	1,068
Kingdom of Down	459.9	19.6	2,161.9	20.3	55.4	17.2	2,929
Ards	80.3	3.4	426.0	4.0	7.0	2.2	370
Down	152.2	6.5	668.2	6.3	16.7	5.2	883
Lisburn	91.0	3.9	417.3	3.9	11.2	3.5	592
North Down	136.4	5.8	650.3	6.1	20.5	6.4	1,084
Causeway Coast & Antrim Glens	671.7	28.7	3,084.2	29.0	95.6	29.7	5,054
Ballymena	63.0	2.7	289.0	2.7	7.2	2.2	381
Ballymoney	17.4	0.7	89.7	0.8	1.9	0.6	100
Carrickfergus	41.4	1.8	190.9	1.8	6.1	1.9	322
Coleraine	266.4	11.4	1,369.7	12.9	37.9	11.8	2,004
Larne	73.2	3.1	243.9	2.3	10.8	3.4	571
Limavady	40.8	1.7	173.6	1.6	6.7	2.1	354
Moyle	109.0	4.7	430.3	4.0	17.4	5.4	920
Newtownabbey	60.5	2.6	297.2	2.8	7.6	2.4	402
Other	425.7	18.2	1,924.7	18.1	53.5	16.6	2,828
Antrim	98.4	4.2	350.0	3.3	14.0	4.4	740
Armagh	24.7	1.1	139.8	1.3	2.9	0.9	153
Banbridge	19.9	0.8	87.3	0.8	2.2	0.7	116
Castlereagh	15.0	0.6	71.1	0.7	2.3	0.7	122
Cookstown	24.0	1.0	127.7	1.2	3.3	1.0	174
Craigavon	53.1	2.3	231.5	2.2	6.9	2.1	365
Dungannon & S. Tyrone	36.7	1.6	192.2	1.8	4.9	1.5	259
Magherafelt	16.1	0.7	80.5	0.8	1.8	0.6	95
Newry & Mourne**	75.2	3.2	293.5	2.8	7.2	2.2	381
Omagh	37.5	1.6	194.7	1.8	3.8	1.2	201
Strabane	25.0	1.1	156.4	1.5	4.2	1.3	222
Total	2,342.3	100.0	10,628.0	100.0	322.0	100.0	17,000

* Full-time equivalent jobs supported by tourism spend, estimated as a proportion of total spend.

** Newry & Mourne was a member of the Kingdom of Down region January-September 1999.

REGIONAL / LOCAL AUTHORITY TOURISM ESTIMATES 1998

	(Thousands) Trips*	%*	(Thousands) Nights	%	(£ Million) Spend	%	Tourism Employment**
Belfast	473.1	21.9	1962.5	19.9	65.5	23.4	3,510
Derry	91.7	4.3	501.5	5.1	13.8	4.9	738
Fermanagh Lakelands	140.2	6.5	609.0	6.2	16.7	6.0	894
South East Region	486.0	22.5	2169.4	22.0	53.8	19.2	2,887
Ards	75.4	3.5	367.1	3.7	6.3	2.2	338
Down	134.2	6.2	582.2	5.9	13.1	4.7	701
Lisburn	79.9	3.7	376.7	3.8	9.4	3.4	506
Newry & Mourne	66.2	3.1	257.3	2.6	7.4	2.6	395
North Down	130.3	6.0	586.1	5.9	17.7	6.3	946
Causeway Coast & Antrim Glens	644.0	29.9	3053.6	30.9	88.9	31.7	4,750
Ballymena	59.0	2.7	293.3	3.0	7.0	2.5	375
Ballymoney	15.1	0.7	78.9	0.8	1.4	0.5	75
Carrickfergus	33.3	1.5	170.5	1.7	4.7	1.7	252
Coleraine	262.4	12.2	1350.5	13.7	34.4	12.3	1,832
Larne	73.5	3.4	256.5	2.6	10.8	3.8	578
Limavady	39.2	1.8	188.9	1.9	6.6	2.4	356
Moyle	109.4	5.1	465.1	4.7	17.4	6.2	935
Newtownabbey	52.0	2.4	249.8	2.5	6.5	2.3	347
Other	321.3	14.9	1580.2	16.0	41.4	14.8	2,220
Antrim	87.8	4.1	300.6	3.0	11.2	4.0	600
Armagh	24.2	1.1	120.0	1.2	2.7	1.0	144
Banbridge	18.1	0.8	107.8	1.1	2.2	0.8	119
Castlereagh	11.7	0.5	77.3	0.8	1.7	0.6	93
Cookstown	19.7	0.9	107.1	1.1	2.9	1.0	155
Craigavon	52.0	2.4	234.3	2.4	6.0	2.1	320
Dungannon	33.7	1.6	213.0	2.2	5.4	1.9	292
Maghera	15.5	0.7	87.9	0.9	1.9	0.7	103
Omagh	36.3	1.7	194.2	2.0	3.7	1.3	198
Strabane	22.4	1.0	137.9	1.4	3.7	1.3	196
Total	2,156.4	100.0	9876.1	100.0	280.0	100.0	15,000

* Figures have been revised.

**Full-time equivalent jobs supported by tourism spend, estimated as a proportion of total spend.

There may be an apparent discrepancy between the sum of the constituent items and the total shown due to rounding.

REGIONAL / LOCAL AUTHORITY TOURISM ESTIMATES 1997

	(Thousands) Trips	%	(Thousands) Nights	%	(£ Million) Spend	%	Tourism Employment*
Belfast	447.6	20.9	1901.0	20.0	61.4	22.9	3,323
Derry	92.6	4.3	518.0	5.4	13.6	5.1	738
Fermanagh Lakelands	122.5	5.7	522.0	5.5	17.0	6.3	918
South East Region	476.2	22.2	2048.0	21.5	52.5	19.5	2,830
Ards	80.5	3.8	368.0	3.9	6.6	2.5	358
Down	109.2	5.1	462.0	4.9	11.3	4.2	609
Lisburn	78.3	3.7	369.0	3.9	9.7	3.6	526
Newry & Mourne	71.0	3.3	310.0	3.3	8.7	3.2	464
North Down	137.2	6.4	539.0	5.7	16.1	6.0	873
Causeway Coast & Antrim Glens	686.4	32.0	2984.0	31.3	82.4	30.7	4,454
Ballymena	57.7	2.7	276.0	2.9	7.6	2.9	413
Ballymoney	16.1	0.8	99.0	1.0	1.8	0.7	96
Carrickfergus	29.2	1.4	150.0	1.6	4.2	1.6	228
Coleraine	293.9	13.7	1303.0	13.7	34.8	13.0	1,881
Larne	83.8	3.9	253.0	2.7	7.4	2.8	399
Limavady	43.1	2.0	226.0	2.4	5.1	1.9	274
Moyle	116.3	5.4	456.0	4.8	15.1	5.6	812
Newtownabbey	46.3	2.2	221.0	2.3	6.5	2.4	352
Other	318.7	14.8	1557.0	16.3	41.0	15.3	2,219
Antrim	87.9	4.1	292.0	3.1	11.5	4.3	624
Armagh	26.3	1.2	145.0	1.5	3.0	1.1	164
Banbridge	15.2	0.7	92.0	1.0	2.2	0.8	117
Castlereagh	10.2	0.5	77.0	0.8	1.6	0.6	84
Cookstown	20.8	1.0	94.0	1.0	3.0	1.1	162
Craigavon	51.0	2.4	238.0	2.5	5.7	2.1	309
Dungannon	35.4	1.7	218.0	2.3	5.4	2.0	293
Magherafeft	16.3	0.8	92.0	1.0	1.8	0.7	97
Omagh	33.9	1.6	188.0	2.0	3.4	1.3	184
Strabane	21.7	1.0	121.0	1.3	3.4	1.3	184
TOTAL	2144.0	100.0	9530.0	100.0	267.9	99.9	14,500

*Full-time equivalent jobs supported by tourism spend, estimated as a proportion of total spend.

There may be an apparent discrepancy between the sum of the constituent items and the total shown due to rounding.

REGIONAL / LOCAL AUTHORITY TOURISM ESTIMATES 1996

	(Thousands) Trips	%	(Thousands) Nights	%	(£ Million) Spend	%	Tourism Employment*
Belfast	425.0	19.3	1889.0	19.1	59.1	22.2	2,775
Derry	93.6	4.2	533.0	5.4	13.3	5.0	625
Fermanagh Lakelands	138.5	6.3	545.0	5.5	17.4	6.5	813
South East Region	533.7	24.2	2302.0	23.2	56.6	21.3	2,663
Ards	83.3	3.8	394.0	4.0	7.9	3.0	375
Down	145.0	6.6	575.0	5.8	13.7	5.2	650
Lisburn	72.2	3.3	356.0	3.6	9.0	3.4	425
Newry & Mourne	86.8	3.9	400.0	4.0	9.9	3.7	463
North Down	146.4	6.6	577.0	5.8	16.1	6.0	750
Causeway Coast & Antrim Glens	700.2	31.9	3026.0	30.5	79.5	29.8	3,725
Ballymena	58.8	2.7	275.0	2.8	7.8	2.9	363
Ballymoney	15.6	0.7	82.0	0.8	1.6	0.6	75
Carrickfergus	27.2	1.2	139.0	1.4	3.8	1.4	175
Coleraine	279.2	12.7	1273.0	12.8	34.0	12.8	1,600
Larne	96.0	4.4	296.0	3.0	9.1	3.4	425
Limavady	43.2	2.0	240.0	2.4	5.0	1.9	238
Moyle	131.1	6.0	486.0	4.9	11.8	4.4	550
Newtownabbey	49.1	2.2	235.0	2.4	6.4	2.4	300
Other	313.0	14.1	1617.0	16.3	40.1	15.1	1,888
Antrim	75.6	3.4	321.0	3.2	11.2	4.2	525
Armagh	34.6	1.6	199.0	2.0	3.7	1.4	175
Banbridge	15.7	0.7	99.0	1.0	2.3	0.9	113
Castlereagh	9.9	0.4	76.0	0.8	1.2	0.4	50
Cookstown	23.8	1.1	85.0	0.9	2.6	1.0	125
Craigavon	48.8	2.2	250.0	2.5	6.0	2.3	288
Dungannon	33.9	1.5	212.0	2.1	5.1	1.9	238
Magheraft	16.5	0.7	99.0	1.0	1.7	0.6	75
Omagh	34.4	1.6	176.0	1.8	3.7	1.4	175
Strabane	19.8	0.9	100.0	1.0	2.6	1.0	125
Total	2204.0	100.0	9912.0	100.0	266.0	99.9	12,500

*Full-time equivalent jobs supported by tourism spend, estimated as a proportion of total spend.

There may be an apparent discrepancy between the sum of the constituent items and the total shown due to rounding.

REGIONAL / LOCAL AUTHORITY TOURISM ESTIMATES 1995

	(Thousands) Trips	%	(Thousands) Nights	%	(£ Million) Spend	%	Tourism Employment*
Belfast	443.5	17.6	1996.0	18.5	57.2	21.1	2,638
Derry	108.4	4.3	572.0	5.3	13.8	5.1	638
Fermanagh Lakelands	171.4	6.8	572.0	5.3	18.2	6.7	838
South East Region	660.3	26.2	2914.0	27.0	65.1	24.0	3,000
Ards	98.3	3.9	475.0	4.4	9.5	3.5	438
Down	199.1	7.9	842.0	7.8	19.0	7.0	875
Lisburn	73.1	2.9	345.0	3.2	8.4	3.1	388
Newry & Mourne	118.4	4.7	529.0	4.9	10.6	3.9	488
North Down	171.4	6.8	723.0	6.7	17.6	6.5	813
Causeway Coast & Antrim Glens	791.2	31.4	3064.0	28.4	77.4	28.6	3,575
Ballymena	65.5	2.6	237.0	2.2	6.8	2.5	313
Ballymoney	17.6	0.7	65.0	0.6	1.6	0.6	75
Carrickfergus	30.2	1.2	140.0	1.3	3.5	1.3	163
Coleraine	325.1	12.9	1370.0	12.7	33.3	12.3	1,538
Larne	103.3	4.1	302.0	2.8	10.0	3.7	463
Limavady	47.9	1.9	205.0	1.9	4.6	1.7	213
Moyle	138.6	5.5	475.0	4.4	10.6	3.9	488
Newtownabbey	63.0	2.5	270.0	2.5	7.0	2.6	325
Other	345.2	13.7	1672.0	15.5	39.3	14.5	1,813
Antrim	78.1	3.1	378.0	3.5	10.6	3.9	488
Armagh	45.4	1.8	248.0	2.3	4.6	1.7	213
Banbridge	15.1	0.6	86.0	0.8	1.9	0.7	88
Castlereagh	15.1	0.6	76.0	0.7	1.4	0.5	63
Cookstown	30.2	1.2	108.0	1.0	2.7	1.0	125
Craigavon	50.4	2.0	259.0	2.4	6.5	2.4	300
Dungannon	32.8	1.3	140.0	1.3	3.5	1.3	163
Magherafelt	17.6	0.7	86.0	0.8	1.6	0.6	75
Omagh	35.3	1.4	183.0	1.7	3.8	1.4	175
Strabane	25.2	1.0	108.0	1.0	2.7	1.0	125
Total	2520.0	100.0	10790.0	100.0	271.0	100.0	12,500

*Full-time equivalent jobs supported by tourism spend, estimated as a proportion of total spend.

There may be an apparent discrepancy between the sum of the constituent items and the total shown due to rounding.

Gross Domestic Product

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the recent trends in the levels of gross domestic product for Northern Ireland and to make a statement. (AQW 1561/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The Northern Ireland economy grew faster than the UK economy as a whole in the 1990's.

Between 1990 and 1998 — the latest data available — gross domestic product (GDP) in Northern Ireland grew by 26.1% (in real terms) compared to 16.3% for the United Kingdom.

Over the same period GDP per head grew by 18.5% in Northern Ireland compared to 13% for the UK. Consequently Northern Ireland's GDP per head of population, as a percentage of the UK figure, increased

from 72% in 1990 to 76% in 1998 and has resulted in some welcome convergence in living standards.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Trees and Boundary Hedges

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment if he intends to introduce legislation to deal with trees and boundary hedges in domestic gardens and if he will make a statement. (AQW 1418/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I have no plans to introduce such legislation at this time. There is not sufficient evidence to indicate that legislation is needed in this area, or to justify resources being diverted from other important matters to undertake the necessary research, or to progress work where legislation could be introduced. All available resources are committed to an existing programme of work. I will of course continue to keep the Department's priorities under review.

Licensed Premises

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of applications for permission to make alterations to licensed premises in Moy approved by the Planning Service in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1425/00)

Mr Foster: The following is a breakdown of permissions granted, by year, for alterations to licensed premises in Moy:

- 1996: 2 planning approvals granted and 2 listed building consents granted.
- 1999: 1 planning approval granted and 1 listed building consent granted.
- 2000: 1 planning approval granted and 1 listed building consent granted.

The Department has no specific policy on extensions to licensed premises in villages. Each application is considered on its own merits taking account of prevailing planning policies and the statutory development plan for the area.

In the case of an application for an extension to existing licensed premises, the principle of land use would have been established already by virtue of the existing premises. In considering an application, the Department would therefore, take account of visual amenity, traffic impact and the effect that noise or disturbance would have on the amenity of the area.

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his planning policy in respect of small village

public houses which make applications for major extensions to existing premises. (AQW 1426/00)

Mr Foster: The following is a breakdown of permissions granted, by year, for alterations to licensed premises in Moy:

- 1996: 2 planning approvals granted and 2 listed building consents granted.
- 1999: 1 planning approval granted and 1 listed building consent granted.
- 2000: 1 planning approval granted and 1 listed building consent granted.

The Department has no specific policy on extensions to licensed premises in villages. Each application is considered on its own merits taking account of prevailing planning policies and the statutory Development Plan for the area.

In the case of an application for an extension to existing licensed premises, the principle of land use would have been established already by virtue of the existing premises. In considering an application, the Department would therefore take account of visual amenity, traffic impact and the effect that noise or disturbance would have on the amenity of the area.

Planning Compensation Claims

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the number of applicants who successfully applied for compensation against the Planning Service in each of the last five years for which figures are available and detail the total amount paid out in each year.

(AQW 1461/00)

Mr Foster: The Department's records show that 45 applicants have received a total of £3,351,000 compensation over the last five years. A breakdown of this is set out below.

Year	Number of Applicants	Amount of Compensation Paid
1995/96	6	£51,500
1996/97	11	£817,000
1997/98	12	£2,165,500
1998/99	6	£125,000
1999/00	10	£192,000
Totals:	45	£3,351,000

Landfill Tax

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment if he will make it his policy to ensure that landfill tax

funds are diverted to district councils in order to support recycling schemes and to make a statement.

(AQW 1487/00)

Mr Foster: Landfill tax is an excepted matter.

I am aware that the UK Government, in its 2000 pre-Budget report, announced its intention to explore how the resources of the landfill tax credit scheme could be better used to increase recycling rates, particularly of household waste. I am not aware of any developments since then.

I am not, myself, in a position to determine landfill tax policy. However, I will explore with the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether representation should be made to Her Majesty's Treasury about the uses to which landfill tax credit scheme funds are put.

Waste Management

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment to ensure that financial resources are made available to public and private sector organisations so they can achieve the targets established as a result of the European Union Landfill Directive and the Northern Ireland waste strategy and to make a statement.

(AQW 1488/00)

Mr Foster: As regards the public sector, my Department has provided financial support to two of the three council groupings, which are preparing waste management plans for their areas. The third group has been promised similar support.

I wrote to all district councils on 9 November 2000 indicating that an extra £3.5m is being made available for waste management in the financial year 2001-02 and that most of this additional funding would be set aside to assist them with their waste management plans.

Completion of the management plans will help us begin the process of meeting the primary and secondary targets declared in the NI waste management strategy.

As regards private sector organisations, I intend to pursue a market development programme in the first phase of the strategy to prepare the foundation for the targets to be met. The programme, which will involve my Department, the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment and other key stakeholder groups, will assist eligible projects designed to develop sustainable markets for recycled materials.

My officials are in the process of completing the arrangements for the appointment of the Waste Management Board, which will play a key role in guiding the programme.

Landfill Sites

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment to outline when the approvals for planning applications for current landfill sites will be determined and to make a statement.

(AQW 1489/00)

Mr Foster: My Department is at present considering a number of planning applications proposing extensions to current landfill sites and the establishment of some entirely new sites.

In addition to normal planning considerations such as environmental and traffic impacts, these applications are also assessed in terms of the contribution they may make to the achievement of the objectives of the waste management strategy, published last year. This requires district councils to prepare waste management plans, which will provide for the disposal of waste in the context of the waste management strategy. The future distribution of waste disposal sites will be determined with regard to the waste management plans. District councils are required to prepare plans during 2001.

In the period prior to the publication of plans, councils will have to make interim arrangements for the disposal of waste. My Department has written to councils to request their proposals for providing such essential interim capacity (EIC) and is presently assessing the responses. The assessment of EIC will be completed in the near future and at that stage it is expected that decisions will be taken on the best way to proceed with individual landfill applications.

Tullyvar Landfill Site

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment to list the types of material that have been dumped at Tullyvar landfill site, County Tyrone. (AQW 1511/00)

Mr Foster: The Tullyvar site is owned, operated and regulated by Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council which is responsible for monitoring and recording the detail of the types and quantities of waste deposited.

My Department has issued two authorisations for the Tullyvar site: Planning permission and Water Act consent.

Planning permission was granted in 1990 for infilling and restoration using imported domestic, commercial and construction industry wastes. No conditions were imposed on the planning approval to qualify or restrict the types of waste to be deposited.

However, the most recent Water Act consent, issued in May 2000, restricted waste deposited at Tullyvar to household waste; industrial waste; old cars and trailers; waste from the construction industry; and digested sewage sludge cake as well as some special wastes.

Planning Application

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to (a) confirm that a planning application has been lodged for development of the former carpet factory, Moss Road, Ballygowan (b) detail the nature of this application and if it is compatible with the Ards and Down area plan draft 'issues paper' which specifically designates this site as a valuable asset for industrial use and (c) state what policy he is following in regard to this.

(AQW 1534/00)

Mr Foster: I can confirm that my Department received an application for outline planning permission for housing development on lands totalling 7 hectares, which includes the former Lamont Carpets and Yarn factory, on 29 November 2000.

Part of the application site — approximately 1 hectare — lies outside the development limit for the village of Ballygowan, as defined in the North Down and Ards plan 1984 to 1995, which remains the statutory development plan for the area.

The Ards and Down area plan 'Issues Paper' does identify the site as a potential valuable asset for industrial use, and will be a material consideration in the Department's assessment of the application.

The issue of retaining an industrial land reserve will be fully taken into account before a decision is reached on this application.

Christmas Cards

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment if, pursuant to AQW 1110/00, he will confirm that he sent official Christmas cards to the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

(AQW 1545/00)

Mr Foster: The Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety were sent a Christmas card from the Minister of the Environment.

Review of Local Government

Mr A Doherty asked the Minister of the Environment to outline what progress has been made with regard to a comprehensive review of local government.

(AQW 1570/00)

Mr Foster: As outlined in the Programme for Government, the Executive are committed to a comprehensive review of all aspects of public administration in Northern Ireland. Administration of local public services will be considered as part of that review, and I propose to engage the local government sector in that process at the earliest opportunity. The Executive are presently considering the detailed requirements for taking the

review forward, and this will inform the programme for consulting local government.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the measures he is taking to prevent the destruction of woodland in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1597/00)

Mr Foster: Important woodlands for wildlife and nature conservation in Northern Ireland have been designated by the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department as areas of special scientific interest or are recognised as nature reserves. These measures both secure their future and open the way for their active management.

The Environment and Heritage Service also promotes the retention and expansion of woodland through education and by providing grant-aid for conservation work.

Planning decisions affecting trees and woodland are subject to the policies in the Planning Policy Statement 2 (PPS2) entitled 'Planning and Nature Conservation'. The Department seeks to protect trees, groups of trees and woodland areas of particular importance if they have nature conservation value or contribute to the amenity of a particular area.

Area plans contain policies to protect specific woodlands and groups of trees. They recognise woodlands designated for their international, national and local nature conservation importance, with a presumption towards their conservation.

My Department also makes tree preservation orders (TPOs) to protect trees, groups of trees or woodlands. In the recent past, a number of TPOs have been made specifically to protect woodland areas. We are considering ways in which the legislation for making TPOs can be strengthened.

The statutory advisory body to my Department, the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, is holding a seminar in early March specifically to investigate the need for measures to conserve and enhance our forests and woodlands and promote their wise and sustainable use. I look forward to receiving and considering the resulting advice in due course.

My Colleague the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development also has responsibilities in the area of woodland management and regeneration especially in relation to commercial forestry.

European Commission Directive 96/61/EC

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm that the European Commission Directive 96/61/EC is being fully implemented.

(AQW 1607/00)

Mr Foster: Directive 96/61/EC, which deals with integrated pollution prevention and control, has not yet been transposed in Northern Ireland.

This is part of a backlog of work to transpose EU Directives relating to the environment into Northern Ireland domestic legislation which arose before devolution.

However, as a direct result of the recent Budget, I will be able to allocate additional resources to take forward the policy and legislative work needed to achieve the transposition of this and other Directives. The draft Programme for Government contains a commitment to progressively reduce the backlog.

The process of recruiting additional staff has now started. In the meantime, my officials are preparing a consultation paper seeking views on the proposed arrangements for transposing the Directive; this will be issued as soon as possible. I hope that the necessary legislation will be in place by July 2002.

In the meantime, the control of emissions from industrial processes will continue to be regulated under the Industrial Pollution Control (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which provides a strong and effective means of pollution control.

Special Areas of Conservation

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of special areas of conservation (SAC) designated since 1992, and outline his plans for further designations. (AQO 707/00)

Mr Foster: No special areas of conservation have yet been designated under the Habitats Directive by any member state in the European Union. Formal designation by member states follows acceptance by the European Commission of the national lists of candidate special areas of conservation. This process is not yet complete for the United Kingdom.

The UK Government have proposed a total of 576 sites for submission as candidate special areas of conservation, including 43 sites in Northern Ireland.

Of the 43 Northern Ireland sites, 40 have been submitted to the EC, and consultation on the remaining three sites is either under way or will commence very shortly.

Once these outstanding sites have been submitted to the Commission, the Northern Ireland contribution to the UK list of special areas of conservation will be substantially complete. I do acknowledge, however, that there may be grounds for additional sites for Atlantic Salmon in Northern Ireland. I have asked my officials to consider this possibility.

Local Government Modernisation

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his plans to modernise local government and to make a statement. (AQO 703/00)

Mr Foster: It is intended that local government will be included in the review of the public sector which will be conducted by the Office of the First and the Deputy First Minister.

My Department, in partnership with local government, is putting in place the necessary procedures for best value, and it is planned to have the framework and requirements of the regime enshrined in primary legislation by June 2001. A further aspect of modernisation will be the development of a new ethical framework for councillors and council officials. Work on this development is now under way, again in partnership with local government.

School Transport

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any discussions he has had with his ministerial counterpart in Education concerning school bus transport in Northern Ireland and to make a statement.

(AQO 672/00)

Mr Foster: I have not had any such discussions. Home to school transport is a matter for education and library boards, in accordance with arrangements approved by the Department of Education.

My Department is responsible under the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 for the general licensing of road transport operators who carry passengers by road for reward. My Department also issues road service licences to these operators in respect of the specific services they provide. Vehicles used by operators are required to meet relevant construction and use standards, which include limits on the maximum numbers of passengers permitted to be carried. My Department's enforcement staff regulate both operator and road service licences, as well as vehicle standards, as do the police.

A bus permits scheme, introduced in 1990 through an amendment to the 1967 Act, allows non - profit organisations concerned with education, religion, social welfare and other activities of benefit to the community to operate passenger-carrying vehicles. This is the scheme under which education and library boards operate their own buses.

The Environment Committee of the Assembly began a public inquiry into school transport in September 2000. I look forward to seeing the Committee's report. Its findings and recommendations will be fully considered by my Department in conjunction with the Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development.

Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail when he plans to publish the Northern Ireland sustainable development strategy. (AQO 706/00)

Mr Foster: The UK sustainable development strategy, published in May 1999, acknowledged that the devolved Administrations would have the opportunity to deliver policies for sustainable development which reflect their institutions, landscapes, cultures and ways of life.

The UK strategy established social progress, environmental protection, prudent use of natural resources, and economic growth as the integrated objectives of sustainable development. The strategy also included a set of key principles to support these objectives.

The Executive have endorsed the objectives and principles of the UK strategy. These are reflected in the draft Programme for Government and in many of the departmental policies and programmes that underpin it.

The published Programme for Government will include a target for my Department to publish proposals for a sustainable development strategy for Northern Ireland by the end of June this year. This will be subject to the agreement of other Departments and Ministers.

Publication will be followed by widespread consultation to encourage an extensive and inclusive debate on sustainable development as a key cross-cutting issue.

Waste Management

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment to ensure that local authorities have adequate financial resources to prepare and deliver realistic, sustainable and responsible waste management strategies. (AQO 678/00)

Mr Foster: One of the key objectives of the NI waste management strategy published by my Department in March 2000 is to put in place a framework for the preparation of joint waste management plans.

As indicated recently in reply to a similar written question on this topic, my Department has given financial support to two of the three council groupings which are preparing waste management plans for their areas. The third group has been promised similar support.

In addition, an extra £3.5m has been made available for waste management in the Budget for the next financial year. On 9 November last year I wrote to all of the district councils indicating that most of this additional funding would be made available to them to assist with the implementation of their waste management plans.

It is my intention to distribute the additional monies in a fair and transparent manner, and I will ensure that my

officials communicate regularly with the council groupings and individual councils as waste plans are finalised.

While my Department will offer district councils all the help it can, primary responsibility for resourcing the preparation and implementation of waste management plans rests with the councils themselves.

Historic Buildings Grants

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail those buildings that will benefit as a result of the additional allocation of £600,000 for historic buildings grants. (AQO 680/00)

Mr Foster: It has been practice in the past to stage certain historic buildings grants across a number of years. This applied to projects attracting grant-aid of more than £25,000 for churches or £50,000 for buildings owned privately or by district councils. The purpose was to ensure that the annual budget for historic buildings grant was distributed equitably across applications.

The additional £600,000 being made available this year, for which I am grateful to Minister Durkan and Colleagues on the Executive Committee, will be used to bring forward payments on these large schemes which would otherwise represent commitments in the 2001-02 financial year. This will facilitate budgetary management next year and help avoid the problem of overcommitment which led to the current suspension on the acceptance of new applications for historic buildings grants.

Invitations to claim have been issued in respect of 32 large schemes – 19 privately owned, 2 owned by district councils and 10 churches. The amount to be paid to each will depend on the value of any valid claim submitted in respect of work completed to required standards.

It remains my intention to start accepting new applications from 1 April, subject to the condition that no grant-aid will be payable before the 2002-03 financial year.

Low Emission Fuels

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment if he intends to introduce any incentives for motorists to convert their vehicles to run on low emission fuels and to make a statement. (AQO 662/00)

Mr Foster: I am pleased to say that an incentive, in the form of financial assistance, is already available to motorists under the UK Government's PowerShift programme. This programme, which extends to Northern Ireland, provides grant-aid of 40% to 75% of the additional cost of buying a clean-fuelled vehicle or converting an existing vehicle.

The programme is administered in Northern Ireland by the Energy Saving Trust.

Grants are available, to both private and commercial vehicle users, to assist in the purchase or conversion of vehicles to run on liquid petroleum gas, natural gas or electricity. Grants can range from a few hundred pounds for a clean-fuelled car to many thousands for a larger vehicle such as a refuse lorry or a bus.

The UK Government has also established a forum to review the development of the clean-fuels market. The forum will consider measures to encourage the introduction of cleaner fuels and engine technologies. My officials will be monitoring progress on this work.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Budget Statement

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he plans to discuss his recent Budget statement with each district council. (AQW 1546/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The draft Budget that was published in October 2000 provided a full opportunity for interested parties including district councils, to make representations. The draft Budget and the revised Budget were each debated fully by the Assembly and approved on 18 December 2000. I have no plans at present to discuss the final Budget statement with each district council.

Capital Investment in Public Services

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his plans for capital investment in public services over the next three years and to make a statement. (AQW 1613/00)

Mr Durkan: The total capital investment plans for the years 2001-02, 2002-03 and 2003-04 are £750m, £750m and £730m respectively. Further details about individual departmental allocations are set out in the public expenditure plans, approved by the Assembly on 19 December 2000.

These allocations may be further enhanced through successful bids against the executive programme funds.

Capital Investment in Public Services

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his plans for capital investment in public services over the next three years. (AQW 1661/00)

Mr Durkan: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 1613/00 given on 9 February 2001.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Occupational Therapy Departments

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of referrals to occupational therapy departments from the Housing Executive grants department, in each health and social services trust, which are outstanding; (b) the steps being taken to decrease the time taken for the occupational therapy departments to respond to referrals from the Housing Executive grants department; (c) the number of occupational therapists currently employed (i) full-time and (ii) part-time by each health and social services trust; and (d) her plans to increase the number of occupational therapists in each trust. (AQW 1423/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Information on the number of referrals to occupational therapy departments from the Housing Executive grants department which are outstanding is not collected centrally. I am considering the preliminary report of the joint Housing Executive/Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety review of the housing adaptations service. This contains a number of recommendations designed to improve the service, including improved response times by occupational therapy departments.

The number of full-time and part-time occupational therapists employed by each health and social services trust is set out in the table below. This shows the position on 30 September 2000, the latest date for which figures are available. Proposals to increase the number of occupational therapists employed by health and social services trusts are under consideration and decisions will be taken as soon as possible.

Trust	Full Time	Part Time
Armagh and Dungannon	16	14
Belfast City Hospital	21	3
Causeway	14	6
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	28	12
Down Lisburn	24	14
Foyle	30	6
Green Park	29	9
Homefirst	64	24
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	7	1
Newry & Mourne	20	3
North & West Belfast	20	9

Trust	Full Time	Part Time
Royal Group of Hospitals	18	1
South & East Belfast	26	16
Sperrin Lakeland	22	5
Ulster Community & Hospitals	31	16
Total	370	139

Ní bhailítear eolas go lárnach ar líon na n-atreoruithe chuig ranna teiripe saothair ó roinn deontas an fheidhmeannais tithíochta atá gan réiteach. Tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh ar réamhthuaisce chomhathbhreithniú an Fheidhmeannais Tithíochta/na Roinne Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí ar an tseirbhís oiriúnaithe tithíochta. Inti seo tá roinnt moltaí leagtha amach leis an tseirbhís a fheabhsú, lena n-áirítear amanna freagartha feabhsaithe ag ranna teiripe saothair.

Leagtar amach líon na dteiripithe saothair lánaimseartha agus páirtaimseartha a fhostaíonn gach iontaobhas sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta sa tábla thíos. Léiríonn sé seo cúrsaí mar atá siad ar an 30ú Meán Fómhair 2000, an dáta is déanaí dá bhfuil figiúirí ar fáil. Tá machnamh á dhéanamh ar mholtaí le líon na dteiripithe saothair a fhostaíonn iontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta a mhéadú agus déanfar cinntí a luaithé agus is féidir.

Iontaobhas	Lánaimseartha	Páirtaimseartha
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	16	14
Otharlann Cathrach Bhéal Feirste	21	3
An Clochán	14	6
Pobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna	28	12
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	24	14
An Feabhal	30	6
An Pháirc Ghlas	29	9
Homefirst	64	24
An Otharlann Mater Infirmorum	7	1
An tÍúr & an Mhúrn	20	3
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	20	9
Grúpa Ríoga na nOtharlann	18	1
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	26	16
Loch-cheantar Speirín	22	5
Pobal & Otharlanna Uladh	31	16
Iomlán	370	139

Housing Executive Disabled Facilities Grants

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail for each health and social services trust area, for each of the last five years for which figures are available (a) the number of referrals of Housing Executive disabled facilities grants to occupational therapy departments; (b) the average interval between

the referral of a Housing Executive disabled facilities grant to the occupational therapy department and the first visit to the applicant by the occupational therapist; and (c) the maximum interval between the referral of a Housing Executive disabled facilities grant to the occupational therapy department and the first visit to the applicant by the occupational therapist. (AQW 1424/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available. Information on the number of individuals referred for assessment by the Housing Executive to occupational therapists is available for the years ending September 1997 to September 2000 and is detailed in the table below.

REFERRALS TO OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS FROM HOUSING EXECUTIVE

Year ending	Priority	Other	Total
September 1997	624	4,183	4,807
September 1998	765	5,092	5,857
September 1999	1,196	5,031	6,227
September 2000	1,151	4,263	5,414

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil. Tá eolas ar líon na ndaoine aonair a atreoraíodh le haghaidh measúnú ag an Fheidhmeannas Tithíochta chuig teiripithe saothair ar fáil do na blianta ag críochnú Meán Fómhair 1997 go Meán Fómhair 2000, agus mionléirítear sa tábla thíos é.

ATREORUITHE CHUIG TEIRIPITHE SAOTHAIR ÓN FHEIDHMEANNAS TITHÍOCHTA

Bliain ag críochnú	Tosaíocht	Eile	Iomlán
Meán Fómhair 1997	624	4,183	4,807
Meán Fómhair 1998	765	5,092	5,857
Meán Fómhair 1999	1,196	5,031	6,227
Meán Fómhair 2000	1,151	4,263	5,414

Intensive Care and High Dependency Beds

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1018/00, to detail the number of permanent intensive care and high dependency beds allocated to each trust area.

(AQW 1427/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is as follows:

Trust	Additional IC & HD Beds	Costs (£000)
Royal Group of Hospitals	8	£875
Belfast City Hospital	2	£65
Ulster Community & Hospitals	5	£499
United Hospitals	2	£530
Craigavon Area Hospital	3	£435
Altnagelvin Hospital	1	£308
Total	21	£3,587

It is not possible to provide a detailed breakdown of the additional staff associated with the additional beds in each trust. In general terms, however, each additional intensive care bed will on average require five to seven staff and each additional high dependency bed two to three staff.

Is mar a leanas atá an t-eolas a iarradh:

Iontaobhas	Leapacha Breise DC & AS	Costais (£000)
Grúpa Ríoga Ospidéal	8	£875
Ospidéal Cathrach Bhéal Feirste	2	£65
Pobal & Ospidéal Uladh	5	£499
Na hOspidéal Aontaithe	2	£530
Ospidéal Cheantar Craigavon	3	£435
Ospidéal Alt na nGealbhan	1	£308
IOMLÁN	21	£3,587

Ní féidir miondealú a dhéanamh ar líon na foirne breise a bhaineann leis na leapacha breise i ngach iontaobhas. Ach i gcoitinne, beidh idir cuig agus seacht mball foirne ar an mheán de dhíth le freastal ar gach leaba dianchuraim bhreise agus idir dha agus trí bhall foirne le freastal ar gach leaba ardspleach bhreise.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the additional human and financial resources allocated to service the recently announced additional permanent intensive care and high dependency beds for each trust area. (AQW 1428/00)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 1427/00.

Tarraingim aird an Chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 1427/00.

Additional Beds

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1018/00, to detail the human and financial resources for each trust area allocated to service the 291 additional beds. (AQW 1429/00)

Ms de Brún: Boards estimate that a total of £7.29 million will be invested to support the introduction of the additional 291 beds, as follows:

Trust	Additional Beds	Costs (£000)
Royal Group of Hospitals	54	£1,566
Belfast City Hospital	40	£769
Down Lisburn	38	£568
Ulster Community & Hospitals	37	£663

Trust	Additional Beds	Costs (£000)
United Hospitals	39	£1,560
Causeway	12	£250
Craigavon Area Hospital	27	£935
Newry & Mourne	11	£250
Altnagelvin	24	£628
Sperrin Lakeland	9	£100
Total	291	£7,289

It is not possible to specify in detail the human resources involved in supporting these additional beds, since they comprise not only new nursing staff but also extra nursing, medical and other support from existing resources. I can confirm, however, that in total an extra 130 staff have been recruited for this purpose.

Measann na boird go n-infheisteofar £7.29m san iomlán mar thacaíocht maidir leis na 291 leaba bhreise a thabharfar isteach, mar a leanas:

Iontaobhas	Leapacha Breise	Costais (£000)
Grúpa Ríoga Ospidéal	54	£1,566
Ospidéal Cathrach Bhéal Feirste	40	£769
An Dún agus Lios na gCearrbhach	38	£568
Pobal & Ospidéal Uladh	37	£663
Na hOspidéal Aontaithe	39	£1,560
An Clochán	12	£250
Ospidéal Cheantar Craigavon	27	£935
An tÍúr & Múma	11	£250
Alt na nGealbhan	24	£628
Loch-Cheantar Speirín	9	£100
Iomlán	291	£7,289

Ní féidir na hacmhainní daonna a bheas i gceist le freastal ar na leapacha breise seo a shonrú go mionchruinn, na ní hé amháin go mbeidh baill foirne nua san áireamh ach beidh cúnamh breise altránais agus míochaine ag teacht ó acmhainní atá anois ann. Ach thig liom a dhearbhu gur earcaíodh 130 ball foirne breise san iomlán chun na críche sin.

Nursing and Midwifery Council

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline if there will be a separate regulatory structure for midwives within the new national plan. (AQW 1431/00)

Ms de Brún: The proposals for a new nursing and midwifery council provide for the separate registration of midwives and the regulation of their practice.

Forálann na moltaí do chomhairle altranais agus chnámhseachais nua do chlárú scartha ban cabhrach agus do rialú a gcleachtais.

Health and Personal Social Services Strategy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of doctors who will be employed within her national plan.

(AQW 1434/00)

Ms de Brún: I have not yet decided on a strategy for the future development of the health and personal social services here. When decisions are made, the workforce implications for all the professions concerned will be considered.

Níl cinneadh déanta agam go fóill ar straitéis d'fhorbairt na seirbhísí sláinte sóisialta agus pearsanta sa toadhchá. Nuair a dhéanfar cinntí, cuirfear na himpleachtaí do fhórsa oibre na ngairmeacha uile i gceist san áireamh.

Royal Maternity Hospital Neonatal Unit

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of occasions in the last six months the Royal Maternity Hospital neonatal unit was unable to accept a patient on transfer.

(AQW 1440/00)

Ms de Brún: In the last six months there were four occasions when the Royal Maternity Hospital was unable to accept a patient transfer request. This involved a total of eight antenatal mothers who were booked in to other hospitals for delivery. The neonatologist made arrangements with colleagues in other units to accept these mothers for delivery.

Bhí ceithre ócáid ann le linn na sé mhí seo caite nuair nach raibh an tOspidéal Máithreachais Ríoga ábalta glacadh le hiarraidh chun othair a aistriú. Bhí ocht máthair réidh le breith i gceist san iomlán a raibh leapacha luí seoil curtha in áirithe dóibh in ospidéal eile. Rinne an lia nua-naíochta socruithe lena chomhghleacaithe in aonaid eile go gcuirfeadh siad leapacha luí seoil ar fáil do na máithreacha sin.

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of occasions in each of the last three years for which figures are available when expectant mothers admitted to the Royal Maternity Hospital needing neonatal services have had to be transferred to other hospitals due to lack of beds.

(AQW 1441/00)

Ms de Brún: In the last three years there has been one occasion, on 26 December 2000, when one expectant mother who was booked for delivery in the Lagan Valley hospital was admitted to the Royal Maternity Hospital and after assessment was transferred to the Ulster Hospital.

Le linn na dtrí bliana seo caite bhí ócáid amháin ann, ar an 26 Nollaig 2000, nuair a tharla, i gcás mná a bhí réidh le breith agus a raibh leaba luí seoil curtha in áirithe dí in Ospidéal Ghleann an Lagáin, gur glacadh isteach san Ospidéal Máithreachais Ríoga í agus i ndiaidh measúnú a dhéanamh uirthi aistríodh go dtí Ospidéal Uladh í.

Midwives

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of midwives employed at the Jubilee Hospital prior to the merger with the Royal Maternity Hospital who have not continued in their profession at the Royal Maternity Hospital.

(AQW 1442/00)

Ms de Brún: Prior to the merger with the Royal Maternity Hospital, 191 midwives were employed at the Jubilee Hospital. After the merger with the Royal Maternity Hospital, 171 of the 191 Jubilee midwives continued in their profession at the Royal Maternity Hospital. Therefore, 20 of the Jubilee midwives did not continue in their profession at the Royal Maternity Hospital.

Roimh an chumasc leis an Ospidéal Máithreachais Ríoga, bhí 191 chnámhseach ar fostú in Ospidéal an Jubilee. I ndiaidh an chumaisc leis an Ospidéal Máithreachais Ríoga, lean 171 de 191 chnámhseach an Jubilee ar aghaidh ina ngairm san Ospidéal Máithreachais Ríoga. Mar sin de, níor lean 20 de chnámhseacha an Jubilee ar aghaidh ina ngairm san Ospidéal Máithreachais Ríoga.

Fibromyalgia

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps she is taking to improve early diagnosis of fibromyalgia in children.

(AQW 1450/00)

Ms de Brún: Fibromyalgia is rare in children. There are three doctors who specialise in the diagnosis of fibromyalgia in children, two of whom are Rheumatologists with special interest in children and the other is a paediatrician with a special interest in musculoskeletal conditions. By its nature, fibromyalgia is difficult to diagnose and other medical or neurological conditions must first be excluded. There is no blood test or diagnostic examination available and in view of the multiple diverse symptoms there will always be a possibility of delays in diagnosis. In general clinical practice there is an awareness of this condition and every effort is made to diagnose as early as possible.

Is annamh a bhíonn fiobrómialge i bpáistí. Tá triúr dochtúir ann a dhéanann speisialtóireacht ar fháithmheas fiobrómialge i bpáistí. Réamaitheolaithe is ea beirt acu, a bhfuil suim ar leith acu i bpáistí, agus is leanbhla é an duine eile a bhfuil suim ar leith aige i riochtaí cnámhra-

mhatánacha. De réir a nádúir, tá sé deacair fiobrómialge a fháithmheas agus caithfear riochtaí míochaine nó néareolaíocha eile a chur as an áireamh ar dtús. Níl tástáil fola nó scrúdú fáthmheasa ar fáil agus ó tharla go bhfuil ilairíonna éagsúla ann, is féidir go mbeidh moilleanna ann i gcónaí á fáithmheas. I geachtas cliniciúil ginearálta tá eolas ar an riocht seo agus déantar gach iarracht í a fháithmheas a luaithe agus is féidir.

Bed Provision — Sperrin Lakeland Trust

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current hospital bed provision in the Sperrin Lakeland Trust, West Tyrone. (AQW 1451/00)

Ms de Brún: At 3 December 2000 — the latest date for which information is available — there were a total of 365 hospital beds in Sperrin Lakeland Trust: 211 in Erne Hospital and 154 in Tyrone County Hospital.

Ar an 3 lá de Nollaig 2000 — an data ba déanaí a raibh eolas le fáil — bhí 365 leaba otharlainne ar fad san Iontaobhas Speirín Tír na Lochanna, 211 in Otharlann na hÉirne agus 211 in Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain.

Operation Costs

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average cost of a hip replacement operation in the year 2000-01. (AQW 1452/00)

Ms de Brún: The estimated full cost for a primary hip replacement operation performed during 2000-01 is approximately £3,300.

Measfar go raibh faoi thuairim £3,300 mar chostas iomlán ar obráid de phríomhathsholáthar corróige a rinneadh sa bhliain 2000-01.

Domiciliary Care for the Elderly

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the availability of domiciliary care for the elderly. (AQW 1453/00)

Ms de Brún: Domiciliary care services such as home help, night help, community nursing and other specialist services are available in all health and social services trust areas to elderly people who have been assessed as needing such services.

Tá seirbhísí chúram baile mar chúnamh baile, cúnamh oíche, altranas pobail agus seirbhísí sainiúla eile le fáil i ngach limistéar d'iontaobhas SSS don sean ar measadh iad mar dhaoine a raibh na seirbhísí sin de dhíth orthu.

Primary Health Care

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps she is taking to improve access to primary health care.

(AQW 1454/00)

Ms de Brún: Health and Social Services Boards have a duty to ensure that all people living in their areas have access to primary care services. A range of incentive payment schemes already exists to encourage practitioners to work in areas where there might otherwise be difficulties in accessing primary care services. These include the deprivation payments, rural practice payments, practice viability, dispensing doctors and essential small pharmacy schemes.

I recently published a major consultative paper entitled 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care' and this has been widely circulated to interested parties, including MLAs. It identifies a number of priority areas for development, including the need to promote equity of access to primary care and to explore new ways of improving access to primary care services. The paper suggests a number of ways in which we might achieve those aims, including new models of teamworking, a locality-based approach to needs assessment and service delivery, and improved communications technology, use of information and out-of-hours cover. I have invited comments on the range of proposals by 2 March 2001, and I will consider all views that are expressed.

Tá dualgas ar bhoird SSS a dheimhniú go bhfuil teacht ar phríomhsheirbhísí cúraim ag gach duine atá ina chónaí ina limistéir. Tá réimse scéimeanna d'íocaíochta spreagúla ann cheana féin le dochtúirí a mhealladh chuig limistéir nach mbeadh, ar dhóigh éigin, teacht ar phríomhsheirbhísí cúraim. Sna scéimeanna seo, tá íocaíochtaí díthe, íocaíochtaí cliantachta tuaithe, inmharthanacht cliantachta, dochtúirí dála agus scéimeanna riachtanacha chógaslaine bige.

D'fhoilsigh mé ar na mallaibh mórpháipéar comhairleach dar teideal, 'Ag Tógáil an Bhealaigh Chun Tosaigh I bPríomhchúram.' Riaradh go forleathan é ar eagraíochta a mbeadh suim acu ann, Comhaltar san áireamh. Aimsíonn sé roinnt bunréimsí le haghaidh forbartha, ina measc an gá le cothromas a chothú i rochtain bhunchúraim, chomh maith le dóigheanna úra a scrúdú ar rochtain seirbhísí bunchúraim a fheabhsú. Molann an páipéar roinnt dóigheanna trína dtiocfadh linn, b'fhéidir, na haidhmeanna sin a bhaint amach, chomh maith le samhlacha úra d'obair as láimh a chéile, dul i gcomhar, ar bhunadh logánta, le measúnú díthe agus seacadú seirbhísí, agus teicneolaíocht teagmhála fheabhsaithe, úsáid eolais agus urrús i ndiaidh uaireanta. D'fhear mé fáilte roimh bharúileacha, data deiridh Márta 2001, ar an réimse de mholtaí agus déanfaidh mé, gach ceann acu a thomhas.

Retention of Children's Organs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) whom she has appointed to head the inquiry into the retention of children's organs; (b) the remit of the inquiry; (c) the funding involved; and (d) when a report is expected.

(AQW 1458/00)

Ms de Brún: I have not commissioned a formal inquiry into the retention of children's organs here at this stage. I am still establishing the full facts concerning the retention of organs without informed consent and 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 recur. At this point I am ruling nothing out.

Níor choimisiúnaigh mé fiosrú foirmiúil ar choinneáil orgáin páistí anseo go fóill. Tá mé ag iarraidh na fíricí iomlána a aimsiú go fóill maidir leis na horgáin a coinníodh gan toiliú eolasach a bheith tugtha agus déanfaidh mé cibé beart is gá ina leith. Tá sé beartaithe agam gníomhú go gasta chun an dochar a rinneadh mar gheall ar sheanchleachtas nach raibh inghlactha a leigheas agus chun a chinntiú nach dtarlóidh a leithéid de chleachtas arís. Ag an phointe seo níl mé ag cur rud ar bith as an áireamh.

Organ Donation and Retention

Mrs Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) confirm that she was presented with a report from the health trust medical director of the Royal Group of Hospitals into organ donation and retention and (b) give her assessment of the report.

(AQW 1459/00)

Ms de Brún: I can confirm that I have initiated an investigation here to establish the facts surrounding the removal and retention of organs in the past as part of post-mortems. The information obtained as a result of that process will be considered as part of my overall assessment of how best to take forward this difficult and sensitive issue. I have not asked for, or received, any report relating to the issue of organ donation. Such donations are a separate issue and are covered by very clear guidelines.

Thig liom a dhearbhu gur chuir mé tús le himscrúdú anseo chun teacht ar na fíricí a bhain leis na horgáin a glacadh amach as coirp agus a coinníodh mar chuid den scrúdú iarbhaís san am a chuaigh thart. Déanfar breithniú ar an eolas a thiocfaidh de bharr an phróisis sin mar chuid den mheasúnú fhoriomlán a dhéanfaidh mé ar an dóigh is fearr leis an cheist dheacair íogaireach seo a láimhseáil amach anseo. Níor iarr mé tuarascáil agus ní bhfuair mé ceann ar bith a bhaineann le deonú orgán mar cheist. Ceist eile ar fad atá i ndeonú orgán agus tá treoirlínte an-soiléir leagtha síos ina leith.

Mortuary Facilities

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that the mortuary facilities in Northern Ireland hospitals are adequate.

(AQW 1464/00)

Ms de Brún: I can confirm that mortuary facilities in local hospitals are adequate in terms of space and storage to meet the demands placed upon them.

Thig liom a dhearbhu go bhfuil áiseanna marbhlainne in otharlanna áitiúla sásúil i dtéarmaí spáis agus stórála leis na freagrachtaí a cuireadh orthu a chomhlíonadh.

In Vitro Fertilisation

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that it is her policy to charge for in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment and related drugs and to confirm whether or not she has had this policy impact assessed in respect of the requirements of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

(AQW 1466/00)

Ms de Brún: Patients receiving IVF treatment pay for this on a private basis, although drugs are prescribed by some general practitioners. The provision of sub-fertility services, including in vitro fertilisation, is at present being considered by a group established by the regional medical services consortium, which commissions regional services on behalf of the four health and social services boards. The group will advise me on how services for people experiencing fertility problems can be improved.

My Department, in liaison with boards and trusts will shortly be drawing up for consultation an impact assessment programme under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The need to carry out an impact assessment of this policy will be considered as part of this exercise.

Is ar bhonn phríobháideach a íocann othair as cóireáil TIV (IVF), cé go bhforordaíonn roinnt liachleachtóirí ginearálta na drugaí. Faoi láthair tá soláthar seirbhísí fothorthúlachta, agus toirchiú in vitro san áireamh, á mheas ag grúpa atá bunaithe ag an chuibhreannas seirbhísí míochaine réigiúnacha a choimisiúnaíonn seirbhísí réigiúnacha thar ceann na gceithre bhord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta. Cuirfidh an grúpa comhairle ar fáil dom faoi na dóigheanna ar féidir feabhas a chur ar sheirbhísí do dhaoine a bhfuil fadhbanna torthúlachta acu.

Beidh m'j Roinn, i gcomhar le boird agus le hiontaobhais ag cur clár measúnaithe iarmharta le chéile le haghaidh comhlairle faoi mhír 75 d'Acht Thuaisceart Éireann 1998 gan mhoill. Déanfar machnamh ar an ghá le measúnú iarmharta a dhéanamh ar an pholasáí seo mar chuid den chleachtadh seo.

Clinical Waste

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) confirm that Sterile Technologies Inc. (NI) Ltd is currently disposing of clinical waste at Antrim Hospital and (b) to outline what disposal system is being utilised. (AQW 1467/00)

Ms de Brún: The Sterile Technologies Inc. (NI) Ltd facility located at the Antrim Hospital site is a treatment plant that makes the clinical waste unrecognisable and safe before it is then disposed of, presently by land filling at a local licensed landfill site.

The facility comprises two treatment plants, each plant incorporating a shredder and a steam auger that treats and disinfects the waste. It has no discharges to drain and minimal emission to atmosphere. The treated waste is then bagged for transport to the landfill site. Although the treated waste is currently being landfilled, the treatment process enables around 75% of the treated waste to be recycled/recovered, mainly consisting of plastics, metals, glass, textiles and paper pulp material. The contractor intends to recycle the treated waste at an all-Ireland recycling facility and it is hoped that this facility will be located here.

Of the estimated 4,000 tonnes of clinical waste generated here by HPSS trusts and agencies, 90% to 95% is being treated using the facility. The remainder of the waste that has to be incinerated is transported to GB for incineration.

Is monarcha chóireála í an áis Theicneolaíochtaí Steiriúla. Teoranta (TÉ) suite ag láithreán Otharlainne Aontroma, agus déanann sí an dramhaíl chliniciúil do-aitheanta agus slán sula bhfaightear réidh léi ansin leis ag líonadh talún ag láithreán líonta talún áitiúil agus ceadúnaithe.

Istigh san áis tá dhá mhonarcha chóireála, le scríobán agus le tarathar gaile a chóireálann agus a dhíghalraíonn an dramhaíl i ngach ceann díobh. Níl silte ar bith le síleadh aici agus is beag na hastúcháin a théann aníos san atmaisféar. Cuirtear an dramhaíl chóireáilte ansin i málaí le hiompar go dtí an láithreán líonta talún. Cé go bhfuil an dramhaíl chóireáilte á líonadh i dtalamh faoi láthair, cuireann an próiseas cóireála ar chumas thart fá 75% den dramhaíl chóireáilte le bheith athchúrsáilte/athghabháilte, ina bhfuil plaistigh, miotail, gloiní, teicstíil agus ábhar laín pháipéir den chuid is mó. Tá sé ar intinn ag an chonraitheoir an dramhaíl chóireáilte a athchúrsáil ag áis athchúrsáilte uile-Éireannach agus táthar ag súil go mbeidh an áis seo suite anseo.

Den 4,000 tonna measta de dhramhaíl chliniciúil ginte anseo ag Iontaobhais agus ag gníomhaireachtaí SSSS, tá 90% go 95% di á cóireáil ag úsáid na háise seo. Iompraítear an chuid eile den dramhaíl atá le dó chun na BM le bheith dóite.

Funding Allocations to HSS Trusts

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the apportionment of recent additional fund allocations for each of the 11 itemised areas by (a) trust area and (b) health and social services board area. (AQW 1478/00)

Ms de Brún: The allocation of resources to health and social services trusts is largely determined through service level agreements with health and social services boards and general practitioner fundholders.

Of the additional £14.48 million made available in December monitoring, the boards were allocated £6.5 million as follows:

Description	Northern £000	Southern £000	Eastern £000	Western £000	Total £000
Acute Pressures	283	211	508	198	1,200
Children's Services	118	88	212	82	500
Learning Disability	118	88	212	82	500
Physical Disability	165	123	297	115	700
Winter Pressures / Community Care	707	529	1270	494	3,000
Equality Legislation	141	106	254	99	600
Total	1,532	1,145	2,753	1,070	6,500

The remaining money was earmarked for services that are centrally managed by the Department. These are scanners and special acute hospital services (£0.55 million), capital (£3 million), clinical negligence claims (£3 million), family doctors (£1.3 million) and GP registrars' training costs (£0.13 million).

Is iondúil go gcinntear dáileadh na seirbhísí ar iontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta trí aontuithe ardleibhéal na seirbhíse le boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta agus le scarthóirí gnáthdhochtúra.

As an £14.48 milliún a cuireadh ar fáil i monatóireacht Mhí na Nollag, dáileadh £6.5 milliún ar na boird mar a leanas:

Cineál	Tuaisceart t £000	Deisceart £000	Oirthear £000	Iarthar £000	Iomlán £000
Géarbhrúnna	283	211	508	198	1,200
Seirbhísí do Pháistí	118	88	212	82	500
Míchumas Foghlama	118	88	212	82	500
Míchumas Fisiciúil	165	123	297	115	700
Brúnna Geimhridh / Cúram Pobail	707	529	1270	494	3,000
Reachtaíocht Chomhionannais	141	106	254	99	600
Iomlán	1,532	1,145	2,753	1,070	6,500

Cuireadh an chuid eile den airgead i leataobh do sheirbhísí a ndéantar bainistíocht lárnach orthu ag an Roinn. Is iad seo scanóirí agus géarsheirbhísí speisialta

ospidéal (£0.55 milliún), caipiteal (£3 mhilliún) éilimh fhaillí cliniciúla (£3 mhilliún), dochtúirí teaghlaigh (£1.3 milliún) agus costais thraenála cláraitheoirí gnáthdhochtúra (£0.13 milliún).

Children's Anti-Drug Programme

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the impact of the Government's anti-drugs programmes aimed at children. (AQW 1482/00)

Ms de Brún: Protecting young people from the harm resulting from illicit drug use is a very important priority and is being taken forward in a range of ways, including drug prevention and education within schools, public information campaigns and community-based education and awareness programmes.

Evaluation of the Health Promotion Agency's public information campaign targeted at young people, has found that the campaign appears to have succeeded in influencing the attitude of young people towards drug taking by increasing knowledge about drugs and their harmful effects and promoting a more negative attitude towards drugs. Similarly, informal feedback on some community-based programmes for young people and parents, which were supported by the additional drug strategy resources, suggests that these programmes are succeeding in their aims, though full evaluation will be carried out later in the life of the programmes.

The Department of Education has issued comprehensive guidance to schools and youth clubs on developing drug education policies and dealing with drug-related incidents, and, following the allocation of the additional drug strategy funding, two full-time officers have been appointed to each of the education and library boards to address the development of drug education programmes.

Is tosaíocht an-tábhachtach í an chosaint do dhaoine, óga ón dochar a tharlaíonn as mí-úsáid druga. Tá sí a tabhairt ar aghaidh ar roinnt dóigheanna, mar chosc ar dhruga, chomh maith le heolas a scaipeadh fríd na scoileanna, feachtais eolais poiblí, cláir oideachais de bhunadh pobail agus cláir fheasa.

As measúnú ar fheabhsú eolais poiblí de Ghníomhaireacht Chothaithe Sláinte, a bhí dírithe ar dhaoine óga, fuarthas amach gur éirigh leis an fheachtas, de réir dealraimh, dul i bhfeidhm ar sheasamh dhaoine óga i dtaca le drugaí a ghlacadh, tré bhreis eolais faoina drugaí agus faoina dtionchar díobhálach, chomh maith le cur chun cinn seasamh diúltach do dhrugaí. Mar an gcéanna, as aiseolas neamhfhoirmiúil ag teacht ó roinnt cláir bhunadh pobail, dírithe ar dhaoine óga agus ar thuismitheoirí, cláir a fuair cuidiú ó bhreis seifteanna straitéis druga, maíonn an t-aiseolas go bhfuiltear ag éirí leis na cláir seo ina gcuid aidhmeanna, gidh go mbeidh

meastóireacht iomlán déanta orthu níos moille, fad is a mhaireann na cláir.

D'eisigh an Roinn Oideachas treoir chuimsitheach do scoileanna agus do chumannn óige ar chuspóirí eolais druga agus ar an dainséar a ghabhann le drugaí, agus a bhuíochas ar dháileadh maoinithe breise ón straitéis druga, ainmníodh beirt oifigeach lán aimsire do gach ceann de na boird oideachais agus an chuspóir acu ná forbairt clár oideachais drugaí.

Hernia Operations

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of hernia operations performed in the last twelve months. (AQW 1484/00)

Ms de Brún: In the financial year 1999-00 - the latest date for which information is available, - 2,930 hernia operations were carried out at local hospitals.

Sa bhliain airgeadais 1999-00 (an dáta is déanaí dá bhfuil eolas ar fáil), rinneadh 2,930 obráid mhaidhm sheicne in otharlanna áitiúla.

Nursing Employment

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of additional full-time nurses to be employed under the national plan. (AQW 1485/00)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my response to AQW 1434/00.

Tarraingim aird an Teachta ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 1434/00.

Physical/Sexual Abuse of Children

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children who were referred to social services as a result of physical or sexual abuse by relatives, guardians and/or friends in each of the last two years for which figures are available. (AQW 1493/00)

Ms de Brún: The information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh.

Hospital Mortuaries

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of occasions on which hospital mortuaries were unable to

accept a corpse due to lack of accommodation in the years 1998-99 and 1999-2000. (AQW 1494/00)

Ms de Brún: I am not aware of any occasions when hospital mortuaries here were unable to accept a corpse under normal circumstances. Due to the exceptional circumstances surrounding the Omagh bomb on 15 August 1998, the Tyrone County Hospital was unable to accept corpses due to a lack of available accommodation. However in this particular instance a temporary mortuary was established in line with the trust's major incident plan.

Ní feasach domh ócáid ar bith nuair nach raibh marbhanna ospidéal anseo in ann glacadh le marbhán faoi ghnáththosca. Mar gheall ar thosca eisceachtúla bhuamáil na hÓmaí ar an 15 Lúnasa 1998, ní raibh Otharlann Contae Thír Eoghain ábalta marbháin a ghlacadh de dheasca na heaspa cóiríochta a bhí ar fáil, ach sa chás áirithe seo áfach, bunaíodh marbhlann shealadach de réir plean an iontaobhais do tharluithe móra.

Child Abuse

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of cases of physical and sexual abuse of children that were referred to the police and the Director of Public Prosecutions and (b) how many of these cases were successfully prosecuted. (AQW 1495/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is outside the remit of my Department.

Níl údarás ag mo Roinn san eolas a iarradh.

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps she is taking to ensure a significant reduction in the level of physical and sexual child abuse and that sufficient funding is available to staff, and to monitor the process. (AQW 1496/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department is taking various steps to improve safeguards for children.

The departmental guidance for professionals involved in child protection is contained in 'Co-operating to Protect Children', which is currently being revised in the light of experience. The new guidance will be published later this year.

In addition, my Department runs the Pre-employment Consultancy Service which allows employers and voluntary organisations to check the suitability of those applying to work with children. I will be bringing forward proposals for a protection of children and vulnerable adults bill, which will place this service on a statutory footing.

My Department is also represented on the joint working group on child protection established by the North/South Ministerial Council. This aims to develop a mechanism

for the reciprocal identification of people considered to be unsuitable for working with children.

Health and social services boards received an additional £9.5 million this year for the development of all children's services including child protection measures.

Tá mo Roinn ag beartú roinnt dóigheanna le páistí a chosaint.

Tá an treoir roinne do ghairmithe a bhfuil teagmháil acu le cosaint páistí le fáil i 'Comhoibriú i gCosaint Páistí', atá ag dul faoi phróiseas athchóirithe faoi láthair, siocar chleactaidh. Foilseofar an treoir nua níos moille sa bhliain atá roimhainn.

Chomh maith leis sin, tá mo Roinn i mbun na Seirbhíse Comhairliuchain Reamhfhostai ochtta a ligeann do fhostóirí agus d'eagraíochtaí deonacha oiriúnacht duine atá ag iarraidh dul a dh'obair le páistí a mheas. Beidh mé ag cur chun tosaigh moltaí le haghaidh Bille Cosaint do pháistí agus gosach leochaileacha, a chuirfidh an tseirbhís seo ar bhonn reachtúil.

Tá teachtaí ó mo Roinn ar an chomhghrúpa oibre ar chosaint pháistí a bhunaigh An Chomhairle Aireashta Thuaidh/Theas. Is í an aidhm atá leis so ná meicníocht a fhorbairt le haithint chómhálartach ar dhaoine a cheaptar mar neamhoiriúnach le bheith ag obair le páistí.

Fuair boird SHSS £9.5 milliún breise i mbliana le haghaidh fhorbairt gach seirbhíse páistí agus seifteanna cosanta do pháistí san áireamh.

Maternity Services

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the steps she has taken in preparing for a further consultation process regarding maternity services in Belfast; and (b) who she has appointed to oversee this report; and (c) when it will be published. (AQW 1505/00)

Ms de Brún: I have asked my Department to set in motion a new consultation process regarding maternity services in Belfast. A team is being convened to look at the way forward with a view to publishing a new consultation document in the spring. This is a complex process and, while I recognise the importance of expediting the matter, my priority is to ensure that a robust consultation document is developed.

Tá mé i ndiaidh a iarraidh ar mo Roinnse tús a chur le próiseas nua comhairliúcháin maidir le seirbhísí máithreachais i mBéal Feirste. Tá foireann á tabhairt le chéile leis an bhealach chun tosaigh a scrúdú agus is é a bheas mar chuspóir acu doiciméad comhairliúcháin nua a fhoilsiú san earrach. Is próiseas casta é seo agus, cé go n-aithním an tábhacht a bhaineann le dlús a chur leis, is é an tosaíocht atá agam féin a chinntiú go n-ullmhófar doiciméad láidir comhairliúcháin.

Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA)

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people who have been infected by methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) in each hospital in the past year. (AQW 1512/00)

Ms de Brún: These figures are maintained on a hospital laboratory, and not a hospital-by-hospital, basis. In 2000, as shown in the table below, there were 121 such MRSA infections reported from 10 hospital laboratories.

MRSA BACTERAEMIA BY LABORATORY 2000

Reporting Laboratory	No. Reported
Altnagelvin Area Hospital	22
Antrim Area Hospital	15
Belfast City Hospital	22
Causeway Laboratory	1
Craigavon Area Hospital	10
Erne Hospital	2
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	2
Musgrave Park Hospital	1
Royal Victoria Bacteriology Laboratory	26
Ulster Hospital	20
Total	121

Coinnítear na figiúirí seo de réir saotharlainne ospidéil, agus ní de réir ospidéal i ndiaidh a chéile. Sa bhliain 2000, mar a thaispeántar sa tábla thíos, tuairiscíodh ó 10 saotharlann ospidéil go raibh 121 chás ionfhabhtú MRSA den chineál sin ann.

BAICTÉIRÉIME MRSA DE RÉIR SAOTHARLAINNE 2000

Saotharlann a thuiriscigh	Líon a tuairiscíodh
Ospidéal Cheantar Alt na nGealbhan	22
Ospidéal Cheantar Aontroma	15
Ospidéal Cathrach Bhéal Feirste	22
Saotharlann an Chlocháin	1
Ospidéal Cheantar Craigavon	10
Ospidéal na hÉirne	2
Ospidéal an Mater Infirmorum	2
Ospidéal Pháirc Musgrave	1
Saotharlann Bhaictéireolaíochta Ríoga Victoria	26
Ospidéal Uladh	20
Iomlán	121

Financial State of Health Trusts

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total financial surplus or deficit for each of the health trusts. (AQW 1513/00)

Ms de Brún: The surplus or deficit position of each HSS trust as at 31 March 2000 is set out in the attached table. The table shows the cumulative operational surplus or deficit position for each trust from its formation to 31 March 2000. The final figures for the current financial year will not be available until after end March 2001.

POSITION AS AT 31 MARCH 2000

Trust	Cumulative Operational surplus/ (Deficit) £m
Belfast City Hospital	(3.5)
Royal Group of Hospitals	(12.9)
Ulster Community & Hospital	(0.9)
Down Lisburn	3.7
South & East Belfast	0.6
North & West Belfast	(1.0)
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	0.8
Craigavon Area Hospital	(2.6)
Newry & Mourne	0.5
Green Park	(1.9)
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	0.1
Causeway	0.1
NI Ambulance Service	0.1
Homefirst Community	0.1
Foyle	0.4
Sperrin Lakeland	(1.5)
Armagh & Dungannon	0
Altnagelvin	(2.3)
United Hospitals	0
Total	(20.2)

Tá barrachas nó easnamh gach iontaobhais SSS, mar a bhí ar an 31 Márta 2000, leagtha amach sa tábla atá i gceangal leis seo. Taispeántar sa tábla barrachas carnach oibríochtúil nó easnamh carnach oibríochtúil gach iontaobhais ó bunaíodh iad go dtí an 31 Márta 2000. Beidh na figiúirí deireanacha don bhliain airgeadais reatha ar fáil i ndiaidh dheireadh mhí Mhárta 2001.

STÁID MAR A BHÍ AR AN 31 MÁRТА 2000

Iontaobhas	Barrachas/(Easnamh) Carnach Oibríochtúil £m
Ospidéal Cathrach Bhéal Feirste	(3.5)
An Grúpa Ríoga Ospidéal	(12.9)
Pobal & Ospidéal Uladh	(0.9)
An Dún agus Lios na gCearrbhach	3.7
Deisceart & Oirthear Bhéal Feirste	0.6
Tuaisceart & Iarthar Bhéal Feirste	(1.0)
Pobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna	0.8
Ospidéal Cheantar Craigavon	(2.6)
An tIlú & Múrna	0.5
An Pháirc Ghlas	(1.9)

Iontaobhas	Barrachas/(Easnamh) Carnach Oibriochtúil £m
Ospidéal an Mater Infirmorum	0.1
An Clochán	0.1
Seirbhís Otharcharranna TÉ	0.1
Pobal Homefirst	0.1
An Feabhal	0.4
Loch-Cheantar Speirín	(1.5)
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	0
Alt na nGealbhan	(2.3)
Na hOspidéal Aontaithe	0
Iomlán	(20.2)

General Practitioners' Services

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the level of evening and weekend general practitioner services in the Middleton area of County Armagh.

(AQW 1515/00)

Ms de Brún: General practitioners, as independent contractors, are personally responsible for making arrangements for services to their patients during the out-of-hours period, — evenings, weekends and public holidays. Health and social services boards, as the other party to the contract, are responsible for monitoring the adequacy and effectiveness of the out-of-hours arrangements.

The Southern Board has commissioned an evaluation of the out-of-hours services in the area that includes Middleton and in the light of the report, which is due shortly, will be considering the role and future development of GP out-of-hours services in its area.

Bíonn freagracht phearsanta ar dhochtúirí ginearálta, mar chonraitheoirí neamhspléacha, as socraithe a dhéanamh faoi sheirbhísí a n-othair le linn tréimhsí I ndiaidh uaireanta, - trathnónta, deireadh seachtainí, agus saoire phoiblí - Bíonn boird SHSS, mar an dara cuid den chonradh, freagrach as monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar leorgacht agus as éifeacht na socraithe do sheirbhísí I ndiaidh uaireanta.

Choimisiúnaigh Bord an Deiscirt Theas meastóireacht ar na seirbhísí i ndiaidh uaireanta sa limistéar sin a chuimsíonn an Baile Lár, agus siocair na tuairisce air sin, a bheidh ar fail Roimh i bhfad, beidh siad ag meabhrú ar ról agus ar fhorbairt sa todhchaí de sheirbhísí DG I ndiaidh uaireanta sa limistéar sin.

Drug Misuse

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the progress being made in achieving the Government's targets on combating drug misuse.

(AQW 1525/00)

Ms de Brún: Since the launch of the drug strategy in August 1999, good progress has been made towards delivering its overall aims and objectives.

Four local drugs co-ordination teams are in place, comprising representatives from the key agencies working in the field. Each of these has produced, and is putting into effect, an action plan reflecting circumstances and priorities in its respective area. The key Departments and agencies have also produced, and are implementing, plans for action at the regional level across their various fields of responsibility.

Through the Department's Drugs Information and Research Unit, a specialised information and research programme to support the drug strategy is being developed. Work is under way to establish accurate baselines against which to measure successes more precisely than has been possible in the past.

Over £4.5 million additional resources have been allocated to a range of projects which are helping to deliver on many of the objectives of the drug strategy. These include a regional needle/syringe exchange scheme; education and awareness within schools and community groups; drugs education for parents; increased provision of treatment, rehabilitation and counselling services for drug users; and services designed to reduce drug use among offenders. All of the projects have been funded until March 2002 and will be fully evaluated to determine how effective they have been.

Most recently, my Department has created a dedicated drug strategy team to strengthen the capacity to tackle this important problem and a drug strategy co-ordinator has been appointed to lead the team. She will be driving forward action across Departments and agencies to implement the drug strategy, and will be considering what further steps need to be taken to sustain the momentum already achieved.

Ó seoladh an straitéis drugaí i Mí Lúnasa 1999, rinneadh dul chun cinn maith a h-aidhmeanna agus a cuspóirí iomlána a chomhlíonadh.

Tá ceithre fhoireann comhordaithe drugaí ann ina bhfuil ionadaithe ó na heochairghníomhaireachtaí atá ag obair sa réimse. Chuir gach ceann díobh seo amach plan gníomhaíochta a léiríonn tosca agus tosaíochtaí ina réimse féin; plan gníomhaíochta atá siad a chur i gcrích. Chuir na heochair-Ranna agus na heochairghníomhaireachtaí amach plananna do ghníomhaíocht ag leibhéal réigiúnach trasna a réimsí éagsúla freagrachta, plananna atá siad a chur i gcrích.

Trí ionad taighde agus eolais ar dhrugaí na Ranna, tá clár sainiúil eolais agus taighde á fhorbairt le tacú leis an straitéis drugaí. Tá obair ag dul ar aghaidh le bunlínte cruinne a bhunú lenár féidir rath a thomhas níos cruinne ná mar a tomhaisíodh roimhe seo.

Dáileadh breis agus £45 milliún d'acmhainní breise ar réimse tionscadal atá ag cuidiú le cuid mhór de chuspóirí na straitéise drugaí a chomhlíonadh. Ina measc seo tá scéim mhalartaithe snáthaide/steallaire réigiúnach; oideachas agus eolas i scoileanna agus i ngrúpaí pobail; oideachas ar dhruaí do thuismitheoirí; soláthar níos mó seirbhísí cóireála, athshlánaithe agus comhairliúcháin d'úsáideoirí drugaí, agus seirbhísí a ceapadh le húsáid drugaí ag ciontóirí a laghdú. Maoiníodh na tionscadail uilig go Mí an Mhárta 2002 agus déanfar measúnú iomlán orthu lena n-éifeachtacht a fháil amach.

Le déanaí, bhunaigh mo Roinn foireann straitéise drugaí dhíograiseach le cur leis an chumas dul i ngleic leis an fhadhb thábhachtach seo agus ceapadh comhordaitheoir straitéise drugaí le bheith i gceannas ar an fhoireann. Beidh sí ag spreagadh Ranna agus gníomhaireachtaí an straitéis drugaí a chur i bhfeidhm, agus beidh sí ag smaoineamh ar na bearta breise atá le déanamh leis an fhuinneamh a baineadh amach cheana féin a choinneáil ag dul.

Health Service Complaints Procedure

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail when she intends to publish a report on a review of the Health Service complaints system. (AQW 1528/00)

Ms de Brún: The York Health Economics Consortium is currently carrying out an evaluation of the Health Service complaints procedure throughout the NHS in England, Scotland, Wales and the HPSS complaints procedures here. The final report is due to be finalised at the end of February 2001. I will wish to consider the findings in relation to the HPSS complaints procedures here when the report is finalised.

Faoi láthair, tá an cuibhreannas eacnamaíochta sláinte Eabharc i mbun meastóireachta ar mhodh gearáin na Seirbhíse Sláinte ar fud SSN i Sasana, in Albain, sa Bhreatain Bheag, agus modhanna gearáin na SSSP anseo. Tá an tuairisc dheireanach le bheith réidh faoi dheireadh Mhí Feabhra 2001. Beidh mé ag dúil leis na torthaí a mheas i dtaca le modh gearáin SSSP anseo, nuair a bhéas bailchríoch ar an tuairisc.

Expenditure on Health and Social Services

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail expenditure on health and social services, excluding capital spending and European monies, for the years 1990 to present in the parliamentary constituency of West Belfast.

(AQW 1541/00)

Ms de Brún: Expenditure information is not available by parliamentary constituency.

Níl eolas ar chaiteachas ar fáil de réir toghcheantair pharlaiminte.

Health Trust Chief Executives

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of travel expenses and subsistence allowances paid to health trust chief executives, by board area, in each of the last four years for which figures are available. (AQW 1542/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is shown in the table below.

Board Area	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
HSS Trusts in Eastern Board	24,036.64	31,175.33	39,656.15	32,009.92
HSS Trusts in Northern Board	500.00	868.53	921.00	856.90
HSS Trusts in Southern Board	914.55	887.00	843.00	604.00
HSS Trusts in Western Board	3,203.60	6,082.43	5,706.80	7,408.41
NI Ambulance Service	1710.13	1805.72	5976.22	2828.94

Léirítear an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

Ceantar Boird	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Oirthir	24,036.64	31,175.33	39,656.15	32,009.92
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Tuaiscirt	500.00	868.53	921.00	856.90
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Deiscirt	914.55	887.00	843.00	604.00
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Iarthair	3,203.60	6,082.43	5,706.80	7,408.41
Seirbhís Otharcharr TÉ	1710.13	1805.72	5976.22	2828.94

Health Trust Executive Directors

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of travel expenses and subsistence allowances paid to health trust executive directors, by board area, in each of the last four years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1543/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is shown in the table below.

Board Area	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
HSS Trusts in Eastern Board	25,587.43	31,536.81	52,909.81	31,077.15

Board Area	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
HSS Trusts in Northern Board	612.72	3,475.35	3,022.05	3,799.82
HSS Trusts in Southern Board	8,102.77	8,921.24	9,403.43	12,137.99
HSS Trusts in Western Board	1,397.00	3,197.40	5,114.75	3,270.60
NI Ambulance Service	NIL	NIL	1922.03	1347.07

Léirítear an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

Ceantar Boird	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Oirthir	25,587.43	31,536.81	52,909.81	31,077.15
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Tuaiscirt	612.72	3,475.35	3,022.05	3,799.82
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Deiscirt	8,102.77	8,921.24	9,403.43	12,137.99
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Iarthair	1,397.00	3,197.40	5,114.75	3,270.60
Seirbhís Otharcharr TÉ	NÁID	NÁID	1922.03	1347.07

Health Trust Chief Executives

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by board area, the hospitality expenses of health trust chief executives in each of the last four years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1547/00)

Ms de Brún: I would refer the Member to my response to AQW1184/00.

Tarraingim aird an Teachta ar mo fheagra ar AQW 1184/00.

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by board area, the number of days spent on official business outside Northern Ireland by health trust chief executives in each of the last four years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1548/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is shown in the table below.

Trusts in Board Area	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
HSS Trusts in Eastern Board	127	136	139	139
HSS Trusts in Northern Board	2	5	7	4
HSS Trusts in Southern Board	6	4	6	2
HSS Trusts in Western Board	13	31	32	36
NI Ambulance Service	3	7	22	8

Léirítear an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

IONTAOBHAIS I gCEANTAR BOIRD	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Oirthir	127	136	139	139
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Tuaiscirt	2	5	7	4
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Deiscirt	6	4	6	2
Iontaobhais SSS i mBord an Iarthair	13	31	32	36
Seirbhís Otharcharr TÉ	3	7	22	8

Health Trust Executive Directors

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Board area, the hospitality expenses of health trust executive directors, in each of the last four years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1549/00)

Ms de Brún: I would refer the Member to my response to AQW1183/00.

Tarraingim aird an Teachta ar mo fheagra ar AQW 1183/00.

Treatment of People with Addictions

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, in each health trust, the locations and capacities of outpatient facilities, dedicated to the treatment of people with addictions. (AQW 1558/00)

Ms de Brún: There are three outpatient facilities here which are dedicated solely to the treatment of people with addictions. Details of their locations and the number of contacts in each for the financial year 1999-2000 are shown in the table below.

Trust	Facility	Contacts in 1999/00
South & East Belfast	Shaftesbury Square Hospital	1,007
Homefirst Community Trust	Community Addiction Unit, Parkmore Drive, Ballymena	1,151
Sperrin Lakeland	Community Addiction Unit, Duke Street, Londonderry	Aprox. 2,000

In addition, many trusts hold addiction clinics in facilities which are not solely dedicated to the treatment of people with addictions.

Tá trí áis othar seachtrach anseo atá tiomnaithe do chóireáil daoine le handúil amháin. Léirítear eolas ar an áit a bhfuil siad agus ar líon na dteagmhálaithe i ngach ceann díobh don bhliain airgeadais 1999-00 sa tábla thíos.

Iontaobhas	Áis	Teagmhálai the i 1999/00
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	Otharlann Chearnóg Shaftesbury	1,007
Iontaobhas Phobal Homefirst	Ionad Andúile Pobail, Corrán na Páirce Móire, An Baile Meánach.	1,151
Loch-cheantar Speirín	Ionad Andúile Pobail, Sráid Díúic, Doire.	Thart fá. 2,000

Ina theannta sin, cuireann cuid mhaith iontaobhas clinici andúile ar fáil in áiseanna nach bhfuil tiomnaithe do chóireáil daoine le handúil amháin.

Operation Waiting Lists

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list, by board area, the numbers on operation waiting lists for over 18 months.

(AQW 1589/00)

Ms de Brún: It is not possible to provide the information requested. However, in the quarter ending 30 September 2000, 5,637 patients had been waiting for admission to the surgical specialties for more than 18 months.

Ní féidir an t-eolas a iarradh a chur ar fáil. Ach, sa ráithe dar chrioch an 30 Meán Fómhair 2000, bhí 5,637 n-othar ag feitheamh le breis agus 18 mí le hiontráil chuig na speisialtóireachtaí máinliachta.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Student Funding

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail (a) the funding per student per annum given to further education colleges for higher education students and (b) to state the funding per student per annum given to higher education institutions for higher education students.

(AQW 1468/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): There is no single basis for funding students on higher education courses. Further education colleges and universities each have their own particular funding methodology geared to their individual needs:

(a) Funding of Higher Education Students in Further Education Colleges

As a result of the current transitional funding arrangements in further education and the nature of the

new funding formula it is not possible to be precise about the funding given per student per annum on a higher education course at a further education college. However, in the current academic year, assuming that the student was fully funded under the new funding formula arrangements, a full-time higher education student in a further education college would have attracted funding broadly in the range £2,100 to £3,200, excluding tuition fees, depending on the subject area being studied and the characteristics of the student.

(b) Funding of Higher Education Students in Universities

The level of resource for each full-time equivalent (FTE) student at a university depends on the subject being studied. There are four broad groups of subjects - price groups - for funding defined by the nature and cost of delivery. The funding per FTE student, excluding tuition fees falls within the range £1,681 and £11,240 per annum depending on the price group. The most expensive price group covers clinical medicine and dentistry.

Provision of Foundation Degrees

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline his plans to enable further education colleges to expand their delivery of higher education through the provision of foundation degrees.

(AQW 1469/00)

Dr Farren: Pilot schemes in areas of high skill demand are being taken forward by Queen's University and the University of Ulster in conjunction with a number of FE colleges and employers' interests. I understand that some half dozen colleges will be involved in the first phase. The teaching will be delivered mainly in the FE colleges, predominantly in part-time mode with a strong workplace element. The universities will bring forward their proposals by end February 2001 for approval by the Northern Ireland Higher Education Council. The pilots will run from September 2001.

No decisions will be taken about the introduction of the new degree on a longer term basis until the pilot schemes have been fully evaluated.

Student Enrolment

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the number of students at further education colleges as measured by (a) gross; (b) net; (c) full-time; (d) part-time; and (e) full-time equivalents for each of the last 15 years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1503/00)

Dr Farren: I attach a series of tables detailing the numbers within the requested categories.

ENROLMENTS AT NORTHERN IRELAND FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES BY COLLEGE EXPRESSED BY MODE OF ATTENDANCE AND FULL TIME EQUIVALENTS (FTES): 1992/93

	Mode of Attendance		Full Time Equivalents
College / Institute ⁴	Full-Time ¹	Part-Time ¹	Gross
Armagh College	1,044	1,187	1,332
BIFHE	4,040	18,572	8,674
Castlereagh College	684	2,938	1,414
Causeway Institute	1,109	2,629	1,783
East Antrim Institute	1,228	3,990	2,194
East Down Institute	1,207	2,800	2,031
East Tyrone College	867	1,582	1,276
Fermanagh College	850	1,887	1,197
Limavady College	790	877	1,059
Lisburn College	725	2,543	1,361
Newry & Kilkeel College	1,300	3,269	2,022
NIHCC	307	121	352
North Down & Ards Institute	1,421	4,458	2,163
North East Institute	2,083	4,833	3,252
North West Institute	2,228	4,433	3,426
Omagh College	787	1,390	1,287
Upper Bann Institute	1,861	4,768	3,082
Total	22,531	62,277	37,905

Source: Further Education Statistical Record / Annual Monitoring Survey

¹ Full and part time figures are based on a snapshot of enrolments @ 1st November in the given academic year.

² Prior to September 1994 there were 24 colleges. The 17 colleges have been created by amalgamating the appropriate colleges.

ENROLMENTS AT NORTHERN IRELAND FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES BY COLLEGE EXPRESSED BY MODE OF ATTENDANCE AND FULL TIME EQUIVALENTS (FTES): 1993/94

	Mode of Attendance		Full Time Equivalents		
College / Institute ⁴	Full-Time ¹	Part-Time ¹	Gross	Net ²	Net for Funding ³
Armagh College	981	851	1,251	1,085	1,041
BIFHE	3,980	17,741	9,761	7,971	7,662
Castlereagh College	840	2,568	1,482	1,059	1,026
Causeway Institute	1,117	2,252	1,752	1,234	1,177
East Antrim Institute	1,192	3,742	2,181	1,743	1,701
East Down Institute	1,094	2,256	1,945	1,469	1,363

	Mode of Attendance		Full Time Equivalents		
College / Institute	Full-Time ¹	Part-Time ¹	Gross	Net ²	Net for Funding ³
East Tyrone College	877	1,760	1,283	1,099	1,076
Fermanagh College	925	1,814	1,281	1,070	1,011
Limavady College	797	985	1,110	910	830
Lisburn College	769	2,577	1,459	1,130	1,110
Newry & Kilkeel College	1,432	3,004	2,079	1,721	1,668
NIHCC	328	151	372	347	338
North Down & Ards Institute	1,511	4,420	2,334	1,860	1,806
North East Institute	2,214	4,324	3,303	2,552	2,501
North West Institute	2,306	4,260	3,520	2,768	2,704
Omagh College	842	1,321	1,253	1,069	1,019
Upper Bann Institute	1,920	4,372	3,093	2,679	2,592
Total	23,125	58,398	39,459	31,766	30,625

Source: Further Education Statistical Record / Annual Monitoring Survey

¹ Full and part time figures are based on a snapshot of enrolments @ 1st November in the given academic year.

² Gross less cost recovery students.

³ Net less withdrawn students.

⁴ Prior to September 1994 there were 24 colleges. The 17 colleges have been created by amalgamating the appropriate colleges.

ENROLMENTS AT NORTHERN IRELAND FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES BY COLLEGE EXPRESSED BY MODE OF ATTENDANCE AND FULL TIME EQUIVALENTS (FTES): 1994/95

	Mode of Attendance		Full Time Equivalents		
College / Institute	Full-Time ¹	Part-Time ¹	Gross	Net ²	Net for Funding ³
Armagh College	1,003	889	1,286	1,134	1,090
BIFHE	4,409	16,782	9,759	7,938	7,723
Castlereagh College	740	2,436	1,441	1,061	1,015
Causeway Institute	1,006	2,030	1,480	1,124	1,088
East Antrim Institute	1,120	3,381	2,023	1,637	1,593
East Down Institute	1,182	2,374	1,925	1,420	1,341
East Tyrone College	796	1,787	1,249	1,087	1,047
Fermanagh College	1,012	1,627	1,316	1,118	1,072

	Mode of Attendance		Full Time Equivalents		
Limavady College	753	1,073	1,096	903	834
Lisburn College	856	2,684	1,548	1,212	1,191
Newry & Kilkeel College	1,549	2,771	2,264	1,853	1,784
NIHCC	371	116	413	394	389
North Down & Ards Institute	1,718	4,205	2,548	2,044	1,978
North East Institute	2,152	4,184	3,196	2,561	2,501
North West Institute	2,292	4,011	3,746	3,027	2,945
Omagh College	842	1,237	1,229	1,003	947
Upper Bann Institute	1,874	3,991	2,868	2,551	2,433
Total	23,675	55,578	39,387	32,067	30,971

Source: Further Education Statistical Record / Annual Monitoring Survey

¹ Full and part time figures are based on a snapshot of enrolments @ 1st November in the given academic year.

² Gross less cost recovery students.

³ Net less withdrawn students.

ENROLMENTS AT NORTHERN IRELAND FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES BY COLLEGE EXPRESSED BY MODE OF ATTENDANCE AND FULL TIME EQUIVALENTS (FTES): 1995/96

College / Institute	Mode of Attendance		Full Time Equivalents		
	Full-Time ¹	Part-Time ¹	Gross	Net ²	Net for Funding ³
Armagh College	1,044	686	1,293	1,132	1,110
BIFHE	4,630	16,215	9,637	7,856	7,634
Castlereagh College	754	2,225	1,346	944	927
Causeway Institute	1,145	2,148	1,600	1,174	1,131
East Antrim Institute	1,097	3,531	1,993	1,506	1,476
East Down Institute	1,163	2,777	1,960	1,427	1,342
East Tyrone College	872	1,727	1,351	1,128	1,086
Fermanagh College	1,000	1,642	1,340	1,145	1,096
Limavady College	764	1,035	1,119	917	854
Lisburn College	1,012	2,798	1,658	1,261	1,239
Newry & Kilkeel College	1,675	3,076	2,325	1,896	1,821
NIHCC	367	125	420	402	380
North Down & Ards Institute	1,854	4,139	2,657	2,191	2,132

	Mode of Attendance		Full Time Equivalents		
North East Institute	2,036	4,008	3,184	2,474	2,400
North West Institute	2,425	4,318	4,003	3,244	3,142
Omagh College	856	1,248	1,278	1,017	924
Upper Bann Institute	1,240	4,181	2,255	1,964	1,902
Total	23,934	55,879	39,419	31,678	30,596

Source: Further Education Statistical Record / Annual Monitoring Survey

¹ Full and part time figures are based on a snapshot of enrolments @ 1st November in the given academic year.

² Gross less cost recovery students.

³ Net less withdrawn students.

ENROLMENTS AT NORTHERN IRELAND FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES BY COLLEGE EXPRESSED BY MODE OF ATTENDANCE AND FULL TIME EQUIVALENTS (FTES): 1996/97

College / Institute	Mode of Attendance		Full Time Equivalents		
	Full-Time ¹	Part-Time ¹	Gross	Net ²	Net for Funding ³
Armagh College	1,287	605	1,541	1,324	1,286
BIFHE	4,680	17,462	9,356	7,930	7,750
Castlereagh College	777	2,552	1,418	983	943
Causeway Institute	1,211	2,143	1,724	1,309	1,261
East Antrim Institute	1,127	3,763	2,041	1,597	1,542
East Down Institute	1,227	2,879	1,977	1,454	1,380
East Tyrone College	863	1,817	1,376	1,115	1,053
Fermanagh College	1,076	1,790	1,559	1,278	1,230
Limavady College	839	1,046	1,218	1,009	944
Lisburn College	1,103	2,562	1,723	1,276	1,221
Newry & Kilkeel College	1,858	3,241	2,620	2,067	1,977
NIHCC	378	162	436	400	390
North Down & Ards Institute	1,878	4,183	2,762	2,315	2,190
North East Institute	2,098	4,227	3,205	2,437	2,382
North West Institute	2,496	5,442	4,043	3,392	3,287
Omagh College	918	1,822	1,358	1,010	927
Upper Bann Institute	1,217	4,373	2,251	1,928	1,837
Total	25,033	60,069	40,608	32,824	31,600

Source: Further Education Statistical Record / Annual Monitoring Survey

¹ Full and part time figures are based on a snapshot of enrolments @ 1st November in the given academic year.

² Gross less cost recovery students.

³ Net less withdrawn students.

ENROLMENTS AT NORTHERN IRELAND FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES BY COLLEGE EXPRESSED BY MODE OF ATTENDANCE AND FULL TIME EQUIVALENTS (FTES): 1997/98

College / Institute	Mode of Attendance		Full Time Equivalents		
	Full-Time ¹	Part-Time ¹	Gross	Net ²	Net for Funding ³
Armagh College	1,374	591	1,583	1,354	1,323
BIFHE	4,407	17,456	8,647	7,464	7,317
Castlereagh College	851	2,463	1,436	950	929
Causeway Institute	1,065	1,958	1,624	1,260	1,207
East Antrim Institute	1,152	3,923	2,084	1,628	1,561
East Down Institute	1,227	2,523	1,949	1,350	1,294
East Tyrone College	868	1,978	1,451	1,108	1,058
Fermanagh College	1,060	2,060	1,671	1,362	1,320
Limavady College	821	1,116	1,263	1,051	986
Lisburn College	1,108	2,333	1,795	1,260	1,188
Newry & Kilkeel College	1,820	3,682	2,670	2,069	1,947
NIHCC	422	226	499	458	448
North Down & Ards Institute	1,973	4,409	2,829	2,360	2,239
North East Institute	2,181	3,790	3,150	2,379	2,325
North West Institute	2,474	6,247	4,301	3,638	3,429
Omagh College	917	1,977	1,476	1,043	997
Upper Bann Institute	1,248	3,969	2,256	1,957	1,875
Total	24,968	60,701	40,684	32,691	31,443

Source: Further Education Statistical Record / Annual Monitoring Survey

¹ Full and part time figures are based on a snapshot of enrolments @ 1st November in the given academic year.

² Gross less cost recovery students.

³ Net less withdrawn students.

ENROLMENTS AT NORTHERN IRELAND FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES BY COLLEGE EXPRESSED BY MODE OF ATTENDANCE AND FULL TIME EQUIVALENTS (FTES): 1998/99

College / Institute	Mode of Attendance		Full Time Equivalents		
	Full-Time ¹	Part-Time ¹	Gross	Net ²	Net for Funding ³
Armagh College	1,295	613	1,494	1,305	1,279
BIFHE	4,030	18,336	8,706	7,862	7,688
Castlereagh College	767	2,487	1,414	916	892
Causeway Institute	1,070	1,834	1,630	1,279	1,230
East Antrim Institute	1,069	3,769	2,019	1,548	1,494
East Down Institute	1,154	2,722	1,939	1,370	1,299
East Tyrone College	828	1,879	1,485	1,139	1,078

	Mode of Attendance		Full Time Equivalents		
	Full-Time ²	Part-Time ²	Gross	Net ²	Net for Funding ³
Fermanagh College	948	2,318	1,746	1,462	1,404
Limavady College	934	1,374	1,423	1,120	1,072
Lisburn College	1,097	2,417	1,749	1,298	1,256
Newry & Kilkeel College	1,774	3,831	2,532	1,939	1,862
NIHCC	395	158	464	434	408
North Down & Ards Institute	2,049	4,580	2,869	2,354	2,232
North East Institute	2,107	3,915	3,079	2,386	2,303
North West Institute	2,358	6,212	4,262	3,623	3,409
Omagh College	778	1,715	1,382	1,026	988
Upper Bann Institute	1,201	4,286	2,213	1,938	1,887
Total	23,854	62,446	40,406	33,000	31,782

Source: Further Education Statistical Record / Annual Monitoring Survey

¹ Full and part time figures are based on a snapshot of enrolments @ 1st November in the given academic year.

² Gross less cost recovery students.

³ Net less withdrawn students.

ENROLMENTS AT NORTHERN IRELAND FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES BY COLLEGE EXPRESSED BY MODE OF ATTENDANCE: 1999/2000

College / Institute	1999/2000 ¹	
	Full-Time ²	Part-Time ²
Armagh College	1,168	863
BIFHE	4,061	18,281
Castlereagh College	761	2,683
Causeway Institute	1,054	1,765
East Antrim Institute	990	3,738
East Down Institute	1,221	2,864
East Tyrone College	786	2,269
Fermanagh College	968	3,102
Limavady College	911	1,483
Lisburn College	1,057	2,553
Newry & Kilkeel College	1,974	3,601
NIHCC	333	209
North Down & Ards Institute	2,140	4,768
North East Institute	2,117	4,240
North West Institute	2,528	6,407
Omagh College	893	2,241

	1999/2000 ¹	
Upper Bann Institute	1,170	4,180
Total	24,132	65,247

Source: Further Education Statistical Record

¹ Full Time Equivalent data is not presently available for this academic year.

² Full and part time figures are based on a snapshot of enrolments @ 1st November in the given academic year.

New Deal

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail (a) the total number of private sector companies within each electoral ward that have signed up to New Deal and (b) the total number of full-time jobs created within these companies for New Deal trainees. (AQW 1516/00)

Dr Farren: Information on companies signing New Deal agreements is not available within electoral wards. These statistics are collated by jobcentre area and the table below gives a breakdown of 5,759 agreements signed by private sector companies to date.

NEW DEAL EMPLOYER AGREEMENTS – PRIVATE SECTOR

Office	Total Signed	Office	Total Signed
Antrim	157	Headquarters	10
Armagh	157	Kilkeel	34
Banbridge	68	Larne	54
Belfast East	201	Lisburn	59
Bangor	240	Londonderry Waterloo	215
Ballynahinch	37	Lurgan	117
Ballymena	276	Londonderry Richmond	217
Belfast North	194	Limavady	128
Belfast South	302	Londonderry Waterside	149
Ballymoney	210	Magherafelt	246
Carrickfergus	109	Newtownards	73
Cookstown	144	Newtownabbey	135
Coleraine	148	Newcastle	32
Dungannon	327	Newry	252
Downpatrick	79	Omagh	220
Enniskillen	409	Portadown	107
Falls Road	100	Shankill	71
Andersonstown	108	Strabane	274
Grand Total		5759	

Due to difficulties with the recently introduced client management system, which tracks the progress of participants through the programme, it is not currently possible to confirm the number of New Deal participants who have been assisted into employment. It is anticipated that this information will be available by the end of February 2001.

Adult Education and Training Services

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail expenditure on adult education and training services, excluding capital spending and European monies, for the years 1990 to present in the parliamentary constituency of West Belfast. (AQW 1539/00)

Dr Farren: This information is not available in the format requested.

Funding for adult education and training services is allocated on the basis of enrolments at individual FE colleges and numbers of trainees undergoing training with training organisations. Information on the parliamentary constituency of residence of students or trainees is not available and could only be obtained at an excessive cost.

New Deal

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to give his assessment of the cost effectiveness of the New Deal for young people in Northern Ireland and to make a statement. (AQW 1574/00)

Dr Farren: I am convinced that the New Deal for young people has been effective in Northern Ireland. Since it was introduced in April 1998 the number of young people unemployed for 6 months or more has fallen from 6,448 to 2,336 at December 2000, a decrease of over 63%. While this decrease is not solely attributable to New Deal, and reflects the overall improvement in the local economy there is no doubt that New Deal has played a significant part. The fact that the decrease in the numbers of non-New Deal-eligible JSA claimants during the same period was only 6% supports this view.

Comprehensive statistical data from the Department's client management system are not currently available pending resolution of a number of data and IT issues. When data are available it will be possible to provide more detailed information on the cost of outcomes from New Deal.

Higher Education Courses

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline

the steps he is taking to increase the number of places available in higher education courses at further education colleges and to make a statement. (AQW 1579/00)

Dr Farren: The only restriction placed upon further education colleges in relation to increases in higher education courses relates to publicly-funded full-time places due to resource implications. An additional 600 full-time places were distributed across the sector in academic years 1999-2000 and 2000-01 using significant resources secured under the recent comprehensive spending review. In addition a further cohort of up to 100 HND places in the vocational areas of software engineering and electronics has also been introduced in the current year. Any further increase will be dependent upon additional resources becoming available and being distributed in the light of existing priorities. It should be noted that colleges are free to increase the level of part-time provision on approved courses without restriction.

I have also announced plans for the piloting of foundation degrees in Northern Ireland and would envisage that the further education sector will have an important role to play in future developments. Indeed, a total of six pilots will be initiated in September this year involving a total of 100 full-time equivalent students, with a further 100 new enrolments from September 2002.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Parking Offences

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of revenue his Department receives from fines for parking offences in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1419/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (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 does not receive any revenue from fines for parking offences. Fines issued by the courts in respect of such offences, and revenue from fixed penalty tickets that are issued for on-street parking offences, are received by HM Treasury. The Roads Service does, however, receive revenue from excess and alternative charges that may be applied in its off-street car parks. In 1999-2000, the Roads Service received approximately £283,000 from these charges.

Aggregates Tax on Quarrying Industry

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the aggregates tax and its detrimental impact on the quarrying industry

and outline the representations he is making to the Chancellor of the Exchequer concerning this matter. (AQW 1490/00)

Mr Campbell: I refer the Member to the assessment provided in my answer of 12 January 2001 (AQW 1025/00) to a similar question.

I have made known my concerns on the issue and understand that representations on the matter have been made direct to the Chancellor by the First and Deputy First Ministers. They have my support.

Street Lighting

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the costs associated with the proposed transfer of the design and consultancy service of the street lighting section of the Roads Service from Downpatrick to Lisburn. (AQW 1497/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service is currently in consultation with the trade union side regarding proposals for a revised structure for the street lighting function which include the relocation of a small number of posts from Downpatrick to Lisburn. As yet, no final decisions have been taken.

If it is decided that the relocation should proceed, a staff assignment exercise will be carried out to enable staff to state their preferences in relation to work type and location. Until that exercise has been completed, it is not possible to detail the precise costs associated with the relocation. However, in broad terms it seems likely that any additional costs arising from the relocation of posts will be offset by savings accruing from increased effectiveness, reduced official travel and consequential productivity gains.

Traffic Calming in West Belfast

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans to enhance the traffic calming programme in the West Belfast constituency. (AQW 1510/00)

Mr Campbell: The demand for traffic calming measures across Northern Ireland is significantly greater than the resources which are available for such schemes. My Department's Roads Service must, therefore, prioritise schemes, essentially on the basis of their potential to reduce the number of road accidents.

The Roads Service resources for traffic calming measures for 2001-02 have yet to be allocated to Divisions and, at present, I am unable to detail definite plans for the West Belfast constituency. I can, however, advise that the following locations within the constituency will be given highest priority for traffic calming measures:

- Suffolk Road;

- St James Road area; and
- extension of the Lenadoon Road hump scheme in Stewartstown Park, Stewartstown Avenue, Horn Drive and Falcarragh Drive.

I have asked the Roads Service eastern divisional roads manager to write to the Member when the traffic calming programme for 2001-02 is finalised.

Regional Transportation Strategy

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline details of the equality impact assessment of his regional transport strategy.

(AQW 1514/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's draft equality scheme, which was submitted to the Equality Commission on 30 June 2000, included a commitment to carry out an equality impact assessment on the regional transportation strategy.

My officials are factoring in equality considerations as proposals for the draft regional transportation strategy are developed. The latest multi-modal transportation study practice 'Guidance on the Methodology for Multi-Modal Studies', DETR 2000) is being applied and requires distribution and equity analyses to be undertaken as an integral part of the study.

The Interim Guidance on Equality Impact Assessment, published by OFMDFM, is being followed and at present my officials are consulting and collecting information which will inform the equality impact assessment.

A consultation paper on the key issues has been distributed and an attitudinal survey, comprising a quantitative survey and focus group discussions, is also under way to determine attitudes to travel, transport problems, potential solutions and sources of funding. Information is also available on the regional transportation strategy web site. A working conference for key stakeholders is planned for late May, at which potential strategies will be considered.

Information from these different strands of the consultation exercise will inform both the equality impact assessment and the preparation of proposals for a draft regional transportation strategy.

Road Safety

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to give details of the sight lines measurement demanded, in the interest of road safety, for commercial applications seeking an exit onto those sections of the A2 Warrenpoint to Newcastle route that are controlled by the general speed limit.

(AQO 679/00)

Mr Campbell: As this is a matter for the Department for Regional Development, your question has been passed to me for reply.

The A2 Warrenpoint to Newcastle road forms part of the protected routes network in Northern Ireland on which a policy of access control is exercised.

Where accesses are permitted, the required visibility standards would be in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Development Control Advice Note 15, 'Vehicle Access Standards'. These standards, which are dependent on a number of factors, including traffic generated by the proposed development and traffic speed on the priority road, are set out in the attached tables.

In all cases regarding visibility standards, the professional judgement of the Roads Service is the overall deciding factor.

VISIBILITY STANDARD REQUIRED ON THE ACCESS ROAD (X-DISTANCE(M))

Type of Access	X-Distance
Access with traffic flow up to 60 vpd	The minimum x-distance is normally 2.4 m. Where traffic speeds on the priority road are below 60 kph (37 mph), the minimum x-distance is 2.0 m. On other roads the x-distance may be reduced to 2.0 m only where danger is unlikely to be caused.
Access with traffic flow between 60 & 1000 vpd	The minimum x-distance is normally 4.5 m. It may be reduced to 2.4 m, but only if traffic speeds on the priority road are below 60 kph (37 mph) and danger is unlikely to be caused.
Access with traffic flow over 1000 vpd	The desirable minimum x-distance is 6.0 m. It may be reduced to 4.5 m, but only where danger is unlikely to be caused. In this case developers may be required to demonstrate the adequacy of the access capacity using junction analysis techniques.

1. Reductions in visibility standards will not be permitted simply because the applicant does not control the required visibility area or does not have a reasonable prospect of bringing it under his control.
2. Traffic volumes are in vehicles per day (vpd) and refer to the total combined flow in both directions. Volumes on the priority road include traffic generated by the development.
3. If there is a dispute about the predicted minor road (access) traffic flow, it shall be determined by reference to a recognised database such as TRICS, or failing that by a direct survey of a similar existing development over an acceptable period.
4. Where the minor road (access) flow is subject to peaks, an enhanced x-distance may be required.
5. The traffic speed to be used is a reasonable estimate of the 85%ile speed on the priority road; for example, by the use of following vehicle surveys or, in the case of a dispute, the measured 85%ile speed.

FORWARD SIGHT DISTANCE (M) ON THE PRIORITY ROAD

Type of Access	Traffic Speed on the Priority Road kph (mph)							
	120 (75)	100 (62)	85 (53)	70 (44)	60 (37)	50 (31)	40 (25)	30 (19)
Access other than those listed below	285 [215]	215 [160]	160 [120]	120 [90]	90 [70]	70 [45]	45 [33]	33

Access flow up to 60 vpd onto priority road > 3000 vpd	215	160	120	90	70	60	45	33
Access flow up to 60 vpd onto priority road < 3000 vpd	215 [160]	160 [120]	120 [90]	90 [70]	70 [45]	60 [33]	45 [33]	33

Notes

1. In exceptional circumstances a reduction in the visibility standards may be permitted where, in the judgement of the Department, danger to road users is not likely to be caused. Where exceptional circumstances are considered to exist, it is highly unlikely that the Department will permit visibility standards which fall below the figures in the square brackets.
2. In the case of single or paired dwelling accesses a reduction in the visibility standards may be acceptable where, in the judgement of the Department, there is a slightly lower risk of conflict, particularly when traffic on the priority road is light.
3. Reductions in visibility standards will not be permitted simply because the applicant does not control the required visibility area or does not have a reasonable prospect of bringing it under his control.
4. Traffic volumes are in vehicles per day (vpd) and refer to the total combined flow in both directions. Volumes on the priority road include traffic generated by the development.
5. If there is a dispute about the predicted minor road (access) traffic flow, it shall be determined by reference to a recognised database such as TRICS, or failing that by a direct survey of a similar existing development over an acceptable period.
6. The traffic speed to be used is a reasonable estimate of the 85%ile speed on the priority road; for example, by use of following vehicle surveys or, in the case of a dispute, the measured 85%ile speed.
7. Where actual speed falls between the given values the y-distance may be interpolated.

Road Safety

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he is taking to improve road safety on the Newry to Dundalk road. (AQO 729/00)

Mr Campbell: As this is a matter for the Department for Regional Development, your question has been forwarded to me for reply.

Over the past five years my Department's Roads Service has completed a significant number of measures to improve road safety on the stretch of road between the Belfast Road roundabout in Newry and the border. In addition, speed camera signs are at present being erected along this road. The signs are part of a joint initiative by the police and the Roads Service to promote road safety along a number of routes across the country through greater enforcement of the national speed limits. The Roads Service also plans to provide a pedestrian and cycle crossing facility on the southern side of the Armagh Road roundabout close to Craigmole Road.

For the longer term, the Roads Service is working with the ROI National Roads Authority, the ROI's Department of Environment and Local Government, and Louth County Council to bring forward the detailed design and statutory procedures for the provision of a

four-lane dual carriageway from Cloghogue roundabout (south of Newry) to Ballymascanlon roundabout (north of Dundalk).

Traffic Calming Measures

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to introduce traffic calming measures on the centre and outside lanes of the northbound carriageway of the M2 between Greencastle and Sandymount during rush hour traffic periods. (AQO 676/00)

Mr Campbell: As this is a matter for the Department for Regional Development, your question has been forwarded to me for reply.

Traffic calming measures involve the use of a range of self-enforcing engineering measures — eg road humps, chicanes et cetera — that are designed to lower the speed of vehicles and so reduce the frequency and severity of road traffic accidents on urban streets. The M2 motorway is a major traffic route carrying approximately 30,000 vehicles per day (northbound) and, as such, is not the type of road that is suitable for traffic calming measures.

My Department's Roads Service is aware, however, of the traffic conditions which occur mainly in the evening peak period on this stretch of carriageway. To help address this situation, the Roads Service plans to install a cantilever signal and an overhead gantry as part of an extension to its motorway control system and driver information system. These facilities will enable the Roads Service to provide advance information to road users regarding driving conditions on the carriageway. Consideration will also be given to the provision of new direction signing. It is intended that these measures will assist lane discipline on this section of the motorway network. This work is scheduled to take place during the next financial year.

Excavation of Public Road/Footpaths

Mr R Hutchinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to introduce legislation to ensure that utilities, following excavation and repair work, leave roads and footpaths in a more acceptable condition.

(AQO 701/00)

Mr Campbell: There were 37,200 road openings in 1999 and 46,455 in 2000. The table below details of the utilities involved.

I should explain that these utilities have a statutory right to open public roads and footways to install and maintain their equipment. For this reason they cannot be required to apply to make an opening, but they are required to notify my Department's Roads Service of their intention to do so. The Roads Service has,

therefore, no control over the number of openings made by utilities, but it does have powers under the Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to regulate the process.

The 1995 Order facilitates the co-ordination and control of street works and makes utilities more accountable for their street works. Article 31 of the Order provides that my Department's Roads Service may issue practical guidance on the materials, workmanships and standards of reinstatements. Accordingly, the Roads Service has issued a code of practice on the reinstatement of openings in Roads which became operational on 1 February 1999.

The code of practice is modelled on a similar GB code of practice. It requires that reinstatements be carried out to nationally agreed standards and be guaranteed for a minimum of two years. The content of the code of practice has been agreed with local utilities.

The estimated number of road openings made in public roads by the various utility companies during the past two years is as follows:

Utility	1999	2000
Water Service	16,000	16,000
NTL	2,900	3,000
Phoenix Natural Gas	9,000	18,000
BT	3,000	3,000
NIE	2,500	2,500
Cable and Wireless	300	300
Rivers Agency	100	100
Nevade Tele.com	-	100
Eircom (NI)	-	55
Private Openings	3,400	3,400
Total	37,200	46,455

Traffic Volume

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the volume of traffic on the A2 road from Donaghadee to Bangor during the morning "travel to work" period. (AQO 694/00)

Mr Campbell: The most recent traffic figures available for this part of the A2 are from a 1994 survey which found a 24-hour traffic flow of 5,600 vehicles. However, there is no breakdown of these figures for the morning peak period.

My Department's Roads Service has recently installed traffic counter loops on this road in connection with a traffic study in the Bangor area. These will provide the data requested and I will write to the Member in due course.

Rural Transport

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the allocation of the extra funding of £450,000 designated for rural transport. (AQO 689/00)

Mr Campbell: Some £410,000 of the additional £450,000 is being spent on 14 fully accessible minibuses. These vehicles will be used by rural community transport partnerships. The remaining £40,000 will go towards grants made by the Department to support the revenue costs of these partnerships.

Excavation of Public Road/Footpaths

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the number of applications made to excavate access trenches in public roads in each of the last two years with reference being made to the specific utility or service supplier and (b) his plans to regulate this process. (AQO 730/00)

Mr Campbell: There were 37,200 road openings in 1999 and 46,455 in 2000. The table below details of the utilities involved.

I should explain that these utilities have a statutory right to open public roads and footways to install and maintain their equipment. For this reason they cannot be required to apply to make an opening, but they are required to notify my Department's Roads Service of their intention to do so. The Roads Service has, therefore, no control over the number of openings made by utilities, but it does have powers under the Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to regulate the process.

The 1995 Order facilitates the co-ordination and control of street works and makes utilities more accountable for their street works. Article 31 of the Order provides that my Department's Roads Service may issue practical guidance on the materials, workmanships and standards of reinstatements. Accordingly, the Roads Service has issued a code of practice on the reinstatement of openings in roads, which became operational on 1 February 1999.

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Phoenix Natural Gas	9,000	18,000
BT	3,000	3,000

NIE	2,500	2,500
Cable and Wireless	300	300
Rivers Agency	100	100
Nevade Tele.com	-	100
Eircom (NI)	-	55
Private Openings	3,400	3,400
Total	37,200	46,455

Salting of Roads

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the 37% road gritting programme in relation to the cost, criteria, selection and contracts.

(AQO 665/00)

Mr Campbell: The salting of roads during wintry conditions costs approximately £5 million per annum. The salted network includes all main through routes carrying 1,500 or more vehicles per day. In addition, some other routes that carry more than 1,000 vehicles per day are salted provided there are special circumstances, eg, sharp bends or gradients et cetera. The salted network covers 27% of the entire public road network and carries some 80% of all road traffic. The Roads Service does not employ contractors to carry out salting operations.

The Member may be aware that I have initiated a review, involving the Regional Development Committee, of all the policy considerations pertaining to the salting of roads.

Roads Service - Adoption of Canning's Lane

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail why Canning's Lane, Coney Road, Culmore, County Derry, has not yet been adopted by the Roads Service.

(AQO 688/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service has not adopted Canning's Lane as the owner has not given formal written consent for its adoption. Also, I understand that the lane falls below adoption standard and even if such consent were received, the lane would have to be upgraded to adoption standard before it could be adopted into the public road network.

Planning Applications

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of requests from the Department of the Environment's Planning Service for information regarding Roads Service opinions in respect of planning applications which have been outstanding for more than three months.

(AQO 696/00)

Mr Campbell: I am advised that the number of planning applications referred to my Department's Roads

Service by the Department of Environment's Planning Service is currently running at some 15,000 per year. At present, approximately 550 such applications, which were received by Roads Service over three months ago, have not yet been returned with a recommendation.

Over 98% of these outstanding planning applications are the subject of further dialogue with the applicants or their agents, and the Planning Service has been advised accordingly. The applications are generally in respect of proposals for larger developments where, for example, traffic impact assessments or other additional information has been requested.

Toome Bypass

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current progress on the Toome Bypass.

(AQO 684/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service is continuing to progress this project through the relevant statutory procedures. In particular:

- the statutory environmental procedures were completed without objection in December 2000;
- the necessary direction order is expected to become operative this month; and
- The Roads Service hopes shortly to initiate the formal land vesting procedures.

Assuming all goes well with the land acquisition procedures, the design and construct contract could be advertised in summer 2001, with the successful contractor undertaking the detailed design in the autumn and starting work on the ground in early 2002. I should emphasise, however, that commencement of the scheme will depend on the availability of funds at that time and in future years.

Upgrading of the A26

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any representations he has received for the development of a motorway/dual carriageway between Ballymena and Ballymoney.

(AQO 661/00)

Mr Campbell: Four district councils have made representations about the upgrading of the A26 between Ballymena and Coleraine, and I have received two Assembly Questions. Finally, I received a petition from Cllr Frank Campbell requesting a dual carriageway on the route. To the best of my knowledge, these are the only representations I have received about upgrading this route.

Knockmore Railway Line

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans for the future of the Knockmore Railway line. (AQO 710/00)

Mr Campbell: In the 2000 spending review my predecessor, Mr Peter Robinson MP MLA, sought sufficient resources to keep open all the existing railway lines in Northern Ireland. However, the additional resources for railways in the Budget approved by the Assembly on 18 December 2000 provided resources only for the consolidation option outlined in the Railways Task Force Report. This option assumed that the line from Antrim to Knockmore would be closed when the line from Antrim to Bleach Green was reopened.

Consequently, Translink had no option but to commence the statutory procedure to close the Antrim to Knockmore line. Under this procedure there is an opportunity for people to object to the closure if they consider they will suffer hardship as a result. Translink is obliged to pass any such valid objections to me for consideration.

I remain committed to maintaining and developing rail services in Northern Ireland and would like the line between Antrim and Knockmore to remain open. However, I must also manage with the resources that have been allocated by the Assembly for railways.

I should point out that if there are objections to the closure on grounds of hardship the line cannot be closed without the approval of the Assembly. If the Assembly is not prepared to approve a closure proposal, I would expect it to provide me with the additional resources necessary to keep the line open.

Water Treatment Works

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that the new treatment works for the Silent Valley catchment area is brought forward within the programme from 2003-04 to the 2001-02 financial year and to make a statement. (AQO 670/00)

Mr Campbell: The Water Service is planning to construct a new water treatment works for the Silent Valley water supply in order to provide an effective barrier against cryptosporidium and to comply with the requirements of the revised EC Drinking Water Directive. Subject to planning approval, the new treatment works will be situated at Drumaroad, between Castlewellan and Ballynahinch.

The procurement competition for the design and construct contract for the new treatment works is already under way. It is expected that, provided no planning difficulties arise, a contract will be awarded during the summer, and that construction will commence towards

the end of 2001. It will take three years to build the new works at an estimated cost of £35 million.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that £125,000 per year has been spent under the domestic energy efficiency scheme in Mid Ulster, and to make a statement. (AQW 1443/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): In the three years to 31 December 2000, a total of £412,984 has been spent on the domestic energy efficiency scheme in the Mid Ulster constituency.

The level of expenditure under the current domestic energy efficiency scheme is not a barometer of fuel poverty. The scheme 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 much more comprehensive range of energy efficiency measures and will target the most vulnerable groups in our society.

Fuel Poverty

Mr F Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development to explain how he intends to tackle fuel poverty in Mid Ulster. (AQW 1444/00)

Mr Morrow: I am introducing a new domestic energy efficiency scheme, which will cover all of Northern Ireland. It 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, the new domestic energy efficiency scheme will start on 1 April 2001, commencing a lead-in period covering scheme marketing, tendering and client registration for the installation of physical measures from 1 July 2001.

Fuel poverty in public housing is not as highly concentrated as in the private housing sector, and responsibility for addressing the issue rests 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.

Homeless Families

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of homeless families in Northern Ireland in each of the last ten years for which figures are available. (AQW 1447/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, whose chief executive has advised me that the number of households, which will include families as well as singles, who have been accepted as homeless by the Housing Executive is as follows:

Year ¹	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00
Owed a duty to be housed	4,410	4,158	4,061	3,971	4,014	4,319	4,708	4,956	4,997	5,192
Not owed a duty to be housed	2,921	3,335	3,488	3,245	3,320	3,337	3,276	3,218	2,937	2,988
Total	7,331	7,493	7,509	7,216	7,334	7,656	7,984	8,174	7,934	8,180

¹. Based on the financial year 1 April to 31 March.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Mr Davis asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total sums written off in each of the last five years by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive due to debtors who cannot be traced. (AQW 1455/00)

Mr Morrow: The information requested is as follows:

Year	Amount Written off
1996/97	£508,000
1997/98	£573,000
1998/99	£535,000
1999/00	£646,000
*2000/01	£720,000

* To 31 December 2000

Written-off amounts include debts in respect of rent/rates, district heating, recoverable legal costs and recoverable damages.

Child Support Agency

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm (a) the formation of the new fraud and security team within the Child Support Agency; (b) its budget allocation; (c) the number of staff under its jurisdiction; (d) the number of cases it is equipped to deal with annually; and (e) the number of cases successfully resolved to date. (AQW 1457/00)

Mr Morrow: The Child Support Agency is fully committed to the policy of improving security and reducing fraud and loss in all its forms.

I can confirm that a new fraud team was formed in the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency in July 2000.

The budget allocation for this team is £45,000 for the current financial year. There are three staff within the team at present, and they are equipped to deal with approximately 1,000 cases annually. To date 100 cases have been successfully resolved.

Homeless

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people who presented themselves as homeless but did not qualify for assistance during each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1463/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, whose chief executive has advised me the information is as follows:

Year ¹	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00
Not homeless	1,680	1,959	2,226	2,190	2,131

¹ Based on the financial year 1 April to 31 March

Although the Housing Executive does not have a duty to those who are not statutorily homeless it does provide general advice on housing options, including referral to the voluntary sector and information on qualifying under the house selection scheme.

House Sales Scheme

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties sold to tenants of Housing Executive properties who were subject to the exclusion provisions contained in the right to buy and voluntary sales schemes regulations and to make a statement. (AQW 1472/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, whose chief executive has advised that the organisation does not maintain a record of the number of properties sold which, when certain criteria are met, are excluded from sale under the house sales scheme.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that £125,000 per year has been spent under the domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES 1) in East

Londonderry, representing a high need area and to make a statement. (AQW 1499/00)

Mr Morrow: I refer to my answer to AQO 596/00 on 29 January 2001, when I arranged for information about the domestic energy efficiency scheme expenditure in all constituencies to be placed in the Assembly Library.

The level of expenditure under the current domestic energy efficiency scheme is not an indicator of fuel poverty. The scheme 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 much more comprehensive range of energy efficiency measures and will target the most vulnerable in our society.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how he proposes to tackle fuel poverty in East Londonderry on £125,000 per annum. (AQW 1500/00)

Mr Morrow: Funding for the domestic energy efficiency scheme is not allocated on a constituency basis. The existing scheme is very much demand led. 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 and targeting those in greatest need. This will be achieved through publicising and marketing the scheme and through the development of an effective referral network. In the circumstances, therefore, I cannot predict what the future allocation of funding in East Londonderry will be.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that less than £95,000 a year has been spent under the domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES 1) in Newry/Armagh, a high need area and to make a statement. (AQW 1501/00)

Mr Morrow: I refer to my answer to AQO 596/00 on 29 January 2001, when I arranged for information about the domestic energy efficiency scheme expenditure in all constituencies to be placed in the Assembly Library.

The level of expenditure under the current domestic energy efficiency Scheme is not an indicator of fuel poverty. The scheme 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 much more comprehensive

range of energy efficiency measures and will target the most vulnerable in our society.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) how he proposes to tackle fuel poverty in Newry/Armagh and (b) what budget will be set aside to address this issue in this constituency. (AQW 1502/00)

Mr Morrow: A new domestic energy efficiency scheme will be introduced from 1 April 2001. In some respects the new scheme will be similar to the existing domestic energy efficiency scheme, but greater emphasis will be given to focusing and targeting those in greatest need. This will be achieved through publicising and marketing the scheme and through the development of an effective referral network.

Funding for the domestic energy efficiency scheme will be based on need and will not, therefore, be allocated on a constituency basis.

Protection for Housing Executive Tenants

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the steps he is taking to ensure that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive affords better protection to tenants whose homes have been targeted in recent sectarian attacks and to make a statement. (AQW 1508/00)

Mr Morrow: Personal security is a matter for the individual. However, when property is attacked, each case is considered on its merits, taking account of the particular circumstances, location and risk or frequency of incidents. In exceptional circumstances, the Housing Executive has, following consultation with the RUC, replaced external glazed doors with solid doors, installed lights above entrance doors and replaced window units with laminated/ polycarbonate units.

Purchase Applications from Housing Executive Tenants

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the number of applications from Housing Executive tenants to purchase their homes in each of the last five financial years; (b) the categories of houses to which these applications referred; (c) the number approved; (d) the number refused; and (e) the reasons for refusal in each case. (AQW 1518/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, whose chief executive has advised that not all the information requested is available. It is not possible to segregate applications by property type without incurring disproportionate cost. Neither is a separate

record available of the number of applications refused or the reason for refusal. Figures for the number of applications received and the number of cases where the sale has been completed are as follows:

Year	No of Applications	No of Completions
2000/2001	9,600 (predicted)	5,600 (predicted)
1999/2000	10,815	4,482
1998/1999	8,455	4,308
1997/1998	8,653	4,756
1996/1997	9,613	4,498
1995/1996	8,200	4,694

Expenditure on Community Development

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail expenditure on community development, excluding capital spending and European monies, for the

years 1990 to present in the parliamentary constituency of West Belfast. (AQW 1537/00)

Mr Morrow: The information provided relates to years 1995 to 2001 only. Information on projects prior to this date could be made available only at disproportionate cost. The table below shows the total expenditure by Belfast Regeneration Office on community development projects for the period 1995 to 2001 in West Belfast.

Year	Expenditure
1995/96	£1,382,734.37
1996/97	£1,822,421.08
1997/98	£3,476,589.59
1998/99	£3,889,867.30
1999/00	£3,188,202.40
2000/01 (projected spend 2001)	£2,380,913.52

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 16 February 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Electronic Delivery of Government Services

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the progress made in meeting the targets for the year 2005 for making Government information and services electronically available and to make a statement. (AQW 1553/00)

Reply: In March 2000 the Prime Minister announced revised targets for the electronic delivery of Government services. These were 25% of all services 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 opportunity to develop their own targets for electronic service delivery.

In the draft Programme for Government, the Executive gave an undertaking to set local targets for electronic service delivery and to monitor progress. Our officials, in consultation with the other Northern Ireland Departments, have been considering the Whitehall targets as to their appropriateness to Northern Ireland. Decisions on the targets for the electronic delivery of Government services in Northern Ireland and an appropriate monitoring regime will be taken by the Executive Committee in the coming weeks. An announcement will be made in due course.

Military Watchtowers

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail representations it has made to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland regarding the retention of military watchtowers along the border. (AQW 1562/00)

Reply: We have not jointly discussed these matters with the current Secretary of State or his predecessor.

Our respective parties have, however, met with the Secretary of State to discuss this issue.

Queen's Speech

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail discussions it has had with other Ministers in the Executive Committee regarding the implications of the Queen's speech for the people of Northern Ireland. (AQW 1563/00)

Reply: The Executive have approved a legislative programme and a draft Programme for Government. In contributing to both of these documents, Ministers will have considered any relevant implications of the Queen's speech for the people of Northern Ireland.

Violence and Criminal Acts in Northern Ireland

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the initiatives it has suggested the Secretary of State should consider when dealing with violence and criminal acts in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1564/00)

Reply: We have not jointly discussed these matters with the current Secretary of State or his predecessor. Our respective parties have, however, met with the Secretary of State to discuss this issue.

North/South Consultative Forum

Ms McWilliams asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline proposals for the North/South consultative forum referred to in paragraph 19, strand two, of the Good Friday Agreement. (AQW 1565/00)

Reply: At the North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting on 26 September 2000, it was agreed to initiate a study on the North/South consultative forum. Progress on the study will be reported to the next plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, following which we shall make a further statement to the Assembly.

Cost of Fuel

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the representations it has made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the cost of fuel in Northern Ireland and to outline the outcome of those discussions. (AQW 1598/00)

Reply: We wrote to the Chancellor in November 2000 and at a subsequent meeting with him on 24 January 2001 registered our continuing concern over the high level of fuel excise duty. As a follow-up to our discussion

with the Chancellor, a meeting took place this week with the chairman of HM Customs and Excise and contacts will continue.

Christmas Cards

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if, pursuant to AQW 1108/00, it will confirm that Christmas cards were sent to the Minister of Education, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Health and the leader of Sinn Féin.

(AQW 1604/00)

Reply: The Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety were sent a Christmas card from the First Minister. The Deputy First Minister did not send a card to any Minister.

Neither of us sent a Christmas card to the leader of Sinn Féin.

Working Group on Transsexual People

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how the report to the United Kingdom Government on the interdepartmental working group on transsexual people can be obtained.

(AQW 1812/00)

Reply: This report to the UK Government was prepared by a Home Office-led working group. The Home Secretary published the report on 26 July.

Copies of the report were placed in the Libraries of the United Kingdom Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly on the day of publication. The report is also on the Home Office web site, and printed copies are available from the Home Office on request.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Economic Position of Farmers

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail representations she has received regarding the economic situation of farmers and to make a statement.

(AQW 1600/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I receive frequent personal and written representations on matters relating to the economic position of farmers from a wide range of sources, including farmer representative bodies, councils, MPs, MEPs, MLAs, political parties and individual farmers. Many of these representations arise during the course of discussions,

both formal and informal, and in correspondence relating primarily to other topics, and it would be impossible to detail every instance where this has occurred.

Incineration of Cattle

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has considered alternatives to the incineration of cattle which are slaughtered as a measure against bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

(AQW 1637/00)

Ms Rodgers: This is not considered necessary. To maintain public confidence that no suspect cases can enter either the human or animal food chains, incineration is the most appropriate method of disposal.

All BSE suspect animals are moved directly to DARD's veterinary science laboratory where the brain tissue is removed for examination and diagnostic testing. The remainder of the carcass is destroyed by incineration.

Animal Waste By-Products and Hydrolysis

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explain why Regulations governing animal waste by-products do not include the hydrolysis process as an approved method.

(AQW 1638/00)

Ms Rodgers: The EC Animal Waste Directive 90/667/EEC, which is implemented in Northern Ireland by the Animal By-Products Order (Northern Ireland) 1993 (as amended), sets out the permitted disposal routes for animal by-products. When the Directive was adopted in 1990, the hydrolysis process had not been developed as a disposal route for animal by-products and therefore could not be included. The Directive is under review and the European Commission is seeking the advice of the EU scientific steering committee on whether hydrolysis should be a permitted disposal route in future.

Incineration of Cattle

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the extent to which following the incineration of cattle, residual ash may still contain proteins.

(AQW 1639/00)

Ms Rodgers: Residual ash from incineration of cattle must contain no more than a maximum permitted level of 5mg of protein or amino acid per 100g ash. This maximum level has been accepted by the spongiform encephalopathy advisory committee (SEAC) as being the acceptable level to ensure that any risk from residual BSE prion protein is negligible.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of cattle which have been slaughtered as a measure against bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and which are held in cold storage and to give the cost for that storage.

(AQW 1660/00)

Ms Rodgers: To date almost 700,000 cattle have been slaughtered in Northern Ireland as a measure against BSE. No carcasses are held in cold storage and therefore there are no costs involved.

This figure comprises 2,295 BSE suspects, 65 offspring animals, 695,609 in the over-30-months schemes (OTMS) cattle and 1,485 selective cull cattle.

Alkaline Hydrolysis

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail discussions she has had with experts about alkaline hydrolysis for the disposal of infected cattle carcasses and what conclusions she has drawn about its use in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1681/00)

Ms Rodgers: I have not been involved in discussions with experts about alkaline hydrolysis for the disposal of infected cattle carcasses. However, the primary EU legislation governing disposal of this type of waste (the EC Animal Waste Directive 90/667/EEC) is under review and in this respect the European Commission has sought the advice of the EU scientific steering committee on whether the hydrolysis process should be a permitted disposal route in future. I will consider that advice when it becomes available.

Funding for Fishing Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the proposed funding to be made available to the fishing industry and how it will be allocated. (AQW 1683/00)

Ms Rodgers: Under the community support framework, the European Commission has approved 29 million ecus for assistance to the Northern Ireland fishing industry. However, details of how this funding is to be allocated between the different fisheries measures have still to be agreed by the Commission as they are contained in the overall Northern Ireland transitional objective 1 programme. At present, I am therefore not in a position to indicate how the funding will be allocated.

Decommissioned Fishing Vessels

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to ensure the quota of decommissioned

fishing vessels will be retained for the Northern Ireland fishing fleet. (AQW 1684/00)

Ms Rodgers: It is my hope that the quota attached to decommissioned vessels under a Northern Ireland scheme can be retained for use by the Northern Ireland fishing fleet. I am currently exploring this possibility.

New Ice Plant at Portavogie

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to advise when the new ice plant in Portavogie will open. (AQW 1685/00)

Ms Rodgers: Currently, completion of the new ice plant at Portavogie harbour is scheduled for early July.

Limiting EU Beef Production

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the European Agriculture Commissioner's recent call for further measures to limit European Union beef production and the implications for Northern Ireland beef producers. (AQW 1690/00)

Ms Rodgers: I am aware that Commissioner Fischler has called for a further package of measures to control future beef production in the EU. In itself this is an understandable Commission reaction to the recent marked fall in beef consumption in many EU member states. Nonetheless any proposal that might have adverse financial implications for Northern Ireland is unwelcome news for the industry here.

At the moment it is not at all clear what proposals the Commission may bring forward to the Agriculture Council or where their major effects might be felt. Most beef-related proposals would have some impact on beef producers here but some are likely to have a greater impact than others. For instance, individual quotas for beef special premium (BSP) producers allied to a reduction in the overall ceiling available would affect all our producers directly whereas a reduction in stocking density thresholds would affect some beef producers but not all since we have a relatively high proportion of extensive producers. It is not inconceivable that some measures could even benefit the local industry, if they resulted in a better balance between supply and demand in the European beef market.

It is therefore not possible for me to give you a realistic assessment of the implications until more is known about the details of any proposals.

Impact of European Union Regulations on Agriculture

Mrs Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the impact

on agriculture by European Union regulations in each of the last five years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1710/00)

Ms Rodgers: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

2001 Less Favoured Compensation Allowance Schemes

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will amend the 2001 less favoured compensatory allowance scheme to address the £20 a hectare reduction imposed upon farmers who share clearly defined areas (as distinct from commonage) of mountain or moorland.

(AQW 1750/00)

Ms Rodgers: As common land carries with it less in the way of management and financial burdens, a lower rate of aid has been applied to avoid overcompensation. This principle applies to any shared land, even where it has a clearly defined external boundary. The full rate of aid is payable only on land which is recorded as being for the sole use of one farmer.

Tuberculosis Reactors

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what proportion of cattle found to be tuberculosis reactors were subsequently confirmed by autopsy to have contracted the disease.

(AQW 1756/00)

Ms Rodgers: Approximately 40% of reactor animals show signs of infection on post mortem examination.

Harvesting Shellfish in Belfast Lough

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her strategy for the harvesting of shellfish in Belfast Lough.

(AQW 1808/00)

Ms Rodgers: There is no formal strategy for the harvesting of shellfish from Belfast Lough. Development is industry led, with full departmental input when licence applications are received. The Department's long-term aim, however, is to develop a sustainable aquaculture industry in Northern Ireland with minimum additional environmental impact. To this end, the Department has licensed 11 sites covering some 750 hectares of seabed in Belfast Lough for the culture of bottom dredge mussels. These sites have been re-laid with seed mussels using purpose-built mussel dredgers. The mussels are harvested once they have reached marketable size and by the end of this year it is expected that some 2,000 tonnes will have been harvested mainly for the Dutch and French

markets. Due to marketing considerations, harvesting tends to take place during the winter months.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Improving Cultural Facilities

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his plans to assist local authorities in improving their cultural facilities.

(AQW 1587/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): My Department has initiated a process of engagement with district councils, non-departmental public bodies and education and library boards, the aim of which is to produce guidance for local authorities on the development of local cultural strategies. My intention is that this guidance will assist councils to plan for cultural services and will encourage a strategic approach to the provision and improvement of cultural facilities.

Investment in Local Football Facilities

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his plans to increase investment in football facilities at a local level.

(AQW 1588/00)

Mr McGimpsey: I should explain that I announced the introduction of the interim safe sports grounds scheme in August 2000. The scheme, administered by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, was funded initially by the Sports Lottery Fund and the Sports Foundation. I then secured additional funding of £2 million under the Agenda for Government for the 2000-01 year for priority safety improvement works at all sports grounds in Northern Ireland. I recognise the fact that further major investment is needed to carry out all the safety improvement work required and funding secured for 2001-02 will enable the scheme to continue. I will be considering how longer-term problems can be addressed and the outcome of the work I put in place to develop a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland will also be relevant in dealing with the problems of facilities at all levels.

You may wish to note that soccer clubs may also apply to the Sports Lottery Fund, through the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, under the club sport programme.

Bicentenary of the Act of Union (1801)

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if funding is to be made available for community groups to celebrate the bicentenary of the Act of Union.

(AQW 1616/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Appropriate funds from my Department have already been fully committed to the planned programme of bicentenary events, which I outlined at the inaugural event at the Ards Arts Centre/Town Hall, Newtownards, on 22 January 2001. Therefore, I cannot offer any financial assistance to community groups wishing to commemorate the bicentenary of the Act of Union.

However, community groups may wish to approach the Community Relations Council (CRC) to see if it would be willing to grant aid any locally produced bicentenary events. The CRC runs a cultural diversity programme, which aims to develop understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity through the arts, history and language.

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail discussions he has had with Government officials in relation to events to celebrate the bicentenary of the Act of Union. (AQW 1636/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Senior officials within my Department have been in touch with their counterparts in the Department of Education (DE) in order to seek co-operation as regards the Act of Union bicentenary education initiative, that is, workshops for A-level history students to be held in the NTL Studio, Waterfront Hall, Tuesday 16 October 2001. As a result DE has agreed to make available to the organisers a contribution of £3,000 to help to cover the cost of the fees, expenses and accommodation of academics engaged to run the education workshops.

Discussions have also taken place with officials in the devolution unit at the Cabinet Office, who have signalled their support for bicentenary activities, in particular, the acquisition of space within the Palace of Westminster in which to display the travelling version of the Act of Union bicentenary exhibition.

New Opportunities Fund

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (a) the Northern Ireland alternative to the United Kingdom New Opportunities Fund which has made £100 million available to enable public libraries to offer online services and (b) his plans to introduce funding to enable all public libraries in Northern Ireland to offer online services. (AQW 1633/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The new opportunities fund (NOF) was established as a lottery distributor by the National Lottery Act 1998 to make grants to health, education and environment projects. NOF is a UK-wide body and distributes 4-5% of its allocations to Northern Ireland.

Within the fund's community access to lifelong learning programme £100 million has been reserved for the development of the people's network across the UK including £4.5million for Northern Ireland. The people's network aims to link every public library in the UK to the Internet and the National Grid for Learning by 2002.

The five education and library boards are currently working on a project electronic libraries for Northern Ireland. An important element of the project will be the connection of all libraries to the National Grid for Learning, and through that to the University for Industry. The Department funds the public library service at 100% through the education and library boards.

Improving Cultural Services

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the steps he is taking to assist local authorities to improve their cultural services.

(AQW 1807/00)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has initiated a process of engagement with district councils, nondepartmental public bodies and education & library boards, the aim of which is to produce guidance to local authorities on the development of local cultural strategies. My intention is that this guidance will assist councils to plan and improve their cultural services.

EDUCATION

Special Education Units

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail, by education and library board area, the cost of educating a child with special care needs in a mainstream school as opposed to the cost in a special education unit.

(AQW 1544/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The education and library boards inform me that the average costs of educating pupils with moderate learning difficulties in special education units attached to primary and secondary schools are as follows:

Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern
£6,170	£6,000	£5,300	£4,000	£5,150-£5,900

It is not possible to give average costs for similar pupils attending mainstream classes in primary and secondary schools since this varies according to the amount of additional support each pupil requires, as detailed in their statement of special educational needs.

The average costs for pupils in special units, as shown above, fluctuate according to the number of pupils attending each unit and this applies both within board areas as well as between them.

Capital Programme for Schools

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the capital funding programme for schools in the Strangford constituency for 2001-02. (AQW 1628/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I shall be announcing the next capital programme for schools later this month

Attacks on Schools

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to list the dates of all the statements issued in his name condemning attacks on schools or the use of schools by proscribed organisations in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1752/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I issued statements on the following dates about attacks on schools:

25 January 2001
30 November 2000
27 November 2000
24 November 2000
11 October 2000
30 August 2000
19 July 2000
15 June 2000

School Improvement Programme

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Education to detail his plans to (i) improve school performance in under-achieving schools and small primary schools and (ii) increase the availability of out-of-school learning opportunities. (AQO 792/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The school improvement programme is a comprehensive programme to raise the standards of pupils' attainment in all schools. It includes the school support programme, which provides additional support for low and underachieving schools. There are no support programmes specifically for small primary schools but the school improvement programme impacts on them and a number of these schools are included in the school support programme. My officials are currently reviewing the operation of the school support programme in consultation with the education and library boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS).

Individual schools decide whether they wish to offer out-of-school-hours learning opportunities. Such provision is funded either from the school's own budget or from resources currently being provided by the new opportunities fund.

Under the literacy and numeracy strategy my Department provides resources to support summer literacy and numeracy schemes. I am pleased to be able to inform the Member that the resources available in 2001 will

enable up to 150 schemes to operate compared to 106 in 2000.

Allocation of Capital Funding

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to explain why his capital spend for the year 2000-01 reflects a 3:1 ratio in favour of that sector of education which predominately provides for the Roman Catholic community.

(AQO 752/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I do not accept that the capital programme announced last year reflects any such ratio and I again refute any suggestion of inequality in the allocation of capital resources. The allocation of capital funding is not determined on any school sector basis but rather on an objective assessment of educational needs across all schools sectors.

Term-Time Staff

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Education if in view of the recent budgetary allocation to his Department he will indicate what funds will be made available to education and library boards to enable them to transfer term-time staff to 52-week contracts and to make a statement. (AQO 749/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Details of the proposals in relation to 52-week contracts continue to be the subject of negotiation. The cost implications of implementing any agreement are not yet known. However, as indicated to the Assembly on 28 November, I will look sympathetically at helping schools meet the associated costs.

European Languages

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps he is taking to promote the teaching of European languages in primary and post-primary-schools and to make a statement. (AQO 772/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The statutory school curriculum here requires all secondary schools to offer pupils the opportunity to study one of the main European languages. There is currently no official requirement to teach a language in primary schools; many schools choose to do so, on an informal basis. The year 2001 has been designated European Year of Languages; I have expressed my support for that initiative and recently took part in its launch here.

Home Tuition

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children, in each education and library board

area, who are being tutored at home and the reasons for each case. (AQO 791/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of children in each education and library board area currently receiving home tuition provided by the relevant board is as follows:

Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern
158	109	90	93	106

Home tuition is provided because of medical problems, pregnancy or the young person is awaiting a suitable alternative educational placement. The numbers in each category in each board area are as follows:

Board	Medical	Pregnancy	Placement
Belfast	36	6	116
Western	46	9	54
North Eastern	33	9	52
South Eastern	67	6	20
Southern	80	4	22

English as a Second Language

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children in primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland who have English as a second language. (AQO 765/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The returns from schools at October 2000 indicate 846 pupils in primary schools (including nursery and reception classes) and 443 pupils in post-primary schools as having English as an additional language. In addition, in Irish-medium schools English is taught as a second language and the numbers were 1,159 pupils in primary (including reception classes) and 332 pupils in post-primary schools.

Attendance at North South Ministerial Council

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Education when he is next due to attend meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQO 789/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I am due to attend the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in plenary session which is scheduled for 2 March 2001.

Teaching Graduates

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of teaching graduates who have gained permanent teaching posts in their first year after qualifying in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQO 777/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Forty-nine per cent of student teachers qualifying in 1993 obtained permanent teaching posts that year. The equivalent percentages for each of the years from 1994 to 1997, the last date for which figures are available, are 49·7, 37·1, 28·1 and 26·3.

Homophobic Bullying in Schools

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Education to outline his policy to combat homophobic bullying in schools and to make a statement. (AQO 803/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Bullying, for whatever reason, including homophobic bullying, has no place in schools. It is unacceptable behaviour and as such falls to be dealt with under a school's discipline policy.

All schools are required by law to have a discipline policy and to implement it.

Local Management of Schools (LMS) Formula

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Education to detail his plans for training for school governors prior to the introduction of the new local management of schools (LMS) formula. (AQO 763/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The proposed common funding formula does not change the financial management responsibilities of school governors. The consultation document containing the new proposals will be published soon and will explain the formula, as will the common LMS scheme which will be prepared on foot of the consultation process. Existing training arrangements should therefore be sufficient. Any new governors appointed to schools in due course will of course receive appropriate training.

Capital Spending Proposals 2001-02

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to detail his capital spending proposals for the 2001-02 financial year. (AQO 755/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The schools capital budget for 2001-02 is some £95 million. The largest part of that budget will be directed to major capital works across all sectors, but substantial funds will also be available for minor capital works. I shall be announcing details of the new starts programme later this month.

Ulster Scots

Dr Adamson asked the Minister of Education to detail what actions he is taking to promote the Ulster Scots language in the education system and to make a statement. (AQO 781/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Responsibility for the promotion of Ulster Scots lies with the Ulster-Scots Agency, set up as part of the North/South language implementation Body. The agency hopes to appoint an education officer by December 2001 to develop resources for use in the classroom. Scope already exists within the statutory curriculum for schools to introduce aspects of Ulster Scots language, literature and culture as part of the cultural heritage and education for mutual understanding cross-curricular themes, and resource material is available from the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council.

Post-Primary Education

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education to consider good practice in post-primary education in the Republic of Ireland to inform his decisions for post-primary education here. (AQO 794/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that the review body on post-primary education will be considering arrangements and structure in a range of countries including the Republic of Ireland. Extensive knowledge and expertise on post-primary education on these arrangements is already available to the review body from within its own membership and from the panel of education advisers.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Regulatory Impact Assessments

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail discussions he has had with other Departments to reduce the regulatory burden on small businesses. (AQW 1567/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I attach great importance to reducing regulatory burdens on small businesses. All Government Departments are required to carry out regulatory impact assessments for any legislation affecting business. These are required to be signed off by the Department's Minister.

I have instigated recently a series of consultations with business representatives about the aspects of regulation most in need of action and I intend to put a paper with my recommendations to the Executive within the next few months.

Competition in the Energy Market

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he is taking to ensure the energy market is open to greater competition. (AQW 1576/00)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department's policy is to promote competition in the Northern Ireland energy market within the wider all-island and European context. Competition already exists in the well-established coal and oil sectors. Action has been taken to implement the EU Directives on the liberalisation of the electricity and gas markets. The required level of opening up of the electricity market will be achieved two years before the April 2003 deadline. The gas market is already open to competition beyond the level required by the EU Gas Directive.

Current action aimed at extending competition in the energy sector includes: a further stage in opening up the electricity market on 1 April 2001; the securing of EU financial assistance for the construction of the Moyle electricity interconnector with Scotland with 75% of the capacity open to immediate third-party access and the further strengthening of the links between the NIE and ESB networks; the regulator's invitation for applications for gas licences outside the Greater Belfast area; the ongoing discussions with the Government of the Republic of Ireland on North/South gas interconnection; and the support for the development of renewable energy sources and combined heat and power projects.

Knowledge-Based Economy

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he has taken to support the development of a knowledge-based economy in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1577/00)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department is entirely committed to assisting the development of a knowledge-based economy in Northern Ireland.

The IDB's activities in attracting inward investment now target the knowledge-based sectors of software, telecommunications, network services and e-business. Significant recent achievements include the investments by companies such as Acer Inc, CMAC, Avalanche Technology, Gem.com and TeleTech, which together represent a total investment of £50 million and offer the prospect of 2,089 new jobs.

The IDB and LEDU encourage existing businesses, including those in traditional industries, to develop their capabilities by embracing technology. They do this by providing support that will enable local companies to achieve the highest standard of business excellence, to embrace e-business and to expand sales overseas.

New programmes such as enterprise excellence and fast forward finance have been developed to ensure that those small knowledge-based businesses which offer high growth potential are provided with appropriate development assistance and financial support.

I was also delighted recently to be able to launch an industry trade guide for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) to promote the introduction of e-commerce among the small and medium sized (SME) sector of the tourism industry.

The Department has also made significant progress with its leapfrog to the information age initiative which aims to increase the use of ICT by business and to encourage the development of Northern Ireland's ICT sector. The results of the Department of Trade and Industries (DTI) annual ICT benchmarking survey for the year 2000 show that Northern Ireland has moved from bottom of the list in terms of businesses going online to equal sixth within the 12 UK regions. Businesses accounting for 75% of Northern Ireland employees are now online, and Northern Ireland has shown the fastest growth of any UK region.

My Department is also continuing to improve the infrastructure for a knowledge-based economy. The Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) is currently developing a strategy for the provision of a world-class telecommunications service in Northern Ireland. IRTU is also taking the lead in the development of co-ordinated regional research and development (R&D) and innovation strategies which will provide the appropriate framework to deliver a knowledge-based economy successfully. These include R&D programmes of support, the science park development, the creation of R&D centres of excellence, and the expansion of the teaching company scheme.

DETI has also been working closely with the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to ensure that our education and training systems produce the skills that businesses need in the knowledge-based economy.

Assistance Afforded to Harland & Wolff

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail discussions he has had with the management of Harland & Wolff relating to the securement of a Ministry of Defence contract and state what assistance his Department has afforded Harland & Wolff to help to secure this contract. (AQW 1591/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I continue to follow events closely in relation to progress of this conditional contract between Harland & Wolff and AWSR Shipping Ltd for construction of two ro-ro ferries at the shipyard. I recently met senior management at Harland & Wolff to discuss a number of aspects with regard to the company's continuing negotiations with AWSR. I and the Secretary of State have also made representations on the company's behalf to Ministers at the Ministry of Defence and Department of Trade and Industry. My Department has made an outline offer of shipbuilding intervention aid grant to the company towards the estimated build costs

of the two vessels and is also assisting with costs of a benchmarking and performance review study at the shipyard in preparation for work on the building project.

Modern Apprenticeships

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the financial assistance given to the shipyard to retain and encourage apprenticeships in the financial years 1998-99 and 1999-2000.

(AQW 1592/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Harland & Wolff have a contract with the Training and Employment Agency to deliver modern apprenticeships within the Jobskills programme. Apprentices recruited by the company in 1998-99 and 1999-2000 are continuing in training at the shipyard. Relevant payments made to the company amounted to £117,649 in 1998-99 and £118,549 in 1999-2000.

Redundancies in the Textile and Clothing Industries

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of job losses in the textile industry by each parliamentary constituency area for the year 2000. (AQW 1601/00)

Sir Reg Empey: In the year to December 2000, there were 2,019 redundancies within the textiles and clothing industry confirmed to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Information by parliamentary constituency area is not currently available. However, the 2,019 redundancies can be shown by job centre area (see table 1 below):

TABLE 1: CONFIRMED REDUNDANCIES IN THE TEXTILE AND CLOTHING INDUSTRY DURING 2000 *

Job Centre Areas	Confirmed Redundancies
Antrim	0
Armagh	153
Ballymena	48
Ballymoney	0
Ballynahinch	0
Banbridge	5
Bangor	229
Belfast	0
Carrickfergus	0
Coleraine	73
Cookstown	0
Downpatrick	0
Dungannon	0
Enniskillen	135

Job Centre Areas	Confirmed Redundancies
Kilkeel	0
Larne	0
Limavady	24
Lisburn	17
Londonderry	454
Lurgan	167
Magherafelt	141
Newcastle	0
Newry	42
Newtownards	317
Omagh	135
Portadown	0
Strabane	79
Total	2,019

* under the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 companies are only legally required to notify the Department of impending redundancies of 20 or more employees.

New Broadband Connections in Donegal

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he is aware of plans by the Government of the Republic of Ireland to introduce several broadband lines into Donegal and to make a statement.

(AQW 1611/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Recent press releases from the Department of Public Enterprise in the Republic of Ireland show that a number of projects have been approved to install new broadband connections in Donegal. These developments were also highlighted in the report 'Telecommunications for e-Business' published in November last year which was sponsored by the CBI, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, the Department of Public Enterprise in Ireland and my own agency, the Industrial Research and Technology Unit. This report showed current and projected broadband connections for the whole of Ireland including enhancements to Northern Ireland's telecommunications network. The draft Programme for Government recognises the importance of broadband services to the progressive development of a knowledge-intensive, business-based economy.

Inward Investment Visits to Strangford Constituency

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of visits he has made to the Strangford constituency in the last 12 months in comparison to other constituencies and (b) how many of those visits were related to inward investment.

(AQW 1630/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I have made two visits to the Strangford constituency in the last 12 months, both of which were inward investment related.

The number of visits to other constituencies and those relating to inward investment are shown below in annex A.

The figures include announcements of new inward investment projects or expansions and visits to externally owned companies or related promotional events and meetings at which inward investment would have been raised

ANNEX A

Constituency	Number of Visits	Inward Investment
Newry and Armagh	2	1
Strangford	4	1
South Antrim	10	5
East Antrim	6	1
Belfast East	6	1
Belfast South	6	3
Belfast West	7	1
East Londonderry	11	3
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	8	3
North Down	3	0
South Down	1	1
Mid Ulster	1	0
North Antrim	3	2
Foyle	6	0
Lagan Valley	4	0
Belfast North	1	0
Upper Bann	3	2
West Tyrone	1	1

Selective Financial Assistance

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of investment made by the Industrial Development Board (IDB) in each district council area in the last financial year. (AQW 1635/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The IDB's expenditure over the last financial year on selective financial assistance (grants, loans and shares) and on property capital works is set out in the following tables.

Similar analysis of trade international expenditure could only be attempted at disproportionate costs.

PROPERTY CAPITAL EXPENDITURE BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA 1999-2000

District Council Area	Expenditure (£'000)
Antrim	1,643
Ards	848

District Council Area	Expenditure (£'000)
Armagh	12
Ballymena	99
Ballymoney	-
Banbridge	145
Belfast	1,387
Carrickfergus	123
Castlereagh	-
Coleraine	-
Cookstown	37
Craigavon	126
Derry	425
Down	2,422
Dungannon	4
Fermanagh	664
Larne	74
Limavady	50
Lisburn	689
Magherafelt	106
Moyle	6
Newry and Mourne	2,575
Newtownabbey	2,860
North Down	94
Omagh	621
Strabane	10

Note: While most items of expenditure in relation to the IDB's property portfolio are recorded on a district council area 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 district council area is therefore not a fully comprehensive analysis.

SELECTIVE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE EXPENDITURE 1999-2000

District Council Area	Selective Financial Assistance Expenditure (£'000) 1999-2000
Antrim	2,691
Ards	1,034
Armagh	-
Ballymena	4,862
Ballymoney	384
Banbridge	487
Belfast	15,526
Carrickfergus	2,583
Castlereagh	909
Coleraine	3,234
Cookstown	5,164
Craigavon	6,944
Derry	19,224

District Council Area	Selective Financial Assistance Expenditure (£'000) 1999-2000
Down	461
Dungannon	2,319
Fermanagh	3,092
Larne	8,406
Limavady	2,066
Lisburn	4,755
Magherafelt	385
Moyle	-
Newry and Mourne	3,806
Newtownabbey	4,613
North Down	349
Omagh	60
Strabane	1,264

Note: Payments of SFA are made to the NI headquarters of the company concerned and are therefore recorded against the district council area in which the HQ is located. Where a company has a number of production units in different district council areas, this may not offer a true reflection of which council areas actually benefited from the expenditure.

InterTradeIreland

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, with particular reference to counties Fermanagh, Tyrone and Londonderry, the work and achievements of 'InterTradeIreland'.

(AQW 1647/00)

Sir Reg Empey: InterTradeIreland, the trade and business development body, has carried out a number of activities to promote cross-border trade and business development throughout the island of Ireland. A major e-commerce event 'Building Your E-Business' was held in Enniskillen in June 2000 and a road show event was held in Londonderry in November 2000. The two events together attracted almost 300 business people drawn primarily from the west and the north-west.

Council Groupings Working in Partnership

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he proposes to replicate the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) initiative 'Into the West' in counties Antrim and Down.

(AQW 1650/00)

Sir Reg Empey: 'Into the West' is an excellent example of a group of councils coming together with a statutory organisation, LEDU, to address particular needs identified through the experience of all parties concerned. I am aware that a number of the councils in Antrim have come together in an organisation known as CORE and in

counties Down and Armagh a similar organisation known as SEED exists. Both CORE and SEED are at different stages of development from Into the West and also may not exactly follow its model. However, they are examples of council groupings that are working in partnership with agencies such as LEDU to allow experience and best practice to be shared and maximise the use of public funds.

For this reason I currently have no proposals to replicate this particular initiative in Antrim or Down. However, I would encourage the councils to continue to work on areas of collaboration and I would assure the Member that LEDU will promote this and seek to identify opportunities from initiatives such as 'Into the West' with a view to further collaboration in the future.

ENVIRONMENT

Safer Routes to Schools Initiative

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what representations he has received on the safe routes for schools schemes and to give his assessment of the initiative. (AQW 1595/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I have received one written representation from two organisations and one Assembly question about the safer routes to schools initiative. To the best of my knowledge, these are the only representations I have received on this subject.

From the evidence available in Great Britain, I am of the opinion that there may be considerable merit in this initiative. I therefore intend to promote, through the aegis of the school travel advisory group and in conjunction with other Northern Ireland Departments and external organisations, at least five safer routes to schools pilot projects across Northern Ireland.

Tree Preservation Orders

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of specimen trees which have been subject to tree protection orders in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1618/00)

Mr Foster: Over the last five years my Department has placed two tree preservation orders on individual trees considered worthy of special protection. These were a redwood tree at Dergmoney House in Omagh and a horse chestnut tree at the junction of Woodburn Road and Upper Road, Carrickfergus.

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of prosecutions brought against developers for breaching tree preservation orders and (b) the number of prosecutions that have been successful in

each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1620/00)

Mr Foster: There have been no prosecutions brought for breaching tree preservation orders in any of the last five years.

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of trees, protected by tree preservation orders, which have been removed or damaged by developers in each of the last five years within the borough of Newtownabbey. (AQW 1621/00)

Mr Foster: The Department does not compile overall figures on the number of trees protected by tree preservation orders nor does it have figures for the number of trees which have been removed or damaged by developers.

Planning Applications for Apartments and Town Houses

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications for apartments and town houses which have been approved within the borough of Newtownabbey in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1622/00)

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications for apartments and town houses that have been submitted for sites within the Newtownabbey Borough Council area in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1624/00)

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications for apartments and town houses that have been refused within the Newtownabbey Borough Council area in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1625/00)

Mr Foster: The information requested is not available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

The Department does not routinely record separately the precise nature of dwellings proposed in housing developments involving a range of house types. To identify accurately the information requested would require a manual scrutiny of all planning applications for housing development submitted in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area in each of the last five years. There are currently more than 600 planning applications per year in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area.

Townscape Character

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to identify and extend, in conjunction with Newtownabbey Borough Council, areas of townscape within the borough of Newtownabbey. (AQW 1626/00)

Mr Foster: There are at the moment two areas of townscape character within the Newtownabbey Borough Council area. These are the Lenamore area of townscape character and the Lenamore (extended) area of townscape character (designated on 5 October 1992 and 20 July 1998 respectively), both of which are located in the Jordanstown area of the borough.

I have recently launched the Belfast metropolitan area plan, which will involve a widespread consultation exercise. This will offer the opportunity for the public to make suggestions with regard to areas within Newtownabbey, and indeed throughout the Belfast metropolitan area, which may merit special protection because of their heritage value.

It is not possible to anticipate the outcome of that exercise as it will affect Newtownabbey or any specific proposals for designations that may be brought forward. My Department will, however, address any proposals on their planning and heritage merits.

Waste Management

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his plans to assist local authorities to segregate waste at source. (AQW 1645/00)

Mr Foster: One of the key requirements of the Northern Ireland waste management strategy is for district councils to prepare waste management plans. The plans must ensure that there are adequate facilities available for recycling and recovery to allow the targets in the strategy to be met.

These plans will determine the nature, extent and systems of segregation which represent the best practicable environmental option for meeting materials recycling targets.

Plans are currently in preparation by three council groupings covering all 26 district council areas in Northern Ireland. My Department has provided financial assistance to support these joint planning partnerships.

My Department will also make available an extra £3.5m for waste management in the incoming financial year. The distribution of these funds, including any assistance for waste segregation, will be informed by the waste management plans which district councils submit.

Licensing Bus Services

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his plans to introduce new legislation for licensing bus services in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1646/00)

Mr Foster: I have no plans at present to amend the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 which provides for the regulation and licensing of bus services in Northern Ireland.

However, the European Commission is currently pursuing proposals for a Regulation on public service requirements and the award of public service contracts in passenger transport. The United Kingdom Government have broadly welcomed the thrust of this proposal.

I will therefore be keeping the matter of the legislation governing the licensing of bus services in Northern Ireland under review in the context of developments on the proposed European Regulation.

European Directive 86/278/EEC

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to ask his Republic of Ireland counterpart if the European Directive 86/278/EEC in relation to sewage sludge has been fully implemented in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 1651/00)

Mr Foster: Compliance with European Directives is a matter between individual member states and the European Commission in the first instance. It is ultimately for the European Court of Justice to decide if a Directive has been properly implemented.

It would not be appropriate for me to raise, with my counterpart, matters that lie between the Republic of Ireland and the European Commission and in which Northern Ireland does not have a direct interest.

I would also refer Mr Robinson to the answers that I gave, on 8 December 2000, to AQWs 799/00, 800/00, 801/00 and 802/00 and, on 26 January 2001, to AQWs 1171/00, 1174/00 and 1254/00.

European Directive 86/278/EEC

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm that the European Directive 86/278/EEC in relation to sewage sludge is implemented in the border regions of Northern Ireland. (AQW 1665/00)

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 Regulations place a responsibility on sludge producers to maintain registers of sewage sludge use in agriculture. They are complemented by a UK code of practice for the agricultural use of sewage sludge.

Within Northern Ireland, the only sludge producer under the terms of the Directive is the Department for Regional Development's Water Service. 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.

Audit checks undertaken by the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department indicate that the

procedures and records kept by the Water Service conform to the requirements of the Regulations.

The Regulations are enforced not only in the border regions but across all of Northern Ireland.

Task Force on Housing Development

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to establish a task force to study the impact of apartment and town house developments in residential areas.

(AQW 1654/00)

Mr Foster: I have no plans to establish a specific task force for this purpose.

The most comprehensive way of dealing with these developments is through clear planning policy and associated planning guidance, the preparation of which follows the actual experience of the impact of these developments. Planning policy and guidance will reflect this experience within its recommendations for the integration of future proposals within the urban fabric.

My Department is currently finalising, following public consultation, a planning policy statement to provide a policy context against which the design of proposed housing developments both on greenfield lands and within existing urban areas can be considered, including their locational context. The Department is also preparing, for consultation, supplementary planning guidance in the form of a development control advice note giving design guidance specifically related to proposals for small-unit housing within existing residential areas. I hope to publish both documents in the spring.

The Department for Regional Development will be preparing a regional planning policy statement entitled 'Housing in Settlements'. This will go through the normal consultation arrangements for the preparation of planning policy which afford the opportunity for specific issues to be raised for consideration.

Recycling Domestic Waste

Mr Fee asked the Minister of the Environment to detail by district council area for the last five years for which figures are available, the percentage of domestic waste which is recycled under the following categories: (a) paper (b) glass (c) plastic and (d) fabric. (AQW 1682/00)

Mr Foster: Information on the levels of recycling of individual waste types by district council area is not held by my Department.

My Department carried out a survey of municipal waste in all district council areas for the 1998-99 financial year. The survey revealed that the average domestic waste recycling rate is 4.9% with a total of 42,300 tonnes being recycled.

My Department has now commissioned another study of the waste arisings to provide further information to support district councils in the development of their waste management plans.

Paper Recycling Scheme

Mr McClelland asked the Minister of the Environment to undertake to promote a paper recycling scheme in local schools. (AQW 1700/00)

Mr Foster: Recycling is principally a responsibility of district councils. All councils now employ recycling officers who liaise closely with schools in their area to promote recycling. Magherafelt District Council has set a good example by introducing a paper recycling scheme for all schools in its district. I would encourage all other councils to consider similar action.

One of the aims of my Department's waste management strategy, published in March 2000, is to effect a cultural shift towards recycling. To achieve this it will be necessary to motivate all members of society, not least schoolchildren.

Recycling is promoted as an important aspect of sustainable development by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service. The service's educational strategy aims to promote good environmental practice, including recycling, through partnerships with district councils, community groups and environmental bodies.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Official Meetings with Organisations

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list the organisations he met in his official capacity during (a) September 2000 (b) October 2000 (c) November 2000 and (d) December 2000, detailing the number of occasions on which he met each organisation. (AQW 1417/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): In my official capacity, I have met the following organisations:-

September

- NICVA, Barnardo's, Save the Children Fund, NSPCC, Child Care NI
- Economic and Social Research Council
- Polish Monitoring Committee
- Derry City Council Marketing Committee
- Regional Policy Directorate, European Commission

October

- Delegation from Committee of the Regions
- Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland
- Arthur McCabe & Associates
- Construction Employers Federation
- Consultation seminar on Robson indicators*
- Confederation of British Industry
- Services, Industrial, Professional, Technical Union
- Londonderry Chamber of Commerce
- Lady Chair's reception, Federation of Small Businesses
- Working Group on delivery mechanisms Peace II with representatives from district councils, intermediary funding bodies, district partnership board, district partnerships and NICE

November

- Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors
- Royal Society of Arts
- Building Control Group Committee
- Omagh District Council
- Community Evaluation NI, NICVA, University of Ulster*
- Quarry Products Association
- Changing the Face of Public Purchasing Conference representatives from small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (clients of LEDU, IDB and Enterprise Ireland)
- Budget Equality Conferences*

December

- Strabane District Council
- Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust
- Peace Monitoring Committee including representatives from the equality, environment, voluntary and community, business, agriculture and rural development and fisheries sectors, trade union and sub-regional and local government
- Peace II and the voluntary sector seminar*
- Human Rights Commission Northern Ireland
- Community Support Framework Monitoring Committee including representatives from the equality, environment, voluntary and community, business, agricultural and rural sectors, trade union and local government
- Intermediary funding bodies including representatives from Co-operation Ireland, Community Relations Council, Educational Guidance Service, NIPPA, NIVT, PROTEUS, Playboard, Rural Community Network, Rural Development Council, Training for Women Network and Youthnet

* Includes representatives from the various sectors within the community which the Minister has met on more than one occasion.

Regional Rate

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline discussions he has had with representatives of the private sector on the impact of the regional rate.

(AQW 1575/00)

Mr Durkan: I have not had any discussions with representatives of the private sector. I have received written representations from Strabane Business 2000, the Association of Riding Establishments in Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation on this issue. In addition I have been made aware of the objections of a delegation of independent retailers that lobbied the Assembly on 15 January 2001.

Radon Designation

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his plans to raise the issue of designation of radon-affected areas with his counterpart in the Irish Government.

(AQW 1631/00)

Mr Durkan: I have no immediate plans at present to raise the matter of radon designation with Ministers in the Irish Government. There are regular discussions at official level on radon and other environmental protection matters. When further considering the issue of designation and consulting on proposals for extending areas of designation, I will consider relevant provisions in other jurisdictions in these islands.

Socio-Economic Statistics

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if, in light of the recent report published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and the Central Statistics Office 'Ireland North and South: A Statistical Profile', he will advise on those comparative socio-economic statistics which are not available and which are referred to on page iii of the above report and what plans he has to have this data produced.

(AQW 1632/00)

Mr Durkan: 'Ireland, North and South: A Statistical Profile' was jointly produced by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO). Through a process of elimination, they identified major policy areas for which comparable data were readily available for both jurisdictions. These are the policy areas covered by the profile. NISRA is in regular contact with CSO to investigate (i) the potential to provide further comparable statistics for those policy areas already covered by the profile, and (ii) the possibility

of new comparable data being identified/produced. It is intended that future editions of the profile will feature greater data coverage arising from these contacts.

'Focus on Northern Ireland' Report

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency plans to update the 1997 report 'Focus on Northern Ireland' and in particular its section entitled 'The Two Communities'. (AQW 1644/00)

Mr Durkan: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency plan to publish a new edition of 'Focus on Northern Ireland' in winter 2001. This will include an update of the material included in the section entitled 'The Two Communities'.

Relieving Child Poverty

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the fiscal measures he is taking to relieve child poverty in Northern Ireland and to make a statement. (AQW 1666/00)

Mr Durkan: A focus on our young people is central to the Programme for Government's vision for the future. The budget for 2001-02 approved by the Assembly on 18 December 2000 contains a number of measures to alleviate child poverty.

Parity with the social security system in Great Britain will be maintained to provide an overall framework within which poverty will be tackled. Nearly £16 million will be spent on the welfare reform and modernisation programme which, amongst other things, will modernise the child support service for lone parents and simplify current assessment procedures.

Real terms increases in the DE, DHSSPS and DSD budgets will enable current programmes that are designed to alleviate child poverty to be maintained and developed. For example, the Budget provides a 10% increase in provision for personal social services in 2001-02. This will maintain the improvements made to children's services in 2000, expand the Sure Start coverage by almost 50% and provide some additional residential care places in response to the deficiencies identified in the 'Children Matter' report.

In recognition of the special needs of children the Executive have also set up a £28 million children's fund to provide targeted support for children in need and youth at risk over the next three years.

Legal Costs

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of public money spent on behalf of (a) the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (b) the Minister of Education and (c) the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on

legal costs associated with the court case taken by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety against the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. (AQW 1862/00)

Mr Durkan: The respective legal representatives of the First Minister, Deputy First Minister, Minister of Education and Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have not yet submitted a note of their costs in the court case taken by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety against the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. At this stage, therefore, no public money has been spent.

Deficits in Health Service Trusts

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail progress in relation to plans to overcome difficulties caused by deficits in Health Service Trusts. (AQO 759/00)

Mr Durkan: At its meeting on 8 February the Executive agreed my proposals to resolve the Health Service deficits through an injection of £18 million of additional funding. It was also agreed that DFP, DHSSPS and OFMDFM should oversee a joint consultancy exercise to examine the origins and consequences of the recent growth of deficits in HPSS boards and trusts and the effectiveness of new arrangements which DHSSPS is currently putting in place to ensure improved transparency and accountability. The conclusions of this review will be brought back to the Executive in the late spring.

Budget Help for Pensioners

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give his assessment of how the budget will help the poorest pensioners in Northern Ireland. (AQO 735/00)

Mr Durkan: The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a range of tax and expenditure measures in his pre-budget report which will be of benefit to pensioners. These include increases in the basic state pension, the minimum income guarantee for poorer pensioners, and the winter fuel payment. The Executive intend to implement these measures in full in Northern Ireland.

In the draft Programme for Government, published in October 2000, the Executive made a commitment to address fuel poverty and provide free transport for older people.

On 22 January I announced that the Executive were allocating an additional £2 million to the Department for Social Development for action against fuel poverty.

Barnett Formula

Mr Maginness asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his plans to make representations to the

Treasury regarding improved levels of resources allocated under the Barnett formula and to make a statement.

(AQO 758/00)

Mr Durkan: The First Minister and Deputy First Minister met with the Chancellor of the Exchequer recently to discuss a range of issues including the operation of the Barnett formula.

My officials have also had a series of meetings with HM Treasury officials during the spending review process to discuss Northern Ireland's Barnett-determined funding allocations.

I will continue to seek changes in relation to the Barnett formula and press for funding allocations which fully reflect the higher levels of need in Northern Ireland.

Assistance to Victims of Terrorism

Mr Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if it is his intention to ring-fence a portion of Peace II funds for assistance to victims of terrorism.

(AQO 774/00)

Mr Durkan: Under the latest allocations for the Peace II programme, agreed by the Executive Committee, victims are specifically catered for within the social integration, inclusion and reconciliation priority. The indicative allocation for carrying out actions for support for victims and survivors of violence under this priority is some £6.67 million including matching Government funding.

Socio-Economic Statistics

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his plans for the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency to provide socio-economic statistics on community differentials according to religion.

(AQO 761/00)

Mr Durkan: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) includes a question on religion in all major surveys and routinely includes analysis by religion in the published reports on these surveys. Publication of the Labour Force Survey Religion Report for 1999 and a source book of fair employment statistics providing time series covering the period 1971 to 1999 is in progress. In addition, NISRA plans to publish a number of compendia publications over the year ahead including new editions of the Northern Ireland Social Brief and Focus on Northern Ireland, both of which will provide socio-economic statistics according to religion.

Peace II: Partnership Working

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail progress in relation to the development

of the partnership arrangements which will take forward Peace II.

(AQO 799/00)

Mr Durkan: The Executive have agreed upon a model for partnership working under Peace II which will evolve directly from the existing district partnerships, and build on their successes. Through district councils, social and economic partners and statutory agencies together developing integrated local area strategies, we aim to promote arrangements which will be sustainable after the programme ends. We hope that these new arrangements will have taken root in all district council areas by local agreement within a framework specified by the Executive by the end of this year.

Funding for District Partnerships

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm when funding will be available for district partnerships to distribute under the Peace II programme.

(AQO 740/00)

Mr Durkan: Negotiations with the European Commission on the Peace II operational programme should be completed by March 2001. Thereafter the availability of funding to district partnerships will depend upon approval of the programme complement by the monitoring committee and the establishment of arrangements by each district partnership to receive and evaluate applications for funding under priority 3 of the new programme.

Monitoring Expenditure of Departments

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the monitoring procedures he follows in relation to expenditure by each Civil Service Department.

(AQO 745/00)

Mr Durkan: The Department of Finance and Personnel conducts four monitoring rounds in the course of each financial year during July, October, December and February. Each Department writes to DFP setting out its proposals for changes in the pattern of departmental allocations in response to spending patterns. These can be reductions, increases or reallocations between Departments. Proposals for reallocations are scrutinised jointly by DFP and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Investing in New Methods of Treatment

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps she is taking to

ensure that the Health Service has sufficient resources to invest in new methods of treatment. (AQW 1568/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The historic underfunding of the health and social services here has created difficulties in ensuring the adequate provision of services, including new methods of treatment. My Department's bids for additional resources in the last public expenditure round identified a range of needs including the additional costs of new methods of treatment and it is my Department's policy to maximise the amount of available resources going to front-line care. The resources made available for health and social services, however, are determined by the Executive and approved by the Assembly and I will continue to press for additional funding.

Tá deacrachtaí cruthaithe ag an easpa maoinithe stairiúil sna seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta anseo maidir le soláthar sásúil seirbhísí a chinntiú, modhanna nua cóireála san áireamh. D'aithin éilimh mo Roinne ar áiseanna breise sa dreas caiteachais phoiblí dheireanaigh réimse riachtanas, na costais bhreise a bhaineann le modhanna nua cóireála san áireamh, agus is é polasaí mo Roinne an méid is mó agus is féidir de na háiseanna a chur chuig cúram líne thosaigh. Bíodh sin mar atá, cinntear na háiseanna a chuirtear ar fáil do shláinte agus sheirbhísí sóisialta ag an choiste Feidmiúcháin agus ceadaítear ag an Tionól iad agus leanfaidh mé de bheith ag tathant orthu maoiniú breise a chur ar fáil.

Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) Vaccination

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the suggested link between the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination and autism in young children and to detail the number of diagnosed autism cases in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1578/00)

Ms de Brún: I am aware of the weight of research evidence on this issue. The World Health Organisation, the Medical Research Council, the Committee on the Safety of Medicine and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation have all stated that there is no link between the MMR vaccine and autism and I have seen no credible evidence to the contrary.

Information about the annual numbers of diagnosed autism cases is not collected centrally.

Tá méid an taighde ar an cheist seo ar eolas agam. Mhaigh an Eagraíocht Dhomhanda Sláinte, an Chomhairle Taighde Míochaine, an Coiste ar Shábháilteacht Mhíochaine agus an Comhchoiste ar Vacsaíní agus ar Imdhíonad uilig nach bhfuil nasc ar bith idir vacsaín BPB agus uathachas, agus ní fhaca me cruthú creidiúnach ar a mhalairt.

Ní bhailítear eolas go lárnach ar líonta bliantúla na gcásanna fáthmheasta le huathachas.

Speech and Language Therapy Services

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the provision for speech and language therapy services in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board and to make a statement.

(AQW 1580/00)

Ms de Brún: There are 108.83 WTE (whole time equivalent) permanent and 5.3 WTE temporary speech and language therapists employed by trusts in the Eastern Board area. The board advises that at the end of December 2000 there were 304 people waiting for assessment and 131 waiting for treatment to commence. There are currently 27.65 WTE vacancies covering permanent, temporary and new initiative posts. Recruitment and retention of qualified therapists has proved problematical for trusts. My Department is reviewing the number of speech and language therapists in training. Currently there is an annual intake of 22 students a year to the University of Ulster.

Fostaíonn iontaobhais 108.83 teiripí labhartha agus teanga buana CAI (coibhéis ama iomláin) agus 5.3 teiripí labhartha agus teanga sealadacha CAI i limistéar Bhord an Oirthir. Measann an bord go raibh 304 duine ag fanacht ar mheasúnú agus 131 duine ag fanacht ar thús a gcóireála ag deireadh Mhí na Nollag 2000. Faoi láthair, tá 27.65 folúntas CAI a chumhdaíonn poist bhuana, sealadacha agus tionscnaimh nua. Bhí fadhb ag iontaobhais teiripithe cáilithe a earcú agus a choinneáil. Tá mo Roinn ag déanamh athbhreithnithe ar líon na dteiripithe labhartha agus teanga in oiliúint. Faoi láthair, glacann Ollscoil Uladh 22 mhac léinn in aghaidh na bliana.

Coleraine Hospital

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to protect the former workhouse building within the grounds of Coleraine Hospital.

(AQW 1581/00)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to written question AQ 1582.

Tarraingim aird an Chomhalta ar cheist scríofa AQ 1582.

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her plans for the site of Coleraine Hospital following its closure.

(AQW 1582/00)

Ms de Brún: When the new Causeway Hospital opens in April 2001, Coleraine Hospital will be surplus to the requirements of the Causeway Health and Social Services Trust. In accordance with Government procedures for the disposal of surplus property, the availability of Coleraine Hospital has been circulated within the public sector. This produced no expressions of interest.

The next step in the procedure is to appoint an estate agent to deal with the disposal of the hospital on the open market. It is considered, however, that the decommissioning of the hospital to facilitate its disposal will take approximately six months. Consequently the appointment of an estate agent will not take place until the autumn.

Meetings between officers of the Causeway Trust and the Valuation and Lands Agency have already taken place and a further meeting has been arranged for 6 September 2001. It is anticipated that after this meeting the Valuation and Lands Agency will be able to appoint an estate agent to complete the disposal of the hospital. It is hoped that this will be achieved no later than 12 months after the transfer of services from Coleraine Hospital to the new Causeway Hospital.

The particulars of sale for the hospital will state that the administration building, formally the workhouse, has been listed as a category B building by the Environment and Heritage Service. It will be the responsibility of the purchaser to address any issues associated with the listed status of the building.

Nuair a osclófar Otharlann nua an Chlocháin i Mí Aibreáin 2001, beidh Otharlann Chúil Raithin ina h-áis iomarcach do riachtanais Iontaobhas SSS an Chlocháin. De réir gnásanna an Rialtais do dhíol sealúchais bhreise, scaipeadh eolas ar infhaighteacht Otharlann Chúil Raithin istigh san earnáil phoiblí. Níor cuireadh suim ar bith inti in iúl dá ainneoin seo.

Is í an chéad chéim eile ná gníomhaire eastáit a cheapadh le déileáil le díol na hotharlainne ar an mhargadh oscailte. Síltear, áfach, go dtógfaidh díchoimisíú na hotharlainne a chuideoidh chun í a dhíol thart fá sé mhí. Ar an ábhar sin, ní cheapfar an gníomhaire eastáit go dtí an Fómhair.

Bhí cruinnithe idir feidhmeannaigh Iontaobhas an Chlocháin agus na Gníomhaireachta Luachála agus Tailte cheana féin, agus socraíodh cruinniú eile don 6ú Meán Fómhair 2001. Táthar ag súil go mbeidh an Gníomhaireacht Luachála agus Tailte ábalta gníomhaire eastáit a cheapadh leis an otharlann a dhíol i ndiaidh an chruinnithe seo. Táthar ag súil go ndéanfar seo gan níos moille ná bliain i ndiaidh aistriú na seirbhísí ó Otharlann Chúil Raithin go hOtharlann nua an Chlocháin.

Maífidh mionsonraí na díola don otharlann gur liostáladh an foirgneamh riaracháin, nó teach na mbocht roimhe sin, mar fhoirgneamh chatagóir B ag an tSeirbhís Chomhshaoil agus Oidhreacht. Beidh an ceannaitheoir freagrach as dul i gceann ceisteanna ar bith bainteach le stádas liostáilte an fhoirgnimh.

Morning-After Pill

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to

ensure that the morning-after pill (Levonelle-2) is not made available to girls under 16 years of age.

(AQW 1586/00)

Ms de Brún: Emergency hormonal contraception (EHC), also known as the morning-after pill (Levonelle-2), has been available here on prescription from general practitioners to all women, independent of age, since November 1999 and so has continually been available to girls under 16 years of age since that date. With the introduction of the availability of EHC in pharmacies, pharmacists may only sell EHC to women of 16 and over. A woman of under 16 seeking EHC would be referred to a doctor.

Comprehensive guidance on best practice for the supply of EHC has been sent to all pharmacists by the Pharmaceutical Society here and has been supported by a series of seminars and an education pack on EHC, provided by the Centre for Postgraduate Pharmaceutical Education and Training.

Tá frithghiniúnach hormónach éigeandála (FHÉ), ar a dtugtar piollaire na maidine dár gCionn (Levonelle-2) ar fáil ar oideas anseo ó liachleachtóirí ginearálta do gach bean gan spleáchas d'aois ó mhí na Samhna 1999, agus ar an ábhar sin tá sé ar fáil go leanúnach do chailíní faoi 16 bliana ón dáta sin. Ón am a cuireadh FHÉ ar fáil i gcógaslanna, ní féidir le poitigéirí é a dhíol ach le mná 16 bliana d'aois agus os a chionn. Dá mbeadh bean faoi 16 bliana ag iarraidh FHÉ chuirfí ar aghaidh chuig dochtúir í.

Chuir an Cumann Cógaisíochta anseo treoir chuimsitheach ar dhea-chleachtas maidir le soláthar FHÉ chuig gach poitigéir agus i dtacaíocht léi reáchtáil an tAonad Oideachais agus Oiliúna Iarchéime Cógaisíochta sraith seimineár agus d'eisigh sé paca oideachais ar FHÉ.

Adoption

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail by board area (a) the number of children who were waiting for adoption in the years 1998 and 1999 and (b) the number of foster parents who were available to adopt for the years 1998 and 1999.

(AQW 1593/00)

Ms de Brún: (a) The information is not available in the form requested.

However, between 1 October 1998 and 30 September 1999 a total of 102 children were being considered for adoption. The breakdown for each health and social services board area was as follows:

Eastern HSSB	62
Southern HSSB	13
Western HSSB	14
Northern HSSB	13

(b) While some looked-after children have been adopted by their foster carers, the exact numbers are not known.

(a) Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh.

Idir an 1ú Deireadh Fómhair 1998 agus an 30ú Meán Fómhair 1999, bhí machnamh á dhéanamh ar altramú 102 pháiste san iomlán. Seo a leanas an breacadh síos do limistéar gach bord SSS:

BSSS an Oirthir	62
BSSS an Deiscirt	13
BSSS an Iarthair	14
BSSS an Tuaiscirt	13

(b) Cé gur uchtáil cúramóirí altrama cuid de na páistí ar thug siad aire dóibh, níltear eolach ar na líonta cruinne.

Children in Foster Placements

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail by board area (a) the number of children currently with foster parents and (b) the number of children adopted in the years 1998 and 1999. (AQW 1594/00)

Ms de Brún: (a) At the end of March 1999, the latest date for which figures are available, the number of children in foster placements was:

Eastern HSSB	681
Northern HSSB	363
Southern HSSB	182
Western HSSB	280
Total	1,506

(b) The number of children adopted in 1998 and 1999 was:

	1998	1999	Total
Eastern HSSB	53	61	114
Northern HSSB	33	38	71
Southern HSSB	19	50	69
Western HSSB	22	32	54
Total	127	181	308

(a) Ag deireadh Mhí an Mhárta 1999, an dáta is déanaí atá figiúirí mar seo ar fáil, seo a leanas líon na bpáistí a bhí in áiteanna altrama:

BSSS an Oirthir	681
BSSS an Tuaiscirt	363
BSSS an Deiscirt	182
BSSS an Iarthair	280
Iomlán	1,506

(b) Seo a leanas líon na bpáistí a altramaíodh i 1998 agus i 1999:

	1998	1999	Iomlán
BSSS an Oirthir	53	61	114
BSSS an Tuaiscirt	33	38	71
BSSS an Deiscirt	19	50	69
BSSS an Iarthair	22	32	54
Iomlán	127	181	308

Numbers Suffering From Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the numbers suffering from cancer in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area for the years 1998 and 1999.

(AQW 1602/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil.

Emergency Services

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her proposals to have the emergency services use common facilities.

(AQW 1608/00)

Ms de Brún: The report on the strategic review of the Ambulance Service stated that there was potential for use of common facilities between the emergency services and a number of such proposals are currently under consideration. As a result of the strategic review a number of project groups have been established to look more closely at how the report's recommendations could be implemented and the costs of doing so. The potential to further develop the use of common facilities by the emergency services will be explored as part of this work.

Dúirt an tuairisc ar athbhreithniú straitéiseach ar an tSeirbhís Otharchair go bhfuil féidearthacht ann go dtiocfadh leis na seirbhísí éigeandála áiseanna a roinnt agus tá roinnt moltaí den sórt á machnamh faoi láthair. De thoradh an athbhreithnithe straitéisigh cuireadh roinnt grúpaí tionscnaimh ar bun le hamharc níos grinne ar an dóigh a d'fhéadfadh moltaí na tuairisce a chur i bhfeidhm agus ar na costais a bheadh i gceist. Fiosrófar an fhéidearthacht go bhféadfadh forbairt bhreise a dhéanamh ar chomhúsáid áiseanna ag na seirbhísí éigeandála mar chuid den obair seo.

Residential and Nursing Home Accommodation

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to ensure that the fall in the number of independent sector residential and nursing homes in Great Britain is not replicated in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1609/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department and the health and social services boards and trusts will continue to work in partnership with the independent sector to provide appropriate residential and nursing home accommodation.

Last year a working group carried out a review of funding for residential and nursing homes in the independent sector. The group recommended that fees paid to independent sector providers of nursing and residential care beds should be reviewed annually and that boards and trusts should consider waiting lists for places in nursing and residential care homes. Where appropriate, more places should be purchased in independent sector care homes to raise occupancy levels. It was also recommended that boards and trusts should consider whether block contracts could be offered to homes to give the provider a more secure income stream and that boards and trusts should consider setting fee structures to encourage and reward quality.

Boards and trusts are now working to implement those recommendations.

Leanfaidh mo Roinn agus na Boird agus iontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta ar aghaidh ag obair i bpáirtíocht leis an earnáil neamhspleách chun cóiríocht chónaithe agus bhanaltrachta chuí a sholáthar.

Anuraidh, rinne grúpa oibre athbhreithniú ar mhaoiniú tithe cónaithe agus banaltrachta san earnáil neamhspleách. Mhol an grúpa gur chóir athbhreithniú bliantúil a dhéanamh ar tháillí a íocadh do sholáthraithe leapacha cúraim chónaithe agus bhanaltrachta san earnáil neamhspleách agus gur chóir do na boird agus d'iontaobhais machnamh a dhéanamh ar liostaí feithimh d'áiteanna i dtithe cónaithe agus banaltrachta. Nuair a bheidh sé cuí, ba chóir níos mó áiteanna i dtithe cúraim na hearnála neamhspleáiche a cheannach le leibhéil na ndaoine a chónóidh iontu a mhéadú. Moladh fosta gur chóir do bhoird agus d'iontaobhais machnamh a dhéanamh ar thairiscint bhloc-chonarthaí do thithe le sruth ioncaim níos daingne a thabhairt don sholáthraí agus gur chóir Bhoird agus d'iontaobhais machnamh a dhéanamh ar leagan síos struchtúr táillí le cáilíocht a spreagadh agus a chúiteamh.

Tá boird agus iontaobhais ag obair anois leis na moltaí sin a chur i gcrích.

Morning-After Pill

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that she has signed an Order permitting the sale of the morning-after pill to women aged 16 years or over, even though the age of consent in Northern Ireland is 17 years of age.

(AQW 1648/00)

Ms de Brún: On 8 December 2000 I signed an Order (The Prescription Only Medicines (Human Use) Amendment (No. 3) Order 2000), which introduced the sale of

the morning-after pill to women aged 16 years or over from 1 January 2001. I can also confirm that prior to my signing, notification was sent to the HSSPS Committee. On attaining 16 years, a person can secure medical treatment without parental consent.

Ar an 8ú Nollaig 2000, shínigh mé an tOrd (Ord Athraithe (Uimh. 3) ar Chógais ar Ordú Amháin (Úsáid Dhaonna)) a thug díol an phiolla don mhaidin dar gCionn do mhná 16 bliana d'aois nó níos mó isteach ón 1ú Eanáir 2001. Thig liom a dhearbhu fosta gur cuireadh scéala faoi chuig an Choiste SSSSP sular shínigh mé é. Nuair a bhaineann duine éigin 16 bliana d'aois amach is féidir leis an duine cóireáil mhíochaine a fháil gan cead tuismitheora.

Discovery of Foetus

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) detail what investigation she has initiated into the finding of a foetus in a vehicle belonging to the Ulster Hospital Trust and (b) state who is in charge of this investigation and to make a statement.

(AQW 1659/00)

Ms de Brún: I have asked the chief executive of the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust to investigate this as a matter of urgency. My officials are in contact with the trust and have asked for a full report to be provided.

D'iarr mé ar phríomh-fheidhmeannach Iontaobhas Otharlanna agus Phobal Uladh an cheist seo a fhiosrú go práinneach. Tá m'óifigh i dteagmháil leis an iontaobhas agus d'iarr siad orthu tuairisc chuimsitheach a dhéanamh.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus

Mr I Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people diagnosed human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) positive in Northern Ireland in the last 12-month period for which figures are available and detail the comparable figures for (a) 1995 (b) 1990 and (c) 1985.

(AQW 1662/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on persons newly diagnosed as HIV positive ⁽¹⁾ here for the calendar years 1985, 1990 and 1995 are detailed in the table below.

1985	13
1990	12
1995	12

(1) Individuals with laboratory reports of infection plus those with AIDS or death reports for whom no matching laboratory report has been received.

Initial figures for the 12 months up to December 2000 indicate that there were 14 persons newly diagnosed as HIV positive here.

Mionléirítear eolas ar dhaoine nuafháthmheasta mar VED-dhearfach ⁽¹⁾ anseo do na blianta 1985, 1990 agus 1995 sa tábla thíos.

1985	13
1990	12
1995	12

(1) Daoine aonair le tuairiscí saotharlainne ar ghalrú agus iad siúd le SEIF nó le tuairiscí báis nach bhfuarthas a mhacasamhail de thuairisc saotharlainne orthu.

Léiríonn na figiúirí tosaigh don 12 mhí go dtí an Nollaig 2000 go raibh 14 dhuine nuafháthmheasta mar VED-dhearfach anseo.

Brucellosis Reactive Animals

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the procedures she has in place to treat persons infected through contact with brucellosis reactive animals and to make a statement.

(AQW 1675/00)

Ms de Brún: Individuals who suffer, or who are concerned that they may be suffering, from brucellosis should, in the first instance, contact their general practitioner. Hospital admission, consultant referral or specialist microbiological advice may be necessary. As the early symptoms of brucellosis can mimic those of viral illnesses, it is essential that general practitioners are alert to patients who present with flu-like symptoms and who may be occupationally at risk. The need for vigilance was highlighted in the March 2000 edition of the Chief Medical Officer's 'Update' (a newsletter sent to all doctors here). This alerted doctors to the re-emergence of brucellosis, reminding them of the early symptoms and of the 'at risk' occupational groups.

Ba chóir do dhaoine aonair a fhulaingíonn nó atá buartha go bhfulaingíonn siad ó bhrúiséallóis dul i dteagmháil lena ngnáthdhochtúir ar an chéad dul síos. Féadann ligean isteach otharlainne, atreorú chuig comhairleoir nó sainchomhairle mhicri-bhitheolaíochta bheith riachtanach. Mar gur féidir le hairíonna luatha brúiséallóise aithris a dhéanamh ar thinnis víreasacha, tá sé riachtanach go mbíonn gnáthdhochtúirí san airdeall ar othair a bhfuil an chuma orthu go bhfuil airíonna cosúla fliú orthu, nó orthu siúd a d'fhéadfadh a bheith i mbaol mar gheall ar a ngairm. Cuireadh béim ar an ghá le bheith san airdeall in eagrán an Mhárta 2000 de 'Leagan Úr Leasaithe' an Príomh-Oifigigh míochaine (nuachtlitir a sheoltar chuig na dochtúirí uile anseo). Chuir seo dochtúirí san airdeall ar ateacht ar ais brúiséallóise, ag cur na n-airíonna luatha agus na ngrúpa a d'fhéadfadh bheith 'i mbaol' mar gheall ar a ngairm i gcuimhne dóibh.

"Dalriada Doctors on Call"

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm the number of

out-of-hours doctors who are part of the "Dalriada doctors on call" service and what size of population they cover.

(AQW 1687/00)

Ms de Brún: "Dalriada doctors on call" out-of-hours service draws from a total of 282 doctors caring for a population of 380,000.

The out-of-hours service is provided from four centres, located in Ballymena, Coleraine, Moneymore and Newtownabbey. During the out-of-hours periods three of the centres have a minimum of three doctors on duty with one doctor oncall up to midnight, and one doctor on duty and one doctor oncall from midnight to 7.30 am - 8.00 am.

In the other centre, Moneymore, which covers fewer patients, a minimum of two doctors are on duty with one oncall up to midnight, and from midnight to 7.30 am - 8.00 am there is one doctor on duty and one doctor oncall.

Procedures are in place to increase the number of doctors on duty if there is increased demand.

Roghnaíonn an tseirbhís as uaireanta oibre "dochtúirí Dhál Riata ar dualgas" ó 282 dhochtúir san iomlán a riarann ar dhaoine 380,000.

Soláthraítear an tseirbhís as uaireanta oibre ó ceithre ionad, suite ar an Bhaile Meánach, i gCúil Raithin, i Muine Mór agus i mBaile Nua na Mainstreach. Le linn na dtréimhsí as uaireanta oibre tá trí dhochtúir ar a laghad ar diúite le dochtúir amháin ar dualgas ó mheán oíche go dtí 7.30r.n./8.00r.n.

San ionad eile i Muine Mór a chumhdaíonn níos lú othar, tá dhá dhochtúir ar a laghad ar diúite le dochtúir amháin ar dualgas go dtí meán oíche; agus ó mheán oíche go dtí 7.30r.n./8.00r.n., tá dochtúir amháin ar diúite agus dochtúir amháin eile ar dualgas.

Tá gnásanna ann anois le líon na ndochtúirí ar diúite a mhéadú má tá méadú san éileamh orthu.

Sure Start Projects in South Down

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to extend the Sure Start Programme in south Down.

(AQW 1697/00)

Ms de Brún: Sure Start projects in Downpatrick and Newry were approved for funding in July last year. While parts of south Down were identified by the eastern and southern childcare partnerships as priority areas for the second round of Sure Start projects, no bid has been received from those areas. The introduction of the second round of projects from April this year will complete the allocation of all of the funding available for the Sure Start programme.

Ceadáíodh maoiniú do thionscadail Sure Start i nDún Pádraig agus san Iúr i Mí Iúil anuraidh. Cé gur aithin

páirtíochtaí cúraim pháistí an oirthir agus an deiscirt ceantair sa Dún Theas mar cheantair thosaíochta don dara babhta de thionscadail Sure Start, ní bhfuarthas iarratas ar bith ó na ceantair sin. Cuirfidh tabhairt isteach an dara babhta de thionscadail ó Aibreán i mbliana dáileadh na maoinithe uile a bhí ar fáil don chlár Sure Start i gcrích.

Age Profile of Nursing Staff

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the age profile of nursing staff in Northern Ireland and to make a statement. (AQW 1712/00)

Ms de Brún: As at 30 September 2000 an estimated 19,411 nurses and midwives were employed in the HPSS. The age profile is set out in the following table:

NURSING STAFF IN POST BY AGE AT 30 SEPTEMBER 2000 (HEADCOUNT)

	Qualified Nurses	Midwives	Student Midwives	Unqualified Nurse
Under 30	3,258	171	48	1,544
30-39	5,701	593	2	1,360
40-49	3,176	427	0	1,035
50-59	1,252	129	0	614
60-64	44	9	0	47
65+	1	0	0	0

Mar a bhí ar 30 Méan Fómhair 2000 measadh go raibh 19,411 altra agus bean chabhrach fostaíthe i SSSP. Tá an phróifíl aoise leagtha amach sa tábla thíos:

FOIREANN ALTRACHTA I BPOST DE RÉIR AOISE AR 30 MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2000 (CUNTAS CLOIGINN)

	Altraí Cáilithe	Mná Cabhrach	Ábhar Ban Cabhrach	Altraí Neamhcháilithe
Faoi 30	3,258	171	48	1,544
30-39	5,701	593	2	1,360
40-49	3,176	427	0	1,035
50-59	1,252	129	0	614
60-64	44	9	0	47
65+	1	0	0	0

Regional Maternity Services

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if future maternity provision at the Mater and Lagan Valley hospitals will be included in the proposed review of regional maternity services.

(AQO 767/00)

Ms de Brún: The acute hospital review group is currently carrying out a review of acute hospitals here

and its report, which is due to be published in the spring, will help to inform my decisions on the future of all hospital services, including regional maternity services.

Faoi láthair tá grúpa athbhreithnithe na nospidéal géarmhíochaine ag déanamh athbhreithniú ar na hospidéal ghéarmhíochaine anseo agus rachaidh a thuarascáil, atá le foilsiú san earrach, i gcion ar na cinntí a dhéanfaidh mé maidir leis na seirbhísí ospidéal uilig sa toadhcháil, agus seirbhísí réigiúnacha máithreachais san áireamh.

Orthodontic Treatment

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the availability of orthodontic treatment and to make a statement.

(AQO 802/00)

Ms de Brún: Orthodontic treatment is available to everyone under the health and social services system here on the basis of clinical need. Most treatment is given following a referral from a general dental practitioner to a specialist orthodontist or a practitioner with orthodontic experience.

Tá coireáil ortadóntach ar fáil do gach duine anseo faoin chóras sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta ar bhonn riachtanais chliniciúil. Tugtar cóireáil d'othair i ndiaidh d'fhiacloir ginearálta iad a chur ar aghaidh chuig sainortadóitir nó chuig cleachtóir a bhfuil taithí ar ortadóntaice aige.

Occupational Therapy

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of occupational therapy provision in Northern Ireland and to make a statement.

(AQO 754/00)

Ms de Brún: Health and social services boards and trusts are responsible for occupational therapy provision to meet the needs of their populations. There are 295 full-time and 125 part-time occupational therapists employed by community health and social services trusts. In addition, there are 75 full-time and 14 part-time therapists employed by hospital Trusts. At 30 September 2000 there were 13,000 people waiting for a community occupational therapy assessment, of whom 2,500 were priority cases.

I have identified £0.5m to recruit an additional 20 occupational therapists in the coming financial year. I have also approved implementation of the recommendations contained in the preliminary report of the joint housing executive/DHSSPS review of the housing adaptations service, designed to improve occupational therapy response times for the service.

Tá na boird agus na hiontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta freagrach as teiripe ceirde a sholáthar le freastal ar riachtanias a ndaonraí. Fostaíonn na hiontaobhais

phobail sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta 295 theiripeoir ceirde lánaimseartha agus 125 theiripeoir ceirde páirtaimseartha. Lena chois sin, fostaíonn na hiontaobhais ospidéal 75 theiripeoir lánaimseartha agus 14 theiripeoir pháirtaimseartha. Ar 30 Meán Fómhair 2000 bhí 13,000 duine, ar cásanna práinne 2,500 díobh, ag feitheamh lena measúnú le haghaidh teiripe ceirde.

Tá mé i ndiaidh £0.5m a aimsiú le 20 theiripeoir ceirde breise a earcú sa bhliain airgeadais atá le teacht. Tá ceadú tugtha agam fosta maidir le feidhmiú moltaí na réamhthuarascála ar athbhreithniú comhpháirteach an Fheidhmeannais Tithíochta/RSSSP ar an tseirbhís oiriúnaithe tithe leis an tréimhse a ghiorrú ina gcuirtear an tseirbhís teiripe ceirde ar fáil.

Morning-After Pill

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain her policy on the availability of the morning-after pill (Levonelle-2). (AQO 756/00)

Ms de Brún: An emergency hormonal contraception product (Levonelle-2), containing levonorgestrel 0.75mg, has been authorised as a prescription only medicine since November 1999. The Prescription Only Medicines (Human Use) Amendment (No.3) Order 2000, which I signed on 8 December 2000, reclassified levonorgestrel 0.75mg for pharmacy availability for women aged 16 and over. I can also confirm that prior to my signing, notification was sent to the HSSPS Committee. This product is now licensed here, and in England, Scotland and Wales, without prescription from 1 January 2001.

Ó mhí na Samhna 1999 údaraíodh táirge frithghiniúnach hormónach éigeandála (Levonelle – 2), a bhfuil 0.75mg léabhanoirgeistril ann, mar chógas le haghaidh oideas amháin. De réir an Prescription Only Medicines (Human Use) Amendment (No.3) Order 2000, a shínigh mé ar an 8 Nollaig 2000, athaicmíodh léabhanoirgeistril mar chógas le bheith ar fáil i gcógaslanna do mhná 16 bliana d'aois agus os a chionn. Thig liom a dhearbhu fosta gur cuireadh scéala faoi chuig an Choiste SSSSP sular shínigh mé é. Ón 1 Eanáir 2001 tá an táirge sin ceadúnaithe gan oideas anseo agus i Sasana.

Nursing Care for the Elderly

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to introduce free nursing care for the elderly in Northern Ireland. (AQO 804/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department is currently considering the issues of long-term care for the elderly, including nursing care, and I intend to make a statement shortly.

Tá mo Roinnse ag déanamh breithniú faoi láthair ar cheisteanna a bhaineann le cúram do dhaoine aosta, agus

cúram altranais san áireamh, agus tá rún agam ráiteas a dhéanamh faoi ar ball.

Hospital Medical Equipment

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) define “essential hospital medical equipment” and (b) list current requests for replacement of same in each trust area. (AQO 737/00)

Ms de Brún: There is no precise definition of the term “essential hospital medical equipment”. This would cover equipment ranging from surgical scalpels through intravenous tubing to imaging equipment, all of which ensure the safe and effective running of hospital services to patients.

Trusts receive an annual allocation of general capital from within which they are expected to maintain and upgrade their assets, including hospital medical equipment. Trusts do not, therefore, routinely submit requests for the replacement of equipment to my Department.

In the past, capital resources available to the Department have not kept pace with the need to replace and modernise equipment. As a result a substantial backlog has built up. From this year I will be increasing the level of general capital available and I expect that this will go some way to managing this backlog. I would, however, make it clear that eliminating the backlog, as well as meeting statutory standards, will require additional capital.

Níl sainmhiniú beacht ar an téarma “trealamh míochaine riachtanach ospidéal”. Is éard a bheadh i gceist trealamh i ngach réimse, mar atá, sceanóga máinliachta, feadáin infhéitheacha nó trealamh déanta íomhánna, ar nithe iad sin uile a chinntíonn go reáchtáiltear seirbhísí ospidéal d’othair go slán éifeachtach. Faigheann iontaobhais leithroinnt chaipitil ghinearálta gach bliain as a mbítear ag dréim leis go ndéanfaidh siad a gcuid socmhainní, agus trealamh míochaine ospidéal san áireamh, a chothabháil agus a uasghrádú. Ar an ábhar sin ní gnách le hiontaobhais iarratais i leith athsholáthair trealamh a chur faoi bhráid mo Roinne.

San am a chuaigh thart níor leor na hacmhainní a bhí ar fáil ag an Roinn le riar ar na riachtanais maidir le trealamh a athsholáthar nó nuachóiriú a chur air. Dá bharr seo tá riaráiste mór anois ann. Ón bhliain seo ar aghaidh méadóidh mé leibhéal an chaipitil ghinearálta a bheas ar fáil agus tá mé ag súil go mbeidh sé ina chuidiú maidir leis an riaráiste sin a bhainistiú. Ach ba mhaith liom a rá go soiléir go mbeidh caipiteal breise de dhíth má táimid chun deireadh a chur leis an riaráiste agus caighdeán reachtúla a shroicheadh chomh maith.

In Vitro Fertilisation

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if it is her intention to make in vitro

fertilisation (IVF) treatment available on the National Health Service in Northern Ireland. (AQO 738/00)

Ms de Brún: The provision of sub-fertility services, including invitro fertilisation, is at present being considered by a group established by the regional medical services consortium, which commissions regional services on behalf of the four health and social services boards. I shall be considering all the issues involved in sub-fertility, including the provision of invitro fertilisation treatment, when I receive the group's report.

Faoi láthair tá soláthar seirbhísí fothorthúlachta, agus toirchiú in vitrio san áireamh, á mheas ag grúpa atá bunaithe ag an chuibhreannas seirbhísí míochaine réigiúnacha a choimisiúnaíonn seirbhísí réigiúnacha thar ceann na gceithre bhord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta. Beidh mé ag déanamh breithniú ar na ceistanna a bhaineann le fothorthúlacht, agus soláthar cóireáil toirchiú in vitro san áireamh, nuair a gheobhaidh mé tuarascáil ón ghrúpa.

Victims of Domestic Violence

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her Department's role in (a) reducing the incidents of domestic violence and (b) the protection of victims of domestic violence and to make a statement. (AQO 747/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department provides the secretariat support for the regional domestic violence forum, which brings together the main statutory and voluntary sector agencies dealing with domestic violence. The forum's aims are:

- to raise public awareness of domestic violence as a serious problem;
- to challenge seriously the attitudes and behaviour of those who perpetrate or condone it;
- to improve support and treatment services for survivors; and
- to build a clearer picture of the nature and extent of domestic violence.

My Department also provides financial support for the vital work being done by Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation to assist women and children who are victims of domestic violence.

There are measures in both the criminal and civil law to protect victims of domestic violence. The introduction of the Family Homes and Domestic Violence Northern Ireland Order in 1999 strengthened the civil law to provide better protection to victims of domestic violence. Last year the regional domestic violence forum established a new subgroup to examine child protection issues arising from domestic violence.

Cuireann mo Roinnse tacaíocht rúnaíochta ar fáil don fhóram réigiúnach um fhoréigean teaghlaigh, a tharraingíonn le chéile príomhghníomhaireachtaí na hearnála reachtúla agus na hearnála deonaí a bhíonn ag plé le foréigean teaghlaigh. Is iad aidhmeanna an fhórait:

- an pobal a dhéanamh feasach faoi fhoréigean teaghlaigh mar fhadhb mhór;
- cur go mór in éadan dearcadh agus iompar na ndaoine atá ina bhun nó a ligeann dó;
- seirbhísí tacaíochta agus cóireála do mharthanóirí a fheabhsú; agus
- léargas níos soiléire a thabhairt ar chineál agus ar mhéid foréigin teaghlaigh.

Tugann mo Roinnse tacaíocht airgeadais fosta le haghaidh na hoibre a dhéanann Cónascadh Cúnta na mBan le cuidiú a thabhairt do mhná agus do leanaí ar íospartaigh foréigin teaghlaigh iad.

Féadtar bearta a dhéanamh sa dlí coiriúil agus sa dlí sibhialta araon chun íospartaigh foréigin teaghlaigh a chosaint. Tugadh isteach an Family Homes and Domestic Violence (NI) Order sa bhliain 1999 a neartaíonn an dlí sibhialta le cosaint níos fearr a thabhairt d'íospartaigh foréigin teaghlaigh. Bhunaigh an fóram réigiúnach um fhoréigean teaghlaigh foghrúpa nua anuraidh chun scrúdú a dhéanamh ar cheistanna a bhaineann le cosaint leanaí nuair atá foréigean teaghlaigh ann.

Free Wigs for Chemotherapy Outpatients

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make it her policy to extend the qualification for free wigs to chemotherapy outpatients and to make a statement. (AQO 764/00)

Ms de Brún: Under current legislation, hospital inpatients can receive a wig free of charge. Day patients and outpatients are expected to pay for their wig unless they are exempt on income grounds. Charges for wigs were introduced in 1971 and reflect the long-standing principle that those who can afford it should contribute towards the cost of the appliance they need. Full or partial remission of charges for wigs is available under the Health Service low income scheme. I have no plans at present to amend the legislation.

Faoi reachtaíocht reatha, thig le hothair chónaitheacha ospidéal bréagfholt a fháil in aisce. Bítear ag súil go n-íocfaidh othair lae agus othair sheachtracha as bréagfholt mura rud é go bhfuil siad díolmhaithe ar fhorais ioncaim. Cuireadh tús le costas a ghearradh ar bhréagfhoilt sa bhliain 1971, rud a léiríonn an prionsabal seanbhunaithe gur chóir dóibh siúd a bhfuil sé ar a n-acmhainn ranníocaíocht a dhéanamh i leith chostas an fhearaí atá uathu. Is féidir costais na mbréagfholt a laghdú go páirteach nó go hiomlán faoi scéim na

seirbhíse sláinte do dhaoine ar bheagán ioncaim. Níl pleananna ar bith agam faoi láthair an reachtaíocht a leasú.

Obstetric Unit at the Ulster Hospital

Ms Morrice asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what progress has been made in approving development plans for the obstetric unit at the Ulster Hospital. (AQO 784/00)

Ms de Brún: The Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust has submitted proposals for the upgrade and extension of the Obstetric Unit at the Ulster Hospital to my Department. This was part of a strategic development plan for a phased refurbishment of the hospital. My Department is urgently assessing the detail of the plan and I will announce my decision once this process is completed.

Tá Iontaobhas Phobal agus Ospidéal Uladh i ndiaidh moltaí maidir le huasghrádú agus fairsingiú a dhéanamh ar Aonad Cnáimhseachais Ospidéal Uladh a chur faoi bhráid mo Roinne. Bhí seo mar chuid de phlean forbartha straitéiseach le haghaidh athchóiriú céimnithe an ospidéil. Tá mo Roinn ag déanamh measúnú práinneach ar mhionsonraí an phlean agus fogróidh mé an cinneadh a dhéanfaidh mé a luaithe a bheas an próiseas sin curtha i gcrích.

Roads Strategy to Support Healthcare Needs

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any discussions she has had with the Minister for Regional Development with a view to developing a roads strategy to support healthcare needs. (AQO 806/00)

Ms de Brún: I have had no such discussions. My Department, however, liaises with the Department for Regional Development on these matters as the development and improvement of our roads system will improve access to healthcare and an effective transportation policy will impact on people's health. This has resulted in some specific road developments to support the provision of healthcare services. DHSSPS is also working with DRD with a view to carrying out a health impact assessment (HIA) on the transportation strategy.

Ní raibh a leithéid de phlé agam. Ach bíonn mo Roinn i dteagmháil leis an Roinn Forbartha Réigiúnaí faoi na nithe seo, nó de réir mar a chuirfear forbairt agus feabhas ar an chóras bóithre atá againn is fusa a bheas daoine ábalta teacht ar chúram sláinte agus rachaidh polasaí éifeachtach iompair i bhfeidhm ar shláinte an phobail. Dá bharr seo forbraíodh bóithre sonracha chun tacú le soláthar seirbhísí cúraim sláinte. Tá an RSSSP ag obair i bpáirt leis an RFR fosta chun measúnú a dhéanamh ar thionchar na straitéise iompair ar chúrsaí sláinte.

Hospice Service

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm the annual cost of running the hospice service in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 805/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on the costs of providing hospice services is not routinely collected by my Department, as these services are provided on a voluntary basis by a number of different organisations.

Ní gnách le mo Roinn eolas a bhailiú ar na costais maidir le soláthar seirbhísí ospísí ós rúd é go gcuireann roinnt eagraíochtaí éagsúla na seirbhísí sin ar fáil ar bhonn deonach.

Hospital Treatment for Punishment Beatings

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list, by local authority area, the number of patients treated by hospitals as a result of punishment beatings. (AQO 734/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil.

Average Mortality Index

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average mortality index for Northern Ireland hospitals.

(AQO 783/00)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl eolas ar fáil sa chruth inar iarradh é.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Expenditure on Adult Education and Training Services

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail, by parliamentary constituency, the expenditure on adult education and training services (excluding capital spending and European Union moneys) for each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1673/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): This information is not available in the format requested.

Information in relation to the expenditure on adult education and training services (excluding capital spending and European Union moneys), for each of the last five years by parliamentary constituency, is not available and could only be obtained at an excessive cost.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Railway Trackworks

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the progress that has been made since 19 December 2000 to repair railway track and to make a statement. (AQW 1406/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): Translink has advised that in the period since 19 December 2000 no new railway trackworks have been undertaken. However, in relation to the Belfast to Bangor line relay, Translink has advised that project managers have now been appointed and a programme of work agreed. In addition, Translink has pointed out that since the early summer of 2000 it has been engaged on an extensive programme of safety-related trackworks associated with the recommendations of the A D Little safety review. The overall cost of this programme of works is estimated at some £7.6 million. I should also point out that over £22 million of the additional £105 million that I obtained for railways in the Budget for next year and in the indicative allocations for 2002-03 and 2003-04, is expected to be used for trackworks and infrastructure.

Water Infrastructure in South Down

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the need for the replacement of the water infrastructure in South Down. (AQW 1456/00)

Mr Campbell: In common with all other areas of Northern Ireland, the water infrastructure in south Down has suffered from significant under investment in the past.

Water Service has initiated a number of detailed assessments of the water distribution system throughout Northern Ireland to identify the improvements necessary to meet modern standards of water quality and continuity of supply to customers. The assessments will be completed progressively over the next five years. It is estimated that the required improvements will cost in excess of £500 million. Subject to the necessary funding, this work is programmed to be carried out on a prioritised basis from 2005 to 2011.

Water Service will, of course, continue with its more modest ongoing programme of replacing or renewing older water mains which are particularly prone to bursting or

which lead to poor water quality. In the current financial year, contracts to a total value of £3.7 million are progressing or have already been completed to improve water mains and increase service reservoir storage capacity in the south Down area. A further investment of £2.6 million is planned during the next two years.

In addition to this, other major investment in the south Down area is already under way or is planned. Phase 1 of the Mourne conduit replacement has just been completed at a cost of £17 million. Subject to planning approval, two new water treatment works, to treat water from the Silent Valley, Fofanny and Spelga impounding reservoirs, will be constructed by late 2004 at a cost of some £48 million.

Retail Sector in Border Towns

Mr Hay asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he is taking to sustain the retail sector in border towns in Northern Ireland. (AQO 643/00)

Mr Campbell: There are three main areas in which the Department is taking action to sustain the retail sector in all areas of Northern Ireland. This demonstrates the need for joined-up government across a number of Departments.

I understand from the Minister for Social Development that the invigoration of our town centres is being examined by an interdepartmental group. This is a wide-ranging review. It includes important matters such as planning policy, transport and housing. It will therefore address issues which are crucial to town centre retailers such as out-of-town shopping and parking arrangements in town centres.

The Department for Regional Development's regional development strategy is nearing completion, subject to agreement within the Assembly. It contains the spatial development strategy which will encourage the revitalisation and regeneration of small towns and villages in rural Northern Ireland which act as local service centres for their rural catchments. The strategy encourages mutually beneficial cross-border trade, recognising the important roles of the city of Londonderry in this respect and Newry serving as an interregional gateway.

The current policy for retailing and town centres is set out in regional planning policy statement 5 (PPS5) entitled 'Retailing and Town Centres' published in June 1996. This promotes the policy "to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres" and "to maintain an efficient, competitive and innovative retail sector". There is a need to review the existing retail policy. The department has included within its programme to commence the preparation of a new retail planning policy during this financial year.

Sludge (Use in Agriculture) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1990

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the measures the Water Service is taking to monitor activity under the European Union Directive 86/278/EEC which is implemented by The Sludge (Use in Agriculture) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1990.

(AQW 1583/00)

Mr Campbell: Approximately 3,000 tonnes of dry sewage sludge generated at waste water treatment works is spread on agricultural land.

The sludge and the soil to which it is applied are sampled and analysed by Water Service for the parameters specified in the Sludge (Use in Agriculture) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1990. These methods used are in accordance with the code of practice for agricultural use of sewage sludge, which complement the Regulations and are subject to quality assurance procedures.

In accordance with the Regulations, Water Service maintains a register of the results of the analysis, the quantity of sludge produced, the type of treatment, the recipients of the sludge and the location of the fields on which it is spread.

Water Service's compliance with the requirements of the Regulations are subject to audit by the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment.

Sewage Sludge

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the most recent results of samples and analyses of soil and sludge in border regions, conducted by the Water Service, and advise if they are in accordance with the code of practice for agricultural use of sewage sludge.

(AQW 1585/00)

Mr Campbell: The amount of sewage sludge spread on agricultural land has reduced considerably over recent years. No sludge has been spread on land in border regions during the past year.

I will write to the Member giving details of the analyses of soil and sludge samples when sludge was last spread in border regions.

National Cycle Network

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail for each district council area (a) the number of cycle parking locations installed in town centres (b) the length of the national cycle network and (c) the proposed length of further planned additions to the national cycle network.

(AQW 1614/00)

Mr Campbell: The table below shows details of the cycle parking provision and the national cycle network on a district council basis.

District council area	Town	Number of cycle parking stands	Lengths of national cycle network - first phase (km) ¹	Proposed further lengths of national cycle network - second phase (km) ²
Antrim	Antrim	3	0	64
Ards		0	0	32
Armagh		0	71	0
Ballymena	Ballymena	3	0	69
	Portglenone	2	0	69
	Ahoghill	2		
Ballymoney	Ballymoney	2		
Banbridge		0	6	0
Belfast	Belfast	13	19	16
Carrickfergus		0	0	19
Castlereagh		0	0	5
Coleraine	Coleraine	7	37	6
	Portrush	4		
	Portstewart	3		
Cookstown	Cookstown	4	47	31
Craigavon	Portadown	6	29	51
Derry	Londonderry	10	43	0
Down	Newcastle	1	0	64
Dungannon and South Tyrone	Dungannon	4	26	6
Fermanagh	Enniskillen	4	249	0
Larne	Larne	4	0	43
Limavady	Limavady	3	37	0
Lisburn	Lisburn	2	24	3
Magherafelt		0	0	10
Moyle	Ballycastle	2	32	53
Newry and Mourne	Newry	1	35	40
Newtown-abbey		0	5	6
North Down	Groomsport	1	0	21
Omagh	Omagh	4	95	0
Strabane	Strabane	4	92	0
Total		89	847	560

Footnotes

1. The first phase of the national cycle network (ie, the millennium routes) will be substantially completed by April 2001.
2. The proposed further lengths of the national cycle network included in the second phase are dependent on future funding becoming available and confirmation of the proposed routes.

Safer Routes to Schools Projects

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of safe routes to school that have been established in each district council area.

(AQW 1615/00)

Mr Campbell: As yet, no safer routes to schools projects have been introduced in Northern Ireland. Departmental officials are, however, working in conjunction with other Government Departments and external organisations with a view to introducing at least five safer routes to schools pilot projects in the near future. It is expected that at least one pilot project will be in each education and library board area.

Public Water Supply - West Tyrone

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the progress made by the Water Service in connecting households in west Tyrone to the public water supply. (AQW 1623/00)

Mr Campbell: Since April 1999, 82 existing properties have been connected to the public water supply in the Omagh and Strabane District Council areas. The work involved laying some 16,500 metres of new water main in 28 separate schemes.

A further five water main extension schemes, in the Omagh District Council area, are currently at design or construction stages. These schemes, which involve laying some 3,300 metres of new water main, will enable 13 existing properties to be connected.

Hedges and Trees Overhanging Public Roads

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to pay farmers and rural land-owners to trim hedges and trees that overhang public roads adjoining their lands. (AQW 1634/00)

Mr Campbell: It is the responsibility of property owners and occupiers of lands adjacent to public roads to remove trees or hedges or to lop trees or cut back hedges that endanger or obstruct road users. Indeed, the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 provides that my Department's Roads Service may serve notices on such persons requiring them to undertake any necessary remedial works. It is an offence for persons not to carry out these works and article 58 of the 1993 Order provides that Roads Service may execute such works and recover its costs from the relevant owners or occupiers. In the circumstances, there is no question of my Department paying persons to comply with their statutory obligations.

Sewage Overflow

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that there is sewage overflow in open watercourses in the Jordanstown area and to detail the steps he is taking to address this problem. (AQW 1653/00)

Mr Campbell: It is a normal feature of combined sewerage systems, which deal with both sewage and storm water, to include overflows. These are designed as safety devices to allow highly diluted but untreated waste water, which is in excess of the sewer capacity, to discharge to rivers or other watercourses, and prevent out-of-sewer flooding. There are a number of these combined sewer overflows which discharge to watercourses in the Jordanstown area.

Water Service is progressing a programme of 105 studies to identify the extent and cost of improvements to the sewerage networks across Northern Ireland to achieve modern capacity and environmental standards. A study has recently been completed for the Newtownabbey and Jordanstown area. This identifies the need for improvements to the sewerage infrastructure including a reduction in the number of combined sewer overflows. The detailed proposals are presently being discussed with the Environment and Heritage Service, whose consent is required for discharges to local watercourses. However, given current funding levels and other priorities, it is unlikely that the general upgrading of the sewerage networks in the Newtownabbey and Jordanstown areas can commence before 2006.

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the monitoring arrangements in place in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area which prevent sewage from entering the water system. (AQW 1658/00)

Mr Campbell: It is a normal feature of combined sewerage systems, which deal with both sewage and storm water, to include overflows. These are designed as safety devices to allow highly diluted but untreated waste water, which is in excess of the sewer capacity, to discharge to rivers or other watercourses, and thus prevent out-of-sewer flooding.

There are a number of these combined sewer overflows which discharge to watercourses in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area. These are inspected on a regular basis, usually once a week, to ensure they are operating satisfactorily.

Planned improvements to the sewerage infrastructure will result in a reduction in the number of combined sewer overflows, and will also ensure that they will be required to operate less frequently during periods of heavy rainfall.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of houses in the Strangford

constituency that have received insulation measures under the new domestic energy efficiency scheme.

(AQW 1629/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow):

The new domestic energy efficiency scheme (DEES) does not come into operation until 1 April 2001. However, under the current DEES scheme, a total of 2,943 jobs have been completed in houses in the Strangford constituency for the period January 1995 to 31 December 2000.

Rehousing Due to Intimidation

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail by district council area the number of applications for housing due to intimidation in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1649/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, whose chief executive has advised that information prior to the 1995-96 financial year is not available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. The information from 1995-96 is set out in the table below.

APPLICATIONS TO THE HOUSING EXECUTIVE FOR REHOUSING AWARDED A1 PRIORITY STATUS ON GROUNDS OF INTIMIDATION

District Council Area	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000
Belfast	106	178	157	105	174
North Down	8	5	8	4	11
Ards	16	8	8	4	2
Castlereagh	11	11	10	6	1
Lisburn	15	26	15	17	19
Down	6	4	4	5	3
Banbridge	0	2	3	1	5
Newry	0	0	5	2	12
Armagh	4	4	2	6	9
Craigavon	4	18	4	10	14
Dungannon	1	1	1	7	5
Fermanagh	0	1	3	2	4
Ballymena	7	10	10	2	12
Antrim	1	4	11	13	33
Newtownabbey	11	25	22	16	15
Carrickfergus	4	15	9	13	2
Larne	10	8	2	12	14
Ballycastle	0	0	7	5	6
Ballymoney	1	0	6	10	10
Coleraine	5	5	1	4	5
Derry	21	33	33	23	18

District Council Area	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000
Limavady	3	2	5	5	1
Magherafelt	0	2	0	2	3
Strabane	8	4	2	3	1
Omagh	3	1	2	4	5
Cookstown	3	2	0	0	3
Northern Ireland	248	369	330	281	387

Intimidation, in this instance, is defined as a situation where the applicant's home has been destroyed or seriously damaged as a result of a terrorist or sectarian attack. Alternatively, it may not be reasonable for the applicant to remain in his/her home, because of a serious and imminent risk that he/she or members of their household would be seriously injured as a result of a terrorist attack.

Unfit Housing

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the number of houses in the Strangford constituency that are listed as sub-standard and (b) the steps he is taking to address this problem.

(AQW 1656/00)

Mr Morrow: Every five years the Housing Executive carries out a house condition survey which shows the levels of unfitness in Northern Ireland. The information however, is only broken down to district council level. It is therefore not possible to provide figures exclusive to your constituency as none of the three councils are fully located within its boundaries.

The latest figures available for the three councils are from the 1996 survey and show:

Council	Percentage unfit	Number unfit	Total stock
Ards	6.6	1,730	26,020
Castlereagh	3.0	790	26,030
Down	10.6	2,160	20,340
NI Total	7.3	43,970	602,500

A new survey is due to commence in the summer of this year.

The private sector grants scheme administered by the Housing Executive has played an important part in reducing unfitness to its present level of 7.3% (1996 survey) and will continue to be a key programme. Since 1992 some £305 million has been spent on private sector grant activity throughout Northern Ireland and for the 3 councils that make up your constituency some 458 grant applications, worth around £7.3 million, have been approved between March 1997 and March 2000.

Income Support

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a breakdown by gender of the number of people who are in receipt of income support. (AQW 1663/00)

Mr Morrow: As at September 2000, there were 169,563 people in receipt of income support, 65,858 male and 103,705 female.

Appeals Service

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his plans to simplify the language used in correspondence from The Appeals Service. (AQW 1671/00)

Mr Morrow: The appeals service has no immediate plans to simplify the language used in correspondence. However, if Mr Fee is aware of any particular issues or concerns in relation to the language used, I am happy to ask the appeals service to conduct a review in light of those concerns.

Child Support Agency

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what steps he is taking to ensure improvements in the quality of decision-making within the Child Support Agency following the findings of the first annual report on decision making in the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency 1999-2000. (AQW 1688/00)

Mr Morrow: The Child Support Agency is taking the following steps to ensure the ongoing improvement in the standard of its decision-making:

- an accuracy task force was established to improve the overall agency accuracy rate and to support the preparation for the child support reforms. Recommendations made by the task force are already being implemented throughout the agency;
- training has been delivered to all staff on problematic decision-making areas;
- revised training and consolidation process in place for the significant number of new staff joining the agency;
- developed and delivered an "intensive care" training course for staff who have particular problem areas;

- introduced new arrangements for case handling which will speed up information gathering, particularly in cases deemed to have insufficient evidence;
- introduced a new accuracy information database which provides low level detail on adjudication errors;
- developed new accuracy plans for decision-makers; and
- increased numbers of pre-adjudication checks.

In addition to the above steps, an agency quality council has been introduced for the co-ordination and control of all quality initiatives throughout the Child Support Agency.

On a weekly basis, operational staff and managers discuss weaknesses and implement suggestions for improvement.

The standard of decision-making in the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency is significantly better than in Great Britain. This is evident in the cash value accuracy of maintenance assessments, with the Northern Ireland agency achieving 12% higher accuracy in 1999-2000 compared to the Great Britain agency.

However, until the child support reforms are fully implemented the complexity of the current system, coupled with staff inexperience, will continue to make it difficult for the agency to achieve the accuracy targets which I have set for it.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Number of Assembly Staff

Mrs I Robinson asked the Assembly Commission to detail by directorate the number of staff it employs. (AQW 1657/00)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mrs E Bell): The Assembly Commission directly employs a total of 231 staff. The Assembly Commission is committed to recruiting all Assembly staff through open competition and at present the total number of staff who have been recruited through open advertisement is 78. In addition the Assembly Commission uses a number of independent recruitment agencies to employ temporary staff pending the outcome of several open recruitment competitions. At present there are a total of 68 temporary recruitment agency staff employed in the Assembly. The distribution of staff by directorate is shown in the table on the following page.

DIRECTORATE	Open Competition		NICS Secondees	Total Direct Employees	Recruitment Agency Staff	Total Direct Recruits & Agency Staff
	Direct Recruits	Secondees				
Speaker's Office		1	1	2		2
Clerk to the Assembly	1		7	8	2	10
Clerk to the Commission		1	2	3	1	4
Clerk Assistant	1	24	42	67	11	78
Official Report	10	8	14	32	17	49
Keeper of the House	5	5	40	50	18	68
Research and Information	18	4	16	38	9	47
Finance and Personnel			31	31	10	41
Total	35	43	153	231	68	299

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 23 February 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Civic Forum

Ms Hanna asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to advise how it proposes to take account of the views of the Civic Forum on issues including the draft Programme for Government.

(AQW 1596/00)

Reply: On 6 February the Assembly approved the arrangements for seeking views from the Civic Forum on social, economic and cultural matters and our officials will shortly be meeting with the Civic Forum Chairperson to discuss the matters on which its views will be sought. In addition, the Forum will be advised when public consultation exercises on relevant matters are being carried out by Departments and it will be a matter for the Forum itself to determine which of these it wishes to respond to. Views expressed by the Civic Forum on social, economic and cultural matters once received by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will be forwarded directly to officials, who are developing the particular policy in question, to be considered along with other responses.

The Forum offered views on the Programme for Government on 15 January. A new draft of the Programme taking account of these and other comments is being put to the Executive for approval. The Programme will be presented to the Assembly in the coming weeks.

Victim Groups

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail by District Council area (a) victim groups which have received public funds in each of the last three years (b) the nature of those groups and (c) the amount of funding each has received.

(AQW 1617/00)

Reply: The Northern Ireland Office has to date had responsibility for providing core funding for these groups and specific questions on funding should be referred to that Department.

In addition, approximately £4.2m was allocated to victims groups from the European Peace I Programme. Information on the breakdown of funding by District Council area is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Victims

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister pursuant to AQW 1356/00, to outline the practical help and support for which the funds allocated will be used over the next twelve months.

(AQW 1767/00)

Reply: The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has allocated £320,000 in the current financial year to assist victims. While final decisions on the allocation of these resources have not yet been made, the emphasis will be on providing practical help and support by contributing to the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, supporting the four Trauma Advisory Panels, assisting with specific projects undertaken in the health and trauma fields, developing capacity building and commissioning research on service provision for victims.

The Peace II European Programme will include a specific measure for victims, with funding of approximately £6.67 million, which will become available in the next financial year.

Advertising Campaigns

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if he will list for (a) 1997-98 (b) 1998-99 (c) 1990-00 and (d) 2000-01, (i) total spending by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on advertising campaigns, (ii) the cost of each individual advertising campaign and (iii) the criteria that were established to gauge the effectiveness of each campaign and (iv) what assessment has been made of the effectiveness of each campaign based on these criteria.

(AQW 1768/00)

Reply: There were no advertising campaigns undertaken by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in any of the periods mentioned.

Visit of the President of the United States

Mr Hilditch asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the total cost, to the

Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, of the visit of President Clinton in December 2000.

(AQW 1809/00)

Reply: The total cost of invoices received to date by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister is £88,583 for the use of the Odyssey Arena and an estimated £50,000 for press and media facilities.

Electronic Methods to Improve Efficiency

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what plans there are for the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and public access to information within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

(AQW 1826/00)

Reply: The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, via the Executive Information Service, maintain a NI Executive web site and an Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister web site. The addresses are www.nics.gov.uk and www.ofmfmni.gov.uk.

A common Information Technology infrastructure has been deployed across the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, linking all functions of the Department. An information Technology Programme is being developed with the aim of improving efficiency and public access.

The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister is taking the lead in the development of a project called "Knowledge Network" which will link all Northern Ireland Departments and enable key information to be shared. It is hoped that much of this information will be made available to the public via Internet technologies.

Peace Process

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an assessment of international support for developing the peace process in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1869/00)

Reply: The peace process, being a dialogue between the Northern Ireland political parties and the Governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland, relates to matters that are not devolved to this administration.

Funding for Victims' Organisations

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to confirm (a) the total funding allocated to increase the effectiveness of victims' organisations and (b) detail the amount allocated to each group.

(AQO 811/00)

Reply: The devolved administration is taking proactive measures to deal with the needs of victims. These include the actions contained in the draft Programme for Government, the establishment of an interdepartmental working group on victims and the development of a cross-departmental strategy on victims issues which will be subject to public consultation. In addition, capacity building programmes for both victims' groups and policy makers are currently taking place.

A total of £320,000 has been allocated to the Victims Unit for this financial year. No final decisions have yet been made on the distribution of this funding but it is likely that funds will be allocated to the four Trauma Advisory Panels, projects in the health and trauma fields and the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund. In addition, a specific measure for victims will be included in Peace II with approximately £5m coming from Europe and £1.67m coming from the Northern Ireland Executive.

Review of Public Administration

Mr McFarland asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an assessment of the Review of Public Administration.

(AQO 853/00)

Reply: The Executive gave a commitment in the Programme for Government to undertake a Review of Public Administration.

Over the past couple of months the Executive has been giving detailed consideration to the wide range of issues which will shape the review. These include the scope of the review, the terms of reference, how it should be carried out and by whom. While important details are yet to be finalised, we are agreed that there needs to be a fully comprehensive review of all aspects of the public sector, a strong element of independence is essential, and the process should be as inclusive as possible, involving wide-spread consultation.

The time we are taking to consider these matters is an indication of the importance the Executive places on getting this right. Rushing into this exercise without proper consideration of all the issues would be counter-productive. We hope to be in a position to make a full statement to the Assembly providing details about the review in the near future.

New Targeting Social Need

Ms Hanna asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when the New Targeting Social Need Action Plans will be published.

(AQO 842/00)

Reply: The New Targeting Social Need Action Plans for all Northern Ireland Departments together with an explanation of the Executive Committee's agreed New TSN policy will be published in March.

On-Course Betting

Mr Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what steps can be taken by the Executive to implement the resolution of the Assembly in support of Sunday On-Course Betting.

(AQO 821/00)

Reply: Following a substantial debate on the 28 November, the Assembly adopted a resolution to legalise Sunday On-Course betting in Northern Ireland. This is a matter for the Minister of Social Development in the first instance. We have, however, written to the Minister to ascertain what plans he has to come to the Executive to outline his response to the resolution and to detail the proposals to bring forward the relevant legislation.

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr McGrady asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister which items are planned for discussion at the next North South Ministerial Council Plenary session.

(AQO 820/00)

Reply: The agenda, when finalised, will be notified to the Assembly in accordance with section 52(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Racism and Sectarianism in Northern Ireland

Mr Neeson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail discussions with the Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office regarding racism and sectarianism in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 838/00)

Reply: We have corresponded with the Secretary of State on this issue and have arranged to meet with the Minister of State in the near future to discuss these issues, including the contribution which the criminal law can make to combating racist and sectarian behaviour.

Northern Ireland Drugs Strategy

Dr Adamson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail, pursuant to their statement of 26 January 2000, and their written answer of 5 January 2001 to AQO 516/00, what progress has been made in the Executive Committee's strategy to tackle the problem of drugs in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 852/00)

Reply: At the Executive meeting of 9 February 2000 it was agreed that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should take the lead role on behalf of the Executive in relation to the Northern

Ireland Drugs Strategy, involving other relevant Ministers as necessary.

A report by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, setting out the current position on the implementation of the Northern Ireland Drugs Strategy and the proposals for taking forward co-operation on drugs issues within the context of the British-Irish Council was circulated to the Executive on 17 January 2001.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety provided details of progress on the Drugs Strategy in reply to Oliver Gibson AQW 1525/00) on 8 February 2001.

Review of Public Administration

Ms Lewsley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what plans they have for a review of Public Administration.

(AQO 834/00)

Reply: The Executive gave a commitment in the Programme for Government to undertake a Review of Public Administration.

The Executive has been giving detailed consideration to the wide range of issues, which will shape the review. These include the scope of the review, the terms of reference, how it should be carried out and by whom.

The time we are taking to consider these matters is an indication of the importance the Executive places on getting this right. Rushing into this exercise without proper consideration of all the issues would be counter-productive. We hope to be in a position to make a full statement to the Assembly providing details about the review in the near future.

Community Relations Council

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the appointment of Government representatives to the Community Relations Council.

(AQO 863/00)

Reply: The First Minister and Deputy First Minister may appoint up to eight of the twenty-four members of the Community Relations Councils. Sixteen shortlisted applicants were interviewed last year and appointments are expected to be made shortly.

Community Relations Programme

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps have been taken to promote community relations.

(AQO 844/00)

Reply: Under the Executive's Community Relations Programme, funding is provided to a wide range of groups which promote community relations, with the bulk of the

support channelled through the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council and the District Council Community Relations Programme. In the current financial year the Department's Community Relations budget, including research provision, amounts to some £5.5m. The Department of Education also has its own community relations programme for schools and young people amounting to £3.4m this financial year. In addition, under the EU Peace Programme "Pathways to Reconciliation", Measure which is administered by the Community Relations Council, over £3m was available for projects during this financial year.

New Targeting Social Need

Mr McMenamin asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how it is intended to evaluate New Targeting Social Need. (AQO 841/00)

Reply: The Programme for Government commits the Executive to undertaking an evaluation of New TSN by December 2002. The evaluation will focus on the progress made by Departments in the implementation of their New TSN Action Plans.

The evaluation is expected to draw both on internal resources and externally commissioned work.

Loyalist and Republican Terrorism

Mr Davis asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline any discussions they have undertaken with the Secretary of State regarding the activities of Loyalist and Republican terrorists. (AQO 851/00)

Reply: We have not jointly discussed this matter with the Prime Minister, the current Secretary of State or his predecessor. Our respective parties have, however, met them to discuss this issue.

The Late Billy Wright

Mr Kane asked the Deputy First Minister to outline pursuant to his responsibilities on equality issues, whether he has any plans to meet the family of the late Billy Wright to discuss the widespread calls for a public inquiry into his death. (AQO 871/00)

Reply: As this relates to a criminal justice matter which is not a devolved responsibility, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have not held joint meetings with the family of the late Billy Wright and have no plans at this time to hold any such meetings.

The First Minister has however met with Mr David Wright on a number of occasions to discuss the death of Mr Wright's son in December 1997 and is more than happy to meet with Mr Wright again.

The Deputy First Minister has referred requests from the family of the late Billy Wright to the Social Democratic and Labour Party to be handled on a party basis. However, he has asked to be kept informed of developments in this case including, in particular, the recent British Irish Rights Watch Report into Mr Wright's death.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Hunting with Dogs

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the potential impact of a ban on hunting with dogs in rural areas and to make a statement. (AQW 1668/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I am aware of the Westminster Bill on hunting with dogs currently progressing through Parliament. Hunting with dogs is not an agriculture issue *per se* and I am therefore not in a position to make a statement on the issue.

Additional Funding for Farmers

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans to access additional funding for Northern Ireland's farmers from the 971 million euro in the 2001 supplementary amending budget of the European Union when adopted and to make a statement. (AQW 1725/00)

Ms Rodgers: The 971m euro is made up of 700m euro for the Purchase and Destruction Scheme, 238m euro for beef market intervention and 33m euro for the co-financing of BSE tests. The UK has made a bid for a proportion of the 33m euro for the mandatory BSE testing programme. The exact amount to be received from the Commission is to be determined. It is not appropriate to make a bid under the Purchase and Destruction Scheme, as the Over Thirty Months Scheme already applies in the UK, nor under beef market intervention, as beef prices in the UK have not fallen to trigger levels to merit market intervention.

Vision Group Appointments

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explain her appointment of a person to represent the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association on the Vision Group considering this person had not been put forward as a representative to the Civic Forum. (AQW 1763/00)

Ms Rodgers: I should, first of all, point out that, although I initiated the exercise to develop a vision for the future of the Northern Ireland agri-food sector, the members of the Steering Group were actually appointed during a period when the devolved institutions were suspended. That said, I fully approve of the membership of the Steering Group to which members were appointed for their personal expertise and knowledge and not to represent particular groups.

2001-2006 Rural Development Programme

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her policy for Rural Development and to detail the Leader+ Programme.
(AQW 1764/00)

Ms Rodgers: The 2001-2006 Rural Development Programme is currently being finalised with the EU Commission as part of the next round of Structural Funds. I hope to be in a position to publish the Programme Strategy within the next three months.

The Programme is expected to consist of the following elements:

- *Strengthening Rural Communities* - to help rural people gain the skills necessary to participate successfully in local regeneration activity.
- *Local Regeneration Projects and Programmes* - which can be developed by community groups, collectives and co-operatives.
- *Sectoral and Area Based Development Projects and Programmes* - which will address particular economic, social and environmental sectors or themes.
- *Natural Resource Rural Tourism* (under Peace II) - which will be targeted at disadvantaged areas with a high tourism potential based on their natural resources.
- *LEADER+* - which will be delivered through Local Action Groups and will focus on micro-business development in rural areas, including small farms.
- *INTERREG III* - which will address the problems and opportunities which can be best tackled on a cross border basis.

The full draft of the Leader+ Operational Programme can be viewed on the Internet at www.dardni.gov.uk/publications/pubs0000.htm

Spending on Advertising

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will list for (a) 1997-98 (b) 1998-99 (c) 1999-00 and (d) 2000-01, (i) her Department's total spending on advertising campaigns, (ii) the cost of each individual advertising campaign and (iii) the criteria that were established to gauge the effectiveness

of each campaign and what assessment has been made of the effectiveness of each campaign based on these criteria.
(AQW 1766/00)

Ms Rodgers:

(i) Total spending on advertising

(a) 1997-98	£ 162,007.84
(b) 1998-99	£ 241,593.42
(c) 1999-00	£ 231,671.57
(d) 2000-01	£ 149,333.46

(ii) The cost of each individual campaign

Statutory advertising i.e. legal notices, job advertising, Rivers Agency notices, animal health notices, and tendering adverts account for the largest proportion of Departmental spend on advertising in the years concerned. Detailed below is the total spend on campaign advertising to recruit students for the four DARD Colleges at Enniskillen, Greenmount, Loughry, and Newforge Lane.

(a) 1997-98	£ 51,899.37
(b) 1998-99	£ 113,896.09
(c) 1999-00	£ 125,415.98
(d) 2000-01	£ 67,268.74

(iii) Advertising Impact surveys target first year students at the Colleges to establish the route by which the individual was made aware about available courses. The results influence the usage of publications/ newspaper advertising or media for the following year.

Result surveys from the colleges demonstrate the ability of students and exam grades being achieved. This factor is also taken into consideration when composing the content of advertising and prospectuses.

Checking Imported Beef

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if, following the recent discovery of spinal cord in imported beef, she will (a) outline the steps she is taking to prevent such meat from entering the food chain (b) state what resources she has committed for this purpose and (c) detail the number of staff involved.
(AQW 1791/00)

Ms Rodgers: All DARD Meat Inspection staff and Veterinary Officers are tasked with checking imported consignments of XAP beef quarters and carry out routine inspections in establishments for the presence of SRM, including spinal cord. Following incidents where consignments of beef from Germany had SRM attached, importers have been requested to notify DARD of such imports and every German consignment is now checked by DARD for the presence of spinal cord. There is also

a due diligence requirement on all beef processors to ensure that beef with SRM attached does not get into the food chain. Any quarters of beef found with spinal cord attached are seized and destroyed. DARD has currently 24 Meat Veterinary Officers and 123 Meat Inspectorate staff responsible for ensuring compliance with the legislation.

Electronic Methods to Improve Efficiency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has for the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and public access to information within her Department.

(AQW 1814/00)

Ms Rodgers: Northern Ireland Departments are required to produce E-Business Strategies by May 2001. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has appointed consultants to undertake work on the DARD E-Business Strategy. This exercise is aimed at optimising the benefits of electronic delivery and integration of services that could provide a better quality service to the citizen.

The Strategy will encompass all key services provided to the public, business and other sectors, together with all internal and interdepartmental processes. The consultant's findings should be available to the Department by May 2001.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that the recent publication of figures for Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) affected cattle will not further hinder the exportation of cattle from Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1845/00)

Ms Rodgers: It is too early to speculate on the reaction of the Commission and Member States to the outcome of the year 2000 testing programme. However, industry has continued to press for a relaxation of the export ban, and I am determined to pursue the matter as soon as it is appropriate to do so. Other Member States will be testing the same category of animals this year and that may well demonstrate that NI has a comparatively low incidence of BSE, even if the overall number of cases was higher than we had thought.

Rural Proofing

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to establish a rural proofing group to consider Government policy and detail (a) when it will be appointed; (b) how will it be appointed; (c) whom will it be answerable to and (d) how many members will be on the committee.

(AQO 808/00)

Ms Rodgers: As the Member is aware, the concept of rural proofing features prominently in the Executive's Draft Programme for Government which I am confident the Assembly will endorse shortly.

Once it has done so I shall take steps to introduce appropriate machinery to ensure that rural proofing is carried out effectively across the system, and I intend to consult the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee before taking final decisions. Nevertheless, as is mentioned in the Draft Programme for Government I see a need for an interdepartmental group of officials from most, if not all, Departments, under my Chairmanship, to manage the process.

Childcare in Rural Communities

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm the importance of childcare in rural communities and to make a statement.

(AQO 843/00)

Ms Rodgers: I am more than happy to confirm the importance of childcare in rural communities. Under the 1994-1999 Rural Development Programme a number of community based regeneration projects located in disadvantaged rural areas included the provision of childcare facilities. These facilities have been provided because the local communities have identified childcare as an issue that needs to be addressed.

I spoke recently at a major Cross Border Rural Childcare Conference which celebrated some excellent work in rural areas. In Northern Ireland the project, funded by my Department and the EU, piloted a range of childcare provision in Belleek, Donemana, and the Clogher Valley. Models of rural childcare that can be replicated in other areas have been developed.

Although we are still negotiating the 2001-2006 Rural Development Programme with the European Commission I expect it to bring opportunities for local communities and women's organisations to identify and address their needs and look forward to proposals coming forward.

Promoting Northern Ireland Beef

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to mount an advertising campaign for Northern Ireland beef in other European states.

(AQO 859/00)

Ms Rodgers: The Livestock and Meat Commission has statutory responsibility for promoting Northern Ireland beef and lamb. My Department has provided £2m towards implementation by the LMC of the Red Meat Strategy. That strategy included considerable volume of expenditure for generic promotion of beef in target markets which would not necessarily be confined to Europe.

While the beef export ban has prevented a major marketing drive, promotional activity has continued. For example considerable effort has been made to promote the Greenfields brand in Holland. In addition the LMC and major processors have maintained a significant presence at major international food shows in Europe each year. This means that there is a real base to build upon when we are able to export again.

I have been pleased to be able to assist the industry in its promotional work with existing and potential customers both in Northern Ireland and other countries and I look forward to continuing to do so.

Safety of Beef Imports

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, following the discovery of spinal cord in beef imported from Germany, to make a statement. (AQO 865/00)

Ms Rodgers: This is a food safety issue and is therefore primarily a matter for the Food Standards Agency. However I can confirm that discovery of remnants of spinal cord in two consignments of beef quarters imported into Northern Ireland from Germany constituted serious breaches of EU rules on the removal of specified risk materials. I would wish to point out that it was the vigilance of DARD's Veterinary Service inspectors that ensured the breaches were detected during their routine checks on imported beef and as a result, the consignments were detained and subsequently re-exported. The matter was referred to the European Commission and they have raised the issue with the German authorities.

Promoting the Horticulture Sector

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to promote the horticulture sector in Northern Ireland. (AQO 816/00)

Ms Rodgers: I have concluded, after discussions with the industry and officials, that some elements of the horticulture sector in Northern Ireland appear to offer potential for expansion, both in home and export markets.

It is my considered opinion, that what we now require is a thorough review of the present situation and the production of a workable strategic plan. I have therefore taken steps to initiate such a study which will be developed in consultation with the industry. We are currently considering the terms of reference and scope of the study but identification of business opportunities and market requirements will clearly be important elements of any such study.

Any recommendations will be discussed with the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee in due

course but in the meantime my Department will continue with its ongoing programme to support companies in improving the promotion of their products. This is done through initiatives such as the Northern Ireland Garden Centre Awards, the Nursery Trade Directory and exhibits at trade shows such as the Kildare Growers and Four Oaks Shows.

Development of an Organic Farming Sector

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the steps she is taking to provide strategic direction for the development of an Organic farming sector in Northern Ireland. (AQO 828/00)

Ms Rodgers: It is clear that organic food represents a growing market opportunity and I wish to encourage the development of a vibrant organic production and processing sector in Northern Ireland. Increased resources, of some £9 million, have therefore been made available under the Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan 2000-2006 for a new Organic Farming Scheme, to help farmers convert to organic production systems. This Scheme will open for new applications on 1 March 2001.

However, I recognise that the ongoing development of the Northern Ireland organic sector must be progressed in a strategic way. Accordingly, on 31 October 2000, I announced that I was commissioning consultants to undertake a strategic study of the Northern Ireland organic sector. The study is progressing well with the consultants, Elm Farm Research Centre in Berkshire, a much-respected centre of excellence in the organic sector, due to report to me by the end of February 2001. I shall wish to reflect upon the consultant's recommendations and consult widely thereon including, of course, with the Assembly Committee.

Importation and Re-export of Beef

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the steps she is taking to investigate the importation, subsequent re-export, sell-on and labelling of beef from other European Union member states and to maintain the integrity of the traceability scheme. (AQO 857/00)

Ms Rodgers: The importation of beef from other Member States is allowed under EU Single Market Rules provided the redmeat trade conditions are complied with and all such consignments are duly checked at the point of destination. The fact that it is these checks which detect instances of breaches of the rules on SRM, provides evidence of their effectiveness.

Under the EU rules on beef labelling, certain information is required to be shown on beef labels to allow the beef to be traced to the plant of origin and a batch of animals. These requirements apply to beef produced in Northern Ireland or imported. Industry interests in Northern Ireland have been reminded of their obligations regarding the labelling of beef whether sourced in Northern Ireland or elsewhere.

Rural Tourism Strategy

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if, given the importance of tourism to rural development, she has any plans to seek co-operation from other Departments in the development of an integrated rural tourism strategy. (AQO 850/00)

Ms Rodgers: My Department, in partnership with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Environment and Heritage Service (Department of the Environment) and the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure is finalising proposals for a Natural Resource Rural Tourism initiative within the Peace II negotiations. This will form part of my Department's next Rural Development Programme which will run from 2001 to 2006.

It is my intention to consult widely on this rural tourism initiative within the next few weeks.

Specified Risk Material

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is she aware of the importation of 'bone meal' from County Cavan for disposal in Waste Centres in Northern Ireland. (AQO 814/00)

Ms Rodgers: I was aware that such imports had been taking place. Processed Specified Risk Material from Monery By-Products (now called Monery 2000 Ltd) in Co. Cavan was exported from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland for landfill at the Tullyvar landfill site at Aghnacloy. The imports were under licence from my Department and took place from July 1999 until December 2000.

New EU rules on Specified Risk Material were introduced by the European Commission on 29 June 2000 through Commission Decision 2000/418. This Decision, which came into force on 1 October 2000, made it illegal to export Specified Risk Material to another Member State except for the purposes of incineration. As the Republic of Ireland authorities lacked the necessary landfill facilities to deal with this material they requested that the trade continue beyond 1 October 2000 while they sought a derogation from the Commission. This approach was unsuccessful and the Republic of Ireland authorities immediately stopped the trade in December 2000. No further trade has occurred since.

Storage of Rendered Animal Residue

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the costs incurred in the storage of rendered animal residue, since the start of the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy crisis to the present date. (AQO 823/00)

Ms Rodgers: I am assuming the Member is referring to the rendered animal residue from the Over Thirty Month Slaughter Scheme, which was introduced throughout the UK in 1996. The costs of storage and associated transport of this material, that is Meat and Bonemeal and Tallow, from May 1996 to the end of November 2000 was just over £178 million.

Around 435,000 tonnes of Meat and Bonemeal and 215,000 tonnes of tallow are currently in secure storage in 18 sites around the UK. In Northern Ireland there are four Meat and Bonemeal stores holding around 90,000 tonnes of Meat and Bonemeal and no tallow stores.

Subsidy for Farmers

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to undertake to (a) provide a new subsidy for farmers to produce higher grades of beef and (b) to provide access to artificial insemination (A.I.) services. (AQO 836/00)

Ms Rodgers: Following the securing of £2m for beef quality in the Programme for Government my Department has been consulting the industry on methods of improving beef quality in Northern Ireland. The increased use of AI and other new breeding techniques were an integral part of the draft proposals. Subject to ensuring that the proposals meet EU State Aid guidelines they will be finalised as soon as possible.

A straightforward subsidy for farmers for the production of higher grade beef would be unlikely to secure state aid approval and I am not convinced that it could have the necessary effect since it would impact more directly on beef finishers than suckled calf producers. However I have already indicated that I will consider the feasibility of applying quality criteria in the use of the Beef National Envelope next year.

European Agriculture Council

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to report on the outcome of the recent European Agriculture Council meeting and to make a statement. (AQO 826/00)

Ms Rodgers: The main focus of the Council was BSE. The Commission reported on progress made by Member States in implementing the new measures adopted in December, as well as on the market and budgetary problems

arising from the dramatic fall in beef consumption in many Member States. In the light of advice from the EU Scientific Steering Committee, the Council agreed that new rules should be put in place banning the use of mechanically recovered meat from ruminant bones, requiring heat treatment of fat from ruminants for use in animal feed and requiring the removal of vertebral columns from beef carcasses. The UK was able to secure a derogation which means that the decision in question will not apply to it.

The Council has received a package of proposals addressing the problems in the Beef market for discussion at the forthcoming Council of Ministers meeting, which I will be attending. I am currently considering these proposals in consultation with the local industry. The proposals will be financed within the budget limits laid down by the Berlin European Council.

The Council also heard presentations from Commissioner Byrne on proposals to improve the welfare of pigs and planned proposals to improve the operation of the Directive on the welfare of animals in transit.

Commissioner Fischler presented new proposals for reform of the olive oil regime and for a pilot scheme introducing a new simplified subsidy to replace certain production-linked aids. The scheme would be limited to farmers receiving no more than 1000 euros a year in direct subsidies.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Christmas Cards

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if, pursuant to AQW 1109/00, he will confirm that he sent Christmas cards to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Education. (AQW 1605/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The official Christmas card list for my Department includes all of my Ministerial colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly - the First and Deputy First Minister, the two Junior Ministers and the other Executive Ministers - and all members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee.

As Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure I can confirm that official Christmas cards were sent according to the official list, without deletions.

Curatorial Staff

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm when the recommendations of the

review in respect of eleven curatorial staff places at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland will be actioned following the 1999 review of grade E/F work. (AQW 1695/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The review of PRONI's Curatorial E and F grades completed in 1999 examined PRONI's current and future staffing requirements at these levels and made recommendations on the numbers and grades required. PRONI's senior management team is currently considering recommendations contained in this report and in a number of other organisational and efficiency reports covering fundamental aspects of the agency's business and operations.

The outcome of PRONI's deliberations will be incorporated into the Agency's draft Corporate and Business Plans which will be presented to the Department for approval during March 2001.

The extent and speed of implementation will be subject to inter alia the availability of financial resources.

Access to Outdoor Pursuits

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the action he is taking to increase young people's access to outdoor pursuits. (AQW 1721/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council, which is responsible for the development of sport within the Province, provides exchequer funding to assist young people entering or remaining in outdoor sports such as mountaineering, canoeing, orienteering, sailing and caving. It also supports the training of instructors who are instrumental in the recruitment and retention of young participants. Courses specifically designed for young people are offered at Tollymore Mountain Centre on the introduction to, leadership, and instruction, in mountaineering and canoeing.

The Countryside Access and Activities Network is an initiative of the Sports Council and the Environment and Heritage Service, designed to develop and sustain a vibrant countryside recreation culture for all, and proposals for the New Opportunities Fund suggests a number of possibilities specifically for Outdoor Adventure activities.

In addition, there are 12 outdoor education centres run by the education and library boards or voluntary youth organisations.

Specialist Sports Facilities in West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what specialist sports facilities are available in West Tyrone for young people of exceptional ability. (AQW 1722/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Most sports facilities, such as pitches, courts, athletic tracks and swimming pools are

available to individuals of all ages and all levels of ability. Specialist services to talented individuals from all parts of the Province will, however, be provided through the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland, which is situated at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown.

Ulster History Park

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any plans to meet with Omagh District Council to discuss funding for the Ulster History Park.

(AQW 1734/00)

Mr McGimpsey: I have no plans to meet with Omagh District Council to discuss funding for the Ulster History Park as no meeting has been requested. However, should the Council wish to arrange a meeting, my Diary Secretary, Sarah Elwood, may be contacted on 028 9025 8893.

All Ireland Soccer Strategy

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any plans to examine the merits of establishing an All Ireland soccer strategy.

(AQW 1757/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The game of football in the Republic of Ireland is administered entirely separately from the game in Northern Ireland, with separate governing body and senior league arrangements recognised by the European and World bodies, UEFA and FIFA. My initiative, *To Create a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland*, is intended to tackle the problems facing the sport here, taking account of all levels of the game, from grass-roots to international level.

I am not aware of any suggestions that this initiative should be extended beyond Northern Ireland and I have no plans to examine the merits of establishing an All Ireland soccer strategy. However I do understand, that discussions are ongoing between the Irish Football League and Eircom League about a North/South knock-out competition at senior level.

Feeding for Fish

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assurance that fish farms are not using contaminated feed associated with Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy or Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease and to outline what consultation he has undertaken with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on this matter.

(AQW 1759/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The scientific evidence is that Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle resulted from the use of feedingstuffs containing contaminated mammalian meat and bone meal (MMBM). The BSE

Order (Northern Ireland) 1999 prohibits the sale, supply and use of any MMBM in the production of any feedingstuff for fish, and also prohibits the feeding to any fish any feedingstuff in which MMBM has been incorporated. I have not consulted the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on this matter as the legislation is already in place banning MMBM in fish feedingstuffs.

Monitoring Internet Usage

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what measures are in place in the Department's Statutory Bodies to monitor internet usage by members of staff.

(AQW 1760/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The measures taken by each of my Department's Statutory Bodies to monitor Internet usage by members of staff are as follows:

Ulster-Scots Agency

The Ulster-Scots Agency has only five full-time staff at this present time. General procedures for staff behaviour have not yet been written (adopted) formally. However staff are aware that general civil service principles from both sides of the border apply. All staff are aware that abuse of the Internet is not acceptable, and in particular the downloading of pornographic, extremist or other similar material is a most serious matter. They have no intentions, at this time of instituting any more formal monitoring process although this may well soon come within audit requirements.

Foras Na Gaeilge

At present no measures are in place to monitor Internet usage by members of staff. Foras Na Gaeilge is a relatively new organisation and have plans to look at organisational structures and procedures. These procedures will include internet usage.

Waterways Ireland

Waterways Ireland is at an early stage of building up a staffing presence at its Headquarters in Enniskillen. Use of the Internet is being addressed as part of a project considering the overall IT needs of the Body for the medium to long term. Existing staff who have access to the Internet have been made aware of their personal responsibilities and line managers monitor its use. In addition, guidelines are being developed as part of an overall training programme for the Body.

Fisheries Conservancy Board

Three members of the Board's staff have Internet access. Access was provided in November 2000. Itemised accounts, detailing log-on time and date, duration and cost are monitored on a quarterly basis by the Board's

Support Manager. Any apparent anomalies or matters of concern are drawn to the attention of the Chief Executive for clarification and/or any appropriate action that may be necessary. The first such account has just been received.

Sports Council

The Sports Council have no measures in place to monitor Internet usage. They are investigating the purchase of necessary software and have made preparatory changes to their existing systems to facilitate internal monitoring through the implementation of new software.

Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI)

MAGNI have approximately 120 computer users with Internet access. The majority have access through the NICS Government Server, which is managed by BDS. The Director of Personnel for MAGNI is currently developing a Policy on Internet Use for the whole of MAGNI to replace policies, procedures and instructions that exist on the component sites. Whilst there are differences of approach on each of the three main sites, Ulster Museum, Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and the Ulster American Folk Park, the Directors on each site may take whatever action is necessary, including investigation or discipline if abuse of access is suspected or proven. At present authorised access to the internet must be for business purposes only, time spent is maintained by scrutiny of telephone logs and each computer is protected by the most recent version of virus scanning software. Internet access via computers connected to networks is forbidden.

Armagh Observatory and Planetarium

All Internet traffic to and from the site must pass through a firewall. This can be used to block traffic by type, by origin and by destination. Blocking is carried out to secure the site from external intrusion but might also be for policy reasons. Each event, when traffic is blocked, is logged and the log is reviewed most days.

All traffic passing to and from our network is continuously monitored by a dedicated computer system. This includes file transfers, web usage, access to remote computers and e-mail traffic.

All e-mail exchanges are routinely logged on our main server. The log includes the sender, recipient, time and date. The contents of e-mail messages are not normally accessed but the Observatory and Planetarium reserve the right to do so if abuse is suspected.

Additional network tools are in use to examine internal network traffic and to check for anomalous usage patterns.

Internet usage at the Armagh Observatory is monitored primarily to ensure efficient operation of the network and to maintain the network's integrity against outside intrusion. The ability to track network use by staff is a by-product of efficient network management.

Arts Council

The Arts Council permits access to the Internet through a limited number of PCs. All staff have access to the Council's internal (Intranet) site from their own PCs. All of the computers with full external Internet access have monitoring software installed on them. The software used is Stealth Activity Monitor (SAM). This software creates a log of the name of the user and all activity undertaken. These logs are monitored on a regular basis by the Council's IT Officer. The Business Development Service (BDS), the Council's Internet Service Provider also maintains a list of banned sites which cannot be accessed from any PC making use of their server to access the Internet.

Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC)

Twelve months ago NIMC had an internal review on e-mail and Internet usage. Arising from that review, a detailed memoranda was prepared for all the staff which provided guidelines and procedures on the use of email and the world-wide web. Within NIMC, personal internet usage is not permitted.

NIMC is currently awaiting a quotation for the installation of software which will allow monitoring of individual staff members Internet usage.

Bicentenary Exhibition of the Act of Union 1801

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost of the Bicentenary exhibition of the Act of Union 1801. (AQW 1761/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The approximate cost of putting the Act of Union Bicentenary exhibition on display in the Ulster Museum for three months will be £120,000. The exhibition will feature original documents and artefacts from archives, museums and libraries from various parts of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. These items must be displayed in secure and environmentally controlled surroundings.

The figure includes the cost of producing a travelling version of the exhibition that will go on show at a number of venues around Northern Ireland, at the Bank of Ireland Arts Centre, Dublin, and at the Palace of Westminster, London.

Design and Build (including refurbishment of gallery)	£30,000 approx.
Transportation of loan items	£30,000 approx.
Exhibition cases	£40,000 approx.
Production of travelling exhibition	£20,000 approx.
Total	£120,000 approx.

It should be noted that the exhibition cases are assets that my Department will be able to re-use for display purposes on other occasions.

Fermanagh and Western Football Association

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, pursuant to AQW 1479/00, those participants from the Fermanagh and Western Football Association invited to the conference workshop planned for 10/12 February 2001. (AQW 1775/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Given the limited number of places available at the conference workshop held from 10-12 February 2001, none of the four divisional football associations of which the Fermanagh & Western Football Association is one, was directly asked to nominate delegates. Instead, twelve nominations (to cover club and governing body administrators and coaching) were sought from the IFA, including two from intermediate football, two from junior football and two people involved in coaching. I understand that none of the nominations put forward included people from the Fermanagh and Western area. There were, therefore, no participants from that Association.

Fermanagh and Western Football Association

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, pursuant to AQW 1479/00, the involvement of the Fermanagh and Western Football Association in focus group discussions in respect of "Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland". (AQW 1776/00)

Mr McGimpsey: A series of eight focus groups was conducted across Northern Ireland with supporters, managers and coaches, and not with officials from any administrative body. There was, therefore, no direct involvement by the Fermanagh & Western Football Association. One of the focus groups for junior managers and coaches, however, took place in Enniskillen, which is within the Fermanagh & Western jurisdiction.

Fermanagh and Western Football Association

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if, pursuant to AQW 1479/00, he will detail those members of the Fermanagh and Western Football Association who were interviewed either in person or by telephone in relation to the consultation exercise carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers. (AQW 1777/00)

Mr McGimpsey: None of the four divisional football associations was directly involved in the key informant interviews.

Fermanagh and Western Football Association

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, pursuant to AQW 1479/00, the clubs and individual players from the Fermanagh and Western Football Association who were invited to respond to the postal survey undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers in respect of the "creating a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland" initiative. (AQW 1778/00)

Mr McGimpsey: 37 clubs in the Fermanagh & Western area were invited to respond to the postal survey. These were as follows:

Ardstraw
 Augher Stars
 Ballinamallard United
 Ballinamallard United III
 Ballygawley
 Barrowfield
 Beragh Swifts
 Camus Swifts
 Churchtown
 Clabby Strollers
 Dergview
 Derrychara United
 Dunbreen Rovers
 Ederney
 Enniskillen Ladies
 Enniskillen Rangers
 Enniskillen Swifts
 Enniskillen Town United
 Fintona Swifts
 Fivemiletown United
 Glebe United
 Irvinestown Wanderers
 Kevlin United
 Killen Rangers
 Killymore Rovers
 Lisbellaw United
 Lisnarick
 Lisnaskea Rovers
 Magees
 Maguiresbridge
 Mountjoy United
 NFC Kesh
 Omagh Hospitals
 Shelbourne
 Sixmilecross Bohemians
 Sperrin Athletic
 Tummery Athletic

Two players from every team entered for the Irish Junior and Youth Cups, and two players from every intermediate and women's club, were invited to respond to the postal survey. In accordance with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct, respondents' anonymity must be strictly preserved, and it would therefore be in breach of the confidentiality assured to respondents by PwC, to

give details of individual players. In total, however, 70 players were surveyed from the following clubs in the Fermanagh and Western Association:

Augher Stars (2 players)
 Ballinamallard United (2 players + 2 youth players)
 Barrowfield (2 players)
 Beragh Swifts (2 players)
 Dergview (2 players + 2 youth players)
 Dunbreen Rovers (2 players)
 Ederney (2 players)
 Enniskillen Ladies (2 players)
 Enniskillen Rangers (2 players + 2 youth players)
 Enniskillen Swifts (2 players)
 Enniskillen Town United (2 players + 2 youth players)
 Fintona Swifts (2 players)
 Fivemiletown United (2 players + 2 youth players)
 Irvinestown Wanderers (2 players + 2 youth players)
 Kevlin United (2 players)
 Killen Rangers (2 players)
 Killymore Rovers (2 players)
 Lisbellaw United (2 players + 2 youth players)
 Lisnarick (2 players)
 Lisnaskea Rovers (2 players + 2 youth players)
 Maguiresbridge (2 players)
 NFC Kesh (2 players + 2 youth players)
 Omagh Hospitals (2 players)
 Shelbourne (2 players)
 Sperrin Athletic (2 players)
 Tummery Athletic (2 players).

Fermanagh and Western Football Association

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, pursuant to AQW 1479/00, in relation to the consultation exercise carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers on behalf of his Department, the results of the public surveys undertaken within that area covered by the Fermanagh and Western Football Association.

(AQW 1779/00)

Mr McGimpsey: As part of the consultation exercise carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers a street survey was conducted with 750 members of the general public across Northern Ireland. The results of the survey are only available broken down by North, South, East and West. It is not possible to provide results based on the Fermanagh & Western jurisdiction.

Major Athletics Facility

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any plans to fund the creation of a major athletics facility in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1805/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Northern Ireland has currently four synthetic tracks, including the soon to be opened eight-lane facility in Bangor. There are, however, plans to create a new track as part of the Sports Institute, Northern Ireland at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown, although the exact specification of this facility has yet to be defined. There is also the possibility that a further track will be provided in the west of the Province in the near future.

My Department is also considering the feasibility of a national stadium for Northern Ireland and there may be potential for making provision for athletics should such a project proceed.

National Sports Stadium

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any representations he has received in respect of the construction of a national football stadium in the Belfast area.

(AQW 1870/00)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department is currently investigating the potential for developing a viable and sustainable scheme for a national sports stadium for Northern Ireland. Although I have received several suggestions for the location of such a facility, no detailed consideration will be given to this issue until the need for a stadium has been determined. If such a scheme is to succeed it would require a high level of commitment from Football, Gaelic, Rugby and Athletics. The sports are currently considering their needs and the question of location and accessibility will be issues which will be important to them.

Promoting Ulster-Scots Language and Culture

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the proposed timetable for the promotion of the Ulster Scots language, culture and history throughout Northern Ireland.

(AQO 812/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The North/South Ministerial Council on 5 December approved Tha Boord o Ulster Scotch corporate plan for 2001/2 to 2003/4. Tha Boord circulated the plan on 2 January 2001 for a period of consultation which ends 28 February 2001.

My Department commissioned research to help the Ulster-Scots Language Society develop their strategic planning capability. The report which has recently been received outlines a three-year strategy for promoting awareness, understanding and respect for the Ulster-Scots language as a central and integral part of the Ulster-Scots identity and to support its use and development.

I understand that Tha Boord o Ulster Scotch and the Ulster-Scots Language Society will work closely on implementing their respective plans.

Access for Disabled People to Arts Premises Today (Adapt)

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his programme to improve accessibility to culture and leisure facilities in respect of the disabled and socially disadvantaged. (AQO 819/00)

Mr McGimpsey: In November 2000 my Department initiated a pilot programme administered by ADAPT Northern Ireland (Access for Disabled People to Arts Premises Today) to carry out a comprehensive audit of an initial 40 venues and buildings in the culture, arts and leisure sectors. The pilot programme runs to March 2001 and comprises:

- access appraisals carried out in buildings chiefly funded directly or indirectly by DCAL;
- assessment of training needs of staff in these buildings and the delivery of training on universal accessibility issues; and
- the establishment of a small grants scheme to provide incentives and lever funding for access improvements.

Decisions on the scale and format of future programmes will be informed by an evaluation of the pilot programme to be carried early in the new financial year.

Electronic Libraries Project

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the Electronic Libraries Project for Northern Ireland. (AQO 861/00)

Mr McGimpsey: This is an important Project which has the potential to make a significant contribution to the Executive priorities outlined in the Programme for Government, in particular Modernising Government, Investing in Education and Skills and Social Inclusion. The Project will create within Northern Ireland a modernised seamless public library service which will enhance access to information resources to all sections of the community, provide lifelong learning opportunities and help develop personal skills and increase employability, thus transforming the Public Library Service into very much more than a means of access to books.

Bi-Lingual Road Signs

Mr McNamee asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to consult with the Minister for Regional Development in relation to obtaining permission for South Armagh Tourist Initiative (S.A.T.I.) to erect bi-lingual road signs in the Ring of Gullion. (AQO 839/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The policy on the use of languages on traffic signs is a matter for the Minister for Regional Development. I believe the Minister advised Members of that policy on 5 February 2001.

Future of Motor Sport

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the future of motorsport in Northern Ireland. (AQO 807/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Responsibility for the development of any sport lies with the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and the Governing Body of the particular sport. I am very keen to support all types of sport within the province including motor sport. However, in an attempt to identify the future facility requirements of motor sport I recently asked the Sports Council to commission a consultant to assess the physical condition of the provinces 4 existing short circuits and to examine the need for, feasibility of, and the viability of providing a regional motorsports facility. The consultants have just completed their review of the short circuits and their report is currently being considered by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. The feasibility report on the regional motorsport facility is due by 15 March 2001.

Promoting Ulster-Scots Culture

Mr Kane asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will detail the level of funding made available to promote the culture and heritage of the Ulster-Scots community in comparison to that made available to promote Irish culture and language. (AQO 822/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Funding of £1.3m stg will be available to Tha Boord o Ulster Scotch in 2001/2002. DCAL will provide £0.97m of this. Funding available to Foras na Gaeilge in the same period is £10.1m DCAL will provide £2.53m of this.

Under direct rule the funding for Ulster-Scots was £118,000.

Funding of £667,000 is available for Tha Boord o Ulster Scotch in 2000/2001. This is a five fold increase on the predevolution figure.

The funding of £1.3m stg for Tha Boord in 2001/2002 represents almost a tenfold increase since devolution.

The Ulster-Scots language and culture are at a different stage of development to Irish, Gaidhlig or Welsh for example.

Cultural Tourism Initiative

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what provisions there are within the current departmental arrangements to ensure a coherent response to the cultural tourism opportunity recognised in the 1998 report entitled "The Cultural Sector: A Development Opportunity for Tourism in Northern Ireland" and to make a statement. (AQO 818/00)

Mr McGimpsey: I am familiar with the Cultural Tourism Initiative being progressed by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and partners. We all recognise that the relationship between tourism and the cultural sector is highly complementary and mutually beneficial. My Department is committed to the early development of a marketing strategy to promote awareness of Northern Ireland's rich cultural treasures. We will strive to ensure, within the context of cross-departmental working, that the full potential of our cultural life is realised in attracting visitors and enhancing their experience of Northern Ireland.

European City of Culture 2008

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if, the appointment of Belfast as a European City of Culture in 2008, will allow events and performances to be held throughout the region. (AQO 833/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Belfast is one of a number of cities in the UK competing to be selected as the European Capital of Culture in 2008. Under the competition criteria set by the European Union, the cultural programme supporting any bid must relate to a conurbation with a distinct identity, which may involve its surrounding region. In keeping with this ruling a bid cannot, in principle, be submitted by a consortium of separate towns or cities. There is, therefore, a physical limit to the area within which events and performances included in any bid by Belfast can be held.

Motor Cycle Racing

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his policy on motor cycle racing in Northern Ireland. (AQO 867/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Responsibility for the development of any sport lies with the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and the Governing Body of the particular sport. I am very keen to support all types of sport within the province including motor sport. However, in an attempt to identify the future facility requirements of motor sport I recently asked the Sports Council to commission a consultant to assess the physical condition of the province's 4 existing short circuits and to examine the need for, feasibility of, and the viability of providing a regional motorsports facility. The consultants have just completed their review of the short circuits and their report is currently being considered by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. The feasibility report on the regional motorsport facility is due by 15 March 2001.

On the specific issue of Motor Cycle Road Racing the Road Race Task Force have completed their review of the province's road racing circuits and their report has been ratified by the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland at their Inter Centre Conference on 27 January. As a result

of the recommendations contained in the report my officials are currently engaged in consultations with key players e.g. the Department of Regional Development and the various Public Utilities bodies, who would be involved in implementing some of the reports safety recommendations. I am satisfied that progress is being made on developing motorsport and in making the sport as safe as possible.

Minority Ethnic Languages

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his language policy for ethnic minority languages. (AQO 860/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The Belfast Agreement commits the Government to:

"recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic minority communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland."

My Department is at an early stage of policy development for ethnic minority languages and our current priority is to obtain broad baseline information on which to base our thinking. My Department has therefore taken part in the Interdepartmental Working Group on Promoting Social Inclusion which has considered language needs. We have also developed contacts with the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission with a view to identifying key issues.

EDUCATION

Funding to Grammar Schools

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Education to detail the funding received by each grammar school in each of the last five years for which figures are available and outline the proportion of funding which has been spent on (a) buildings (b) classroom resources and (c) salaries. (AQW 1529/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The table below details the funding received by each grammar school in each of the last five years (1996/97 to 2000/01).

It includes:-

- amounts made available under LMS Formulae
- Split Site Funding Allocations
- Contingency Funding
- Chancellors Funding (2000/1 only)

It excludes:-

- centre funds held by Boards and the Department and distributed to schools in the course of the year to meet certain costs arising from teacher substitution, statemented pupils and landlord maintenance (ELB Funded schools only);
- recent increases to school budgets to reflect additional energy costs and maintenance (2000/1 only)

The proportion of funding which has been spent on (a) buildings (b) classroom resources and (c) salaries is not readily available in the format requested and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

TOTAL FUNDING RECEIVED BY EACH GRAMMAR SCHOOL IN EACH OF LAST 5 YEARS (1996/7 – 2000/01)

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Controlled Grammar Schools					
BELB					
Grosvenor Grammar	2,509,112	2,610,209	2,609,726	2,724,052	2,822,721
Wellington College	1,913,691	2,060,968	1,942,159	1,957,320	2,066,883
NEELB					
Antrim	1,531,151	1,599,638	1,583,368	1,639,261	1,811,693
Ballyclare High	2,417,247	2,637,745	2,714,398	2,748,711	2,938,651
Cambridge House Boys'	1,095,769	1,136,884	1,128,987	1,107,176	1,140,602
Cambridge House Girls'	1,253,224	1,332,125	1,311,936	1,370,191	1,465,565
Carrickfergus	1,498,524	1,575,552	1,599,658	1,786,910	1,945,086
Coleraine High	1,684,941	1,737,078	1,729,647	1,789,972	1,932,126
SEELB					
Down High	1,610,680	1,694,102	1,851,025	1,875,765	2,195,865
Glenlola Collegiate	2,100,255	2,127,791	2,253,717	2,266,120	2,572,407
Regent House	3,116,524	3,030,757	3,148,177	3,271,551	3,635,801
SELB					
Banbridge Academy	2,257,513	2,346,777	2,650,609	2,994,853	3,089,627
Lurgan College	1,016,603	985,947	1,058,323	1,039,484	1,153,774
Portadown College	1,942,332	1,909,930	1,957,894	2,041,283	2,089,321
WELB					
Enniskillen Collegiate	1,113,802	1,086,319	1,113,160	1,138,322	1,187,356
Limavady	2,030,367	2,024,626	2,007,368	2,012,267	2,250,001
Omagh Academy	1,506,678	1,484,928	1,492,698	1,558,946	1,611,343
Strabane	861,449	845,652	875,739	970,786	1,040,183

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Voluntary Grammar Schools					
Armagh Royal	1,627,877	1,629,409	1,696,714	1,773,898	1,912,349

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Armagh St Patrick's Grammar	1,886,397	1,951,225	2,000,934	2,054,797	2,110,464
Ballymena Academy	2,939,373	2,974,391	3,000,236	3,220,037	3,393,790
Ballymena St Louis Grammar	2,278,829	2,289,778	2,428,933	2,563,342	2,687,687
Ballymoney Dalriada	1,946,890	2,003,516	2,084,025	2,242,135	2,368,090
Ballynahinch Assumption College	2,092,911	2,159,263	2,283,872	2,400,037	2,533,907
Bangor Grammar	2,191,200	2,220,781	2,276,038	2,368,892	2,504,173
Belfast Aquinas	1,218,747	1,435,408	1,941,639	1,988,128	2,204,230
Belfast Bloomfield Collegiate	1,541,755	1,586,250	1,694,021	1,882,460	2,007,542
Belfast Campbell College	2,335,610	2,456,586	2,419,872	2,542,650	2,598,509
Belfast Dominican College	2,397,861	2,368,084	2,511,333	2,648,218	2,769,648
Belfast High	2,053,193	2,041,994	2,150,984	2,346,585	2,481,811
Belfast Hunterhouse College	1,559,615	1,639,900	1,758,960	1,881,808	1,993,085
Belfast Methodist College	4,427,123	4,530,295	4,654,262	5,131,914	5,315,223
Belfast Our Lady & St Patrick's	2,826,426	2,942,340	3,167,629	3,276,512	3,423,923
Belfast Royal Academical Inst.	2,501,134	2,562,661	2,662,306	2,903,543	3,010,933
Belfast Royal Academy	3,375,342	3,398,988	3,551,196	3,901,052	4,082,827
Belfast St Dominic's High School	2,338,541	2,433,284	2,506,706	2,611,870	2,749,968
Belfast St Malachy's College	2,411,410	2,504,948	2,660,207	2,782,562	2,926,761
Belfast St Mary's CBS	2,814,383	2,903,043	2,927,115	3,160,318	3,321,728
Belfast Strathearn	1,729,169	1,800,573	1,936,793	2,088,968	2,151,740
Belfast Victoria College	1,996,734	2,043,899	2,179,465	2,379,763	2,518,341
Coleraine Academical Inst	2,076,476	2,206,487	2,225,079	2,206,101	2,308,667
Coleraine Loreto College	1,846,630	1,890,872	2,000,347	2,106,087	2,216,196
Donaghmore St Joseph's Grammar	1,122,260	1,212,660	1,289,724	1,337,918	1,385,289

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Downpatrick St Patrick's Grammar	1,715,988	1,786,718	1,850,528	1,943,248	2,034,508
Dungannon Royal	1,603,193	1,636,661	1,634,329	1,715,015	1,852,953
Dungannon St Patrick's Academy (B)	1,996,602	2,097,747	2,114,199	2,243,301	2,330,096

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Dungannon St Patrick's Academy (G)	2,000,882	1,997,245	2,056,866	2,148,148	2,249,431
Dunmurry Rathmore Grammar	3,192,848	3,208,287	3,273,911	3,385,730	3,514,414
Enniskillen Convent Grammar	2,124,322	2,258,894	2,363,076	2,424,907	2,539,938
Enniskillen Portora Royal	1,216,868	1,260,966	1,261,370	1,305,833	1,368,555
Enniskillen St Michael's College	1,872,641	1,917,834	1,962,410	2,056,368	2,086,454
Garron Tower St Mac Nissi's College	1,453,710	1,494,931	1,577,462	1,693,582	1,792,476
Hollywood Sullivan Upper	2,532,146	2,564,530	2,714,348	2,937,793	3,058,748
Kilkeel St Louis' Grammar	1,176,752	1,253,723	1,373,113	1,551,034	1,659,407
Larne Grammar	1,605,878	1,683,165	1,757,596	1,920,811	2,028,544
Lisburn Friend's	2,271,971	2,268,054	2,420,994	2,659,807	2,785,041
Lisburn The Wallace	2,723,339	2,744,908	2,918,968	3,141,557	3,288,158
Londonderry Foyle College	2,313,886	2,322,796	2,353,059	2,457,071	2,573,210
Londonderry Lumen Christi*		351,808	407,199	872,736	1,192,919
Londonderry St Columb's College	4,145,671	4,295,357	4,402,815	4,490,411	4,639,957
Londonderry Thornhill College	3,500,618	3,730,083	3,871,395	3,964,545	4,117,485
Imult0Lurgan St Michael's Grammar	1,306,319	1,357,582	1,394,206	1,507,136	1,627,948
Magherafelt Rainey Endowed	1,711,096	1,793,089	1,853,806	1,927,003	1,996,953
Magherafelt St Mary's Grammar	2,530,397	2,602,965	2,688,686	2,816,057	2,997,659

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Newry Abbey Grammar	1,841,995	1,928,201	2,050,518	2,274,756	2,420,213
Newry Our Lady's Grammar	2,015,679	2,069,686	2,172,501	2,303,475	2,429,166
Newry Sacred Heart Grammar	2,041,410	2,089,859	2,219,287	2,394,983	2,483,715
Newry St Colman's College	1,911,025	1,987,902	2,092,513	2,186,295	2,322,100
Omagh CBS Grammar	2,105,208	2,201,390	2,359,029	2,529,666	2,694,902
Omagh Loreto College	2,377,021	2,393,024	2,507,259	2,633,915	2,716,131
Portstewart Dominican College	1,023,816	1,031,849	1,106,988	1,237,384	1,303,231
Strabane Convent Grammar	1,107,600	1,114,640	1,148,367	1,210,100	1,270,960

Notes to table:

Lumen Christi * opened in 1997. Figures exclude supplements to formula funding provided to reflect growth in classes within newly established schools.

Preparatory Departments have been excluded from the calculations.

Funding Per Grammar School Student

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Education to provide a breakdown of funding per grammar school student, excluding Education and Library Board funding, for each grammar school in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1530/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The table below details the funding per pupil received by each grammar school in each of the last five years (1996/97 to 2000/01).

It includes:-

- amounts made available under LMS Formulae
- Split Site Funding Allocations
- Contingency Funding
- Chancellors Funding (2000/1 only)

It excludes:-

- centre funds held by Boards and the Department and distributed to schools in the course of the year to meet certain costs arising from teacher substitution, statemented pupils and landlord maintenance (ELB Funded schools only);
- recent increases to school budgets to reflect additional energy costs and maintenance (2000/1 only)

FUNDING PER PUPIL FOR EACH GRAMMAR SCHOOL IN EACH OF THE LAST FIVE YEARS (1996/97 - 2000/01)

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Controlled Grammar Schools					
BELB					
Grosvenor Grammar	2,298	2,371	2,383	2,465	2,614
Wellington College	2,404	2,563	2,443	2,523	2,675
NEELB					
Antrim	2,130	2,173	2,199	2,303	2,448
Ballyclare High	2,152	2,187	2,198	2,326	2,413
Cambridge House Boys'	2,288	2,306	2,260	2,328	2,493
Cambridge House Girls'	2,191	2,239	2,223	2,306	2,453
Carrickfergus	2,165	2,229	2,184	2,274	2,420
Coleraine High	2,229	2,216	2,229	2,305	2,455
SEELB					
Down High	2,219	2,175	2,261	2,326	2,576
Glenlola Collegiate	2,154	2,098	2,178	2,271	2,522
Regent House	2,158	2,103	2,192	2,282	2,514
SELB					
Banbridge Academy	2,215	2,177	2,256	2,360	2,489
Lurgan College	2,542	2,490	2,622	2,756	2,914
Portadown College	2,481	2,424	2,528	2,653	2,791
WELB					
Enniskillen Collegiate	2,193	2,181	2,227	2,329	2,540
Limavady	2,248	2,272	2,264	2,316	2,470
Omagh Academy	2,307	2,243	2,237	2,327	2,450
Strabane	2,380	2,369	2,370	2,487	2,572
Note: Preparatory Departments have been excluded from the calculations.					
Voluntary Grammar Schools					
Armagh Royal	2,412	2,447	2,548	2,746	2,897
Armagh St Patrick's Grammar	2,394	2,445	2,539	2,686	2,817
Ballymena Academy	2,423	2,460	2,521	2,695	2,823
Ballymena St Louis Grammar	2,325	2,361	2,481	2,632	2,762
Ballymoney Dalriada	2,363	2,408	2,508	2,708	2,854
Ballynahinch Assumption College	2,297	2,347	2,477	2,626	2,759

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Bangor Grammar	2,371	2,414	2,518	2,695	2,836
Belfast Aquinas	3,472	3,087	3,371	2,716	2,855
Belfast Bloomfield Collegiate	2,350	2,368	2,506	2,697	2,848
Belfast Campbell College	2,642	2,679	2,683	2,936	3,066
Belfast Dominican College	2,317	2,354	2,472	2,625	2,756
Belfast High	2,365	2,417	2,498	2,652	2,785
Belfast Hunterhouse College	2,374	2,408	2,527	2,731	2,882
Belfast Methodist College	2,427	2,451	2,557	2,832	2,941
Belfast Our Lady & St Patrick's	2,332	2,386	2,518	2,644	2,767
Belfast Royal Academical Inst.	2,424	2,455	2,553	2,797	2,926
Belfast Royal Academy	2,460	2,490	2,585	2,800	2,922
Belfast St Dominic's High School	2,327	2,376	2,477	2,617	2,751
Belfast St Malachy's College	2,402	2,449	2,573	2,725	2,848
Belfast St Mary's CBS	2,435	2,509	2,570	2,724	2,869
Belfast Strathearn	2,375	2,417	2,552	2,808	2,905
Belfast Victoria College	2,369	2,407	2,543	2,770	2,905
Coleraine Academical Inst	2,523	2,563	2,593	2,758	2,908
Coleraine Loreto College	2,408	2,443	2,542	2,693	2,831
Donaghmore St Joseph's Grammar	2,434	2,485	2,590	2,753	2,905
Downpatrick St Patrick's Grammar	2,328	2,382	2,514	2,662	2,804
Dungannon Royal	2,463	2,510	2,586	2,780	2,925
Dungannon St Patrick's Academy (B)	2,332	2,389	2,479	2,624	2,767
Dungannon St Patrick's Academy (G)	2,385	2,406	2,505	2,642	2,784

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Dunmurry Rathmore Grammar	2,356	2,401	2,520	2,664	2,787
Enniskillen Convent Grammar	2,395	2,434	2,546	2,685	2,829
Enniskillen Portora Royal	2,669	2,706	2,736	2,889	3,030
Enniskillen St Michael's College	2,541	2,574	2,652	2,829	2,962
Garron Tower St Mac Nissi's College	2,456	2,492	2,586	2,754	2,907
Hollywood Sullivan Upper	2,393	2,426	2,541	2,764	2,890
Kilkeel St Louis' Grammar	2,326	2,388	2,515	2,707	2,880
Larne Grammar	2,358	2,384	2,497	2,649	2,779
Lisburn Friend's	2,422	2,441	2,556	2,800	2,931
Lisburn The Wallace	2,366	2,389	2,516	2,741	2,864
Londonderry Foyle College	2,504	2,536	2,594	2,818	2,953
a40Londonderry Lumen Christi*		2,932	3,157	2,694	2,651
Londonderry St Columb's College	2,423	2,449	2,560	2,735	2,875
Londonderry Thornhill College	2,332	2,396	2,509	2,668	2,810
Lurgan St Michael's Grammar	2,699	2,748	2,851	3,014	3,169
Magherafelt Rainey Endowed	2,410	2,450	2,526	2,695	2,827
Magherafelt St Mary's Grammar	2,394	2,440	2,541	2,672	2,794
Newry Abbey Grammar	2,288	2,318	2,450	2,609	2,758
Newry Our Lady's Grammar	2,352	2,404	2,532	2,688	2,827
Newry Sacred Heart Grammar	2,379	2,424	2,533	2,703	2,837
Newry St Colman's College	2,308	2,347	2,470	2,609	2,750
Omagh CBS Grammar	2,339	2,385	2,526	2,691	2,860
Omagh Loreto College	2,375	2,405	2,522	2,696	2,836

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Portstewart Dominican College	2,540	2,554	2,623	2,750	2,902
Strabane Convent Grammar	2,392	2,461	2,569	2,732	2,898

Note : Preparatory Departments have been excluded from the calculations.

* Lumen Christi opened 1997. Figures exclude supplements to formula funding provided to reflect growth in classes within newly established schools

Funding per Pupil

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Education to provide a breakdown of funding per secondary school student, excluding Education and Library Board funding, for each secondary school in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1531/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The table below details the funding per pupil received by each secondary school in each of the last five years (1996/97 to 2000/01).

It includes:-

- amounts made available under LMS Formulae
- Split Site Funding Allocations
- Special Needs Code of Practice
- Contingency Funding
- Chancellors Funding (2000/1 only)

It excludes:-

- resources distributed under the School Support Programme
- centre funds held by Boards and the Department and distributed to schools in the course of the year to meet certain costs arising from teacher substitution, statemented pupils and landlord maintenance (ELB Funded schools only);
- recent increases to school budgets to reflect additional energy costs and maintenance (2000/1 only)

FUNDING PER PUPIL FOR EACH SECONDARY SCHOOL IN EACH OF THE LAST FIVE YEARS (1996/97 TO 2000/01)

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
BELB					
Controlled Secondary					
Ashfield Boys' High	2,700	2,712	2,569	2,657	2,834
Ashfield Girls' High	2,650	2,657	2,493	2,590	2,701
*Balmoral High School (Opened 1/9/96)	2,437	2,691	2,565	2,659	3,010

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Belfast Boys' Model	2,391	2,428	2,423	2,509	2,666
Belfast Girls' Model	2,417	2,421	2,453	2,537	2,703
Castle High	2,910	2,822	2,813	3,142	3,314
*Deramore High (Closed 31/8/96)	4,422	-	-	-	-
*Larkfield High (Closed 31/8/96)	3,499	-	-	-	-
Mount Gilbert Comm. College	3,118	3,050	2,818	2,958	3,367
Orangefield High	2,690	2,740	2,535	2,616	2,800
Maintained Secondary					
Christian Brothers'	2,413	2,375	2,451	2,528	2,692
Corpus Christi College	2,550	2,545	2,558	2,740	2,882
La Salle Boys'	2,425	2,407	2,407	2,543	2,707
Little Flower Girls'	2,370	2,436	2,479	2,572	2,738
Our Lady of Mercy	2,481	2,472	2,496	2,581	2,764
St Gabriel's Boys	3,111	3,066	3,102	3,241	3,408
St Gemma's High	2,870	2,910	2,902	2,948	3,212
St Genevieve's High	2,374	2,444	2,448	2,585	2,708
St Joseph's College	2,719	2,711	2,538	2,525	2,732
St Louise's Comp. College	2,473	2,519	2,553	2,556	2,759
St Patrick's	2,939	2,776	2,726	2,723	2,776
St Rose's High	2,650	2,589	2,544	2,609	2,867
Meanscoil Feirste (Opened 1/9/96)	-	2,811	2,678	2,742	2,893
NEELB					
Controlled Secondary					
*Antrim High (Closed 31/8/98)	3,013	2,962	2,919	-	-
*Ardnaveigh High (Closed 31/8/98)	2,790	2,920	2,775	-	-
Ballee Community High	2,333	2,420	2,421	2,489	2,606
Ballycastle High	2,717	2,546	2,498	2,592	2,756
Ballyclare	2,174	2,229	2,243	2,329	2,466

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Ballymoney High	2,181	2,257	2,239	2,315	2,468
Carrickfergus College	2,188	2,266	2,261	2,368	2,517
Coleraine Boys'	2,410	2,684	2,535	2,631	2,955
Coleraine Girls'	2,400	2,625	2,460	2,502	2,780
Crumlin High	2,338	2,383	2,381	2,468	2,590
Cullybackey High	2,165	2,235	2,243	2,335	2,484
Downshire	2,285	2,278	2,257	2,353	2,507
Dunclog High	2,214	2,250	2,275	2,377	2,504
Dunluce	2,226	2,270	2,271	2,348	2,551
Garvagh High	3,076	3,401	3,152	3,005	3,250
Glengormley High	2,211	2,293	2,271	2,360	2,493
Larne High	2,251	2,303	2,282	2,376	2,562
Maghera High	3,032	3,164	2,929	3,026	3,157
Magherafelt High	2,307	2,341	2,309	2,368	2,509
*Massereene Comm College (Opened 1/9/98)	-	-	2,355	2,500	2,732
Monkstown Community	2,253	2,298	2,283	2,371	2,543
Newtownabbey Community	2,476	2,476	2,389	2,442	2,592
Parkhall High	2,265	2,432	2,300	2,386	2,495
Maintained Secondary					
Cross and Passion College	2,348	2,485	2,392	2,421	2,596
Edmund Rice College	2,261	2,312	2,298	2,403	2,576
Our Lady of Lourdes High	2,578	2,577	2,497	2,718	2,879
St Aloysius' High	2,852	2,996	3,049	3,087	3,329
St Colm's High	2,455	2,502	2,474	2,531	2,693
St Comgall's High	2,634	2,668	2,645	2,760	2,887
St Joseph's High	2,450	2,616	2,595	2,656	2,898
St Malachy's High	2,565	2,732	2,588	2,732	2,924
St Mary's College	2,728	2,792	2,690	2,751	3,032
St Olcan's High	2,292	2,369	2,437	2,499	2,655
St Patrick's College, Ballymena	2,305	2,354	2,404	2,424	2,635
St Patrick's College, Maghera	2,283	2,325	2,337	2,429	2,584

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
St Paul's	2,620	2,745	2,685	2,796	2,951
St Pius X High	2,143	2,208	2,267	2,356	2,502
SEELB					
Controlled Secondary					
The High School, Ballynahinch	2,400	2,279	2,384	2,451	2,655
Bangor High	2,186	2,182	2,223	2,342	2,553
Comber	2,316	2,276	2,244	2,358	2,640
Donaghadee	2,629	2,412	2,430	2,470	2,726
Down Academy	2,300	2,155	2,284	2,399	2,703
Dundonald	2,337	2,227	2,277	2,319	2,543
Dunmurry	2,407	2,285	2,404	2,687	3,113
Fort Hill Girls'	2,180	2,088	2,157	2,263	2,519
Glastry	2,252	2,183	2,250	2,345	2,585
Gransha High	2,195	2,086	2,211	2,272	2,644
Hollywood (Priory College wef' 98/'99)	2,383	2,270	-	-	-
Knockbreda	2,246	2,140	2,197	2,281	2,536
Laurelhill	2,129	2,045	2,151	2,256	2,479
Lisnagarvey Boys'	2,668	2,412	2,546	2,567	2,866
Lisnasharragh	2,295	2,163	2,300	2,584	2,832
Movilla	2,140	2,016	2,128	2,226	2,442
Newtownbreda	2,096	2,018	2,101	2,242	2,452
Priory College (Hollywood HS until '98/'99)	-	-	2,314	2,415	2,768
Saintfield	2,260	2,178	2,232	2,354	2,582
*Scrabo (Closed 31/8/97)	2,451	5,469	-	-	-
Maintained Secondary					
De La Salle	2,233	2,172	2,260	2,387	2,590
St Colman's	2,140	2,075	2,202	2,307	2,731
St Colmcille's	2,213	2,151	2,216	2,307	2,535
St Colm's	2,477	2,337	2,464	2,553	2,807
St Columbanus'	2,246	2,087	2,177	2,333	2,508
St Columba's	2,463	2,379	2,540	2,599	3,033
St Malachy's	2,153	2,121	2,194	2,286	2,535
St Mary's	2,233	2,184	2,234	2,257	2,504
St Patrick's	2,144	2,070	2,157	2,284	2,495
SELB					
Controlled Secondary					
Aughnacloy High	3,125	3,007	2,915	3,627	3,823

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Banbridge High	2,069	2,063	2,195	2,292	2,423
Brownlow College	2,484	2,349	2,433	2,587	2,726
City of Armagh High	2,192	2,152	2,271	2,349	2,551
Clounagh Junior High	2,141	2,100	2,190	2,285	2,439
Cookstown High	2,165	2,146	2,237	2,344	2,491
Craigavon Senior High	2,242	2,292	2,489	2,639	2,787
Dromore High	2,078	2,057	2,167	2,269	2,411
Drumglass High	2,287	2,179	2,294	2,419	2,620
Fivemiletown High	2,310	2,296	2,399	2,564	2,677
Kilkeel High	2,159	2,151	2,252	2,359	2,492
Killicomaine Junior High	2,123	2,099	2,148	2,272	2,393
Lurgan Junior High	2,216	2,130	2,177	2,273	2,410
Markethill High	2,190	2,104	2,216	2,326	2,443
Newry High	2,373	2,303	2,403	2,524	2,667
Newtownhamilton High	3,024	3,099	2,827	3,203	3,377
Rathfriland High	2,313	2,363	2,463	2,633	2,878
Tandragee Junior High	2,388	2,342	2,443	2,511	2,696
Maintained Secondary					
Drumcree High	2,338	2,268	2,347	2,455	2,647
Holy Trinity College (Cookstown)	2,283	2,283	2,366	2,481	2,615
Lismore Comprehensive	2,257	2,259	2,331	2,449	2,588
St Brigid's Boys' High (Armagh)	3,022	2,663	2,570	2,706	2,800
St Catherine's College	2,341	2,299	2,391	2,515	2,647
St Ciaran's High (Ballygawley)	2,123	2,255	2,346	2,439	2,599
St Columban's College (Kilkeel)	2,219	2,258	2,413	2,594	2,685
St Joseph's Boys' High (Newry)	2,429	2,393	2,485	2,583	2,710

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
St Joseph's High (Coalisland)	2,258	2,224	2,334	2,455	2,651
St Joseph's High (Crossmaglen)	2,194	2,170	2,300	2,411	2,570
St Mark's High (Warrenpoint)	2,166	2,119	2,224	2,343	2,481
St Mary's Girls' Junior High (Lurgan)	2,069	2,083	2,204	2,316	2,473
St Mary's High (Newry)	2,244	2,210	2,313	2,438	2,530
**St Patrick's Boys' HS (Closed 31/8/98)	2,279	2,317	2,492	-	-
**St Patrick's Girls' HS (Closed 31/8/98)	2,558	2,535	2,658	-	-
**St Patrick's College (Amal. 1/9/98)	-	-	-	2,610	2,799
St Patrick's High (Banbridge)	2,172	2,178	2,296	2,427	2,565
St Patrick's High (Keady)	2,065	2,091	2,188	2,324	2,536
St Paul's High (Bessbrook)	2,205	2,204	2,308	2,412	2,547
St Paul's High (Lurgan)	2,205	2,142	2,239	2,360	2,523
WELB					
Controlled Secondary					
Castlederg High	2,471	2,412	2,448	2,556	2,682
Clondermot High	2,205	2,175	2,212	2,296	2,425
Duke of Westminster High	2,897	2,791	2,928	3,159	3,341
Dungiven High	3,031	3,232	3,172	3,367	3,883
Enniskillen High	2,361	2,221	2,292	2,362	2,504
Faughan Valley High	2,381	2,215	2,283	2,439	2,654
Limavady High	2,200	2,222	2,249	2,338	2,444
Lisnaskea High	2,662	2,565	2,790	2,762	3,422
Omagh High	2,452	2,371	2,417	2,466	2,570
Strabane High	2,536	2,562	2,361	2,454	2,632
Templemore Secondary	2,468	2,380	2,419	2,547	2,706

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Maintained Secondary					
Dean Brian Maguire High	2,248	2,251	2,353	2,442	2,633
Our Lady of Mercy High, Strabane	2,332	2,353	2,406	2,575	2,724
St Aidan's High, Derrylin	2,285	2,265	2,340	2,436	2,742
St Breacan's High	2,587	2,480	2,481	2,567	2,750
St Brigid's High, Carnhill	2,295	2,278	2,349	2,459	2,604
**St Brigid's High, Omagh (Closed 31/8/00)	2,282	2,307	2,283	2,405	6,245
St Cecilia's	2,260	2,249	2,345	2,457	2,589
St Colman's High, Strabane	2,311	2,302	2,354	2,468	2,602
St Comghall's High, Lisnaskea	2,417	2,377	2,415	2,491	2,646
St Eugene's High, Castlederg	2,455	2,426	2,513	2,629	2,759
St Eugene's High, Roslea	2,495	2,433	2,489	2,666	2,947
St Fanchea's, Enniskillen	2,380	2,372	2,470	2,609	2,707
St John's High, Dromore	2,199	2,220	2,412	2,548	2,680
St Joseph's, Londonderry	2,251	2,230	2,306	2,409	2,554
St Joseph's, Plumbridge	2,462	2,427	2,523	2,606	2,834
St Joseph's, Enniskillen	2,449	2,366	2,341	2,446	2,650
St Mary's High, Brollagh	2,554	2,455	2,608	2,725	2,881
St Mary's, Irvinestown	2,850	2,712	3,091	2,870	3,064
St Mary's High, Limavady	2,225	2,228	2,259	2,416	2,490
St Mary's, Londonderry	2,274	2,270	2,338	2,438	2,582
St Patrick's High, Dungiven	2,459	2,369	2,333	2,416	2,559
**St Patrick's High, Omagh (Closed 31/8/00)	2,320	2,336	2,508	2,606	6,911
St Patrick's & St Brigid's	2,283	2,315	2,529	2,580	2,600
St Peter's	2,439	2,324	2,421	2,512	2,659

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
**Sacred Heart College (Opened wef 1/9/00)	-	-	-	-	4,232
Grant-Maintained Integrated					
Drumragh IC	2,963	2,771	2,807	2,878	3,005
Dungannon IC	3,300	2,967	3,009	3,041	3,103
Erne IC	3,359	3,101	3,030	3,239	3,368
Hazelwood IC	2,757	2,672	2,820	2,943	3,076
Lagan IC	2,679	2,680	2,758	2,843	2,961
Malone IC (Opened 1/9/98)	-	-	3,074	2,923	2,959
Newbridge IC	3,063	2,893	2,976	2,974	3,044
North Coast IC(Opened 1/9/96)	3,465	2,984	3,228	3,183	3,147
Oakgrove IC	2,655	2,616	2,719	2,825	2,943
Shimna IC	3,342	3,050	2,943	3,079	3,163
Slemish IC (Opened 1/9/96)	3,525	3,043	3,030	2,929	2,930
Strangford IC (Opened 1/9/99)	-	-	-	3,171	3,072
Ulidia IC (Opened 1/9/00)	-	-	-	-	2,858

* Per capita fig. for schools closed on 31/8 has been calculated as 5/12 of the enrolment and for schools which opened on 1/9 the per capita fig. has been calculated as 7/12 of the enrolment.

** St Brigid's High and St Patrick's High, Omagh amalgamated to form Sacred Heart College 1/9/00

Funding to Secondary Schools

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Education to detail the funding received by each secondary school in each of the last five years for which figures are available and what proportion of that funding has been spent on (a) buildings (b) classroom resources and (c) salaries.
(AQW 1532/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The table below details the funding received by each secondary school in each of the last five years (1996/97 to 2000/01).

It includes:-

- amounts made available under LMS Formulae
- Split Site Funding Allocations
- Special Needs Code of Practice
- Contingency Funding
- Chancellors Funding (2000/1 only)

It excludes:-

- resources distributed under the School Support Programme
- centre funds held by Boards and the Department and distributed to schools in the course of the year to meet certain costs arising from teacher substitution, statemented pupils and landlord maintenance (ELB Funded schools only);
- recent increases to school budgets to reflect additional energy costs and maintenance (2000/1 only)

The proportion of funding which has been spent on (a) buildings (b) classroom resources and (c) salaries is not readily available in the format requested and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

FUNDING RECEIVED BY EACH SECONDARY SCHOOL IN EACH OF THE LAST FIVE YEARS (1996/7 – 2000/01)

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
BELB					
Controlled Secondary					
Ashfield Boys' High	1,198,945	1,212,197	1,181,087	1,246,168	1,372,161
Ashfield Girls' High	1,319,708	1,336,265	1,331,087	1,506,312	1,632,631
*Balmoral High School (Opened 1/9/96)	618,333	1,092,580	1,077,624	1,153,352	1,166,891
Belfast Boys' Model	2,534,033	2,568,971	2,641,216	2,689,354	2,912,357
Belfast Girls' Model	2,504,274	2,542,352	2,586,843	2,691,035	2,893,103
Castle High	896,250	919,975	841,006	744,521	768,248
*Deramore High (Closed 31/8/96)	368,491	-	-	-	-
*Larkfield High (Closed 31/8/96)	342,615	-	-	-	-
Mount Gilbert Comm. College	1,381,146	1,381,487	1,233,953	1,309,930	1,159,154
Orangefield High	1,656,770	1,550,798	1,462,639	1,615,829	1,668,763
Maintained Secondary					
Christian Brothers'	1,795,533	1,759,879	1,810,947	1,902,349	2,000,365
Corpus Christi College	2,323,362	2,310,455	2,404,506	2,350,293	2,495,721
La Salle Boys'	2,958,121	2,986,915	2,910,514	3,071,816	3,221,078
Little Flower Girls'	1,457,408	1,547,136	1,616,565	1,606,655	1,821,685
Our Lady of Mercy	1,560,715	1,550,037	1,589,941	1,639,974	1,699,363
St Gabriel's Boys	821,312	778,845	761,134	661,983	721,976
St Gemma's High	924,004	905,043	862,018	999,829	999,361

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
St Genevieve's High	2,175,018	2,263,470	2,264,417	2,380,892	2,568,313
St Joseph's College	1,261,766	1,377,284	1,416,420	1,640,193	1,740,069
St Louise's Comp. College	5,702,909	5,746,934	5,767,382	5,764,264	6,133,841
St Patrick's	1,240,098	1,124,297	1,241,328	1,453,382	1,864,873
St Rose's High	1,234,693	1,317,642	1,353,449	1,553,646	1,574,472
Meanscoil Feirste (Opened wef 1/9/96)	-	503,130	688,795	792,355	934,822

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
NEELB					
Controlled Secondary					
*Antrim High (Closed 31/8/98)	789,357	710,846	262,665	-	
*Ardnaveigh High (Closed 31/8/98)	850,903	770,852	299,507	-	
Ballee Community High	1,549,410	1,430,265	1,308,855	1,381,722	1,488,083
Ballycastle High	815,076	847,949	938,386	942,285	1,045,528
Ballyclare	2,071,494	2,119,944	2,155,211	2,221,241	2,398,554
Ballymoney High	1,430,584	1,509,776	1,516,745	1,622,447	1,776,221
Carrickfergus College	1,969,133	2,057,471	1,951,099	2,010,788	2,008,223
Coleraine Boys'	1,127,841	1,086,871	963,816	996,757	940,585
Coleraine Girls'	1,183,310	1,199,558	1,146,212	1,165,115	1,081,135
Crumlin High	857,998	891,389	916,791	969,526	1,062,929
Cullybackey High	1,484,886	1,510,989	1,576,442	1,621,087	1,753,078
Downshire	1,540,406	1,628,969	1,612,549	1,674,668	1,739,179
Dunclug High	1,352,892	1,331,911	1,376,808	1,428,933	1,499,330
Dunluce	1,249,039	1,285,018	1,292,335	1,333,379	1,320,903
Garvagh High	535,152	486,411	463,813	526,381	560,340
Glengormley High	2,596,004	2,646,459	2,600,631	2,693,229	2,950,222
Larne High	1,641,145	1,669,609	1,619,046	1,641,158	1,591,667
Maghera High	582,193	572,687	539,320	571,407	606,496
Magherafelt High	1,086,505	1,142,519	1,152,450	1,230,729	1,309,011
*Massereene Comm College (1/9/98)	-	-	659,412	1,102,697	1,151,293
Monkstown Community	1,588,081	1,613,217	1,611,910	1,608,894	1,728,654
Newtownabbey Community	1,238,132	1,255,463	1,287,205	1,390,707	1,581,522

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Parkhall High	1,177,877	1,172,346	1,188,301	1,204,670	1,324,204
Maintained Secondary					
Cross and Passion College	1,288,993	1,329,527	1,267,626	1,346,051	1,466,327
Edmund Rice College	1,336,285	1,424,156	1,402,816	1,457,776	1,489,764
Our Lady of Lourdes High	922,988	984,474	925,326	936,367	947,275
St Aloysius' High	553,327	572,301	513,566	527,377	569,789
St Colm's High	832,409	880,556	888,811	943,345	986,015
St Comgall's High	1,056,044	1,032,424	892,662	881,238	974,968
St Joseph's High	1,004,386	962,508	959,630	987,363	1,007,863
St Malachy's High	1,138,831	1,106,358	970,037	975,317	1,034,535
St Mary's College	706,569	748,332	743,150	799,521	774,945
St Olcan's High	976,396	1,054,339	1,028,948	1,022,373	1,072,718
St Patrick's College, Ballymena	1,463,806	1,431,024	1,278,696	1,348,351	1,371,901
St Patrick's College, Maghera	3,140,789	3,171,617	3,174,149	3,349,445	3,465,510
St Paul's	678,545	683,494	684,427	703,043	748,499
St Pius X High	1,791,740	1,867,950	1,923,395	2,006,829	2,146,966

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
SEELB					
Controlled Secondary					
The High School, Ballynahinch	791,886	692,714	730,652	816,844	952,101
Bangor High	2,216,546	2,177,685	2,114,121	2,110,934	2,653,576
Comber	981,926	946,899	1,037,650	1,020,423	1,031,623
Donaghadee	667,782	687,550	747,856	787,809	893,268
Down Academy	547,498	540,951	556,806	645,453	761,678
Dundonald	1,460,910	1,356,006	1,476,645	1,448,729	1,657,774
Dunmurry	1,006,072	968,833	940,761	908,646	987,474
Fort Hill Girls'	1,503,974	1,438,600	1,547,626	1,781,313	2,144,825
Glastry	1,260,940	1,159,289	1,267,667	1,337,519	1,489,661
Gransha High	1,387,467	1,224,632	1,158,319	1,272,026	1,191,353
Hollywood (Priory College wef 98/99)	838,785	799,099	-	-	-
Knockbreda	1,309,298	1,344,068	1,363,386	1,452,569	1,720,596
Laurelhill	1,979,774	1,934,736	1,995,135	2,130,510	2,356,947
Lisnagarvey Boys'	803,159	745,238	770,733	854,873	1,021,577
Lisnasharragh	1,064,735	962,315	935,259	928,869	1,067,819
Movilla	1,784,347	1,729,411	1,905,519	1,985,376	2,166,577

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Newtownbreda	1,686,880	1,600,002	1,687,108	1,743,893	1,883,388
Priory College (Holywood HS until '98/'99)	-	-	938,025	949,791	1,099,762
Saintfield	709,586	709,996	766,977	801,509	884,707
*Scrabo (Closed wef 31/8/97)	757,449	644,870	-	-	-
Maintained Secondary					
De La Salle	1,069,642	1,010,169	1,069,255	1,127,793	1,222,188
St Colman's	1,268,735	1,222,021	1,245,486	1,322,067	1,218,262
St Colmcille's	911,852	912,130	990,711	1,019,865	1,114,852
St Colm's	1,411,912	1,435,070	1,666,770	1,710,896	1,928,973
St Columbanus'	970,395	955,993	988,410	1,040,157	1,094,065
St Columba's	857,067	820,902	793,276	786,169	888,528
St Malachy's	1,989,662	1,885,646	1,959,327	1,864,975	2,116,216
St Mary's	1,185,632	1,144,471	1,144,930	1,212,353	1,373,032
St Patrick's	1,052,828	1,090,825	1,191,183	1,266,346	1,398,485

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
SELB					
Controlled Secondary					
Aughnacloy High	415,635	387,928	324,021	316,136	380,118
Banbridge High	1,433,733	1,370,096	1,508,367	1,526,012	1,644,556
Brownlow College	750,083	746,924	873,668	920,621	1,014,694
City of Armagh High	1,473,009	1,476,193	1,467,546	1,418,246	1,399,802
Clounagh Junior High	1,212,043	1,239,176	1,315,418	1,403,277	1,521,251
Cookstown High	2,604,929	2,652,106	2,861,963	2,875,728	3,018,725
Craigavon Senior High	1,255,790	1,143,788	1,254,239	1,505,152	1,638,129
Dromore High	1,660,606	1,619,016	1,693,733	1,789,728	1,862,755
Drumglass High	1,012,920	978,202	1,031,230	1,039,084	1,022,108
Fivemiletown High	1,115,663	1,111,329	1,113,093	1,050,610	1,173,733
Kilkeel High	1,683,790	1,615,681	1,701,131	1,845,503	1,983,994
Killicomaine Junior High	1,205,635	1,230,200	1,285,427	1,246,145	1,389,409
Lurgan Junior High	1,256,652	1,199,183	1,240,179	1,440,436	1,623,344
Markethill High	970,214	953,035	1,012,488	1,057,654	1,185,195
Newry High	1,366,989	1,317,220	1,378,591	1,453,286	1,482,143
Newtown- hamilton High	329,616	319,238	297,550	354,701	414,753
Rathfriland High	677,630	630,870	613,805	617,179	597,920

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Tandragee Junior High	685,322	655,639	688,749	727,885	814,697
Maintained Secondary					
Drumcree High	1,805,085	1,698,603	1,716,911	1,617,518	1,824,052
Holy Trinity College (Cookstown)	2,203,521	2,113,811	2,175,317	2,222,347	2,191,017
Lismore Comprehensive	2,525,147	2,439,392	2,520,642	2,723,722	2,727,922
St Brigid's Boys' High (Armagh)	574,250	572,531	693,138	753,372	898,172
St Catherine's College	2,371,299	2,310,061	2,376,138	2,470,754	2,565,468
St Ciaran's High (Ballygawley)	1,683,384	1,898,513	2,024,791	1,968,713	2,203,558
St Columban's College (Kilkeel)	1,098,230	1,013,707	999,838	957,118	1,046,108
St Joseph's Boys' High (Newry)	901,333	861,494	893,576	971,412	1,061,246
St Joseph's High (Coalisland)	1,456,568	1,420,974	1,418,144	1,458,393	1,420,362
St Joseph's High (Crossmaglen)	1,358,275	1,356,286	1,424,831	1,569,614	1,661,869
St Mark's High (Warrenpoint)	1,893,201	1,851,824	1,944,399	1,953,588	2,017,079
St Mary's Girls' Junior High (Lurgan)	1,330,192	1,329,237	1,422,772	1,466,455	1,544,715
St Mary's High (Newry)	1,285,764	1,221,902	1,204,518	1,246,781	1,344,250
St Patrick's Boys' High (Closed 31/8/98)	950,533	894,294	843,085	-	-
St Patrick's Girls' High (Closed 31/8/98)	813,548	811,297	798,060	-	-
St Patrick's College (Amal. 1/9/98)	-	-	-	1,718,513	1,731,323
St Patrick's High (Banbridge)	1,164,007	1,184,675	1,207,325	1,206,708	1,302,825
St Patrick's High (Keady)	1,964,082	1,992,491	2,097,061	2,247,931	2,637,301
St Paul's High (Bessbrook)	2,939,236	2,964,984	2,976,519	3,080,203	3,236,856
St Paul's High (Lurgan)	1,111,332	1,107,376	1,224,700	1,273,157	1,311,218

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
WELB					
Controlled Secondary					
Castlederg High	822,704	829,663	886,433	934,796	1,032,450
Clondermot High	1,146,604	1,128,970	1,225,773	1,293,963	1,512,758
Duke of Westminster High	837,286	761,866	767,286	766,273	823,334
Dungiven High	260,659	242,430	231,006	244,421	272,156
Enniskillen High	1,145,250	1,088,104	1,158,667	1,210,371	1,299,160
Faughan Valley High	1,369,263	1,315,969	1,287,064	1,291,599	1,351,548
Limavady High	1,608,263	1,492,936	1,506,337	1,566,554	1,735,995
Lisnaskea High	550,981	497,581	477,594	543,793	525,244
Omagh High	1,120,565	1,021,923	1,009,420	1,000,554	1,146,425
Strabane High	981,327	906,939	917,510	978,790	1,016,039
Templemore Secondary	992,083	1,011,620	1,066,427	1,120,760	1,217,487
Maintained Secondary					
Dean Brian Maguire High	989,278	954,407	990,208	1,022,764	1,119,664
Our Lady of Mercy High, Strabane	1,198,550	1,136,480	1,142,039	1,131,400	1,140,249
St Aidan's High, Derrylin	740,184	734,001	732,243	762,639	750,739
St Breacan's High	1,021,880	969,815	966,735	1,039,496	1,143,997
St Brigid's High, Carnhill	2,221,771	2,161,601	2,179,914	2,282,351	2,333,172
**St Brigid's High, Omagh (Closed 31/8/00)	1,184,171	1,197,549	1,228,824	1,291,796	561,165
St Cecilia's	2,135,525	2,160,951	2,254,295	2,219,870	2,337,397
St Colman's High, Strabane	2,094,138	2,016,396	2,132,146	2,283,219	2,370,862
St Comghall's High, Lisnaskea	950,010	917,444	917,925	941,193	1,047,630
St Eugene's High, Castlederg	751,289	715,690	714,605	725,928	866,186
St Eugene's High, Roslea	691,043	720,153	770,593	774,994	738,485
St Fanchea's, Enniskillen	1,087,721	1,060,473	1,043,513	1,064,661	1,091,543
St John's High, Dromore	1,011,561	981,363	992,578	997,382	964,735
St Joseph's, Londonderry	1,960,675	1,973,516	2,084,391	2,148,080	2,273,867
St Joseph's, Plumbridge	711,649	684,357	683,401	760,856	759,916

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
St Joseph's, Enniskillen	810,724	825,638	827,641	891,470	932,265
St Mary's High, Brollagh	472,549	461,486	450,077	556,950	631,691
St Mary's, Irvinestown	601,382	547,818	502,236	454,131	556,628
St Mary's High, Limavady	1,996,234	1,975,856	2,011,426	2,110,599	2,159,222
St Mary's, Londonderry	2,135,729	2,190,261	2,227,285	2,212,843	2,406,446
St Patrick's High, Dungiven	976,209	966,643	976,895	1,066,286	1,089,982
**St Patrick's High, Omagh (Closed 31/8/00)	1,162,253	1,056,045	932,077	929,568	404,119
St Patrick's & St Brigid's	1,009,222	967,841	902,266	912,541	992,428
St Peter's	1,141,240	1,106,165	1,113,796	1,186,431	1,329,772
**Sacred Heart College (Opened wef 1/9/00)	-	-	-	-	1,295,958

** St Brigid's High and St Patrick's High, Omagh amalgamated to form Sacred Heart College 1/9/00

School	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £	1999-00 £	2000-01 £
Grant Maintained Integrated					
Drumragh IC	453,291	750,901	1,063,703	1,398,890	1,604,863
Dungannon IC	320,103	489,589	779,316	1,097,751	1,303,303
Erne IC	658,425	818,758	1,012,160	1,204,960	1,296,517
Hazelwood IC	1,813,779	1,817,210	1,903,613	2,003,967	2,119,358
Lagan IC	2,526,139	2,565,140	2,661,652	2,743,516	2,860,058
*Malone IC (Opened 1/9/98)	-	-	461,160	973,390	1,364,179
Newbridge IC	370,575	592,999	854,227	1,070,579	1,260,208
*North Coast IC (Opened 1/9/96)	173,229	399,866	697,286	935,851	1,198,911
Oakgrove IC	1,282,185	1,580,127	1,873,669	2,090,298	2,242,563
Shimna IC	591,455	774,617	956,405	1,194,653	1,388,435
*Slemish IC (Opened 1/9/96)	172,716	395,529	672,570	990,047	1,303,657
*Strangford IC (Opened 1/9/99)	-	-	-	440,779	893,983
*Ulidia IC (Opened 1/9/00)	-	-	-	-	551,684

Free School Meals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to
(a) detail the number of schools in the Strangford

constituency that receive additional funding on the basis of free school meals entitlement (b) state how this compares to other parliamentary constituencies and (c) give his assessment of this indicator as a bench mark for extra funding. (AQW 1655/00)

Mr M McGuinness:

- (a) In the current financial year there are 49 schools in the Strangford constituency whose LMS Formula Allocation includes an element of funding based on free school meals entitlement.
- (b) The table below details comparable figures for other constituencies:-

Constituency	No. of Schools	Constituency	No. of Schools
Fermanagh South Tyrone	110	Foyle	66
West Tyrone	107	South Antrim	59
Armagh	101	Lagan Valley	58
South Down	101	Belfast North	57
North Antrim	88	East Antrim	55
Mid Ulster	83	Strangford	49
Belfast West	69	Belfast East	41
Upper Bann	68	Belfast South	34
East Londonderry	67	North Down	34

- (c) There is a substantial body of research, both local and international, demonstrating a link between social disadvantage and low educational achievement. Entitlement to free school meals is the most robust, readily available, pupil related measure of social disadvantage. Where the aim of additional funding is to counter the effects of social disadvantage, free school meals entitlement will remain an important indicator but other indicators will be used as appropriate. The Consultation Paper on a Common LMS Formula which will issue shortly includes proposals for the use of educational indicators alongside FSM in the distribution of TSN funding.

School Transport

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school transport in Northern Ireland by (a) education and library board and (b) parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1664/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The estimated cost for home to school transport by education and library board for the 1999/2000 financial year is as follows:

Belfast	£3,276,000
North East	£10,379,821
South East	£9,581,048

Southern	£12,921,538
Western	£9,252,157

Expenditure by parliamentary constituency is not available.

School Crossing Attendants

Mr McClelland asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school crossing attendants employed within the parliamentary constituency of South Antrim. (AQW 1701/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand from the North-Eastern Education and Library Board that there are 59 school crossing attendants in the parliamentary constituency of South Antrim.

Comber High School

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail if the economic appraisal for Comber High School has been completed and to give a timescale for a start on the new building. (AQW 1730/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The revised Economic Appraisal has now been approved in principle by my Department. Planning of the new school is not sufficiently advanced to enable it to be considered for a place in the next conventional new starts programme but I am considering the possibility of a Public Private Partnership Project. Further detailed consideration will be necessary before any estimated start date could be given.

Attacks on Schools

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of repairing schools damaged in attacks carried out by proscribed organisations in each year since 1973. (AQW 1751/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information is not available.

Attacks on Schools

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of schools which have been damaged as a result of attacks carried out by proscribed organisations since 1973. (AQW 1753/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information is not available.

Attacks on School Bus Drivers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school bus drivers who have been killed or

injured as a result of attacks carried out by proscribed organisations attacks since 1973. (AQW 1754/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information on attacks on school bus drivers sought is not held by the Department and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost from Boards and the bus companies.

Attacks on Staff in Schools

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of attacks on staff in schools carried out by proscribed organisations since 1973. (AQW 1755/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information on attacks on staff is not held by the Department and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost from each of the employing authorities.

Participation Rates in Full Time Education

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Education to detail the participation rates in full-time education of over 16 year olds for the parliamentary constituencies of Belfast North, Belfast South and Belfast East for each of the last three years for which figures are available. (AQW 1794/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Information for 2000/01 is not yet available. Based on pupils with Belfast North, Belfast South, or Belfast East postcodes, the participation rates of 16 and 17 year olds in schools (other than special and independent schools) are listed below. Participation rates for 1997/98 are not available.

	1998/99	1999/2000
Belfast North	37.8	38.5
Belfast South	47.4	43.0
Belfast East	43.5	45.1

These figures exclude participation in further education colleges, since further education is not the responsibility of my Department.

Qualification Attainment

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Education to detail the level of qualifications attained by pupils in the parliamentary constituencies of Belfast North, Belfast South and Belfast East in each of the last three years for which figures are available. (AQW 1801/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Information for 1999/2000 is not yet available. The figures for the previous 3 years (excluding special and independent schools) are as follows for pupils with Belfast North, Belfast South and Belfast East postcodes.

HIGHEST QUALIFICATION OF SCHOOL LEAVERS

Belfast North	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99
A Levels			
3 or more ⁽¹⁾	224	214	229
2 ⁽¹⁾	80	122	80
1	35	33	24
GCSEs			
5+ A*-C ⁽²⁾	168	181	208
1-4 A*-C ⁽²⁾	299	293	285
Other Grades (1+D-G) ⁽³⁾	382	318	333
No GCSEs	122	115	105
Total	1,310	1,276	1,264
Belfast South			
A Levels			
3 or more ⁽¹⁾	350	323	334
2 ⁽¹⁾	71	74	77
1	20	17	16
GCSEs			
5+ A*-C ⁽²⁾	150	121	100
1-4 A*-C ⁽²⁾	158	166	141
Other Grades (1+D-G) ⁽³⁾	148	115	146
No GCSEs	62	42	24
Total	959	858	838
Belfast East			
A Levels			
3 or more ⁽¹⁾	269	261	263
2 ⁽¹⁾	55	58	47
1	16	16	20
GCSEs			
5+ A*-C ⁽²⁾	177	145	170
1-4 A*-C ⁽²⁾	214	194	147
Other Grades (1+D-G) ⁽³⁾	183	142	179
No GCSEs	52	40	41
Total	966	856	867

Notes: 1. Includes GNVQ Advanced, 2. Includes GNVQ Intermediate, 3. Includes GNVQ Foundation

Destination of School Leavers

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Education to detail the recorded destination of school leavers from the parliamentary constituencies of Belfast North, Belfast South and Belfast East in each of the last three years for which figures are available. (AQW 1802/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Information for 1999/2000 is not yet available. The figures for the previous 3 years (excluding special and independent schools) are as follows

for pupils with Belfast North, Belfast South and Belfast East postcodes:

DESTINATION OF SCHOOL LEAVERS

Belfast North	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99
Institutions of Higher Education	240	207	238
Institutions of Further Education	319	347	270
Employment	297	328	323
Unemployment	70	90	87
Training	347	272	318
Unknown Destinations	37	32	28
Total	1,310	1,276	1,264
Belfast South			
Institutions of Higher Education	360	307	345
Institutions of Further Education	262	259	187
Employment	99	88	88
Unemployment	46	24	33
Training	178	177	179
Unknown Destinations	14	3	6
Total	959	858	838
Belfast East			
Institutions of Higher Education	277	238	253
Institutions of Further Education	221	223	204
Employment	185	122	141
Unemployment	72	46	82
Training	195	217	173
Unknown Destinations	16	10	14
Total	966	856	867

Electronic Methods to Improve Efficiency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education what plans he has for the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and public access to information within his Department. (AQW 1816/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The Department has commissioned the preparation of a new Information Systems Strategy, incorporating an e-business strategy, which will be completed by April 2001. Its recommendations should enable the Department to build on its existing use of IT in specific functional areas and to identify ways in which this can be further developed. The Department's website already provides public access to a wide range of information, including school inspection reports, policy documents, statistics and circulars. The Department is

currently streamlining and upgrading the website to enhance its accessibility and usefulness to the public.

School Bus Service

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of implementing a school bus service for all children living more than one mile from their school. (AQW 1819/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The home to school transport arrangements enable assistance to be provided to those pupils who have been unable to gain a place in a suitable school within statutory walking distance of their home (3 miles for secondary and 2 miles for primary school age pupils).

The cost of implementing a school bus service for all children living more than one mile from their school is unavailable and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Sporting and Specialist Facilities

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps he is taking to assist small rural schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area to have access to an equal range of sporting and specialist facilities available to non rural schools. (AQW 1820/00)

Mr M McGuinness: All primary schools in the Board area have access to the curriculum advisory and support services in physical education which includes working with pupils and supporting teachers directly in schools and on in-service training. Almost all schools participate in the primary schools swimming programme for which the Board provides lessons at eleven different venues. Many small rural schools also use local church and community halls and sports facilities at leisure centres. The Board has also attracted £181,000 of funding from the New Opportunities Fund to work specifically on sport and coaching in rural primary schools. The Classroom 2000 project will provide ICT facilities to the classrooms in all primary schools within the next year. It is important that all schools have access to the facilities necessary to meet the needs of pupils and this issue will be explored in more detail in the consultation document on LMS funding which I hope to publish shortly.

Results of Transfer Procedure

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the results of the transfer procedure this year and to state how these compare with the results for the year 2000. (AQW 1847/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment have advised that the

details of the Transfer Procedure test results for 2000/2001 and 1999/2000 are:

Grade Obtained	2000/01 Number of pupils	1999/2000 Number of pupils
A	6,420	6,633
B1	1,316	1,416
B2	1,305	1,335
C1	1,458	1,456
C2	1,461	1,333
D	5,103	5,433
Total	17,063	17,606

Capital Spending on Schools

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the total amount awarded to the education and library boards for school capital spending by board area in each of the last three years. (AQW 1848/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Capital expenditure on schools by education and library boards in each of the last three years is set out below.

	1997/98 (£000s)	1998/99 (£000s)	1999/00* (£000s)
Belfast	3,866	6,357	3,161
North-Eastern	6,675	7,643	5,451
South-Eastern	4,614	5,677	6,961
Southern	6,121	5,490	3,894
Western	6,121	7,005	4,708
Total	27,397	32,172	24,175

* Excludes c.£6.4m for furniture and equipment re-classified as recurrent expenditure in line with new accounting policies.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Unemployment Statistics

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to (a) detail the latest unemployment statistics for the Foyle constituency and (b) compare this with the Northern Ireland average. (AQW 1672/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): Unemployment statistics at Parliamentary Constituency level are only available from the claimant count.

Details of claimant count unemployment in Foyle Parliamentary Constituency and Northern Ireland at January 2001 can be found in the table overleaf.

Number and rate of claimant count unemployed in Foyle Parliamentary Constituency and Northern Ireland at January 2001.

	Numbers Unemployed			% Of the Workforce		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
Foyle	3,563	938	4,501	12.7	4.2	8.9
Northern Ireland	31,830	9,336	41,166	7.3	2.7	5.3

Source: Claimant Count, DETI

European Aeronautics 20/20 Vision Strategy Paper

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the impact on the aeronautical industry of the recently published European Aeronautics 20/20 Vision Strategy Paper and to make a statement. (AQW 1692/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The European Aeronautics 20/20 Vision Strategy sets out a welcome framework for industry and stakeholders to work more closely together to achieve improvements in quality, cost, safety and the environment. This focused approach will enhance the international competitiveness of the industry and at the same time ensure it is responsive to the needs of society and the environment. A central theme of the vision is a co-ordinated approach to research and development which is a major priority for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment as it seeks to promote innovation and the knowledge based economy.

Nortel

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the funding made available to Nortel at Newtownabbey in each of the last three financial years and to confirm if that funding was conditional on employment levels. (AQW 1708/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The offers of IDB Selective Financial Assistance made in the last three financial years are as follows:

2000/01	No agreements signed to date	
1999/00	IDB Selective Financial Assistance package: Financial Assistance Agreement has several conditions including levels of employment.	£3,000,000
1998/99	IDB Selective Financial Assistance package: Financial Assistance Agreement has several conditions including levels of employment.	£900,000
	IRTU START project: Assistance earned against agreed R & D Workplan. No employment condition.	£908,925

Harland and Wolff

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what assistance he has extended to Harland and Wolff in their bid to secure contracts from the Ministry of Defence and to make a statement.

(AQW 1781/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I would refer the Member to the answer I gave on 16 February 2001. I continue to follow events closely in relation to this conditional contract between Harland and Wolff and AWSR Shipping Ltd for construction of two RoRo ferries at the shipyard. I recently met senior management at Harland and Wolff to discuss a number of aspects with regard to the company's continuing negotiations with AWSR. I have also made representations on the company's behalf to Ministers at the Ministry of Defence and Department of Trade and Industry as well as keeping the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in touch with developments. My Department has made an outline offer of shipbuilding intervention aid grant to the company and is also assisting with costs of a benchmarking and performance review study at the shipyard in preparation for work on the building project

Adria Factory in Newry

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to (a) detail what arrangements are in place to provide support to maintain jobs at the Adria factory in Newry in light of current trading conditions (b) outline the grants paid by the Industrial Development Board for Northern Ireland to this company in each of the last five years and (c) confirm whether these grants are recoverable in the event of closure. (AQW 1925/00)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) IDB has been working closely with senior management at Adria in an effort to secure the future of the company's operation in Newry. The decision to close the plant was purely commercial and based on the market demand for its products.
- (b) The grants paid to the company in respect of Newry are as follows:-

	Payments
1996/1997	£222,159
1997/1998	£467,258
1998/1999	£54,005
1999/2000	£107,797
2000/2001	£8,889

- (c) Financial assistance to the Newry factory and recoveries of grant will be the subject of discussions

with Adria in the context of its overall commitment to manufacturing in Northern Ireland.

Cooneen Textiles Enniskillen

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he is taking to avoid the impending job losses at Cooneen Textiles, Enniskillen.

(AQW 1958/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Cooneen Textiles has been unable to identify alternative customers to provide a sustainable future for its factory at Enniskillen. In these circumstances the decision to place the workforce on protective notice is commercial. Every effort will be made to identify new employment opportunities for the workforce.

Cooneen Textiles Enniskillen

Ms Gildernew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline if he intends to provide assistance to Cooneen Textiles Limited following their announcement that it is placing all of its employees on 30 days' protective notice and to give a commitment to set up an economic taskforce to reverse the decline in the textiles manufacturing industry in the Fermanagh/ South Tyrone parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1967/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Assistance to Cooneen Textiles could only be provided if there was an expectation of future viability of the factory at Enniskillen. In this instance the company has been unable to identify alternative customers and has taken a commercial decision on that basis. Every effort will be made to identify new employment opportunities for the workforce.

The Kurt Salmon Associates review has set out an action plan for the textiles and clothing sectors in Northern Ireland to address the serious issues facing the industry. The implementation of the action plan will make the industry more competitive and will provide opportunity for the development of higher value employment and products. Additionally, DETI Agencies, T&EA, FE Colleges, local businesses and the Council are working together to identify priorities for local economic development.

ENVIRONMENT

Management of Raptors

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to undertake active management of raptors similar to that in Great Britain. (AQW 1200/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): The active management of raptors in Great Britain is

comprised of reintroduction programmes for the Sea Eagle, Osprey and Red Kite. There is also a programme of supplementary feeding of Hen Harriers to reduce their predation of Red Grouse.

I have no plans to introduce any comparable management schemes in Northern Ireland.

Replacement Dwellings

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications for replacement dwellings that have been (a) applied for (b) granted and (c) refused in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1462/00)

Mr Foster: Details of replacement dwellings in urban areas are not available. In rural areas, i.e., areas outside the development limits of towns, villages and hamlets as defined in statutory Development Plans, the available information is as follows: -

	Rural Replacement	
	Approved	Refused
1995/96	1009	84
1996/97	1044	52
1997/98	1032	77
1998/99	1033	74
1999/2000	1138	69

Planning System in Northern Ireland

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what plans he has to implement those recommendations advocated in the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Report into the planning system in Northern Ireland in 1996. (AQW 1811/00)

Mr Foster: Responsibility for implementing these recommendations lay with the previous administration.

The position regarding those recommendations which affect my Department is as follows: -

1. Legislation providing for additional enforcement powers and giving development plans prime importance in the determination of planning applications.

A Planning (Amendment) Bill will be introduced in the next Assembly session.

2. Quality Audit of the development control process.

An internal audit of a sample of planning decisions from 1996/97 and 1997/98 was carried out in 1998/99. A further audit was completed last year of decisions drawn from 1998/99.

3. Devise and deliver a Development Plan programme.

The Programme is published annually in the Planning Service's Business Plan and progress reported in its Annual Report.

4. Service Level Agreement between the Planning Service and the Environment and Heritage Service.

This has now been completed and the agreement has been made available to relevant advisory bodies.

5. Benchmarking the workload and staffing of the Planning Service with other planning authorities.

This was completed in 1996/97 and produced a number of recommendations, which were incorporated in Planning Service Business Plans.

6. Maintaining a high standard of professionalism within the Planning Service.

Since 1996 the Planning Service has recruited a number of highly qualified professional staff at PTO and HPTO level. Recruitment competitions have been held for a number of senior Posts where RTPI membership was required. The Service improves its staff through training and development. This includes a Bursary Scheme to enable a small number of staff to obtain Planning Degrees.

7. Replacing the Rural Planning Strategy with Planning Policies.

Seven Planning Policy Statements have been published in final form and three as consultation drafts.

8. Giving persons, groups and bodies who have an interest in planning documents an opportunity to comment.

Public consultation and extensive circulation of draft policies and Plans is now normal practice.

9. Ensuring consistency of policy interpretation when dealing with planning applications.

This is pursued through training the quality audit and internal Development Control Groups that discuss applications before consultation with the District Council.

10. Re-advertising and re-notifying neighbours where development proposals change.

Additional guidance was issued to Planning Service staff in 1998.

11. Resolving the concerns of the NI Centre of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health about the use of planning conditions.

All planning conditions were reviewed when introducing the new development control computer system and Chief Environmental Health Officers and Group Chief Environmental Health Officers were consulted about relevant conditions.

12. Training on planning agreements and developers' contributions to be provided to staff when required.

This has not proved necessary but is kept under review when preparing the Planning Service Training Plan.

13. A full review of the effectiveness of enforcement procedures will be carried out and revised arrangements introduced where necessary.

This review was completed and a number of actions taken forward: -

- a. Dedicated enforcement teams were established in each Division;
 - b. There was a review of enforcement procedures;
 - c. A survey was completed during 1997/98 and 1998/99 of non-compliance with planning law;
 - d. An Enforcement Working Group was formed to carry forward survey recommendations and produce an internal Enforcement Manual;
 - e. Specialised training was provided for Divisional enforcement teams including Court Skills for Non-Lawyers; and,
 - f. A Planning Policy Statement on Enforcement was published in March 2000.
14. The commitment that the framework of parliamentary accountability would not change has been overtaken by devolution.
15. Opportunities for community groups to participate in the planning process.

The Planning Service has significantly increased the resources committed to consulting community groups when preparing development plans and has extended its arrangements for consultation about proposed planning policies.

16. Seek ways to give locally elected representatives an enhanced input to the decision making process/ prepare a consultation paper setting out options for the role and composition of a planning advisory body.

Consultation exercises in relation to each of these commitments were completed. However, further progress was put on hold in anticipation of a devolved administration. The Draft Programme for Government has overtaken these commitments.

Open Space Provision

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment to detail which figures are used for calculating open space when considering recommendations from the Planning Appeals Commission. (AQW 1813/00)

Mr Foster: The statutory responsibility for the provision of adequate facilities for recreation in Northern Ireland rests with District Councils. They advise the Department on the future open space needs of their local areas, based on their assessment, as part of the consultation process on development plans.

The primary role of my Department is to facilitate the open space requirements of District Councils by zoning appropriate sites in development plans to meet identified needs. In its presentation of supporting technical information, the Department, for comparative purposes, does undertake a statistical assessment of open space provision generally based on reference to the National Playing Fields Association standard.

The role of the Planning Appeals Commission in Development Plans Inquiries is to hear objections and make recommendations to the Department as to how they should be dealt with. As far as open space is concerned, the Department assesses their recommendations in terms of their impact on the proposals and policies of the Plan, where necessary, in consultation with the District Council.

My Department has published for consultation, a draft Planning Policy Statement (PPS 8), entitled "Open Space and Recreation". As well as setting out my Department's planning policies for Open Space and Recreation, it will also advise on the assessment of recreation/open space provision in Development Plans. The responses are being considered at present and it is anticipated that the PPS will be published in final form later this year.

Electronic Methods to Improve Efficiency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has for the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and public access to information within his Department. (AQW 1817/00)

Mr Foster: My Department is currently drawing up an E-Government strategy which will identify the key departmental services which can be delivered electronically.

This is in line with the commitment given in my Department's 2000/2003 Corporate Plan to exploit information technology to make Government Services easier to access and to increase customer choice.

Private Finance Initiative (PFI)

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the proposed timetable for the updating of the Development Control Advice Note 8 (DCAN 8). (AQW 1882/00)

Mr Foster: Prior to PFI procurement being initiated, an Outline Business Case (OBC) is prepared to establish

whether or not a case for pursuing a PFI solution exists. PFI bids are invited through publication of a notice in the Official Journal of the European Community (OJEC). The OBC also includes a public sector comparator (PSC) which is used in the final assessment of bids to confirm that a PFI solution provides value for money (VFM) over conventional procurement.

The competitive tendering process within PFI further improves the potential for VFM. The Further and Higher Education sector has signed two PFI contracts, the North West and Belfast Institutes.

Uninsured Motorists

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the steps he is taking to address the problem of uninsured motorists. (AQW 1949/00)

Mr Foster: Article 90 of the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 requires users of motor vehicles to be insured against third-party risks. Driver and Vehicle Licensing NI (DVLNI) in my Department requires proof of insurance prior to the grant or renewal of a vehicle licence (Vehicle Excise Duty).

Enforcement against uninsured drivers is principally the responsibility of the RUC. Policing is, of course, a reserved matter.

It can also be the case that users of unlicensed vehicles are also uninsured. Again the principal enforcement agency on Vehicle Excise Duty evasion is the RUC. However, DVLNI has undertaken with some success direct measures, such as wheel clamping and TV advertising, to help reduce levels of VED evasion and continues to work closely with the police to increase detection of offenders.

The efforts of the Department and the RUC to reduce the level of VED evasion should also help reduce the number of uninsured drivers.

In response to the recent report of the Public Accounts Committee on road safety, my Department will be examining whether the compulsory display of MOT discs and insurance discs might offer a further means of facilitating enforcement of legal requirements.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Departmental Running Costs

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his policy in regard to departmental running costs in all Departments and to detail the targets he has set for the next financial year. (AQW 1711/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan):

As shown in Annex C in the Budget document I presented to the Assembly on 12 December 2000, Public Expenditure Plans: 2001/02 to 2003/04, the following allocations for departmental running costs for 2001/02 have been agreed by the Executive Committee.

DEPARTMENTAL RUNNING COSTS 2001-02

	£ million
Agriculture and Rural Development	97.7
Culture, Arts and Leisure	12.5
Education	18.5
Enterprise, Trade and Investment	38.1
Environment	36.2
Finance and Personnel	97.1
Health, Social Services and Public Safety	32.7
Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment	31.5
Regional Development	139.1
Social Development	162.6
Minor Departments	1.3
Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister	13.5
Total Departmental Running Costs Allocation	681.0
Welfare to Work	
Education	0.3
Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment	7.3
Social Development	2.9
Total Welfare to Work Running Cost Allocation	10.5
Total Overall Running Cost Allocation	691.4

In agreeing these allocations, the Executive has aimed to set realistic limits on the administrative costs of departments which should enable them to deliver their agreed objectives effectively and with due regard for value for money.

Illness Contracted by Personnel in the Performance of their Duties

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the procedures involved in investigating cases of illness contracted by personnel employed either by a Government Department or in the Northern Ireland Civil Service through the performance of their duties and to state the length of time taken to determine such cases. (AQW 1765/00)

Mr Durkan: Each case must be initially investigated by the employee's Employing Department. Due to the broad spectrum of illnesses/injuries and particular circumstances

which pertain, some are quite straightforward and can be investigated and determined fairly quickly. However, others are more complex and require further investigation and involvement of outside bodies. Therefore there is no set time for determination.

In their investigations Employing Departments are required to seek to provide the following information;

- Full details of the employee's case;
- Welfare Officer's report;
- Line manager's report (endorsed by branch manager).

Employing Departments are required to refer cases to Civil Service Pensions (CSP) to determine if the injury/illness qualifies for an award under Section 11 of the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland), [PSCPS(NI)]. Section 11 is an employer's liability scheme which provides for the payment of benefits to employees who incur an injury due to the nature of their duties.

There are two types of award which may be payable, namely temporary injury and/or permanent injury award.

In Temporary Injury cases the Employing Department may decide to forward all information to the OHS seeking a medical report prior to forwarding the case to CSP for a final decision.

All applications for Permanent Injury Awards are referred to the Occupational Health Service (OHS) by CSP. If OHS advise that in their opinion a qualifying injury has occurred, then the process continues in that contact is made with various outside bodies such as the Social Security Agency, the Compensation Agency and the Litigation Unit of the Employing Department to establish if any claims have been submitted or settlements made in respect of the same injury as this will have a bearing on any award which may be payable under Section 11. Even in the best of circumstances this process takes at least 3 months. CSP aspires to advise the officer of the outcome of the application for a Permanent Injury award within 10 days of completing these processes.

In the case of a Temporary Injury application CSP aspires to advise the Employing Department of the outcome of the application within 4 weeks of receiving all relevant information required to enable them to make a decision.

Spending Practices

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what steps he has taken to investigate spending practices by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. (AQW 1818/00)

Mr Durkan: This issue was fully addressed in the statement given to the Assembly on 12 February 2001 as recorded in the Official Report, Volume 9, No 3, Pages 87-98.

Electronic Methods to Improve Efficiency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has for the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and public access to information within his Department. (AQW 1823/00)

Mr Durkan: The Department of Finance and Personnel is in the process of preparing its E Business Strategy which will address the need to improve efficiency and public access to information by means of electronic methods. It is planned to have this work completed by Summer 2001.

Infant Mortality

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the infant mortality rate, by Trust Board area, in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1865/00)

Mr Durkan: The General Register Office for Northern Ireland does not collect information on infant deaths by Trust area. This information is only registered at District Council and Health Board level, details of which are presented in the attached table. (Infant Death Rates in Northern Ireland, 1995 - 1999 on following page).

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Accountability Within the Health and Personal Social Services

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail recent representations she has received about accountability within the National Health Service. (AQW 1667/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Since the resumption of devolution I have not received any representations on the broad issue of accountability within the Health and Personal Social Services. However, I answered an oral Assembly Question on 25 September 2000 from Dr Alasdair McDonnell (AQO 68/00) relating to financial accountability for public expenditure, in the context of the Royal Group of Hospitals.

Ó tháinig cineachadh cumhachta i bhfeidhm arís ní bhfuair mé ráitis ar bith ar cheist fhairsing na freagrachta sna seirbhísí sláinte sóisialta agus pearsanta. D'fhreagair mé Ceist Tionóil ó bhéal ar an 25 Meán Fómhair 2000 ón Dr Alasdair McDonnell (AQO 68/00), áfach, maidir le freagracht airgeadais do chaiteachas poiblí i gcomhthéacs an Ghrúpa Ríoga Ospidéal.

INFANT DEATH RATES IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 1995 - 1999

District & Board	1995	1995	1995	1996	1996	1996	1997	1997	1997	1998	1998	1998	1999	1999	1999
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Ards	13.8	12.1	12.9	0.0	4.6	2.2	6.0	4.5	5.3	2.2	0.0	1.1	8.5	7.1	7.8
Belfast	8.9	11.1	10.0	9.9	6.0	8.0	4.4	4.5	4.5	5.8	2.6	4.2	10.2	8.0	9.2
Castlereagh	11.7	2.5	7.2	0.0	2.2	1.1	10.4	4.5	7.6	0.0	2.2	1.1	4.3	4.3	4.3
Down	10.1	4.7	7.6	9.2	2.2	5.7	0.0	6.7	3.4	2.1	2.3	2.2	12.9	7.2	10.2
Lisburn	6.1	6.6	6.3	8.1	2.6	5.5	2.5	5.1	3.8	3.8	10.2	7.0	8.8	4.4	6.7
North Down	17.5	15.1	16.4	4.5	0.0	2.3	9.6	7.6	8.6	11.2	5.2	8.4	9.2	9.7	9.4
Eastern Board	10.1	9.3	9.7	7.0	3.9	5.5	4.9	5.1	5.0	4.6	3.9	4.2	9.4	7.0	8.3
Antrim	5.2	3.0	4.2	2.6	5.0	3.8	12.2	2.5	7.5	10.3	2.5	6.4	7.2	2.4	4.9
Ballymena	2.5	8.1	5.2	7.4	7.1	7.2	7.9	5.1	6.4	7.6	2.8	5.3	8.3	2.7	5.5
Ballymoney	5.4	5.9	5.6	11.4	12.0	11.7	5.0	10.6	7.8	5.1	15.7	10.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Carrickfergus	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.9	7.5	5.7	0.0	4.9	2.2	12.0	4.0	8.0	12.4	8.7	10.6
Coleraine	2.7	13.3	8.0	8.8	0.0	4.2	8.5	2.8	5.6	0.0	2.8	1.4	5.9	0.0	2.9
Cookstown	0.0	14.0	6.7	9.3	0.0	4.9	5.0	0.0	2.7	0.0	5.4	2.7	5.2	0.0	2.8
Larne	0.0	5.7	2.8	15.2	0.0	7.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	26.3	11.6	19.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Magherafelt	3.0	3.1	3.0	9.8	3.4	6.6	0.0	9.3	4.3	9.0	0.0	4.6	0.0	3.0	1.5
Moyle	13.5	35.7	25.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.9	5.0	12.3	13.3	12.8	28.6	0.0	16.0
Newtownabbey	8.9	4.1	6.7	1.8	5.7	3.7	5.5	7.9	6.7	0.0	9.9	4.7	2.0	8.5	5.2
Northern Board	4.0	7.2	5.6	6.5	4.4	5.4	5.3	5.3	5.3	6.8	5.7	6.3	5.6	3.3	4.5
Armagh	10.4	0.0	5.6	7.9	15.8	11.8	5.4	11.7	8.4	2.8	0.0	1.4	2.6	5.6	4.1
Banbridge	3.4	0.0	1.8	3.7	4.0	3.9	7.2	3.7	5.5	14.5	17.5	15.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Craigavon	6.4	1.8	4.2	3.0	3.2	3.1	5.0	10.9	8.1	3.3	3.3	3.3	6.1	7.4	6.8
Dungannon	8.4	5.5	6.9	2.7	2.8	2.8	7.6	2.8	5.3	2.7	2.5	2.6	5.0	2.8	4.0
Newry & Mourne	4.7	4.0	4.4	13.0	5.3	9.2	7.2	6.1	7.0	6.1	5.1	5.8	10.5	4.0	7.6
Southern Board	6.4	2.7	4.6	7.0	5.9	6.5	6.4	7.4	7.1	5.3	4.7	5.1	6.0	4.4	5.4
Fermanagh	9.0	4.9	7.0	6.4	4.6	5.5	5.0	7.3	6.3	9.9	10.1	10.1	7.9	7.9	7.9
Limavady	4.0	16.7	10.2	3.8	0.0	2.0	4.1	8.6	6.3	8.5	8.5	8.5	0.0	4.6	2.3
Derry	5.4	4.5	5.0	7.0	5.3	6.2	5.0	5.5	5.4	8.2	7.3	8.1	4.1	10.0	7.0
Omagh	5.5	0.0	2.8	5.7	6.3	6.0	8.2	6.0	7.2	8.7	3.0	5.9	2.8	6.4	4.5
Strabane	21.3	0.0	10.9	6.9	13.7	10.3	6.2	3.3	4.8	9.4	6.4	7.9	0.0	12.1	5.5
Western Board	8.0	4.6	6.3	6.3	5.8	6.1	5.6	5.9	5.9	8.8	7.2	8.1	3.6	8.8	6.1
Northern Ireland	7.5	6.6	7.1	6.7	4.8	5.8	5.5	5.8	5.6	6.1	5.1	5.6	6.8	5.9	6.4

Speech Therapy

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Health and Social Services Trust, the number of speech therapists employed on a full-time and part-time basis. (AQW 1669/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is set out in the table below.

SPEECH & LANGUAGE THERAPISTS, AT 30 SEPTEMBER 2000:

HSS Trust	Full Time	Part Time
Belfast City Hospital Trust	7	1
Green Park Trust	8	2
South & East Belfast Community	18	15
Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust	14	12
Royal Group Hospital Trust	4	2
North & West Belfast Community	14	12
Lisburn & Down	16	9
Causeway	8	5
Homefirst Community	28	26
Armagh and Dungannon	10	3
Newry & Mourne	7	2
Craigavon/Banbridge Community	13	9
Foyle HSS Trust (Community)	21	2
Sperrin/Lakeland HSS Trust	14	1

Leagtar an t-eolas a iarradh amach sa tábla thíos.

TEIRIPITHE LABHARTHA AGUS TEANGA AG AN 30 MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2000:

Iontaobhas SSS	Lánaimseartha	Páirtaimseartha
Iontaobhas Otharlann Cathrach Bhéal Feirste	7	1
Iontaobhas na Páirce Glaise	8	2
Pobal Bhéal Feirste Theas & Thoir	18	15
Iontaobhas Phobal & Otharlanna Uladh	14	12
Iontaobhas an Ghrúpa Ríoga Ospidéal	4	2
Pobal Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	14	12
Lios na gCearrbhach & An Dún	16	9
An Clochán	8	5
Pobal Homefirst	28	26
Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn	10	3
An tIúr & an Mhúm	7	2
Pobal Craigavon/Dhroichead na Banna	13	9
Iontaobhas SSS an Fheabhail (Pobal)	21	2
Iontaobhas SSS Speirín/Loch-cheantar	14	1

Autism

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 children diagnosed with autism in each of the last ten years for which figures are available (b) the number of adults diagnosed with autism in each of the last ten years for which figures are available (c) the resources allocated for the care of children with autism and (d) the resources allocated for the care of adults with autism. (AQW 1670/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil.

Asbestosis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of people diagnosed as having asbestosis in each of the past ten years for which figures are available (b) the source of their disease and (c) the number who have died as a result of that disease. (AQW 1674/00)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) This information is not collected centrally.
- (b) This information is not collected centrally.
- (c) Figures for recorded deaths in each of the last ten years for which figures are available, where the main cause of death or associated condition was asbestosis, are given in the table below.

Year	Number of Deaths
1999	15
1998	18
1997	13
1996	13
1995	11
1994	13
1993	17
1992	19
1991	19
1990	24

- (a) Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach.
- (b) Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach.
- (c) Léirítear sa tábla thíos na figiúirí do bhásanna taifeadta i ngach bliain de na deich mbliana is déanaí dá bhfuil figiúirí ar fáil i gcás arbh í an aispeastóis an phríomhchúis báis nó ina raibh sí ina riocht gaolmhar.

Bliain	Líon na mBásanna
1999	15
1998	18
1997	13
1996	13
1995	11
1994	13
1993	17
1992	19
1991	19
1990	24

Speech Therapy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of speech therapists required in each Health Board area and outline the steps she is taking to address any shortfall. (AQW 1686/00)

Ms de Brún: The number of speech and language therapists required in each Health and Social Services Board area is a matter for each Board to determine in order to meet the assessed needs of their population. No particular problems of shortfall have been brought to the attention of my Department.

Faoi gach bord é féin a fhágtar an cinneadh ar líon na dteiripithe labhartha agus teanga atá de dhíth i gceantar gach bord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta le freastal ar riachtanais mheasúnaithe a ndaonra. Níor cuireadh fadbanna easnaimh ar leith in iúl do mo Roinn.

Mental Illness

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by each Trust Board area, the number of people who are currently meeting with a Community Mental Health Team and the number on waiting lists. (AQW 1705/00)

Ms de Brún: Information is not readily available in the form requested.

Information on numbers of mentally ill persons or their carers who had contact with Trusts in each financial year is available and is detailed in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1. MENTALLY ILL PERSONS OR THEIR CARERS WHO HAD CONTACT WITH TRUSTS DURING THE YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2000

Trust	Number
Down Lisburn	1,230
North & West Belfast	870
South & East Belfast	1,311

Trust	Number
Ulster Community & Hospitals	736
EHSSB	4,147
Armagh & Dungannon	901
Craigavon & Banbridge	491
Newry & Mourne	739
SHSSB	2,131
Foyle	598
Sperrin Lakeland	1,102
WHSSB	1,700
Homefirst	3,790
Causeway	337
NHSSB	4,127
NI Total	12,105

Information on persons waiting for their first appointment for a consultant outpatient clinic in the quarter ending 30 September 2000 (the latest date for which information is available) for the specialties of Mental Illness, Psychotherapy, Child & Adolescent Psychiatry and Old Age Psychiatry is detailed in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2. PERSONS WAITING FOR FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT IN THE MENTAL ILLNESS SPECIALTIES, QUARTER ENDING 30 SEPTEMBER 2000⁽¹⁾

Trust	Number
BCH	92
Ulster Community & Hospitals	115
Mater	386
Causeway	89
Homefirst	515
Craigavon & Banbridge	308
Newry & Mourne	90
Armagh & Dungannon	276
Total	1,779

⁽¹⁾ Includes patients who cancelled or did not attend

Níl eolas ar fáil go réidh san fhoirm a iarradh.

Mionléirítear agus cuirtear ar fáil eolas ar líon na ndaoine a bhfuil tinneas meabhrach orthu agus ar líon a gcúramóirí a rinne teagmháil le hiontaobhais in achan bhliain airgeadais i dTábla 1 thíos.

TÁBLA 1. DAOINE A BHFUIL TINNEAS MEABHRACH ORTHU NÓ A GCÚRAMÓIRÍ A RINNE TEAGMHÁIL LE HIONTAOBHAIS LE LINN NA BLIANA AG CRÍOCHNÚ AN 31Ú MÁRTA 2000

Iontaobhas	Líon
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	1,230
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	870

Iontaobhas	Líon
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	1,311
Pobal & Otharlanna Uladh	736
BSSSO	4,147
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	901
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	491
An tIúr & Múrn	739
BSSSD	2,131
An Feabhal	598
Loch-cheantar Speirín	1,102
BSSSI	1,700
Homefirst	3,790
An Clochán	337
BSSST	4,127
Iomlán TÉ	12,105

Mionléirítear eolas ar dhaoine atá ag fanacht lena gcéad choinne i gclínice comhairleach d'othair sheachtracha sa ráithe ag críochnú ar an 30 Meán Fómhair 2000 (an dáta is déanaí dá bhfuil eolas ar fáil) do speisialtachtaí tinnis meabhrach, síciteiripe, síciatrachta páistí agus ógánach agus síciatrachta seandaoine i dTábla 2 thíos.

TÁBLA 2. DAOINE ATÁ AG FANACHT LENA GCÉAD CHOINNE OTHAIR SHEACHTRAIGH SNA SPEISIALTACHTAÍ TINNIS MEABHRACH AG AN RÁITHE AG CRÍOCHNÚ AR AN 30 MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2000.⁽¹⁾

Iontaobhas	Líon
OCBF	92
Pobal & Otharlanna Uladh	115
Mater	386
An Clochán	89
Homefirst	515
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	308
An tIúr & an Mhúrn	90
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	276
Iomlán	1,779

⁽¹⁾ Cuirtear othair a chuir ar ceal í nó ná fhreastail uirthi san áireamh

Delays in Discharge from Hospital

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the representations she has received about bed blocking in hospitals and to make a statement. (AQW 1713/00)

Ms de Brún: Since April 2000 there have been representations from 4 Members of the Assembly; 3 members of the public about close relatives; one organisation providing a community care legal advice service; and one private sector nursing home representative

organisation. These representations range from concern about the impact of delayed discharge from hospital on the health and social care services generally to difficulties arising in individual cases. Delays in discharge from hospital are a matter of concern for my Department and I have asked Boards to take appropriate action as part of both their Winter Pressures and Waiting List initiatives. On 31 January I announced a further £5 million for winter pressures and community care next year. This is additional to the £15 million invested in these services over the present winter period.

Ó Aibreán 2000 tháinig uirill ó cheathrar Teachta Tionóil; ó thrí dhuine faoi dhlúthghaolta; ó eagraíocht amháin atá ag soláthar seirbhís phobail comhairle dlí; agus ó eagraíocht ionadaíoch amháin tí altranais de chuid na hearnála príobháidí. Tá scóip ag na huirill seo ó bhuaireamh faoi éifeacht scaoilte moillthe ó otharlann ar sheirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta i gcoitinne go deacrachtaí a thagann aníos i gcásanna aonair. Ábhar cúraim iad moilleana i scaoilte ó otharlanna do mo Roinn agus d'iarr mé ar bhoird heart cuí a dhéanamh mar chuid dá dtionscnaimh do bhrúnna geimhridh agus do liostaí feithimh. Ar an 31 Eanáir d'fhógair mé £5 mhilliún breise do bhrúnna geimhridh agus do chúram pobail don bhliain seo chugainn. Cuirtear seo leis an £15 mhilliún a infheistíodh sna seirbhísí seo thar tréimhse an gheimhridh seo.

Promoting Healthy Eating Amongst Children

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the progress made in promoting healthy eating amongst children of poor families in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1714/00)

Ms de Brún: The Health Promotion Agency has developed a community based nutrition education programme targeted at low income families. The Agency is currently preparing nutritional guidelines for the under fives in child care, which will be published in March. It is also collating information on the range of interventions to encourage healthy eating in primary and post-primary schools. The report, which will also be published and disseminated in March, identifies examples of good practice that can be replicated, particularly in schools in disadvantaged areas.

D'fhorbair an Ghníomhaireacht um Chur Chun Cinn Sláinte clár pobalbhunaithe oideachais ar chothú dírithe ar theaghlaigh ar ioncam íseal. Faoi láthair, tá an ghníomhaireacht ag ullmhú treoirilínte cothaithe do pháistí faoi bhun cúig bliana sa chúram páistí, a fhoilseofar i Mí an Mhárta. Tá sí ag bailiú eolais ar an réimse idirghabhálacha le bia folláin a chur chun cinn i mbunscoileanna agus in iarbhunscoileanna. Aithníonn an tuairisc, a fhoilseofar agus a scaipfead i Mí an Mhárta fosta, eiseamláirí de dheacha-chleachtas is féidir a

athdhéanamh, go háirithe i scoileanna i gceantair faoi mhíbhuntáiste.

Emergency Contraception

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her policy on the provision of emergency contraception and to make a statement. (AQW 1715/00)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQO 756/00.

Tarraingim aird an Teachta ar mo fhreagra ar AQO 756/00.

Kidney Transplants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients awaiting kidney transplants in each of the Health Board areas. (AQW 1732/00)

Ms de Brún: There are currently 167 persons waiting for kidney transplants at local hospitals. A breakdown of this figure by Board is not available.

Faoi láthair tá 167 duine ag fanacht le trasphlandáil duáin ag otharlanna áitiúla. Níl mionléiriú ar an fhigiúr seo de réir boird ar fáil.

Donor Kidneys

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people who have received donor kidneys in each of the Board areas in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1733/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on persons who have received kidney transplants at local hospitals for the calendar years 1995 to 2000 is detailed in the table below.

PERSONS WHO HAVE RECEIVED KIDNEY TRANSPLANTS AT LOCAL HOSPITALS BY BOARD OF RESIDENCE, 1995 – 2000

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
EHSSB	22	26	21	11	19	19
NHSSB	9	16	13	4	10	7
WHSSB	5	9	9	3	4	7
SHSSB	11	7	8	9	7	10
Total	47	58	51	27	40	43

Mionléirítear eolas ar líon na ndaoine a fuair trasphlandáil duáin ag otharlanna áitiúla do na blianta 1995 go 2000 sa tábla thíos.

DAOINE A FUAIR TRASPHLANDÁIL DUÁIN AG OTHARLANNA ÁITIÚLA DE RÉIR BOIRD CHÓNAITHE, 1995 - 2000

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
BSSSO	22	26	21	11	19	19
BSSST	9	16	13	4	10	7
BSSSI	5	9	9	3	4	7
BSSSD	11	7	8	9	7	10
Iomlán	47	58	51	27	40	43

Review of Community Care

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail when she expects to report on the Review of Community Care.

(AQW 1735/00)

Ms de Brún: I expect to receive the report of the review group at the end of September 2001 and will arrange for publication and relevant consultation as soon as possible thereafter.

Tá mé ag dúil le tuairisc an ghrúpa athbhreithnithe a fháil ag deireadh Mheán Fómhair 2001 agus déanfaidh mé socrúithe lena fhoilsiú agus le comhairliúchán ábhartha a dhéanamh chomh luath agus is féidir ina dhiaidh sin.

Care in the Community

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people currently waiting for 'care in the community' in each Trust Board area.

(AQW 1737/00)

Ms de Brún: Information is not currently collected in the form requested. However, plans are in place to begin collecting this information on a quarterly basis from 1 April 2001.

Ní bhailítear eolas faoi láthair san fhoirm a iarradh. Bíodh sin mar atá, tá pleananna ann leis an eolas seo a bhailiú ar bhonn ráithiúil ón 1 Aibreán 2001.

Nurse Recruitment

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her policy for nurse recruitment in the Health Service in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1738/00)

Ms de Brún: Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts are responsible for ensuring that there are sufficient nurses to provide the level of service to meet the assessed needs of their population.

My Department has arrangements in place to monitor the level of the nursing workforce and takes advice from a Nursing and Midwifery Workforce Advisory Group,

whose membership includes representatives of both HPSS and Independent Sector employers, on workforce matters.

Departmental initiatives designed to enhance the supply of qualified nursing staff include the commissioning of an additional 300 training places over a 3 year period and provision of free training for nurses and midwives wishing to return to practice. A significant number of nurses and midwives have expressed an interest in returning to practice and all of these are followed up.

Tá Boird agus Iontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta freagrach as cinntiú go bhfuil go leor altraí ar fáil leis an leibhéal seirbhíse a sholáthar le freastal ar riachtanais mheasúnaithe a bpobail.

Tá socrúithe i bhfeidhm ag mo Roinn monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar leibhéal na foirne altranais agus glacann sí comhairle ar chúrsaí pearsanra ó ghrúpa comhairleach foirne altranais agus cnáimhseachais a bhfuil ionadaithe ó fhostoirí SSSP agus na hearnála neamhspleáiche air.

Ar thionscnaimh na Roinne a ceapadh le soláthar foirne cáilithe altranais a fheabhsú tá coimisiúnú 300 áit oiliúna thar thréimhse trí bliana agus soláthar oiliúna saor in aisce d'altraí agus do chnáimhseacha atá ag iarraidh filleadh ar chleachtas. Léirigh cuid mhór altraí agus cnáimhseach suim i bhfilleadh chun cleachtais agus leantar orthu siúd uilig.

Needs of Schoolchildren

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail if the joint Education and Library Board/Health and Social Services Board Review Group has reported on the Health and Social Services needs of schoolchildren.

(AQW 1746/00)

Ms de Brún: The Joint Review Group has produced two reports 'Review of the Provision of Nursing Services to Children in Special Schools' and 'Report of the Survey Findings of Therapy Input to Children with Special Educational Needs in NI'. Copies were distributed by the Review Group to the Education and Library Boards, and Health and Social Service Boards. Officials from my Department are due to meet officials in the Department of Education to consider the content of the reports.

Chuir an comhghrúpa athbhreithnithe dhá thuairisc amach dar teideal 'Athbhreithniú ar Sholáthar Seirbhísí Altranais do Pháistí i Scoileanna Speisialt' agus 'Tuairisc Ar Thorthaí Suirbhé ar Inchur Teiripe do Pháistí le Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais i dTuaisceart na hÉireann.' Dháil an grúpa athbhreithnithe cóipeanna ar na boird oideachais agus leabharlainne agus boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta. Tá feidhmeannaigh ó mo Roinn le bualadh le feidhmeannaigh sa Roinn Oideachais le hábhar na dtuairiscí a phlé.

Northern Ireland Beef

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of information that her Department has volunteered to the Health Departments of other European Countries confirming the positive assurances associated with Northern Ireland Beef.

(AQW 1748/00)

Ms de Brún: No such information has been requested or sent.

Níor iarradh agus níor seoladh aon eolas den chineál.

Independent Residential and Nursing Homes Sector

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she proposes to (a) agree the fees paid to the independent residential and nursing homes sector for 2001/02 in accordance with the minimum care specification and (b) issue guidance to the commissioners regarding future fee levels.

(AQW 1770/00)

Ms de Brún: The level of fees paid to the independent residential and nursing homes sector is primarily a matter for discussion between the sector and the relevant Health and Social Services Boards. Contract prices are reviewed annually in the light of prevailing circumstances and priorities.

My Department has been considering with Boards the approach to be adopted for this year and has recently issued guidance to Boards. That guidance indicates that, in general, price reviews should be considered in line with the price inflation uplift. Boards have been informed that no additional resources will be made available above the price inflation uplift.

Is cúrsaí pléite idir an earnáil agus na Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta chuí amháin é leibhéal na dtáillí a íoctar d'earnáil na dtithe cónaithe agus banaltrachta neamhspleácha. Déantar athbhreithniú ar phraghasanna conartha gach bliain de réir cúrsaí agus tosaíochtaí reatha.

Bhí an Roinn s'agam i gcomhar leis na Boird ag déanamh machnaimh ar an chur chuige atá le cinneadh don bhliain seo agus thug sí treoir do Bhoird ar na malluibh. Léiríonn an treoir sin i gcoitinne gur chóir athbhreithnithe ar phraghasanna a dhéanamh de réir an ardú boilscithe ar phraghasanna. Cuireadh in iúl do Bhoird nach gcuirfí acmhainní breise ar fáil thar an ardú boilscithe ar phraghasanna.

Carers' National

Mr Clyde asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding that will be made

available to the Northern Ireland Carers Association to fund the Carers Strategy Consultation Process.

(AQW 1836/00)

Ms de Brún: No decisions have been taken about the level of funding for the consultation exercise. My Department has undertaken to make funding available to Carers' National but they have not as yet submitted an estimate of the costs for consideration.

Ní dhearnadh aon socrúithe faoi leibhéal an mhaoinithe don bheart comhairliúcháin. Thug mo Roinn as láimh maoiniú a chur ar fáil do Chúramóirí Náisiúnta ach go dtí seo níor chuir siad meastúchán costas isteach le breathnú.

Carers' National

Mr Clyde asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) outline the consultation process for the Northern Ireland Carers Strategy Document (b) detail what bodies will be consulted and (c) specify the timescale within which the consultation process will be completed.

(AQW 1837/00)

Ms de Brún: The first stage in the consultation process will be a reference group to be convened by Carers' National. Carers' National are currently drawing up a list of organisations that will be invited to nominate people to attend the group. It is expected that the group will consist of a wide range of organisations representing carers' interests and that a substantial number will be carers. This process will be completed by early June.

The proposals which result from the work of this group will form the basis of a consultation document which will then be the subject of consultation with all interested parties in the Autumn.

I expect the strategy to be finalised by December of this year.

Is é an chéad chéim sa phróiseas comhairliúcháin ná grúpa tagartha atá le tionól ag Chúramóirí Náisiúnta. Tá Chúramóirí Náisiúnta ag déanamh amach liosta faoi láthair de na heagraíochtaí a n-iarrfar orthu daoine a ainmniú le freastal ar an ghrúpa. Meastar gurb é a bhéas sa ghrúpa ná réimse leathan eagraíochtaí a ionadaíonn leasanna cúramóirí agus gur cúramóirí a bheidh i gcuid mhór acu. Críochnófar an próiseas go luath i Mí an Mheithimh.

Bunófar doiciméad comhairliúcháin ar na moltaí a thiocfas amach as obair an ghrúpa seo, doiciméad a chuirfear faoi chomhairliúchán na bpáirtithe leasmhara uilig san fhómhar.

Tá coinne agam go gcuirfear bailchríoch ar an straitéis roimh Nollaig na bliana seo.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

European Community Canada Programme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail Northern Ireland's involvement in the European Community Canada Programme for co-operation in higher education and training and to make a statement. (AQW 1689/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): Since the programme began in 1995, Northern Ireland's higher education institutions have been involved in a number of projects seeking support, either as a project lead contractor, or as a member of a multilateral partnership. To date, all of these bids have been unsuccessful.

Long Term Unemployment

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the steps he is taking to address long-term unemployment among young people and males over forty- five years of age and to make a statement. (AQW 1698/00)

Dr Farren: This question has been passed to me as Minister responsible for helping long term unemployed people back into the labour market.

Long term unemployment in Northern Ireland fell by 53% in the period April 1998 to December 2000. Within that overall total, long term unemployment among young people fell by 80% and among males over 45 years by 43%.

The main initiative for tackling long term unemployment is the New Deal programme which has already helped a significant number of young people and adults make the transition from benefit to work. My Department also has other programmes such as Worktrack, Enterprise Ulster and Bridge to Employment which help the long-term unemployed return to work.

The falling trend in unemployment is encouraging but it is important that continuous efforts are made to equip the unemployed, and particularly the long term unemployed, to compete for jobs in today's labour market. Therefore an enhanced New Deal 25+ programme will be introduced from 9 April this year offering a flexible package of help tailored to meet the individual needs of participants with a strong emphasis throughout on helping them compete for jobs.

Finally, as indicated in the draft Programme for Government, I am setting up a taskforce on Employability, which I shall chair myself, and will examine and propose further measures to tackle barriers to employment among both young people and the long term unemployed.

Civil Aviation

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the number of school leavers who have pursued a career in commercial aviation in each of the last three years for which figures are available. (AQW 1716/00)

Dr Farren: This information is not available in the format requested.

The Department issues the Northern Ireland School Leaver Destination survey, detailing the destinations of Year 12 pupils. Of the annual cohort of 26,000, 6% directly enter employment. Information on the numbers entering civil aviation is not available and could only be obtained at an excessive cost.

Civil Aviation

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline his plans to encourage young people to follow a career in commercial aviation. (AQW 1717/00)

Dr Farren: Departmental Careers Officers help clients explore their interests and abilities, linking these to relevant opportunities. Those interested in commercial aviation can discuss the range and level of jobs available, training to NVQ Levels 2 and 3 under New Deal and Jobskills and sponsorships for pilot training with the commercial airlines.

Pilot Training

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline the current position in regard to funding arrangements for those in pursuit of a pilot's licence and to make a statement. (AQW 1718/00)

Dr Farren: The Airline Transport Pilot's Licence (ATPL) is achieved through attendance at private training courses lasting up to 70 weeks. The individual pays the cost of the training, approximately £30,000. Funding is not available from this department.

Sponsorship schemes with commercial airlines are available for pilot training. Competition for sponsorship places is intense.

Scholarships

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail all categories of scholarships available to students in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1720/00)

Dr Farren: My Department makes available post-graduate studentships for research and for approved courses of advanced study in the fields of Humanities, Science and Technology, and the Social Sciences. It also provides for bursary awards for the Masters in Fine Art and Applied Art courses at the University of Ulster and for the vocational course at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies at Queen's University. Under delegated arrangements, the Education and Library Boards provide a range of means-tested discretionary awards for approved undergraduate and postgraduate courses, and the University of Ulster offers a number of Adult Education Bursaries.

Skills Shortages in Engineering

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail his plans to address the skill shortages in engineering trades.
(AQW 1758/00)

Dr Farren: I fully recognise the importance of the engineering industry to the Northern Ireland economy. The Northern Ireland Skills Task Force has identified engineering as one of the five key sectors having the potential to strengthen and develop the local economy.

My Department has undertaken a number of initiatives to ensure that people have the skills required to meet the needs of the sector and to encourage and facilitate future development. At the graduate/professional level we have increased the number of university places available and there are 2300 students currently undertaking courses in engineering disciplines. We have also recently introduced a Technician Training Initiative supporting 20 training places at a cost of £166,000 over a four-year period. At craft level approximately 2100 people are receiving training in engineering trades, including 750 people on MA apprenticeship frameworks. The total cost of support is £9 million per annum.

The Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre's Priority Skills Unit has been commissioned to carry out research into the skills needs of the five sectors mentioned above. A major study on electronics is nearing completion and a study on mechanical engineering has been scheduled which will help the Department to focus on the requirements of the sector.

Student Grants

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail what assessment he has made of the impact on students as a result of the removal of the grant system.
(AQW 1890/00)

Dr Farren: The Callender & Kemp Survey confirmed that undergraduate students in the United Kingdom are generally receiving the support they need from loans,

grants and contributions from their parents, but indicated that some further targeted support is needed for some disadvantaged groups. The proposals which I recently announced, in particular the introduction of non-repayable Access Bursaries in higher education for students from low income families, recognise those needs.

Studies Through the Medium of Irish

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the steps he is taking to accommodate the growing number of pupils coming from Irish Medium Schools who wish to continue their studies through the medium of Irish at further and higher education levels.
(AQW 1896/00)

Dr Farren: There is no statutory curriculum within the Further Education (FE) sector in Northern Ireland. In the first instance, it is a matter for an individual college to determine whether there is sufficient demand for such provision. As regards higher education generally, course provision and method of delivery are a matter for the universities as autonomous bodies.

My Department, however, funds initial teacher training through the medium of Irish at St Mary's University College, on the advice of the Department of Education.

Science Laboratory Facilities

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the steps he is taking to update science laboratory facilities in Further Education Colleges.
(AQW 1897/00)

Dr Farren: There is no funding earmarked specifically for this purpose. However, the Department provides capital funding to Further Education Colleges for a range of purposes and initiatives, including funding to upgrade and replace capital equipment in priority areas of the curriculum. Colleges may use this funding to update their science laboratory facilities.

Local Training Providers

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail his plans to ensure the continuity of local training providers.
(AQW 1898/00)

Dr Farren: My Department contracts, usually for 3 years, with a wide range of training providers, for the delivery of its various programmes. Contracts are awarded based upon performance and quality criteria and identified training needs and bids received from training providers, for new contracts, are assessed accordingly.

Given the competitive nature of this process, the changing economic climate here, and not least in the

interests of equity and value for money, it would be wholly inappropriate for my Department to attempt to ensure the continuity of any particular training provider.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ministerial Resignation

Mr Taylor asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to resign as Minister and to make a statement. (AQW 1436/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): I have no immediate plans to resign.

Financial Assistance Given to Rail Operating Companies

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the financial assistance given to all rail operating companies in each of the last three years for which figures are available. (AQW 1449/00)

Mr Campbell: The financial assistance given to Northern Ireland Railways by the Department of the Environment (NI) and subsequently the Department of Regional Development, in the last 3 complete financial years is detailed below:

Type of Grant	1997/98 £m	1998/99 £m	1999/00 £m
Public Service Obligation and Other Revenue Support	6.969	9.000	9.388
Railway Infrastructure and Safety	0.978	1.442	3.173
EU Capital Grant	3.823	6.576	7.375
Total Financial Assistance	11.770	17.018	19.936

Similarly detailed information is not available for rail operating companies in Great Britain but the following table shows the subsidies given to those companies by the Strategic Rail Authority in 1998/1999 and 1999/2000 and by its predecessor, the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising in 1997/1998. These figures exclude incentive payment by the Authority, but include franchise payments to certain companies by local Passenger Transport Executives. The figures do not include subsidies given to Railtrack for improvement of railway infrastructure in GB.

SUBSIDY TO GB RAIL OPERATING COMPANIES

Train Operator	1997-1998 Subsidy £m	1998-1999 Subsidy £m	1999-2000 Subsidy £m
Anglia Railways	39.5	26.9	23.3

Train Operator	1997-1998 Subsidy £m	1998-1999 Subsidy £m	1999-2000 Subsidy £m
Cardiff Railways	20.4	18.7	18.0
Central Trains	171.7	162.6	146.2
Chiltern Railways	14.5	13.1	10.5
Connex South Central	75.3	56.9	50.1
Connex South Eastern	115.6	87.8	64.0
CrossCountry	115.9	101.4	86.8
Gatwick Express	Nil	Nil	Nil
Great Eastern	28.8	13.9	8.8
Great North Eastern Railway	55.1	37.4	17.6
Great Western Trains	58.9	55.7	48.6
Island Line	2.0	2.0	1.9
LTS Rail	26.3	25.4	24.9
Merseyrail Electrics	65.8	59.9	55.0
Midland Mainline	8.2	2.5	0.9
North Western Trains	182.0	171.2	161.4
Northern Spirit	217.9	196.3	180.3
ScotRail	239.5	230.3	225.4
Silverlink	48.6	36.1	30.6
South West Trains	63.9	63.9	57.4
Thames Trains	34.2	25.5	16.0
Thameslink	2.6	Nil	Nil
Wales and West	72.9	64.3	62.4
West Anglia Great Northern	54.9	36.0	26.2
West Coast Trains	76.6	70.2	59.1

Traffic Volumes in Ballynahinch

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the traffic volumes on the A24 through Ballynahinch from the junction with the Saintfield Road (A21) South to the junction with Downpatrick Road (B2) and (b) any current proposals to improve traffic flow through Ballynahinch. (AQW 1606/00)

Mr Campbell: Traffic surveys carried out in July 1999 on the A24 Belfast to Newcastle road show the following 2-way daily traffic flows:-

- North of the A21 ~Saintfield Road junction – 9,600 vehicles per day;
- In Ballynahinch at the Assumption Grammar School – 15,800 vehicles per day; and
- South of the B2 Downpatrick Road junction – 8,530 vehicles per day.

The traffic volumes at the three points are independent and cannot be analysed as total traffic volumes for the town.

As regards proposals to improve traffic flow through Ballynahinch, you are aware that my Department's Roads Service has a proposal to construct a bypass of the town and that that scheme is currently being assessed for possible inclusion in the Department's 10-year Forward Planning Schedule. I hope to publish details of the Schedule later this year.

Mossley West Railway Station

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to address the omission of Mossley West Railway Station from the Northern Ireland Railways timetable and to make a statement. (AQW 1627/00)

Mr Campbell: A planning requirement for the development at Mossley West halt is the provision of a footbridge across the track in order to facilitate safe pedestrian access to the station. Translink is currently engaged in consultation with interested parties with a view to ensuring that the access problem is resolved as soon as possible. Once the safety issue is resolved and the Mossley West halt becomes operational it will be included in the NIR timetable.

Non Attendance of Roads Service Representatives

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what action he has taken in relation to the non attendance of Road Service representatives at meetings of the Newtownabbey Borough Council Planning and Consultation Committee and to make a statement. (AQW 1676/00)

Mr Campbell: It is my Department's Roads Service policy to attend Councils' Planning Committee meetings only when roads advice is a major component of a planning application and attendance has been specifically requested by Councils and where the Department of the Environment's Planning Service regard such attendance to be necessary. Roads Service is a statutory consultee of the planning process and makes recommendations to Planning Service on roads matters associated with development proposals. Planning Service officials attend these meetings and in the vast majority of cases can deal adequately with roads advice relevant to the recommended decisions.

I am satisfied that the Roads Service opinion can be adequately reflected by this arrangement.

Global Point Railway Station

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that in advance of the opening of Global Point Railway Station in Newtownabbey the local population is well informed of the benefits of rail travel. (AQW 1677/00)

Mr Campbell: Translink has advised that, while it is not providing a Railway Station at Global Point, it hopes, as part of the Antrim to Bleach Green line reinstatement, to provide a new halt at Mossley West located on the corner of the business park site. In advance of the opening of this halt, Translink will certainly be advertising the new rail service and seeking to encourage as many people as possible to travel by rail.

Commuter Problems in Newtownabbey

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps he is taking to address the commuter problems associated with the increasing number of housing developments in Newtownabbey and East Antrim. (AQW 1678/00)

Mr Campbell: I am addressing commuter problems in Newtownabbey and Antrim, and elsewhere, by pursuing an integrated transportation strategy which will make the best use of the existing road network and develop and encourage the use of alternative modes of transport.

In this context, a number of measures are currently being progressed which will offer some benefits to commuters, for example:

- the Antrim to Bleach Green railway line is expected to be re-opened later this month and, as part of this project, a new railway halt is planned at Mossley West;
- part-time traffic signals with an associated bus lane are being introduced at the Shore Road/Station Road junction to assist peak hour traffic progressions; and
- work is underway to extend the Roads Service motorway control system on the M2 motorway to display information to drivers and adjust traffic signals to cope with the prevailing traffic flows.

The longer-term needs of commuters in Newtownabbey and East Antrim will, however, be addressed as part of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan and I would refer you to the answer I gave to your written Assembly Question (AQW 147/00) on 30 October 2000.

Extending the M2 Motorway

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to extend the M2 motorway to Londonderry. (AQW 1694/00)

Mr Campbell: The M2 motorway from Belfast becomes the M22 motorway close to Dunsilly Roundabout at Antrim until it ends in the vicinity of Randalstown. My Department's Roads Service has no plans at present to extend the M22 motorway to Londonderry.

I can, however, confirm that Roads Service is continuing to progress a scheme to provide a dual carriageway bypass

of Toome through the necessary statutory procedures. Assuming there are no objections to the Vesting Order and funds are available for the scheme, work on site is due to commence in early 2002.

Sewage Treatment Works

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps he is taking to provide a new Sewage Treatment Works at Ballyhornan and to make a statement. (AQW 1696/00)

Mr Campbell: There are presently no sewage treatment facilities at Ballyhornan. The trunk sewer serving the village and the former RAF Bishops court site discharges at low water mark into the Irish Sea.

The Urban Waste Water Treatment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995, which implement the EU Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, require the provision of appropriate treatment for wastewater at locations, such as Ballyhornan, by 31 December 2005.

Consulting Engineers engaged by Water Service have prepared a preliminary report outlining proposals for the provision of wastewater treatment at Ballyhornan and these are presently being considered. The scheme will then progress to the detailed design stage. Due to other priorities and current levels of funding, it is unlikely that the scheme can commence before the 2003/2004 financial year.

Unadopted Roads

Mr McClelland asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to conduct a survey of 'unadopted' roads in South Antrim and if he intends to adopt any roads in the next twelve months. (AQW 1699/00)

Mr Campbell: Roads in new housing developments, that have been determined through the planning process but not yet adopted, are the responsibility of the developer. I understand that the total length of such roads within the South Antrim constituency is approximately 136km.

The timing of adoption of these roads by Roads Service depends on the developer bringing them up to the required standard and so it is not possible to predict how many will be adopted within the next twelve months.

Existing private roads which have not been subject to the street planning process are the responsibility of the owners or frontagers of the roads. Roads Service does not hold details of these roads nor the total length involved. Roads Service will consider requests for adoption of such roads provided they are brought up to the required standard.

Waste Water Treatment Facilities

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what consultations have taken place with the local district council and residents regarding the proposed new waste water treatment works at Donaghadee.

(AQW 1703/00)

Mr Campbell: I am committed to consulting fully with the local Councils and to keeping the public fully informed of the proposals for new waste water treatment facilities for the North Down/Ards area. Water Service has engaged in extensive consultation with representatives of the Councils and members of the local community. A number of presentations have been made to the Ards Borough Council and meetings have been held with Council officials and consultants engaged by the Council. This series of meetings is ongoing.

There has also been significant consultation and interaction with the local community through presentations and both public and private meetings. Water Service officials have had a number of direct meetings with local groups, individual residents and all of the landowners affected by the proposals. All letters have been responded to and assurances have been given that the concerns of local residents will be given proper consideration.

In March 1999, copies of a study, into the most appropriate way of providing waste water treatment facilities in the North Down/Ards area and which also identified possible sites, were issued to all local elected representatives, local action groups and a number of individuals. Copies were also placed in local libraries and Council Offices for public perusal. An information booklet on the situation was also circulated. In September 1999 an information leaflet was delivered to all properties within a 2-kilometre radius of the two shortlisted sites.

On 21 August 1999, I met with Ards Borough Council to discuss the proposals for the new works and to hear directly the views of the Council. I visited Eastbourne on the 8 February 2001 to see how large wastewater treatment works can be constructed and operated in close proximity to residential areas. I was accompanied on the visit by Alan McFarland, Vice Chairman of the Regional Development Committee, representatives of Ards and North Down Borough Councils and representatives of the local media. The party met with the Mayor of Eastbourne and heard how the scheme has impacted favourably on the town, despite earlier public disquiet and opposition. My impression is that all concerned found the visit useful and reassuring.

Following the visit I announced that I would be inviting both North Down and Ards Borough Councils to join a Working Party to be chaired by Water Service which would review all aspects of the criteria and processes used in the site selection process. I will give detailed consideration to the findings which will emerge

from this further study before final decisions are taken on the most appropriate site for the new works.

Eurotrack Ireland

Mr McNamee asked the Minister for Regional Development if he intends to meet with Eurotrack Ireland to discuss proposals on the future of the railway network and to make a statement. (AQW 1719/00)

Mr Campbell: I have no immediate plans to meet Eurotrack Ireland to discuss their proposals for the future of the railway network. Northern Ireland Railways is currently engaged in a programme of works to implement urgent safety work recommended in the A D Little Review. Beyond that, the Assembly has allocated resources to enable work to be started on the consolidation option for the rail network contained in the Railways Task Force Report. Work is also proceeding on the preparation of the Regional Transportation Strategy and I do not envisage any major change of policy on railways before the Strategy is finalised. I do appreciate, however, Eurotrack Ireland's continued interest in the rail network for Northern Ireland.

A2 Warrenpoint to Newcastle Road

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to advise of the sight line demands in relation to applications seeking approval for (a) a single residential property and (b) a development of residential properties seeking exit on the section of the A2 Warrenpoint to Newcastle route that are controlled by the general speed limit. (AQW 1726/00)

Mr Campbell: I would refer the Member to my response to his oral Assembly Question (AQO679/00) on 5 February 2001.

The tables attached to my earlier answer are for both commercial and residential developments. For the purpose of consulting the tables, I should add that the A2 route carries in excess of 3000 vehicles per day.

Traffic Calming Measures

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he plans to introduce traffic calming measures outside Primary and Secondary Schools. (AQW 1731/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service has no plans to introduce traffic calming measures outside all primary and secondary schools.

The aim of traffic calming is to reduce the number and severity of road accidents in built up areas by reducing the volume and speed of vehicles. In assessing the need

for such measures, priority is given to those schemes having a road accident history. In this assessment, additional weighting is afforded to accidents involving children and the elderly. This has resulted in the introduction of a number of traffic calming schemes in residential areas in the vicinity of some schools.

Also, in conjunction with public and private sector bodies, Roads Service has established a School Travel Advisory Group to co-ordinate the introduction of a number of Safer Routes to Schools pilot projects across Northern Ireland. This initiative will seek to overcome problems caused by the school run by improving children's safety on school journeys and by encouraging more children to walk, cycle or use public transport when travelling to and from school. Individual schemes may involve the introduction of traffic calming and other traffic management measures at some schools.

Park and Ride Scheme

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain any delay regarding the introduction of a proposed Park and Ride Scheme for Trooperslane, Carrickfergus. (AQW 1739/00)

Mr Campbell: Although Translink is fully aware of the value and benefits of Park and Ride facilities in encouraging a modal shift from private to public transport, Translink does not at present have any specific plans to introduce a Park and Ride Scheme at Trooperslane. Such a Scheme would not rank sufficiently high on Translink's list of priorities to warrant the necessary expenditure from their limited resources. The matter will, however, remain under consideration by Translink.

Strangford/Portaferry Car Ferry

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the operating costs of the Strangford/Portaferry car ferry. (AQW 1780/00)

Mr Campbell: The operating costs of the Strangford/Portaferry car ferry for the year ended 31 March 2000 are detailed in the table below:

Expenditure	Outturn £'000
Staff cost	424
Materials and stores	113
Maintenance	250
Other*	46
Notional and overhead costs	82
Total	915

* Other includes general Administrative Expenses and accommodation.

Biofilm Bacteria in the Water Supply

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps he is taking to address the problem of growth of biofilm bacteria in the water supply in the Rathcoole and Ballybeen housing estates.

(AQW 1800/00)

Mr Campbell: Water Service is aware of the problem with biofilms being experienced by a small number of householders including residents of Housing Executive properties in Rathcoole. Over the past seven years, the Housing Executive has commissioned a number of investigations into the cause. These generally identified the problem to be the formation of biofilms on the inside of hot water cylinders. Unfortunately, the reports could not offer a long-term solution to counteract the formation of the biofilms.

Analysis has confirmed that the water supply is satisfactory and complies with the requirements of The Water Quality Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1994. Water Service has considerable sympathy for the difficulties being experienced by the residents but does not have a responsibility for dealing with the problem. However, Water Service has met the Housing Executive on a number of occasions to discuss the matter, and has undertaken further investigations in an effort to assist the Housing Executive. The most recent investigations, involving scientific tests, consultation with scientific experts and reference to research papers on the subject, were completed in November 2000. They again confirmed that the problem was an internal one and was not related to the water supplied to the properties. The Housing Executive has been informed of the findings of these latest investigations.

Electronic Methods to Improve Efficiency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has for the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and public access to information within his Department. (AQW 1825/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department is fully committed to the NICS targets for e-Government which are that 25% of all key services will be capable of being delivered electronically by 31 December 2002, and 100% by December 2005. The Department has recently revised its Information Systems (IS) Strategy to encompass e-Government requirements and is identifying areas of business suitable for electronic delivery to meet the 2002 target.

Roads Service is currently investigating the potential development of a Contact Centre to enhance responsiveness and efficiency in dealing with telephone, e-mail and Internet communications and information access for the public. Roads Service is also examining ways of enhancing

its Internet web-site to provide more comprehensive and up-to-date information for the public.

Water Service is presently designing a new Internet website. When the first phase is completed in June 2001, the public will have access to an extensive range of information about Water Service. This will include published documents such as the Business Plan, and information on topics relating to the supply of drinking water and treatment of wastewater. Members of the public will be able to download application forms for new services etc. A later phase of the website development will permit customers, whose water supplies are metered, to access their account information online. Customers are already able to communicate with Water Service using e-mail. It is expected that this will be much more widely used when it is publicised on the website.

Water Service also makes extensive use of electronic systems to aid efficient operations. For example, most major installations are unmanned outside normal working hours.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, in relation to the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES1), the average yearly (a) spend (b) number of applications and (c) number of successful applications by (i) district council and (ii) parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1691/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): This information is not readily available in the format requested. However, based on information provided by the Scheme Manager for the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES), the attached table illustrates the average yearly DEES expenditure and the average yearly number of successful applications (jobs) from January 1995 to 31 December 2000, on a constituency basis.

Constituency	Average Yearly Spend Since January 1995 £	Average Yearly Number of Jobs Since January 1995
Belfast East	188,867	1,300
Belfast North	271,883	1,807
Belfast South	78,022	465
Belfast West	236,869	1,804
East Antrim	122,711	796
East Londonderry	131,062	983
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	139,160	981
Foyle	306,406	2,338

Constituency	Average Yearly Spend Since January 1995 £	Average Yearly Number of Jobs Since January 1995
Lagan Valley	61,566	324
Mid Ulster	155,885	1,092
Newry & Armagh	110,280	738
North Antrim	90,133	656
North Down	82,269	557
South Antrim	46,258	359
South Down	26,503	171
Strangford	73,119	512
Upper Bann	198,510	1,403
West Tyrone	176,727	1,273

Housing Executive Property

Mr McClelland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive properties sold in the Borough of Antrim during the past twelve months. (AQW 1702/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive whose Chief Executive has advised that 166 properties were sold in the 12 months ending 31 January 2001.

Urban Regeneration

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) the Northern Ireland equivalent to the United Kingdom's National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (b) the action taken to implement this Strategy and (c) those areas of South Down that will benefit from this strategy. (AQW 1772/00)

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 neighbourhoods of our cities and towns, along the lines embraced by new TSN and reflective of the GB National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal.

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. Research work has been commissioned to update existing data on areas and levels of multiple deprivation. The outcome of that research will inform the consultation process and

largely determine where the limited resources available for urban renewal should be targeted.

Supporting People (NI)

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his Department's progress in introducing "Support People (NI)", the future policy and funding framework for supported housing. (AQW 1773/00)

Mr Morrow: My Department is taking the lead in bringing forward the new funding arrangements under Supporting People. An inter Departmental/Agency working group has been set up to look at the issues and an External Reference Group, consisting of supported housing providers and other interested parties, has been established as an information sharing forum. The Housing Executive, which will be responsible for the administrative arrangements, has established a Supporting People implementation team and I propose to issue the first of a series of consultation documents 'Towards Supporting People' very shortly.

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of pensioners in receipt of the winter fuel allowance. (AQW 1783/00)

Mr Morrow: Last year over 254,000 pensioners received a Winter Fuel Payment.

Means Testing

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the representations he has received on the impact of means testing on the take-up of benefits and to make a statement. (AQW 1787/00)

Mr Morrow: I have received no recent representations on the impact of means testing on the take-up of benefits.

Means testing is important in ensuring that benefits intended for the least well off reach those who are most in need of this help. My Department encourages all people to claim those benefits to which they may be entitled.

Housing Benefit

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his policy on the payment of housing benefit to those students in receipt of student loans. (AQW 1806/00)

Mr Morrow: The policy intent is that support for full-time students is provided primarily from the education support system, which is designed for students' needs while the Social Security system is not.

Most full-time students are not entitled to housing benefit. However, those students who are in a vulnerable group (for example long term sick, disabled and those with dependent children) are eligible to claim benefit. Students, waiting to rejoin their course, who have recovered from illness or are a former carer, are eligible. Part-time students are also entitled to claim housing benefit.

In the assessment of entitlement to Housing Benefit student loans that have been paid or which could have been acquired had reasonable steps been taken to do so, are taken into account as income.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 2 March 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Online NI Initiative

Mr Hussey asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if it is aware of plans by the Government of the Republic of Ireland to pilot an E-Government project in Donegal and to make a statement.
(AQW 1612/00)

Reply: We understand that you are referring to the REACH project.

Initiatives included in the REACH project are very similar to our own OnlineNI initiative which is part of UKOnline (www.ukonline.gov.uk). UKOnline covers the whole of the United Kingdom and appropriately tailored versions are available for citizens in each of the devolved administrations.

It is noteworthy that the British Government, working together with the devolved administrations and the Irish Government, are adopting a similar approach to the provision of electronic services for citizens. The development of OnlineNI will continue and will take account of comments and suggestions from all interested parties including users.

Representations from Children's Organisations

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister when they will advise on changes to the Programme of Government on the basis of representations from children's organisations.
(AQW 1641/00)

Reply: The Programme for Government has been redrafted and strengthened in parts in the light of the very many positive and constructive comments received from Assembly Committees and from a wide range of individuals and organisations, including children's organisations.

The Executive have considered the changes that have been made, and are today presenting the final document to the Assembly for debate and approval in early March.

Children's Fund

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if the proposed criteria for the Children's Fund will be subject to impact assessment as required under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
(AQW 1642/00)

Reply: As we indicated in our answer to your previous question, AQW 1222, the policy of establishing Executive Programme Funds, including the Children's Fund, was included in the draft Programme for Government, which was submitted to an Equality Impact Assessment and widespread consultation.

Departments have now submitted a range of bids for consideration by the Executive. Those projects for which funding is agreed would support policies which will be reflected in the Equality Schemes of individual departments and subjected to equality impact assessment as required under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

In those circumstances, it was not considered necessary to subject the criteria for individual Executive Programme Funds to further impact assessment.

A Strategy for Children

Ms Lewsley asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline the progress made regarding the establishment of a working group on the strategy for children and to indicate what steps have been taken to secure the views of those working outside Government to protect children.
(AQW 1745/00)

Reply: We have written to our Ministerial Colleagues inviting them to nominate senior officials to represent their Departments on an interdepartmental working group, which will develop a strategy for children.

It is intended that the first meeting of the working group will take place shortly.

We recognise the need to draw on the expertise of non-governmental organisations. We expect that the interdepartmental working group will engage fully and meaningfully with such organisations, both in formulating proposals and in subsequent consultation. That will ensure that our new arrangements are informed by the knowledge and experience of those working with children and representing their interests.

Victims' Needs

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail, pursuant to AQW 1356/00, (a) who has been commissioned to research victims' needs, (b) the date this work was commissioned, (c) the terms of reference for such an appointment, (d) the date a report is expected and (e) the specific projects undertaken by the Trauma Advisory Panels and Victims' Organisations. (AQW 1774/00)

Reply: Research into victims' needs has not yet been commissioned. Tenders for the work have been received but no decision has yet been made as to who will take this work forward or when it will begin. The terms of reference will enable research to be taken forward to develop and apply a methodology to capture the views of victims of the troubles about the services they need, and the range and quality of services currently provided. It should ensure that views are taken from a broad spectrum of victims.

It will assess victims' perceptions of how Government have addressed the provision of services for victims, focusing primarily on matters which are the responsibility of the NI Assembly and determine the current level (to be used as a baseline) of victims' overall satisfaction with the Government's response to the needs of victims. (The study should examine the feasibility of developing a "satisfaction scale" which could be used in follow-up research).

It will identify any gaps in service provision, and make recommendations on the future provision of services including the roles of the statutory and voluntary sectors and priority areas for Government intervention and funding. The methodology used must be amenable to periodic comparable follow-up studies.

It is envisaged that the research will be completed by early summer 2001. Funding allocations to specific projects have not yet been made but decisions will be made in the near future.

Juvenile Justice Centres

Ms Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail any discussions that have been undertaken by Departments with the Northern Ireland Office in relation to the detention of children in Juvenile Justice Centres. (AQW 1788/00)

Reply: [holding answer 21 February 2001]: Two departments, Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Education, have had discussions with the Northern Ireland Office.

Officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Northern Ireland Office have

discussed the implications of the latter's plans for the juvenile justice estate and their impact upon the future development of residential child care services. These discussions have been of an exploratory nature and follow recommendations regarding children in the justice system included in the report by the Assembly's Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee into Residential and Secure Accommodation for Children.

The Minister of Education has had a meeting with the Northern Ireland Office Security Minister on how best the education service can assist the Northern Ireland Office in providing education for young people in the juvenile justice system. Officials of both Departments have had a number of follow-up meetings that have resulted in proposals being developed by the South Eastern Education and Library Board, in whose area Lisnevin and Rathgael campuses are located.

An interdepartmental working group is being established to take forward the proposal to establish a commissioner for children, as part of a wider strategy on children's rights and needs. The group will consider the interface between the role and remit of the Commissioner and the juvenile justice system. For that reason, the Secretary of State was invited to nominate, and has now nominated, a senior official from the Northern Ireland Office to serve on the group.

Responsibility for Legislation Regarding Charities

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail which Departments are responsible for legislation regarding charities. (AQW 1804/00)

Reply: The Department for Social Development is responsible for the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 1964 and the Charities (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, which comprise the main body of Northern Ireland legislation regarding charities.

Royal Irish Regiment

Mr Hilditch asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail if discussions have taken place with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland regarding the number of Royal Irish Regiment soldiers whose contracts are not being renewed on 1 May 2001. (AQW 1810/00)

Reply: Those matters are not the responsibility of the devolved administration. We have not jointly discussed this matter with the current Secretary of State or his predecessor.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Beef Prices

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what discussions she has had with meat plants to ensure a better price for beef farmers/producers. (AQW 1846/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The level of prices paid to beef producers by meat plants is a commercial matter to be determined between two parties. The differential between prices paid in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain is a matter of concern to me. Indeed that issue was raised in the Agricultural and Rural Development Committee's report 'Restoring Profit to the Beef Producer'. In my response to that report I have recognised the need for investigation of that price differential and in due course will issue further details of my plans. I am pleased to note that it has declined to its lowest level in the last four years or so.

I have sought to improve the return of beef producers in other ways through education, training, research and development, direct support for marketing and more recently through the allocation of an extra £2m per year for a beef quality initiative.

Beef Imports

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the quantity of beef imported into Northern Ireland from (a) Germany and (b) other European Countries in each of the last two years for which figures are available. (AQW 1868/00)

Ms Rodgers: Under EU trade rules there is no requirement to maintain data on the importation of meat and meat products entering Northern Ireland from Germany or other Member States. Consequently, the Department is not able to provide statistics on such imports.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Electronic Methods to Improve Efficiency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has for the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and public access to information within his Department. (AQW 1815/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): My Department has recently taken delivery of its first ICT strategy and is in the process of implementing the recommendations in the strategy. The

Department is also in the process of engaging consultants to produce an e-business strategy for the Department, which will recommend appropriate methods of improving efficiency and public access to information within the Department, its agencies and non-departmental public bodies.

Healthy Living Centres

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to identify Northern Ireland's healthy living centres and to detail (a) the amount of funding available to each centre and (b) the actual expenditure incurred by each centre. (AQW 1906/00)

Mr McGimpsey: healthy living centres are funded by the New Opportunities Fund (NOF), a distributor of National Lottery proceeds for health, education and environment projects across the UK. 4.5% of its proceeds come to Northern Ireland. The National Lottery is a reserved matter.

NOF will allocate £300 million to fund a series of healthy living centres throughout the UK, Northern Ireland will receive £13.5 million. The healthy living centre programme closed on 21 December 2000. The fund received 97 applications by the December deadline and those bids are currently being assessed. Two projects in Northern Ireland have been successful to date:

Irvinestown Community Partnership received £315,575 from the fund to develop an innovative project in a deprived area of County Fermanagh. The grant will be used to transform four run down terraced houses in the Sallyswood area of Irvinestown into the Arc Healthy Living Centre.

The Passionist Youth and Parents Resource Centre received £179,497 to develop a counselling service for people in the Ardoyne area of north Belfast. The grant will be used to expand existing counselling services for the local community tackling issues such as depression, bereavement, bullying, sexual abuse and drug abuse.

I am not aware of the actual expenditure incurred by either of those centres.

Irish League Football Clubs

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what funding, excluding that announced in his press release of 16 August 2000, has been given to each senior Irish League Football Club in the last six months. (AQW 1930/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Sports Lottery Capital grants, totalling £273,448, were awarded in the last six months to five senior League Football clubs as follows:

Larne Football Club	£57,400
Coleraine Football Club	£44,448
Newry Town Football Club	£61,600
Linfield Football and Athletic Club	£80,000
Glentoran Football Club	£30,000

Sports Facilities

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail specialist sports facilities available in Northern Ireland for young people of exceptional ability. (AQW 1986/00)

Mr McGimpsey: Most sports facilities, such as pitches, courts, athletic tracks and swimming pools are available to individuals of all ages and all levels of ability. Specialist services to talented individuals from all parts of the Province will, however, be provided through the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland, which is situated at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown.

EDUCATION

Educational Attainment

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Education to detail what progress has been made in the development of value added measures in educational attainment. (AQW 1858/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr McGuinness): The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) has been examining the scope for the introduction of value added measures and late last year published the results of a pilot project aimed at measuring value added. A consultation document is to be published by DfEE in March and a series of further pilot studies is planned. My Department will monitor these developments, and developments elsewhere, closely.

Trainee Teachers - Grants

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Education if he intends to introduce a grant to trainee teachers such as the £6,000 grant currently being offered by the Teacher Training Agency in England. (AQW 1875/00)

Mr McGuinness: Places on initial teacher training courses here are usually over-subscribed with sufficient higher calibre candidates so that, to date, almost all are filled by the Higher Education Institutions. The recruitment process, which is underway for the 2001/02 academic year, continues to be monitored closely by my Department and the Department for Higher and Further Education,

Training and Employment, with a particular focus on applications and admissions to initial teacher training. There are no plans at this stage to introduce a similar initiative here.

Pupils With Moderate Learning Difficulties

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the options open to pupils who leave moderate learning disability schools such as Rosstulla Special school at the age of 16 and to make a statement. (AQW 1940/00)

Mr McGuinness: When pupils with moderate learning difficulties leave school at the age of 16, the options for them are as follows : (a) a place on an ordinary course at a college of further education; (b) a place on a specialised course for pupils with learning difficulties at a college of further education; (c) a place on a Jobskills Programme; (d) employment; (e) a place at a special school for pupils with severe learning difficulties. Advice and guidance on the options available are provided by school principals and careers officers of the Training & Employment Agency for pupils from the age of 14.

The aim of the existing arrangements is to ensure that pupils with moderate learning difficulties leaving school at 16 have as wide a range of options available to them as those who do not have such learning difficulties. This seems a reasonable position and I have no plans to change it.

Moderate Learning Difficulty Schools

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to confirm that pupils leaving moderate learning difficulty (MLD) schools to enter Jobskills provision will subsequently discover their "statement of special educational need" has been withdrawn, thus preventing them from opting for transfer to a severe learning difficulty (SLD) school and to make a statement. (AQW 1941/00)

Mr McGuinness: Statements of special educational needs may be maintained until the age of 19 where the young person is a registered pupil at a school. When a young person leaves school over the upper limit of compulsory school age (16), an education and library board is obliged to discontinue the statement since the young person will no longer be a registered pupil at a school. Where a board maintains a statement of special educational needs on a child, this must be reviewed annually. Annual reviews of statements from age 14 onwards are intended to plan the most suitable destination for the young person on leaving school. Those will have been attended by principals and class teachers, parents, educational psychologists, health professionals, careers officers and board officers. By the age of 16 the young person's potential on leaving school should have been fully assessed. It is therefore unlikely that a young person

who was considered unsuitable for Jobskills would be allowed to go on such a programme. In the unlikely event of that happening, the parents would have to approach the board about re-instating the statement. A board, however, would not be prepared to consider this and amend it to specify a special school for severe learning difficulties, unless it were convinced this was the most appropriate form of provision for the young person.

Moderate Learning Difficulty Schools

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to consider introducing a curriculum designed for pupils in moderate learning difficulty (MLD) schools.

(AQW 1943/00)

Mr McGuinness: The statutory curriculum is a common entitlement for all pupils, and the programmes of study are designed to provide a broad and balanced curriculum with equal access for all pupils. At each Key Stage, an access statement provides teachers with guidance on providing pupils who have particular needs but who are not otherwise exempted, with a curriculum which is appropriate and relevant to their needs and abilities. The current curriculum is therefore designed to meet the needs of every pupil, without the need for exceptional arrangements.

In addition, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) is currently undertaking a review of the school curriculum here, taking into account the changing needs of pupils, society and the economy in the new millennium. As part of this review, CCEA is proposing to include a revised access statement, which will emphasise equality of opportunity for all pupils and will be sufficiently inclusive and flexible to meet the diverse needs of all pupils including those with special educational needs.

List 99

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education how many teachers are registered on List 99. (AQW 1946/00)

Mr McGuinness: As of 16 February 2001, the names of 23 individuals excluded by the Department of Education appear on List 99.

Home Education Tutors

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Education to detail the breakdown by religious affiliation of home education tutors in each education and library board area.

(AQW 1961/00)

Mr McGuinness: It is not possible to provide this information, nor would it be appropriate to do so.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

National Minimum Wage

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the impact of the minimum wage on average earnings.

(AQW 1835/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The National Minimum Wage (NMW), a reserved matter, was introduced to help people on low pay rather than assist with growth of average earnings. The Government's evidence to the Low Pay Commission in December 2000 reported that the NMW appears to have had little discernible effect on average earnings growth. It found, however, that the minimum wage has helped to bring about a narrowing in the spread of earnings between the highest and lowest paid, a reversal of the long-term trend of a widening earnings gap that began at the end of the 1970s. Evidence also shows that the NMW has assisted in boosting the pay of more women workers, narrowing the differential between men and women's pay.

The Northern Ireland New Earnings Survey indicates that over the period April 1998 to April 2000 average adult hourly earnings, excluding overtime, increased by 10.0% for females and 4.4% for males, and 9.6% for those working in manual occupations as compared to 6.7% for those in non-manual occupations.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the procedure for dealing with complaints of a political nature in respect of the work of Northern Ireland Tourist Board offices. (AQW 1871/00)

Sir Reg Empey: NITB has standard procedures in place to deal with complaints in respect of its work. Such procedures do not make exception for complaints of a political nature.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of complaints received regarding the political content of briefings given by the Press Officer of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

(AQW 1872/00)

Sir Reg Empey: No complaint has ever been received regarding the political content of briefings given by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board Press Office.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of employees in the Northern Ireland Tourist Board Press Office who are relatives of Social Democratic Labour Party Ministers.

(AQW 1873/00)

Sir Reg Empey: NITB Personnel Records are held in accordance with current fair employment legislation. Records relate to individuals only and do not document details of relatives.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of people who are currently employed in the Press Office of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

(AQW 1874/00)

Sir Reg Empey: There are four people employed in the Press Office of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board – A Press/PR Manager, two Press Officers and an Administrative Officer.

Textile and Clothing Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will detail the benefits to the textile and clothing industry in Northern Ireland from his recent European Marketing Campaign. (AQW 1902/00)

Sir Reg Empey: During our promotional visit to Europe we presented the Northern Ireland Trade and Investment opportunity to senior business leaders and influencers across all sectors.

In my meeting with Herr Ernst Schwannhold, Minister for the Economy and SMEs in North Rhine Westphalia, we discussed the possibility of creating strategic alliances in a number of fields including textiles, and I am looking at ways to develop this further.

Since my return, I have become aware that a European textile producer has visited IDB to hold initial discussions about joint venture and marketing opportunities in Northern Ireland.

Consultancy Services

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his projected spend on consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year. (AQW 1926/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The total projected spend planned for consultancy services in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is £2,795,550.00.

Tourism Prospects for Newry and Armagh

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he is taking to increase the number of tourists visiting Newry and Armagh.

(AQO 926/00)

Sir Reg Empey: To improve tourism prospects for Newry and Armagh, NITB has awarded over £5.3m to capital and marketing projects in the constituency since 1996. NITB supports local programmes including the South Armagh Tourism Initiative, the Armagh Marketing Initiative and the Armagh-Monaghan Border Towns Initiative.

Job Creation in Rural Areas

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans to encourage job creation in rural areas and what discussions he has had with other departments to ensure his objectives are met.

(AQO 922/00)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department is working closely with DRD, DARD and DHFETE to ensure that the specific employment needs of rural areas are addressed in accordance with the draft Programme for Government and our commitment to assisting New TSN areas, many of which are rural.

Electronic Methods to Improve Efficiency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans for the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and public access to information within his Department.

(AQO 872/00)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department is currently developing an e-business strategy, which will set out a prioritised list of key services to be delivered to the citizen via electronic means. It will be available by early May 2001. Several of my Department's agencies already use electronic methods for public access.

Harland and Wolff

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the current situation at Harland and Wolff.

(AQO 904/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The company is clearly facing a very lean time at present. However, a conditional contract is in place with AWSR Shipping Ltd for construction of two ro-ro vessels as part of a wider service contract to be entered into between AWSR and the Ministry of Defence. This contract is crucial to the ability of the company to re-establish itself on a commercial footing and

negotiations are continuing between the parties in efforts to make the contract effective as quickly as possible.

Impact of Proposed Aggregate Tax

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the impact of the proposed aggregate tax on the Northern Ireland economy.

(AQO 889/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Mark Durkan made a statement in the Assembly on 12 December 2000 about the steps that he and Ministerial Colleagues were taking to fully assess the impact of the levy on the local economy.

Our initial assessment is that up to 4,000 jobs could be at risk in the industry, but work is continuing urgently between relevant Departments and the Quarry Products Association to establish the full economic impact.

Economic Development in Newry and Armagh

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of economic development in the parliamentary constituency of Newry and Armagh.

(AQO 897/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The constituency shares in the economic success of Northern Ireland with the Bank of Ireland's recent investment announcement reflecting the area's competitive cost base, infrastructure and skills availability. However, the closure of Adria underlines the need for the local economy to continuously adjust to changes in the broader economic environment.

American Investment

Dr Ian Adamson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the slow down in the North American economy will have an adverse impact on his endeavours to attract American investment to Northern Ireland.

(AQO 936/00)

Sir Reg Empey: North America has been the main source of inward investment into Northern Ireland in recent years and will remain a key target market for IDB. It is too early to say what impact the slowing of the US economy will have on such investment in Northern Ireland.

Information Technology Jobs

Mr David Ford asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of information technology jobs created in Northern Ireland in the last twelve months.

(AQO 918/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Information on the number of jobs created in any sector is not available. However, the latest employee job figures for September 2000 show an estimated 4,320 employee jobs in companies involved in computer and related activities. Between September 1999 and September 2000, the number of employee jobs in this industry increased by 730 (20.2%).

Call Centres and Integrated Communication Technology Units

Mr Eddie McGrady asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his strategy for the location of call centres and Integrated Communication Technology (ICT) units in regional towns in Northern Ireland and to make a statement.

(AQO 883/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Decisions on location of such projects rest with investors. Historically the majority have located in Belfast. IDB continues to work closely with councils and differentiates levels of financial assistance to encourage investors to consider other areas. Londonderry and Newry are examples of success in that regard.

Textile and Clothing Industry

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if, in view of the recent consultative review of the textile and clothing Industry, he will undertake to increase funding for Research and Development for those textile/clothing firms engaged in value added activities.

(AQO 885/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The Kurt Salmon Associates review has set out an action plan for the future of the textile and clothing industry, of which Research and Development (R&D) is a key component. I would welcome a significant increase in the level of R&D being undertaken in the sector, and expect the action plan arising from the consultative review to lead to a much greater number of R&D projects coming forward to my Department for consideration.

Knockmore Hill Industrial Park

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail if the Industrial Development Board has any plans to make an announcement in respect of job creation at the Knockmore Hill site, Lisburn.

(AQO 878/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Knockmore Hill Industrial Park is one of IDB's new strategic locations and is the main industrial estate in the Lagan Valley Constituency.

The developments currently evident on site are in connection with the expansion and relocation of a Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) growth company.

ENVIRONMENT

Human Rights Legislation

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment of the impact of human rights legislation on the planning process and to make a statement. (AQW 1833/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): The Department of the Environment has been examining the current system of planning and appeals in the context of human rights legislation. It is an evolving area and the Department will continue to actively review policy and procedure in the light of emerging legal judgements.

Third-Party Right of Appeal

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail if the introduction of human rights legislation into Northern Ireland will impact on the current absence of a third party right of appeal to planning applications. (AQW 1834/00)

Mr Foster: The Department of the Environment has been examining the current system of planning and appeals in Northern Ireland in the context of human rights legislation. The Department believes that there are well-established procedures within the planning process through which third parties can submit representations and objections. The Department recognises, however, that it is an evolving area and will continue to keep procedures and policy under review.

Planning (Amendment) Legislation

Ms Morrice asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the proposed timetable for the introduction of Planning (Amendment) legislation. (AQW 1840/00)

Mr Foster: The proposed Planning (Amendment) Bill is part of the current legislative programme, but there remain several policy areas relating to the proposals that need further consideration.

Although the timetable for introduction has yet to be finalised, the legislation will be introduced during the next Assembly session.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr Clyde asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of telecommunication masts erected in the South Antrim area in each of the last five years. (AQW 1877/00)

Mr Foster: My Department does not hold details of the number of telecommunications masts actually erected. As with most planning approvals, a developer has five

years from the date of a decision notice within which to commence a development.

However, 63 applications for telecommunications masts were approved in the South Antrim constituency area in the last five years.

Legislation - Construction of Apartments

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to undertake to bring forward specific legislation in relation to the building of apartments. (AQW 1879/00)

Mr Foster: It would not be practical to legislate on that matter. I am aware however, of growing concerns regarding apartments. The best way forward is through clear planning policy with associated planning guidance.

My Department proposes to issue in the spring a final Planning Policy Statement entitled 'Quality Residential Environments' (PPS 7). This will provide a context against which the design of proposed housing developments both on greenfield and within existing urban areas can be considered, including their locational context.

Around the same time we also expect to publish for public consultation a draft Development Control Advice Note entitled 'Small Unit Housing – New Development in Existing Residential Areas'. This will provide planning guidance specifically related to proposals for small unit housing, including apartments, within existing residential areas.

The Department for Regional Development will also be preparing a Regional Planning Policy Statement (RPPS) entitled 'Housing in Settlements'. Preparation of that RPPS will follow normal procedures, including public consultation, which will provide an opportunity to comment on the relevant issues.

Planning Service's Consultation Procedures

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans to enhance the Planning Service's consultation procedures. (AQW 1880/00)

Mr Foster: The Department has a statutory duty to consult district councils on every planning application received, during the preparation of development plans and on the preparation of planning policy.

The Planning Service, recognising that individuals and groups have important contributions to make to the planning process, publish a variety of documents aimed at improving public awareness of the planning system, and consults widely before introducing new planning policies.

The Planning Service facilitates the involvement of local communities in the preparation of development plans for their areas by ensuring that each stage of the process is publicised, by organising public meetings at

convenient locations and by making officials available for discussions. In addition to advertising applications as required by law, the Planning Service operates a neighbour notification scheme. The Planning Service will continue to examine ways of improving public consultation and participation.

The Planning Service is presently piloting new approaches to public consultation during the preparation of development plans. Issues papers have been published as part of the preparation of the Ards and Down and Magherafelt Area Plans. This innovative approach replaces the traditional publication of preliminary proposals and asks the people a series of questions about the future needs of the area in which they live. The intention is to facilitate discussion by the public, elected representatives and interest groups on the future development of their area, as input to the formulation of specific proposals in a draft plan. To assist that process, the Department has commissioned Community Technical Aid to co-ordinate the views of the community to the issues raised in the publications.

Planning Appeals by Third Parties

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the current position in regard to the right of planning appeal by third parties and to make a statement. (AQW 1881/00)

Mr Foster: Under Article 32 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 there is no provision for a right of appeal by third parties against planning decisions.

There are, however, well-established procedures within the planning process through which third parties can submit representations and objections in relation to planning proposals.

The Department recognises, however, that the area is of considerable public interest and will continue to keep procedures and policy under review.

Development Control Advice Note 8 (DCAN 8)

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the proposed timetable for the updating of the Development Control Advice Note 8 (DCAN 8). (AQW 1882/00)

Mr Foster: The Development Control Advice Note entitled "Small Unit Housing - New Development in Existing Residential Areas" will be published in draft in the spring. A Planning Policy Statement on "Quality Residential Environments" (PPS 7) will also be published in final form in the spring. Both documents will be material considerations in the determination of planning applications and are designed to provide a clearer

context for the consideration of proposals for development within existing communities.

Townscape Areas within East Londonderry

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the location of designated townscape areas within East Londonderry. (AQW 1883/00)

Mr Foster: In the East Londonderry constituency, Portrush contains three areas of Townscape Character as designated in the "North East Area Plan 2002, Alteration No 1, Portrush".

They are:

1. The Landsdowne Crescent Terrace No. 2-21.
2. Bath Terrace, Antrim Gardens and the north-eastern end of Bath Street.
3. The entire length of Kerr Street and Mark Street from the former Town Hall to No 64 including the Mount Royal Terrace and the group of buildings up to the Presbyterian Church, hall and former manse.

Unlicensed Vehicles

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the cost to the Department of prosecutions taken against owners of unlicensed vehicles in each of the last three years. (AQW 1918/00)

Mr Foster: The collection of Vehicle Excise Duty, and associated activities, including enforcement, are excepted matters. They are carried out in Northern Ireland by DVLNI under the terms of a formal agency agreement between the DOE and the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions.

The total cost of enforcement in 1999/00 was £1,203,800. The forecast estimate for 2000/01 is £1,156,388. The costs have been taken from the agency's financial system introduced in 1999/00. Costs prior to that year could be obtained only at disproportionate costs.

The following table shows the enforcement activity over the past three years.

Year	Out of Court Settlements	Court Convictions	Total	Revenue Collected
1998/99	11,426	3,471	14,897	1,823,759.22
1999/00	11,272	1,886	13,158	1,492,099.43
*2000/01	10,513	1,657	12,170	1,426,979.15

*Figures up to the end of January 2001

Consultancy Services

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his projected spend on consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year. (AQW 1929/00)

Mr Foster: Projected spend on consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year is estimated at some £1.2 million.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

National Minimum Wage

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of employers in Northern Ireland who have contravened the National Minimum Wage legislation since its inception and to make a statement. (AQW 1851/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): This is a reserved matter and, therefore, I am unable to comment.

Legal Advisers

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the criteria by which Government Departments employ legal advisers. (AQW 1861/00)

Mr Durkan: Legal advice and services to the Northern Ireland Government Departments are provided by the Departmental Solicitor's Office. Where, exceptionally, particular expertise, or additional resources, are required, or it would not be cost-effective to do the work in-house, Government Departments may employ private sector legal advisers. The criteria applied by Government Departments in employing legal advisers from the private sector are value for money, and the particular experience and expertise required in each case.

Private sector legal advisers have also represented Ministers in litigation against other Ministers, but in such circumstances the legal adviser is employed privately by the Minister and not by the Government Department.

Executive Programme Funds

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how the Executive Programme fund can support the Children's Commission in the Foyle constituency. (AQW 1894/00)

Mr Durkan: At its meeting on 25 January, the Executive agreed a process for making allocations from the five Executive Programme funds (EPfs). Departments were provided with guidance on preparing bids for

projects that might receive support from the funds and have now submitted their proposals. The Executive have agreed to put in place special measures for the Children's Fund to allow voluntary sector projects to benefit from it. An interdepartmental working group is being established to consider and implement the arrangements needed for this. However, it should be borne in mind that there will be considerable competition for the available funding under each EPf and it may not be possible to fund every eligible project.

North/South Implementation Bodies

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if, pursuant to AQW 1243/00, he will confirm that expenditure was incurred by the North/South Implementation Bodies during the period the Assembly was suspended. (AQW 1908/00)

Mr Durkan: Some costs were incurred maintaining the North/South Implementation Bodies and the other institutions established in the Good Friday Agreement during the period of suspension. The expenditure was necessary to retain staff and accommodation until power was restored to the Assembly.

As I stated in my answer to AQW 1243/00, it is not possible to detail the amount spent by the bodies during the period of suspension as their annual accounts cannot be disaggregated without incurring disproportionate costs.

Legal Services

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what criteria, other than cost, are used to assess applications for the provision of legal services. (AQW 1923/00)

Mr Durkan: I refer you to my answer to AQW 1861/00 put down by Edwin Poots MLA.

Legal Services

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what arrangements are in place to provide legal services to Departments. (AQW 1924/00)

Mr Durkan: Legal advice and services to the Northern Ireland Government Departments are provided by the Departmental Solicitor's Office. Where, exceptionally, particular expertise, or additional resources, are required, or it would not be cost-effective to do the work in-house, legal services may be obtained on behalf of Government Departments from solicitors in the private sector. Where solicitors are appointed from the private sector, their selection is normally by way of competitive tender.

External Legal Services

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what tendering arrangements are in place to secure legal services from outside the public sector.
(AQW 1932/00)

Mr Durkan: I refer you to my answer to AQW 1924/00.

Fuel Duty

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what representations he has received from haulier associations concerning the level of fuel duty.
(AQW 1936/00)

Mr Durkan: I have no record of any meetings with, or letters from, haulier associations on the subject of fuel duty, although I am aware of representations having been made to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Capital Requirement of Ulster Hospital

Mrs Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the capital requirements of the Ulster Hospital (b) when a decision will be made on meeting those requirements and (c) what funding will be allocated to those capital requirements.
(AQW 1679/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): [*holding answer 20 February 2001*]: The Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trust has recently provided my Department with its strategic development plan, which sets out proposals for capital investment at the Ulster Hospital. My officials are urgently assessing the detail of the plan, which proposes a major upgrade of the hospital costing around £98 million phased over a seven-year period. When that has been completed, I will consider the options available and announce my decision on the proposals as soon as possible.

The first stage of the plan was the urgent replacement of critical items of medical equipment. My Department has accepted the trust's assessment of its immediate requirements and has provided an additional £1.48 million capital for this.

As with any major scheme, the trust will be asked to make a detailed financial appraisal of its proposals in a business case. When that has been done, I will be able to

consider the timetable and funding for the redevelopment programme.

Tá a phlean forbartha straitéiseach curtha ar fáil ag Iontaobhas SSS Ospidéal agus Phobal Uladh do mo Roinn ar na malluibh, plean a leagann amach a mholtaí ar infheistíocht chaipitil ag Ospidéal Uladh. Tá mo chuid feidhmeannach ag déanamh measúnú práinneach ar shonraí an phlean, a mholann uasghrádú don ospidéal a chosnódh thart faoi £98 milliún agus a chéimneofaí thar thréimhse seacht mbliana. Nuair a bheidh seo críochnaithe déanfaidh mé machnamh ar na roghanna a bhéas ar fáil agus fógróidh mé mo chinneadh ar na moltaí chomh luath agus is féidir.

Ba é an chéad chéim den phlean ná go ndéanfaí athsholáthar práinneach ar fhearas rithábhachtach míochaine. Ghlac mo Roinn le measúnú an iontaobhais ar na riachtanais atá de dhíth air láithreach agus chuir sí £1.48 milliún sa bhreis de chaipiteal chuige seo.

Mar is gnáth le haon mhórsceim, iarrfar ar an iontaobhas luacháil mhionchruinn airgeadais a dhéanamh i gcás gnó. Nuair a dhéanfar seo, beidh mé ábalta machnamh a dhéanamh ar an chlár ama agus an mhaoiniú don chlár athfhorbartha.

Funding Allocated to Mental Health

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total funding allocated to mental health, the amounts allocated to each Trust Board area and what programmes are funded by each Trust Board in respect of mental health care.
(AQW 1704/00)

Ms de Brún: [*holding answer 20 February 2001*]: The table below gives details of expenditure on mental health in overall terms and as provided by trusts for 1999/00. Information on the programmes funded by each trust in respect of mental health could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Trust	Community	Hospital	Personal Social Services	Total
	£	£	£	£
Armagh and Dungannon HSS Trust	718,630	4,706,795	1,975,818	7,401,243
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust		2,513,126		2,513,126
Craigavon and Banbridge Community HSS Trust	1,099,016	3,667,676	1,747,248	6,513,940
Causeway HSS Trust	585,644	1,981,022	1,107,188	3,673,854

Trust	Community	Hospital	Personal Social Services	Total
	£	£	£	£
Down and Lisburn HSS Trust	1,443,845	9,023,448	2,294,456	12,761,749
Foyle HSS Trust	2,423,668	3,749,466	4,079,197	10,252,331
Greenpark Healthcare Trust		1,291,835		1,291,835
Homefirst HSS Trust	2,368,178	13,857,800	5,272,517	21,498,495
Mater Hospital HSS Trust		3,434,497		3,434,497
Newry and Mourne HSS Trust	393,099	736,547	1,763,913	2,893,559
North and West Belfast HSS Trust	1,075,754	5,263,294	3,343,344	9,682,392
Royal Hospitals HSS Trust		270,451		270,451
South and East Belfast HSS Trust	3,914,723	12,866,046	3,011,525	19,792,294
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	3,946,006	7,458,797	3,832,797	15,237,600
Ulster North Down and Ards HSS Trust	2,661,473	2,458,942	1,526,896	6,647,311
Total	20,630,036	73,279,742	29,954,899	123,864,677

Léiríonn an tábla thíos sonraí an chaiteachais fhoriomláin ar shláinte meabhrach a chuir iontaobhais ar fáil do 1999/00. Ní féidir eolas ar na cláracha maoinithe ag gach iontaobhas maidir le sláinte mheabhrach a fháil ach ar chostas díreireach.

Iontaobhas	Pobal	Otharlann	Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta	Iomlán
	£	£	£	£
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha agus Dhún Geanainn	718,630	4,706,795	1,975,818	7,401,243
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Cathrach Bhéal Feirste		2,513,126		2,513,126
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Craigavon agus Dhroichead na Banna	1,099,016	3,667,676	1,747,248	6,513,940

Iontaobhas	Pobal	Otharlann	Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta	Iomlán
	£	£	£	£
Iontaobhas SSS An Chlocháin	585,644	1,981,022	1,107,188	3,673,854
Iontaobhas SSS An Dúin agus Lios na gCearrbhach	1,443,845	9,023,448	2,294,456	12,761,749
Iontaobhas SSS An Fheabhail	2,423,668	3,749,466	4,079,197	10,252,331
Iontaobhas Chúram Sláinte na Páirce Glaise		1,291,835		1,291,835
Iontaobhas SSS Homefirst	2,368,178	13,857,800	5,272,517	21,498,495
Iontaobhas SSS na hOtharlainne Máithreachais		3,434,497		3,434,497
Iontaobhas SSS An Iúir agus an Mhúrn	393,099	736,547	1,763,913	2,893,559
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	1,075,754	5,263,294	3,343,344	9,682,392
Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Rioga na nOtharlann		270,451		270,451
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Theas agus Thoir	3,914,723	12,866,046	3,011,525	19,792,294
Iontaobhas SSS Loch-cheantar Speirín	3,946,006	7,458,797	3,832,797	15,237,600
Iontaobhas SSS Uladh, An Dúin Thuaidh agus Na nArd	2,661,473	2,458,942	1,526,896	6,647,311
Iomlán	20,630,036	73,279,742	29,954,899	123,864,677

Clinical Waste Disposal

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by hospital, (a) the contractor appointed to dispose of clinical waste (b) the method of disposal and (c) the cost of disposal.

(AQW 1727/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: Following the signing on 4 August 1998 of a ten-year principal agreement with Sterile Technologies Ireland Limited for the disposal of all clinical waste within the island, Sterile Technologies Inc. (NI) Limited became responsible for the collection, treatment and disposal of clinical waste arising at each health and social services (HSS) trust and agency.

The contractor collects the clinical waste and transports approximately 95% of it to the treatment facility at Antrim Hospital, where it is shredded and thermally disinfected to render it unrecognisable and safe before going to licensed landfill.

Although the treated waste is currently being landfilled, there is provision in the contract for recycling which the contractor is currently pursuing. The remainder of the clinical waste is incinerated in Great Britain.

The projected annual disposal costs to each HSS trust and agency are presented in the table below. As the contract is managed on an individual Trust/Agency basis a breakdown by hospital is not available.

PROJECTED ANNUAL COST OF CLINICAL WASTE DISPOSAL FOR HSS BODIES

HSS Body	Cost ¹
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust	£263,000
Greenpark HSS Trust	£80,000
Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust	£384,000
Ulster Community and Hospital HSS Trust	£170,000
South & East Belfast HSS Trust	£63,000
North & West Belfast HSS Trust	£56,000
Homefirst Community HSS Trust	£95,000
Causeway HSS Trust	£78,000
Altnagelvin HSS Trust	£124,000
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	£137,000
Foyle HSS Trust	£60,000
Craigavon HSS Trust	£118,000
Armagh & Dungannon HSS Trust	£77,000
Newry & Mourne HSS Trust	£85,000
Mater HSS Trust	£55,000
United HSS Trust	£170,000
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	£122,000
Craigavon & Banbridge Community HSS Trust	£22,000
NI Blood Transfusion Service	£73,000
NI Regional Medical Physics Agency	See Note 2
NI Ambulance Service	See Note 2

1 Based on the projected annual volume of clinical waste generated by each HSS body including the cost for clinical waste packaging. It does not include the costs for the segregation and manual handling of the clinical waste by each HSS body before collection by STI (NI) Ltd.

2 Costs for these HSS bodies are not available.

I ndiaidh príomhaontú deich mbliana a shíniú ar an 4ú Lúnasa 1998 le Teicneolaíochtaí Steiriúla Éireann Teoranta do dhiúscairt dramhaíola clínicíúla uile ar an oileán seo, tháinig freagracht as cruinniú, cóireáil agus as diúscairt dramhaíola clínicíúla ó gach gníomhaireacht agus iontaobhas sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta (SSS) ar Theicneolaíochtaí Steiriúla Corp.(TÉ) Teoranta.

Cruinníonn an conraitheoir an dramhaíl chliniciúil agus iompraíonn sé thart fã 95% di go dtí an áis chóireála ag Otharlann Aontroma áit a stialltar agus a ndíghalraítear go teirmeach í chun í a dhéanamh do-aitheanta agus slán sula dtugtar go láithreán líonta talún ceadúnaithe í.

Cé go bhfuil an dramhaíl chóireáilte á cur isteach i láithreán líonta talún faoi láthair, tá foráil sa chonradh dá hathchúrsáil agus tá an conraitheoir a leanúint seo faoi láthair. Dóitear an chuid eile den dramhaíl chliniciúil sa Bhreatain Mhór.

Léirítear na costais dhramhaíola bhliantúla réamh-mheasta do gach iontaobhas agus gníomhaireacht SSS sa tábla thíos. Ós rud é go stiúrtar an conradh ar bhonn iontaobhais/gníomhaireachta SSS aonair níl miondealú de réir otharlainne ar fáil.

COSTAS BLIANTÚIL RÉAMH-MHEASTA DO DHIÚSCAIRT DRAMHAÍOLA CLINICIÚLA D'FHOIRIS SSS

Foras SSS	Costas ¹
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Cathrach Bhéal Feirste	£263,000
Iontaobhas SSS na Páirce Glaise	£80,000
Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Ríoga na nOtharlann	£384,000
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal agus Otharlann Uladh	£170,000
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Theas & Thoir	£63,000
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	£56,000
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Homefirst	£95,000
Iontaobhas SSS an Chlocháin	£78,000
Iontaobhas SSS Alt na nGealbhan	£124,000
Iontaobhas SSS Loch-cheantar Speirín	£137,000
Iontaobhas SSS An Fheabhail	£60,000
Iontaobhas SSS Craigavon	£118,000
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha & Dhún Geanainn	£77,000
Iontaobhas SSS An Iúir & an Mhúrn	£85,000
Iontaobhas SSS an Mater	£55,000
Iontaobhas SSS Aontaithe	£170,000
Iontaobhas SSS An Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach	£122,000
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna	£22,000
Seirbhís Fhuilaitríthe Thuaisceart Éireann	£73,000
Gníomhaireacht Réigiúnach Fisice Míochaine TÉ	Féach Nóta 2
Seirbhís Otharcharr Thuaisceart Éireann	Féach Nóta 2

1 Bunaithe ar mhéid bliantúil réamh-mheasta na dramhaíola clínicíúla ginte ag gach Foras SSS, an costas do phacáil dramhaíola clínicíúla san áireamh. Ní chuireann sé na costais do dheighilt agus do láimhseáil láimhe na dramhaíola clínicíúla ag gach Foras SSS san áireamh roimh a cruinniú ag TSÉ (TÉ) Tta.

2 Níl costais do na Forais SSS seo ar fáil.

Mental Health Programme of Care

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people

currently receiving 'care in the community' in each Trust Board area. (AQW 1736/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: Information is not collected in the form requested.

Information on the numbers of persons receiving care packages in the mental health programme of care for the quarter ending 30 September 2000 is available and is detailed in the table below.

CARE PACKAGES IN EFFECT, 30 SEPTEMBER 2000; MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMME OF CARE ONLY

Trust	Number
Armagh & Dungannon	60
Causeway	59
Craigavon & Banbridge	39
Down Lisburn	59
Foyle	106
Homefirst	164
Newry & Mourne	83
North & West Belfast	63
South & East Belfast	122
Sperrin Lakeland	229
Ulster Community & Hospitals	11
Total	995

Ní chruinnítear eolas san fhoirm a iarradh.

Tá eolas ar líon na ndaoine atá ag fáil pacáistí cúraim sa chlár sláinte meabhrach cúraim don ráithe ag críochnú an 30ú Meán Fómhair 2000, ar fáil agus mionléirítear sa tábla thíos é.

PACÁISTÍ CÚRAM I BHFEIDHM, 30Ú MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2000; CLÁR CÚRAIM NA SLÁINTE MEABHRACH AMHÁIN

Iontaobhas	Líon
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	60
An Clochán	59
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	39
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	59
An Feabhal	106
Homefirst	164
An tÍúr & an Mhúrn	83
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	63
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	122
Loch-cheantar Speirín	229
Pobal & Otharlanna Uladh	11
Iomlán	995

Podiatry Services

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to increase

financial resources in the podiatry services within the Causeway Health and Social Services Trust.

(AQW 1741/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: I am aware that the Northern Health and Social Services Board recognises that there is a need for resource investment for podiatry services to implement the CREST Guidelines. This is a potential area for future investment detailed within the Northern Board's Services and Financial Framework Document 2002-2005 and will be assessed by the board against other service pressures and priorities in the allocation of the resources available to the board.

Is feasach domh go n-aithníonn Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Tuaiscirt go bhfuil gá le hinfheistíocht in acmhainní do sheirbhísí cosliachta le treoirilínte CREST a chur i bhfeidhm. Tá ionchais na hinfheistíochta ag an réimse seo sa todhchaí mar a léirítear i gCreatcháipéis Seirbhísí agus Airgeadais 2002-2005 de chuid Bhord an Tuaiscirt. Measúnóidh an Bord iad in éadan brúnna agus tosaíochtaí seirbhíse eile i ndáileadh na n-acmhainní atá ar fáil don bhord.

Podiatry Services

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of podiatry service delivery within the Causeway Health and Social Services Trust. (AQW 1742/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: The podiatry service within Causeway Health and Social Services Trust is currently provided across all programmes of care and in a variety of settings such as health centres, community clinics, GP practices, hospitals, residential nursing homes, day centres and in the patient's own home.

The service has been subject to increasing demand over the past number of years, partly due to demographic factors such as an ageing population plus an increase in the number of patients with more complex needs being referred to the service. The amount of podiatry activity delivered within the trust has increased by 12% since 1997/98.

Soláthraítear an tseirbhís chosliachta in Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta An Chlocháin faoi láthair in iomlán na gcláracha cúraim agus i láithreáin éagsúla ar nós ionad sláinte, clinicí pobail agus cleachtas gnáthdhochtúirí, otharlann, tithe cónaithe altranais, ionad lae agus i dteach an othair é/í féin.

Tá éileamh ar an tseirbhís seo ag méadú le roinnt blianta anuas ar bhealach mar gheall ar fhachtóirí déimeagrafacha ar nós daonra níos sine, agus méadú i líon na n-othar le riachtanais níos coimpléascaí a atreoraítear go dtí an tseirbhís. Mhéadaigh méid na gníomhaíochta cosliachta a sholáthraítear san iontaobhas faoi 12% ó 1997/98.

Podiatry Services

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the average waiting times for initial referrals and follow-up appointments for podiatry services within Causeway Health and Social Services Trust in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1743/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: The information requested is not available.

The length of waiting time from referral to initial assessment is as follows:

Year Ending	Less than 3 months	3 - 6 months	6 months +	Total
31/03/97	670	64	6	740
31/03/98	672	140	54	866
31/03/99	725	275	18	1018
31/03/00	719	484	48	1251

The most recent figures available for the period 1/04/00 to 30/9/00 indicated that 731 people had been referred to the podiatry services in Causeway Trust and were still awaiting initial assessment.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil.

Seo a leanas fad an ama feithimh ó atreorú go céadmheasúnú:

Bliain ag críochnú	Níos lú ná 3 mhí	3 - 6 mhí	6 mhí +	Iomlán
31/03/97	670	64	6	740
31/03/98	672	140	54	866
31/03/99	725	275	18	1018
31/03/00	719	484	48	1251

Léirigh na figiúirí is déanaí atá ar fáil don tréimhse 1/04/00 go dtí an 30/0/00 gur atreoraíodh 731 dhuine go dtí an tseirbhís chosliachta in Iontaobhas An Chlocháin agus go raibh siad ag fanacht ar a gcéadmheasúnú go fóill.

Professions Allied to Medicine (PAMs) Services

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm (a) that the current provision of professions allied to medicine (PAMs) services for children with special needs, including those for speech and language therapy, is adequate and (b) if she has any plans to increase student places in this area. (AQW 1744/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: Although there has not been a formal assessment, my Department is aware that there are indications of

pressures on the current level of provision of therapy services to children with special needs. In addition, my Department has recently been advised that there is a high level of vacancy within the speech and language therapy profession in the north of Ireland and elsewhere.

Departmental officials are due to meet in early March 2001 with representatives of the education provider. At this meeting it is planned to discuss an increase in student intake levels for these professions.

Cé nach ndearnadh measúnú foirmiúil, tá a fhios ag an Roinn s'agam go bhfuil comharthaí brúnna ann ar leibhéal reatha soláthar seirbhísí teiripe do pháistí le riachtanais speisialta. Ina theannta sin, tugadh faisnéis don Roinn s'agam le déanaí go bhfuil ardleibhéal folúntas sa ghairm Teiripe Labhartha agus Teanga i dtuaisceart na hÉireann agus in áiteanna eile.

Tá oifigigh Ranna le bualadh go luath i Mí an Mhárta 2001 le hionadaithe an tSoláthraí Oideachais. Ag an chruinniú seo tá sé beartaithe méadú i leibhéil ghlacadh isteach mac léinn sna gairmeacha seo a phlé.

Reducing Hours Worked by Junior Doctors

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps she is taking to reduce the hours worked by junior doctors. (AQW 1769/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: The new contract and pay system introduced in December recognises the long hours of work still undertaken by many doctors in training. The new pay arrangements will provide fresh impetus to trusts to work with their junior medical staff to reduce the hours worked. In addition, my Department is in the process of recruiting staff to assist trusts in this task.

Aithníonn an córas nua conartha agus pá a tugadh isteach i Mí na Nollag na huaireanta fada oibre a dhéantar go fóill ag cuid mhór dochtúirí agus iad faoi oiliúint. Tabharfaidh na socruithe pá nua spreagadh úr do na hiontaobhais bheith ag obair lena bhfoirme míochaine sóisearacha leis na huaireanta a oibríonn siad a laghdú. Lena chois sin, tá mo Roinn ag earcú baill fhoirne faoi láthair le cuidiú leis na hiontaobhais san obair seo.

In-Vitro Fertilisation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm (a) that the Eastern Health and Social Services Board was paying for in-vitro fertilisation treatment prior to 23 October 2000 and (b) that this facility terminated on 23 October 2000 without prior notice being given to patients. (AQW 1782/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: The Eastern Health and Social Services Board has not to date commissioned in-vitro fertilisation treatment. I am aware, however, that some GPs in the Eastern Board area who previously prescribed medications for patients undergoing IVF treatment at the regional fertility centre at the Royal Group of Hospitals ceased to prescribe those medications recently. The provision of sub-fertility services, including in-vitro fertilisation treatment, is at present being considered by a group established by the Regional Medical Services Consortium, which commissions regional services on behalf of the four health and social services boards. I shall be considering all the issues involved in sub-fertility, including the provision of sub-fertility treatment and the prescribing of medication, when I receive the group's report.

Go dtí seo níl cóireáil thoirchiú in vitro coimisiúnaithe ag Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir. Tuigim, áfach, go bhfuil roinnt gnáthdhochtúirí ann i limistéar Bhord an Oirthir a d'ordaíodh cógais d'othair a bhí ag dul faoi chóireáil thoirchiú in vitro ag an lárionad toirchis áitiúil ag an Ghrúpa Ríoga Ospidéil agus gur éirigh siad as na cógais sin a ordú ar na mallaibh. Tá soláthar sheirbhísí fothoirchis, lena n-áirítear toirchiú in vitro, á mhachnamh faoi láthair ag grúpa a bunaíodh ag an Chuibhreannas Réigiúnach do Sheirbhísí Míochaine, a choimisiúnaíonn seirbhísí réigiúnacha ar son na gceithre bhord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta. Beidh mé ag machnamh na gceisteanna uilig a bhaineann leis an fhothoircheas, lena n-áirítear soláthar seirbhísí fothoirchis agus ordú cógais, nuair a gheobhaidh mé tuairisc an ghrúpa.

Admission of Children

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children admitted to adult wards by each health trust area within the last twelve months. (AQW 1789/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: This information is detailed in the table below.

CHILDREN (AGED UNDER 17) ADMITTED TO ADULT WARDS WITHIN THE LAST 12 MONTHS, BY TRUST

Craigavon & Banbridge	34
U C & H	234
Altnagelvin	1,119
Sperrin Lakeland	140
Newry & Mourne	396
BCH	564
Greenpark	49
Foyle	20
Down Lisburn	419
Armagh & Dungannon	N/A
Causeway	175

Mater	320
North & West Belfast	3
Craigavon Group	873
United	898
Royal	1,157
Total	6,401

Tá an t-eolas ar fáil sa tábla thíos.

PÁISTÍ (FAOI BHUN 17 MBLIANA) A GLACADH ISTEACH I MBARDAÍ D'AOSAIGH LE 12 MHÍ ANUAS, DE RÉIR IONTAOBHAIS

Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	34
P & O U	234
Alt na nGealbhan	1,119
Loch-Cheantar Speirín	140
An tÍúr & Múrna	396
OCB	564
An Pháirc Ghlas	49
An Feabhal	20
An Dún agus Lios na gCearrbhach	419
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	Níl ar fáil
An Clochán	175
An Mater	320
Tuaisceart & Iarthar Bhéal Feirste	3
Grúpa Craigavon	873
Na hOspidéal Aontaithe	898
An Grúpa Ríoga	1,157
Iomlán	6,401

Admission of Children

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children admitted to adult psychiatric wards by each Health Trust area within the last twelve months. (AQW 1790/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: This information is detailed in the table below.

CHILDREN (AGED UNDER 17) ADMITTED TO ADULT PSYCHIATRIC WARDS WITHIN THE LAST 12 MONTHS, BY TRUST

Craigavon & Banbridge	34
Homefirst	23
U C & H	0
Sperrin Lakeland	8
BCH	0
Foyle	10
Down Lisburn	10
Armagh & Dungannon	N/A

Causeway	0
Mater	7
North & West Belfast	6
South & East Belfast	5
Total	103

Tá an t-eolas ar fáil sa tábla thíos.

PÁISTÍ (FAOI BHUN 17 MBLIANA) A GLACADH ISTEACH I MBARDAÍ SÍCIATRACHA D'AOSAIGH LE 12 MHÍ ANUAS, DE RÉIR IONTAObHAIS

Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	34
Homefirst	23
P & O U	0
Loch-Cheantar Speirín	8
OCB	0
An Feabhal	10
An Dún agus Lios na gCearrbhach	10
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	Níl ar fáil
An Clochán	0
An Mater	7
Tuaisceart & Iarthar Bhéal Feirste	6
Deisceart & Oirthear Bhéal Feirste	5
Iomlán	103

Psychiatric Care in Northern Ireland

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) outline her policy on psychiatric care in Northern Ireland (b) confirm the number of psychiatric patients in Northern Ireland (c) detail the number of beds available for psychiatric patients and (d) give her assessment on the current provision of psychiatric care at Knockbracken Health Care Park.

(AQW 1793/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]:

- My policy for psychiatric care is to continue to develop a range of services that will enable people with a mental illness to live as full a life as possible in a setting best suited to their needs. Priorities include the development of community mental health teams, a comprehensive forensic mental health service, and child and adolescent services.
- Information on the number of psychiatric patients and the numbers of inpatient beds is not available in the form required. On 17 February 2000 there were a total of 1,489 psychiatric patients in hospital.
- In 1999/2000, the average number of available beds in the Mental Health Programme of Care here was 1,347.

- The average number of available beds at Knockbracken Healthcare Park was 153.

(a) Is é mo pholasáí ar an chúram síciatrach ná leanúint de bheith ag forbairt réimse seirbhísí a chuirfidh ar a gcumas do dhaoine a bhfuil meabhairghalar orthu a mbeatha a chaitheamh ar dhóigh chomh hiomlán agus is féidir sa suíomh is fearr a fhóireann dá riachtanais. Ar na tosaíochtaí tá forbairt a dhéanamh ar fhoirne pobail sláinte meabhrach, seirbhís chuimsitheach fhóiréinseach sláinte meabhrach, agus seirbhísí do pháistí agus ógánaigh.

(b) Níl aon eolas ar líon na n-othar síciatrach agus líon na leapacha d'othair chónaitheacha ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh. Ar 17 Feabhra 2000 bhí 1,489 othar síciatrach san iomlán sna hospidéal.

(c) I 1999/2000, ba é meánlíon na leapacha a bhí ar fáil i gClár Cúraim Sláinte Meabhrach anseo ná 1,347.

(d) Ba é 153 an mheánuimhir de leapacha a bhí faoi réin i bPáirc Chúram sláinte Knockbracken.

Western Health and Social Services Board

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail when she intends next to meet with representatives of the Western Health and Social Services Board on matters relating to health care.

(AQW 1798/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: I have arranged to meet with the chairman, members and staff of the Western Health and Social Services Board in the very near future. It will provide me with the opportunity to hear at first hand about the current issues facing the Board.

Shocraigh mé le bualadh leis an chathaoirleach, le baill agus le foireann Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair ar ball. Tabharfaidh seo an deis domh na saincheistanna reatha atá os comhair an bhoird a chluinstin.

Health and Social Service Boards

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the meetings she has had with representatives of each of Northern Ireland's Health and Social Services Boards relating to healthcare.

(AQW 1799/00)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 20 February 2001]: I have held formal meetings with representatives from each health and social services board on the following occasions:

20 June 2000	Southern Health and Social Services Board
7 July 2000	Southern Health and Social Services Board
7 August 2000	Southern Health and Social Services Board

7 August 2000	Western Health and Social Services Board
9 August 2000	Eastern Health and Social Services Board
10 August 2000	Northern Health and Social Services Board
12 September 2000	Eastern Health and Social Services Board
16 October 2000	All four Health and Social Services Boards
6 December 2000	All four Health and Social Services Board Chair

Bhí cruinnithe foirmiúla agam le hionadaithe ó gach bord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta ar na dátaí seo a leanas:

20 Meitheamh 2000	Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt
7 Iúil 2000	Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt
7 Lúnasa 2000	Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt
7 Lúnasa 2000	Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair
9 Lúnasa 2000	Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir
10 Lúnasa 2000	Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Tuaiscirt
12 Meán Fómhair 2000	Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir
16 Deireadh Fómhair 2000	Na Ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Uilig
6 Nollaig 2000	Cathaoirligh Uilig na gCeithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta

Electronic Methods to Improve Efficiency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has for the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and public access to information within her Department.

(AQW 1824/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department has been developing the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and communications, including the use of electronic mail and Internet and intranet technology. The most recent information systems strategy review was completed last June and identified other potential areas for efficiencies and the more effective use of information and communications technology. A new electronic business strategy is being developed and the resources which it is proposed to undertake include:

- the launch of a new Departmental website, which complies fully with the current guidelines, including those on disability access, and provides easier access to Departmental information and recently published documents;
- improvements in the use and management of information and technology to facilitate a better utilisation of the various sources of information available to the Department; and
- several projects which involve a high degree of collaborative working with other Departments.

Bhí an Roinn s'agam ag forbairt úsáid mhodhanna leictreonacha chun éifeachtacht agus cumarsáid a fheabhsú,

úsáid ríomhphoist, an t-idirlíon agus teicneolaíochta inlín san áireamh. Críochnaíodh an t-athbhreithniú is déanaí ar an Straitéis Chóras Eolais i Mí Mheithimh anuraidh agus aithníodh réimsí a bhfuil dealramh orthu d'éifeachtacht agus d'úsáid níos éifeachtaí theicneolaíocht eolais agus cumarsáide. Tá straitéis ghnó nua leictreonach á forbairt agus i measc na gcúraimí molta a ghlacfaidh sí uirthi féin le déanamh tá:

- lánseáil láithreán gréasáin Ranna nua, a dhéanfar go hiomlán de réir na dtreoirínte reatha, iad siúd ar sho-aimsiú míchumais san áireamh, agus a sholáthróidh infhaighteacht níos fusa ar eolas Ranna agus ar cháipéisí a foilsíodh le déanaí;
- feabhsuithe in úsáid agus i mbainistíocht eolais agus teicneolaíochta chun cuidiú le húsáid níos fearr a bhaint as na foinsí éagsúla eolais ar fáil don Roinn, agus
- roinnt tionscadal a bhfuil ardleibhéal comhoibrithe i gcomhar le Ranna eile i gceist.

Operating Theatres

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of operating theatres there are in each hospital in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1827/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on numbers of operating theatres in local hospitals as at 31 March 2000 (the latest date for which information is available) is detailed in the table below.

Hospital	Total
Altnagelvin	9
Erne	1
Tyrone County	1
Antrim	4
Coleraine	2
Mid-Ulster	2
Route	2
Whiteabbey	2
Craigavon Area	9
Daisy Hill	4
Downe	3
Lagan Valley	4
South Tyrone	3
Ards	2
Belfast City	12
Belvoir Park	1
Jubilee	1
Mater	5
Musgrave Park	6

Hospital	Total
RBHSC	3
Royal Maternity	1
Royal Victoria	17
Ulster	10
Total	104

Tá eolas ar líon na n-obrádlann in ospidéal áitiúla mar a bhí ar 31 Márta 2000 (an dáta is déanaí óna bhfuil eolas ar fáil) breactha síos sa tábla thíos.

Ospidéal	Iomlán
Alt na nGealbhan	9
An Éirne	1
Tír Eoghain	1
Aontroim	4
Cúil Raithin	2
Lár-Uladh	2
Route	2
An Mhainistir Bhán	2
Ceantar Craigavon	9
Cnoc Nóiníní	4
An Dún	3
Gleann Lagáin	4
Tír Eoghain	3
Na hArda	2
Cathair Bhéal Feirste	12
Páirc Belvoir	1
Iúbháile	1
Mater	5
Páirc Musgrave	6
ORBPT	3
Ríoga Máithreachas	1
Ríoga Victoria	17
Uladh	10
Iomlán	104

Provision of Health Care

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what arrangements are in place with health authorities in the Republic of Ireland concerning the provision of health care in the Republic of Ireland for patients from Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1828/00)

Ms de Brún: Urgent necessary treatment is available to any person from here visiting the South of Ireland if the need arises during their visit. Over and above those

arrangements, the provision of healthcare in the South of Ireland for patients from here is a matter for the relevant health boards, North and South. Hospitals North and South already cooperate closely in the provision of some services. In addition, work is being taken forward under the Good Friday Agreement to improve co-ordination and co-operation in accident and emergency services, planning for major emergencies, high-tech equipment, cancer research and health promotion.

Tá cóireál phráinneach riachtanach ar fáil do gach duine as an áit seo ag tabhairt cuairte ar Dheisceart na hÉireann má tá gá leis seal a chuairte. Lasmuigh de na socrúithe seo baineann foráil cúram sláinte i nDeisceart na hÉireann faoi choinne daoine ón áit seo leis na Boird bhainteacha ó Thuaidh agus ó Dheas. Bíonn ospidéal ó thuaidh agus ó dheas ag comhoibriú go dlúth cheana i soláthar roinnt seirbhísí áirithe. Ar a bharr, tá obair tugtha chun tosaigh faoi Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta le comhordú agus comhoibriú a fheabhsú i seirbhísí timpiste agus éigeandála, ag pleanáil le haghaidh móréigeandálacha, trealamh ard-teicneolaíochta, taighde aille agus cur chun cinn sláinte.

Operating Theatres

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average usage per day, in hours, for each operating theatre in each hospital in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1829/00)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected centrally.

Ní chruinnítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach.

Sligo General Hospital

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to specify what medical links and services exist for the provision of health care to Northern Ireland patients by Sligo General Hospital.

(AQW 1830/00)

Ms de Brún: The Western Health and Social Services Board has an arrangement with Sligo General Hospital whereby patients requiring access to fracture services may be referred on to Sligo for treatment from the Erne Hospital, Enniskillen. This arrangement operates on an “as required” basis for patients who cannot be accommodated within the existing healthcare arrangements with either the Altnagelvin or Royal Victoria Hospitals. Since its introduction in July 1999, there have only been four occasions when these arrangements have been used to transfer a patient to Sligo General Hospital.

Tá socrú ag Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair le hOspidéal Ginearálta Shligigh ina mbíonn cead ag othair, a bhfuil seirbhísí ar bhriseadh de dhíth orthu, dul ar aghaidh ó Ospidéal na hÉirne, Inis

Ceithleann go Sligeach ar mhaithe le cóireál. Tá an socrú ag feidhmiú ar bhonn “riachtanais” d’othair nach féidir le hOspidéal Alt na nGealbhan ná Victoria Ríoga freastal orthu laistigh de na socruithe cúram sláinte mar atá anois. Ó tháinig sé i bhfeidhm in Iúil 1999, ní raibh ann ach ceithre ocáid inar úsáideadh na socruithe le hothar a aistriú go hOspidéal Ginearálta Shligigh.

Erne Hospital and Sligo General Hospital

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to specify what plans exist for the expansion of healthcare co-operation between Erne Hospital and Sligo General Hospital. (AQW 1831/00)

Ms de Brún: Sperrin Lakeland Trust is involved in developing a range of initiatives in partnership with Sligo General Hospital, which are being taken forward through the Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT) project. These relate to mutually beneficial aspects of service collaboration such as:

- arranging joint medical and training sessions;
- organising joint nurse education and training initiatives;
- agreeing emergency planning arrangements for major incidents;
- sharing experiences of best practice, specialist knowledge and clinical audit in respect of renal dialysis, pathology and radiology services.

Tá baint ag Iontaobhas Loch-cheantar Shliabh Speirín i bhforbairt réimse tionscnamh i gcomhar le hOspidéal Ginearálta Shligigh, atá á dtabhairt chun tosaigh trí thionscadal Comhoibriú agus Obair le Chéile (CAOC). Baineann siad le gnéithe den chomhoibriú seirbhíse a théann chun sochair don dá thaobh amhail:

- Ag socrú comhsheisiúin mhíochaine agus thraenála;
- Ag eagrú comhthionscnaimh oideachas agus oiliúint altranais;
- Ag teacht ar shocrúithe pleanála éigeandála le haghaidh mórtheagmhais;
- Ag malartú taithí ar an chleachtas is fearr, ar shaineolas agus iniúchadh clínicíúil maidir le scagdhealú duánach, ar sheirbhísí paiteolaíochta agus raideolaíochta

Fire Stations

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all the fire stations in Northern Ireland and state how many incidents were attended by crews from each of these stations in the last year for which figures are available. (AQW 1838/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested for the year 2000 is as follows:

Station Name	Primary Fires (Note 1)	Secondary Fires (Note 2)	Special Service Calls (Note 3)	False Alarms (Note 4)	Chimney Fires (Note 5)	Other	Total
Central Fire Station	331	536	81	749	11	33	1741
Westland Fire Station	336	609	48	467	10	12	1482
Glengormley Fire Station	259	565	38	405	44	15	1326
Springfield Fire Station	807	708	57	798	13	19	2402
Knock Fire Station	433	956	100	715	22	21	2247
Cadogan Fire Station	622	565	60	922	31	22	2222
Whitla Fire Station	205	335	60	254	6	21	881
Bangor Fire Station	209	581	39	324	109	4	1266
Hollywood Fire Station	30	47	7	123	24	0	231
Downpatrick Fire Station	97	173	18	211	37	0	536
Newcastle Fire Station	68	200	17	110	31	2	428
Carryduff Fire Station	29	43	13	66	11	0	162
Ballywalter Fire Station	15	62	10	23	17	0	127
Donaghadee Fire Station	24	46	5	56	44	0	175
Newtownards Fire Station	93	282	24	183	81	0	663
Portaferry Fire Station	8	21	3	36	7	0	75
Lisburn Fire Station	234	352	52	380	90	18	1126
Ballynahinch Fire Station	42	51	12	66	39	9	219
Comber Fire Station	23	121	6	77	23	0	250
Portadown Fire Station	107	232	35	239	30	3	646
Banbridge Fire Station	56	51	11	73	36	0	227
Lurgan Fire Station	264	241	27	268	43	16	859
Dromore Fire Station (Co Down)	23	24	4	21	17	2	91
Newry Fire Station	328	522	61	386	29	19	1345
Crossmaglen Fire Station	13	13	10	8	8	0	52
Warrenpoint Fire Station	48	203	13	92	22	8	386
Kilkeel Fire Station	29	118	11	56	4	0	218
Rathfriland Fire Station	29	45	13	17	5	0	109
Armagh Fire Station	120	133	41	210	31	2	537
Newtownhamilton Fire Station	10	25	7	19	11	0	72
Keady Fire Station	22	58	8	32	7	0	127

Station Name	Primary Fires (Note 1)	Secondary Fires (Note 2)	Special Service Calls (Note 3)	False Alarms (Note 4)	Chimney Fires (Note 5)	Other	Total
Crescent Link Fire Station	186	181	27	559	57	66	1076
Strabane Fire Station	132	135	16	109	81	0	473
Castleberg Fire Station	17	31	6	19	18	0	91
Limavady Fire Station	65	117	16	74	10	0	282
Dungiven Fire Station	19	37	4	13	14	0	87
Northland Road Fire Station	376	335	56	696	108	35	1606
Coleraine Fire Station	119	259	22	222	63	3	688
Portrush Fire Station	43	125	13	117	61	2	361
Portstewart Fire Station	16	41	4	42	38	1	142
Ballymena Fire Station	183	230	44	341	94	19	911
Carnlough Fire Station	10	20	1	4	8	0	43
Larne Fire Station	93	258	33	136	56	1	577
Carrickfergus Fire Station	106	383	28	301	68	1	887
Whitehead Fire Station	28	30	8	24	22	0	112
Ballymoney Fire Station	54	34	17	58	58	1	222
Kilrea Fire Station	39	29	3	13	22	1	107
Ballycastle Fire Station	29	81	2	82	52	0	246
Magherafelt Fire Station	58	63	12	58	48	0	239
Maghera Fire Station	15	25	10	30	25	1	106
Cushendall Fire Station	5	85	3	6	17	0	116
Antrim Fire Station	131	234	34	441	16	1	857
Crumlin Fire Station	44	22	10	34	13	5	128
Ballyclare Fire Station	28	39	16	47	29	0	159
Rathlin Fire Station	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Omagh Fire Station	100	145	14	274	61	0	594
Newtownstewart Fire Station	14	11	5	22	22	0	74
Fintona Fire Station	7	9	2	6	8	1	33
Enniskillen Fire Station	90	116	21	285	98	2	612
Clogher Fire Station	22	65	14	25	38	0	164
Lisnaskea Fire Station	33	51	15	68	100	0	267

Station Name	Primary Fires (Note 1)	Secondary Fires (Note 2)	Special Service Calls (Note 3)	False Alarms (Note 4)	Chimney Fires (Note 5)	Other	Total
Irvinestown Fire Station	21	17	10	51	29	1	129
Belleek Fire Station	9	151	8	15	37	0	220
Dromore Fire Station (Co Tyrone)	14	49	6	14	23	1	107
Dungannon Fire Station	143	119	36	146	42	1	487
Cookstown Fire Station	70	68	22	85	46	0	291
Pomeroy Fire Station	12	47	5	8	2	0	74
Total	7245	11560	1434	11811	2377	369	34796

Notes

1. A Primary Fire is one that results in damage to property.
2. Secondary Fires are all other fires, apart from Chimney Fires, that generally do not result in damage to property and are typified by grass and rubbish fires. They do not require a Fire Report.
3. Special Service Calls are emergency calls to non-fire situations usually involving rescue, such as traffic accidents. They do not require a Fire Report.
4. False Alarms are incidents that are initially believed to be calls to a fire situation but turn out to be otherwise. These can be caused by the operation of automatic detectors reacting to cooking fumes and also the malfunction of such detectors. False Alarms can also be malicious calls or calls where someone has made a genuine mistake in summoning the Brigade. They do not require a Fire Report.
5. Chimney Fires are fires that are confined within chimney flues and do not spread to the room(s) beyond. They do not require a Fire Report.

Is mar a leanas atá an t-eolas a iarradh don bhliain 2000:

Ainm an Stáisiúin	Dóiteáin Phríomha (Nóta 1)	Dóiteáin Thánaisteacha (Nóta 2)	Glaonna Seirbhísí Speisialta (Nóta 3)	Bréag-Aláirim (Nóta 4)	Dóiteáin Simléar (Nóta 5)	Eile	Iomlán
Príomhstáisiún Dóiteáin	331	536	81	749	11	33	1741
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Westland	336	609	48	467	10	12	1482
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Ghleann Ghormlaithe	259	565	38	405	44	15	1326
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Springfield	807	708	57	798	13	19	2402
Stáisiún Dóiteáin an Chnoic	433	956	100	715	22	21	2247
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Cadogan	622	565	60	922	31	22	2222
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Whitla	205	335	60	254	6	21	881

Ainm an Stáisiúin	Dóiteáin Phríomha (Nóta 1)	Dóiteáin Thánaisteacha (Nóta 2)	Glaonna Seirbhísí Speisialta (Nóta 3)	Bréag-Aláiraim (Nóta 4)	Dóiteáin Simléar (Nóta 5)	Eile	Iomlán
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bheannchair	209	581	39	324	109	4	1266
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Ard Mhic Nasca	30	47	7	123	24	0	231
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Dhún Pádraig	97	173	18	211	37	0	536
Stáisiún Dóiteáin an Chaisleáin Nua	68	200	17	110	31	2	428
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Cheathrú Aodha Dhuibh	29	43	13	66	11	0	162
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bhaile Bháltair	15	62	10	23	17	0	127
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Dhomhnach Daoi	24	46	5	56	44	0	175
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bhaile Nua na hArd	93	282	24	183	81	0	663
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Phort an Pheire	8	21	3	36	7	0	75
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Lios na gCearrbhach	234	352	52	380	90	18	1126
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bhaile na hInse	42	51	12	66	39	9	219
Stáisiún Dóiteáin an Chomair	23	121	6	77	23	0	250
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Phort an Dúnáin	107	232	35	239	30	3	646
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Dhroichead na Banna	56	51	11	73	36	0	227
Stáisiún Dóiteáin na Lorgan	264	241	27	268	43	16	859
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Dhroim Mór	23	24	4	21	17	2	91
Stáisiún Dóiteáin an Iúir	328	522	61	386	29	19	1345
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Chrois Mhic Linnáin	13	13	10	8	8	0	52
Stáisiún Dóiteáin an Phoainte	48	203	13	92	22	8	386
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Chill Chaoil	29	118	11	56	4	0	218
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Ráth Fraoileann	29	45	13	17	5	0	109
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Ard Mhacha	120	133	41	210	31	2	537
Stáisiún Dóiteáin an Bhaile Úir	10	25	7	19	11	0	72
Stáisiún Dóiteáin an Chéide	22	58	8	32	7	0	127

Ainm an Stáisiúin	Dóiteáin Phríomha (Nóta 1)	Dóiteáin Thánaisteacha (Nóta 2)	Glaonna Seirbhísí Speisialta (Nóta 3)	Bréag-Aláiraim (Nóta 4)	Dóiteáin Simléar (Nóta 5)	Eile	Iomlán
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Nasc an Chorráin	186	181	27	559	57	66	1076
Stáisiún Dóiteáin an tSraitha Báin	132	135	16	109	81	0	473
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Chaisleán na Deirge	17	31	6	19	18	0	91
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Léim an Mhadaidh	65	117	16	74	10	0	282
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Dhún Geimhin	19	37	4	13	14	0	87
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bhóthar Northland	376	335	56	696	108	35	1606
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Chúil Raithin	119	259	22	222	63	3	688
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Phort Rois	43	125	13	117	61	2	361
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Phort Stíobhaird	16	41	4	42	38	1	142
Stáisiún Dóiteáin An Bhaile Mheánaigh	183	230	44	341	94	19	911
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Charnlaigh	10	20	1	4	8	0	43
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Latharna	93	258	33	136	56	1	577
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Charraig Fhearghais	106	383	28	301	68	1	887
Stáisiún Dóiteáin an Chinn Bháin	28	30	8	24	22	0	112
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bhaile Monaidh	54	34	17	58	58	1	222
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Chill Ria	39	29	3	13	22	1	107
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bhaile an Chaistil	29	81	2	82	52	0	246
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Mhachaire Fiolta	58	63	12	58	48	0	239
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Mhachaire Rátha	15	25	10	30	25	1	106
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bhun Abhann Dalla	5	85	3	6	17	0	116
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Aontroma	131	234	34	441	16	1	857
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Chromghlinne	44	22	10	34	13	5	128
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bhealach Cláir	28	39	16	47	29	0	159
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Reachlainn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Stáisiún Dóiteáin na hÓmaí	100	145	14	274	61	0	594

Ainm an Stáisiúin	Dóiteáin Phríomha (Nóta 1)	Dóiteáin Thánaisteacha (Nóta 2)	Glaonna Seirbhísi Speisialta (Nóta 3)	Bréag-Aláiraim (Nóta 4)	Dóiteáin Simléar (Nóta 5)	Eile	Iomlán
Stáisiún Dóiteáin an Bhaile Nua	14	11	5	22	22	0	74
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Fhionntamhnaí	7	9	2	6	8	1	33
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Inis Ceithleann	90	116	21	285	98	2	612
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Chlochair	22	65	14	25	38	0	164
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Lios na Scéithe	33	51	15	68	100	0	267
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bhaile an Irbhinigh	21	17	10	51	29	1	129
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bhéal Leice	9	151	8	15	37	0	220
Stáisiún Dóiteáin an Droma Mhoir	14	49	6	14	23	1	107
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Dhún Geanainn	143	119	36	146	42	1	487
Stáisiún Dóiteáin na Coirre Críochaí	70	68	22	85	46	0	291
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Pomeroy	12	47	5	8	2	0	74
Iomlán	7245	11560	1434	11811	2377	369	34796

Nótaí

- Is é atá i nDóiteán Príomha dóiteán a ndéantar dochar do mhaoín mar gheall air.
- Dóiteáin Thánaisteacha atá i ngach dóiteán eile, seachas Dóiteáin Simléar. Is dóiteáin iad nach ndéantar dochar do mhaoín mar gheall orthu ar nós dóiteáin féir agus dóiteáin bhruscair. Ní gá Tuairisc Dhóiteáin a thabhairt ina leith.
- Is é atá i nGlaonna Seirbhísi Speisialta glaonna éigeandála i gcásanna nach dóiteáin iad ach nuair is iondúil gur tarrtháil atá i gceist, ar nós taismí tráchtá. Ní gá Tuairisc Dhóiteáin a thabhairt ina leith.
- Is é atá i mBréag-Aláiraim teagmhais a chreidtear ar dtús gur glaonna chuig dóiteáin iad ach nach mar sin atá ar chor ar bith. Is é is cúis leo, b'fhéidir, brathadóirí uathoibriocha ag frithghníomhú nuair a bhraitear míchócaireachta agus brathadóirí arís fosta nuair a bhíonn mífhéidhmiú iontu. Féadfar fosta gur glaonna mailíseacha na Bréag-Aláiraim, nó glaonna nuair atá fiormheancóg déanta ag duine agus é ag cur fios ar an Bhriogáid. Ní gá Tuairisc Dhóiteáin a thabhairt ina leith.
- Is é atá sna Dóiteáin Simléar dóiteáin a tharlaíonn taobh istigh de mhúcháin agus nach leathann chuig an (na) seomra(i) taobh thall díobh. Ní gá Tuairisc Dhóiteáin a thabhairt ina leith.

Fires

Mr Alan McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of fires dealt with in or on (a) commercial premises; (b) domestic premises; (c) rural land; (d) vehicles and (e) other locations and state the number in each category

that required more than 30 minutes for the fire service to extinguish once on site. (AQW 1839/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is as follows:

TOTAL NO. OF FIRES IN 2000				
Commerical	Domestic	Rural Land	Vehicles	Others
0680	4419	3181	3795	9232
FIRES TAKING LONGER THAN 30 MINUTES TO CONTROL				
260	440	370	230	640
Percentage 38%	10%	12%	6%	7%

Is mar a leanas atá an t-eolas a iarradh:

LÍON NA nDÓITEÁN SA BHLIAIN 2000				
Ionad Tráchtála	Ionad Cónaí	Talamh Tuaithe	Feithiclí	Eile
680	4419	3181	3795	9232
DÓITEÁIN A GHLACANN NÍOS MÓ NÁ 30 BOMAITE LENA RIALÚ				
260	440	370	230	640
Céatadán 38%	10%	12%	6%	7%

Patients Prescribed Enbrel/Remicade

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) detail by health board area, the number of patients who are prescribed the drugs Enbrel and/or Remicade for arthritis and (b) state the annual cost of prescribing each of those drugs. (AQW 1841/00)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) Details by Health Board area of the number of patients who are prescribed the drugs Enbrel and/or Remicade for arthritis are set out in the table below:

Board	Number of Patients who are prescribed the drugs Enbrel and/or Remicade for arthritis
EHSSB	27
SHSSB	4 - (Arrangements are being made to commence a further 5 patients before the end of March 2001.)
NHSSB	11
WHSSB	None to date - (Arrangements are being made to commence prescribing within the next few months.)

- (b) The annual cost of prescribing each of these drugs is in the region of £8,500 per patient. Costs vary

depending on which drug is used and whether the treatment is initial or ongoing treatment.

- (a) Leagtar amach sa tábla thíos sonraí de réir ceantar Bord Sláinte ar líon na n-othar ar tugadh na drugaí Enbrel agus/nó Remicade dóibh le haghaidh airtritis.

Bord	Líon na n-othar ar tugadh na drugaí Enbrel agus/nó Remicade dóibh le haghaidh airtritis
BSSSI	27
BSSSD	4 (Tá socruithe á ndéanamh le 5 othar breise a thosú roimh dheireadh Márta 2001.)
BSSST	11
BSSSO	A dhath go dtí seo. (Tá socruithe á ndéanamh le tabhairt amach leighis a thosú laistigh den chéad cúpla mí eile.)

- (b) Thart ar £8,500 an t-othar an costas bliantúil ar thabhairt amach gach ceann de na drugaí seo. Bíonn éagsúlacht costais ann ag brath ar an druga a úsáidtear agus ar cé acu an cóireál tosaigh í nó an bhfuil sí ar bhonn leanúnach.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of persons who died of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in Northern Ireland in the last twelve months for which figures are available and (b) the comparable figures for (i) 1995 (ii) 1990 and (iii) 1985.
(AQW 1849/00)

Ms de Brún: The numbers of persons who have died of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) here for the calendar years 1985, 1990 and 1995 are detailed in the table below.

1985	1
1990	9
1995	10

Source: HIV and STI Division, CDSC Colindale

There have been no reports to date of deaths from AIDS in the last 12 months for which figures are available – 1 January to 31 December 2000.

Mionléirítear líonta na ndaoine a fuair bás de Shiondróm Easpa Imdhíonachta Faighte (SEIF) anseo sna blianta 1985, 1990 agus 1995 sa tábla thíos.

1985	1
1990	9

1995	10
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Foinse: Rannóg SEIF agus STI, CDSC Colindale

Ní raibh tuairisc ar bith go dtí seo ar bhásanna ó SEIF sna 12 mhí deireanacha atá figiúirí ar fáil – 1 Eanáir go dtí 31 Nollaig 2000.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of people in Northern Ireland diagnosed with sexually transmitted diseases other than Human Immune Virus/Acute Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) in the last twelve month period for which figures are available and (b) the comparable figures for (i) 1995 (ii) 1990 and (iii) 1985.
(AQW 1850/00)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil ar an dóigh ar iarradh é.

Review of Pathology Laboratories in Northern Ireland (NIA 31/00)

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) give her assessment of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report 'A Review of Pathology Laboratories in Northern Ireland (NIA 31/00)' (b) outline her policy to increase the number of consultant pathologists and (c) detail the steps she is taking to bring overall costs into line with those in England.
(AQW 1852/00)

Ms de Brún: I welcome the Audit Office report as a useful contribution to the debate on pathology services. My Department is currently considering its full implications.

The need for additional consultant pathologists is accepted. The numbers in the relevant specialist training programmes have been increased in the past year, with further increases planned for 2001/02. While plans are in line for a significant increase in the consultant workforce, recruitment difficulties to the specialist training grades in recent years will preclude significant increases in the short term.

Cost comparisons require careful consideration, as the data must be on a like-for-like basis before meaningful conclusions can be made. As the report makes clear, the Department had reservations about the appropriateness of some of the key comparisons with England. Nevertheless, I wish to see those matters thoroughly examined to determine whether any useful lessons can be learned.

Fáiltím roimh thuairisc na hOifige Iniúchta mar chúnamh úsáideach don díospóireacht ar sheirbhísí paiteolaíochta.

Tá an Roinn s'agam a dhéanamh machnaimh ar a h-impleachtaí iomlána faoi láthair.

Glactar go bhfuil gá le paiteolaithe liachta breise. Méadaíodh na líonta sna cláir oiliúna speisialtóireachta cuí le bliain anuas, le tuilleadh méaduithe pleanáilte do 2001/02. Cé go bhfuil méadú tábhachtach sa mheitheal oibre liachta ar na bacáin, cuirfidh deacrachtaí in earcaíocht sna gráid oiliúna speisialtóireachta sna blianta deireanacha bac ar mhéaduithe tábhachtacha sa ghearrthéarma.

Tá machnamh cúramach ar chomparáidí costas de dhíth mar go gcaithfidh na sonraí bheith ar bhonn cothroime sular féidir bearta tábhachtacha a dhéanamh. Mar a shoiléiríonn an tuairisc, bhí an Roinn in amhras ar fhóirsteanacht roinnt eochairchomparáidí le Sasana. Mar sin féin, is mian liom go scrúdaítear na cúrsaí seo go mion, lena fháil amach ar féidir ceachtanna úsáideacha ar bith a fhoghlaim nó nach féidir.

Reduction in Waiting Lists

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to increase the number of operations carried out by the Health Service. (AQW 1853/00)

Ms de Brún: I have allocated significant additional resources in the current year, totalling £68.1 million, to improve the capacity of health and personal social services to produce more care and treatment for people here. A total of £32.1 million of that sum has been earmarked for hospital services, winter and community care pressures; for the implementation of more effective service planning arrangements, particularly in relation to waiting lists; and for greater co-ordination of services across health and personal social services, all of which are designed to enable more people to receive the hospital treatment they need.

Leithroinn mé acmhainní suntasacha breise i mbliana, £68.1 milliún san iomlán, le cumas na SSSP a fheabhsú le níos mó cúraim agus cóireála a sholáthar do dhaoine anseo. Tá £32.1 milliún de seo curtha ar leataobh faoi choinne seirbhísí ospidéal, brúnna geimhridh agus cúram pobail; faoi choinne socruithe pleanáil seirbhíse níos éifeachtaí a chur i bhfeidhm, maidir le liostaí feithimh ach go háirithe; agus faoi choinne méadú ar chomhordú seirbhísí fud fad na SSSP, iad uile deartha le cur ar chumas níos mó daoine an chóireál ospidéal atá de dhíth orthu.

Hospital Acquired Infection

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will make it her policy to require trust hospitals to report, as standard procedure, rates of hospital acquired infections. (AQW 1854/00)

Ms de Brún: As part of my Department's priorities for 2001/02, trusts will be required to report the rates of Bacteraemia (including Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus - MRSA) in their hospitals, at the year-end. Hospital acquired infection is a very complex issue and this new requirement is another useful step in the process of controlling it.

Mar chuid de thosaíochtaí mo Roinne do 2001/02 beidh ar Iontaobhais rátaí Bacteraemia a thuairisciú (Staphylococcus aureus atá frithsheasmhach in aghaidh Methicillin MRSA) ina gcuid ospidéal, ag deireadh na bliana. Is ceist an-chasta ionfhabhtú tógtha san ospidéal agus is céim úsáideach an t-éileamh nua seo sa phróiseas le smacht a chur air.

Hospital Waiting Lists

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of occasions she has changed the methodology for compiling hospital waiting lists in the last twelve months and to make a statement. (AQW 1855/00)

Ms de Brún: None.

The only changes affecting either inpatient or outpatient waiting list statistics during my period as Minister have been as a result of continuing work by individual trusts to validate the data. Details of the changes resulting from these validation exercises have been included in the relevant waiting list publication released in September 2000.

Athrú ar bith.

Ní raibh na hathruithe a chuaigh i bhfeidhm ar staitisticí liostaí feithimh othar conaitheach nó seachtrach le linn mo thréimhse mar Aire ach mar thoradh ar obair leanúnach Iontaobhas aonair leis na sonraí a dhaingniú. Cuireadh sonraí na n-athruithe a bhí mar thoradh ar na cleachtaí daingnithe san fhoilseachán cuí ar liostaí feithimh a foilsíodh i Mí Mheán Fómhair 2000.

Herceptin Treatment for Breast Cancer

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the representations she has received on the prescribing of Herceptin for the treatment of breast cancer and to make a statement. (AQW 1856/00)

Ms de Brún: I have not received any representations on the prescribing of Herceptin for the treatment of breast cancer. Herceptin may be made available to any breast cancer patient who is judged by their oncologist to have a clinical need for the drug.

Ní bhfuair mé ráitis ar bith ar ordú Herceptin do chóireáil ailse chích. D'fhéadfadh Herceptin bheith ar

fáil d'othar ar bith le hailse chíce ar mheas a n-oinceolaí go raibh riachtanas clínicíúil orthu leis an druga.

Cancer Services

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to improve services to patients suffering from cancer.

(AQW 1857/00)

Ms de Brún: The provision of cancer services is being improved in line with the 1996 report 'Cancer Services: Investing for the Future.' It recommended that cancer care should be delivered by multidisciplinary, multiprofessional teams and that the provision of cancer services should be reorganised, with cancer units established in each Board area, linked to a cancer centre in Belfast.

In line with this, oncology clinics are now provided at 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 conditions, such as breast, lung and colorectal cancers. Multi-disciplinary teams have also been established. A 2-week outpatient appointment target for women with suspected breast cancer was introduced on 1 August last year, with targets to be implemented for other cancers by 2002. An additional £8m was made available for cancer services this year, with a further £6m identified for next year.

Tá soláthar seirbhísí ailse á fheabhsú faoi réir na, tuairisce 1996 'Cancer Services: Investing for the Future.' Mhol sí gur chóir go mbeadh cúram ailse á sholáthar ag foirne ildisciplíneacha ilghairmiúla; agus gur chóir soláthar seirbhísí ailse a atheagrú, ag bunú ionad ailse i ngach ceantar boird a bheadh ceangailte le lárionad ailse i mBéal Feirste.

Faoi réir seo, cuirtear clínicí oinceolaíochta ar fáil anois ag aonaid ailse ag Otharlanna Aontroma, Alt na nGealbhan, Craigavon agus Uladh. Cuirtear 50% de cheimiteiripe othair lae ar fáil taobh amuigh den ionad ailse anois. Thosaigh speisialtacht in ailsí áit ar leith le haithint príomhchliniceoirí i réimse riochtaí ar nós ailse chíce, scamhóige agus colaidhriseacháin. Bunaíodh foirne ildisciplíneacha fosta. Tugadh isteach sprioc dhá sheachtaine do choinne othair sheachtraigh do mhná le hailse chíce mheasta ar an 1ú Lúnasa anuraidh, agus cuirfear na spriocanna d'ailsí eile i bhfeidhm faoin bhliain 2002. Cuireadh £8 milliún breise ar fáil do sheirbhísí ailse i mbliana agus cuirfear £6 mhiliún breise ar fáil don bhliain seo chugainn.

Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR)

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the rate of measles,

mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination by age two years in each of the last five years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1859/00)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

PERCENTAGE OF MMR VACCINATIONS BY AGE TWO

1995/96	92.5%
1996/97	92.8%
1997/98	92.4%
1998/99	90.1%
1999/00	91.1%

Tá an t-eolas breactha síos sa tábla thíos.

CÉATADÁN VACSAÍN MMR FAOI AOIS DHÁ BHLIANA.

1995/96	92.5%
1996/97	92.8%
1997/98	92.4%
1998/99	90.1%
1999/00	91.1%

General Practitioners

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of general practitioners per thousand of the population in Northern Ireland and (b) how this compares with England and Wales in each of the last five years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1860/00)

Ms de Brún: Details of the number of general practitioners per thousand of the population, with comparable figures for England and Wales, are shown in the table below. The information shows the whole time equivalent number of general practitioners providing general medical services and relates to the position at 1 October in each of the years 1995 to 2000. The figures for Wales at 1 October 2000 are not yet available.

Year	Locally	England	Wales
1995	0.577	0.523	0.560
1996	0.582	0.521	0.562
1997	0.582	0.520	0.564
1998	0.581	0.522	0.559
1999	0.584	0.520	0.562
2000	0.582	0.518	Not Available

Léirítear sonraí líon na nGnáthdhochtúirí i ngach míle duine den daonra, le figiúirí comparáideacha do

Shasana agus don Bhreatain Bheag, sa tábla thíos. Léiríonn an t-eolas líon na nGnáthdhochtúirí coibhéise ama iomláin ag soláthar seirbhísí ginearálta míochaine agus baineann sé leis an staid ag an 1ú Deireadh Fómhair i ngach bliain ó 1995 go 2000. Níl figiúirí don Bhreatain Bheag ag an 1ú Deireadh Fómhair 2000 ar fáil go fóill.

Bliain	Tuaisceart Éireann	Sasana	An Bhreatain Bheag
1995	0.577	0.523	0.560
1996	0.582	0.521	0.562
1997	0.582	0.520	0.564
1998	0.581	0.522	0.559
1999	0.584	0.520	0.562
2000	0.582	0.518	Níl sí ar fáil

Royal Group of Hospitals

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people from north and west Belfast who are employed in the Royal Group of Hospitals. (AQW 1863/00)

Ms de Brún: There are currently 2,044 people living in north and west Belfast employed in the Royal Group of Hospitals.

Faoi láthair tá 2,044 duine ina gcónaí i mBéal Feirste Thuaidh agus Thiar atá fostaithe i nGrúpa Ríoga Ospidéal.

Neonatal Intensive Care Unit - Royal Maternity Hospital

Ms Sue Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children who have been transferred to the Royal Maternity Hospital, Regional Neonatal Intensive Care Unit from other hospitals in each of the last two years for which figures are available. (AQW 1864/00)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

CHILDREN TRANSFERRED TO RMH REGIONAL NEO-NATAL INTENSIVE CARE UNIT FROM OTHER HOSPITALS.

1999/00	63
2000/01	88

Mionléirítear an t-eolas seo sa tábla thíos.

PÁISTÍ AISTRITHE GO HIONAD RÉIGIÚNACH DIANCHÚRAIM NUA-NAÍCHE OMR Ó OTHARLANNA EILE.

1999/00	63
2000/01	88

Premature Babies

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of premature babies born, by trust board area, in each of the last five years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1866/00)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

PREMATURE BABIES

Trust	Premature babies				
	95/6	96/7	97/8	98/9	99/00
Armagh & Dungannon	93	88	89	105	88
Craigavon & Banbridge	122	117	122	113	129
Newry & Mourne	99	83	102	102	89
United	215	222	224	200	203
Causeway	48	46	49	33	36
U C & H T	137	134	131	131	167
Down Lisburn	199	174	154	194	180
North & West Belfast	189	204	170	185	190
South & East Belfast	177	179	186	180	184
Foyle	165	179	219	195	185
Sperrin Lakeland	101	109	106	114	94
Total	1,545	1,535	1,552	1,552	1,545

Tá an t-eolas ar fáil sa tábla thíos.

LEANAÍ RÉAMHAIBÍ

Iontaobhas	Leanaí réamhaibí				
	95/6	96/7	97/8	98/9	99/00
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	93	88	89	105	88
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	122	117	122	113	129
An tIlúr & Múrna	99	83	102	102	89
Na hOspidéal Aontaithe	215	222	224	200	203
An Clochán	48	46	49	33	36
P & O U	137	134	131	131	167
An Dún agus Lios na gCearrbhach	199	174	154	194	180
Tuaisceart & Iarthar Bhéal Feirste	189	204	170	185	190
Deisceart & Oirthear Bhéal Feirste	177	179	186	180	184
An Feabhal	165	179	219	195	185
Loch-Cheantar Speirín	101	109	106	114	94
Iomlán	1,545	1,535	1,552	1,552	1,545

Low Birth Weight Babies

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of low birth weight babies born, by trust board area, in each of the last five years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1867/00)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

LOW BIRTH WEIGHT BABIES

Trust	Low birth weight babies				
	95/6	96/7	97/8	98/9	99/00
Armagh & Dungannon	81	89	67	101	89
Craigavon & Banbridge	118	107	114	113	116
Newry & Mourne	83	69	95	96	79
United	200	178	190	179	167
Causeway	43	39	55	36	34
U C & H T	110	104	117	102	118
Down Lisburn	176	152	141	154	159
North & West Belfast	189	187	161	172	191
South & East Belfast	152	162	183	171	167
Foyle	139	152	170	171	152
Sperrin Lakeland	100	98	91	104	86
Total	1,391	1,337	1,384	1,399	1,358

Tá an t-eolas ar fáil sa tábla thíos.

LEANÁÍ ÍSEALMHEÁCHAIN BREITHE

Iontaobhas	Leanaí ísealmheáchain breithe				
	95/6	96/7	97/8	98/9	99/00
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	81	89	67	101	89
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	118	107	114	113	116
An tIúr & Múrna	83	69	95	96	79
Na hOspidéil Aontaithe	200	178	190	179	167
An Clochán	43	39	55	36	34
P & O U	110	104	117	102	118
An Dún agus Lios na gCearrbhach	176	152	141	154	159
Tuaisceart & Iarthar Bhéal Feirste	189	187	161	172	191
Deisceart & Oirthear Bhéal Feirste	152	162	183	171	167
An Feabhal	139	152	170	171	152
Loch-Cheantar Speirín	100	98	91	104	86
Iomlán	1,391	1,337	1,384	1,399	1,358

Pre-Employment Consultancy Service (PECS)

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of names which are on the Pre-Employment Consultancy Service (PECS) register.

(AQW 1884/00)

Ms de Brún: There are currently 16 names on the Pre-Employment Consultancy Service Register.

Faoi láthair tá 16 ainm ar Chlár na Seirbhíse Comhairlí Réamhfhostaíochta

Mixed-Sex Specialist Wards

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) what representations she has received about the abolition of mixed-sex specialist wards in Northern Ireland hospitals and (b) what steps she is taking to address this issue.

(AQW 1885/00)

Ms de Brún: I have not received any representations about the abolition of mixed-sex specialist wards.

A charter standard on mixed sex wards was introduced here from 1 April 1997, which gives people the right to be told before they go into hospital, except in emergencies, whether it is planned to care for them in a ward for men and women. In all cases, they can expect single-sex washing and toilet facilities. If a patient prefers to be cared for in single-sex accommodation, their wishes will be respected wherever possible. Boards are required to have local monitoring arrangements in place to ensure compliance with the standard.

Ní bhfuair mé aon ionadaíocht faoi chealú sainbhardaí gnéis mheasctha.

Tugadh isteach caighdeán cairte ar bhardaí gnéis mheasctha anseo ón 1 Aibreán 1997. Tugann sé an ceart do dhaoine bheith curtha ar an eolas roimh ré sula dtéann siad isteach san ospidéal, ach amháin i gcásanna éigeandála, má tá sé beartaithe cúram a thabhairt dóibh i mbarda fear agus ban. I ngach cás, is féidir leo bheith ag dúil le háiseanna níos áine agus leithris aon ghnéis. Más fearr le hothar cúram a fháil in áit aon ghnéis, freastlófar ar a mianta áit ar bith is féidir. Tá riachtanas ar Bhoird socrúithe monatóireachta áitiúla bheith curtha i bhfeidhm le cloí leis an chaighdeán.

Patient Appointments

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) what guidance she issues on best practice to encourage patients to keep their appointments with hospital consultants and (b) what steps she and the various trusts are taking to ensure that patients attend such appointments. (AQW 1887/00)

Ms de Brún: Under the 'Framework for Action on Waiting Lists', which I issued on 11 September 2000, Trusts are required to monitor closely patients who did not attend (DNA) and cancellation rates, and to establish protocols to assist those patients who cancel their appointments repeatedly. This may include, where appropriate, patients being returned to the care of their GP for alternative care or treatment to be considered.

Trusts are employing a range of measures to ensure that patients keep their hospital appointments, or give notice that they are unable to attend so that other patients can avail of their slots. These include the issue of explanatory leaflets with appointment cards which stress the importance of attending or notifying, in good time, inability to attend; appointment cards that require the patient, by telephone or in writing, to confirm their intention to attend; advisory posters in GP practices and hospital waiting areas; and confirmatory telephone checks with patients two to three days before the date of their appointment.

Faoi Chreat 'Gníomhaíocht ar Liostaí Feithimhah' a d'eisigh mé ar 11 Meán Fómhair 2000, tá dualgas ar Iontaobhais monatóireacht a dhéanamh go cruinn ar rátaí othar NF (Nár Fhreastal) agus rátaí cealaithe, le nósanna imeachta a bhunú le cuidiú leis na hothair úd a chuireann a gcoinne ar ceal arís agus arís eile. San áireamh leis seo, áit ar bith is cuí, is féidir iad a chur ar ais faoi chúram a ngnáthdhochtúra le haghaidh cúraim mhalartaigh nó le cóireál a mheabhrú.

Tá Iontaobhais ag úsáid réimse beart le cinntiú go cloíann othair lena gcoinne ospidéil, nó go dtugann siad fógra nach fhéidir leo freastal sa dóigh go dtig le hothair eile úsáid a bhaint as an seal s'acu. I measc na mbeart tá eisiú bileog mínithe le cártaí coinne a chuireann béim ar thábhacht freastail nó ar fhógra a thabhairt ar an ghuthán nó i scríbhinn le cinntiú go bhfuil sé de rún acu freastal; postaeir chomhairleacha i gcleachtaidh ghnáthdhochtúirí agus i gceantair fheithimh ospidéil; agus cinntithe ar an ghuthán le hothair 2 nó 3 de laethanta roimh dháta a gcoinne.

Patient Appointments

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the disruption to health services as a result of patients failing to keep appointments and what is the estimated cost to the Health Service of such missed appointments.

(AQW 1888/00)

Ms de Brún: Although the full cost to the health and social services for patients who do not attend planned appointments is not known, the effects in financial and service terms are considered to be significant. Patients who fail to keep appointments entail extra administration costs. There are also costs involving staff time. On top of this, other persons who are waiting for treatment are forced to wait longer.

Cé nach fios cá mhéad go hiomlán a chosnaíonn sé do na seirbhísí sláinte agus do na seirbhísí sóisialta nuair nach fhreastalaíonn othair ar choinní pleanáilte, meastar gur mór an tionchar a bhíonn aige ar chúrsaí airgeadais agus seirbhísí.

Bíonn costas breise riaracháin ann nuair nach bhfhreastalaíonn othair ar choinní. Bíonn costais ann a bhaineann le ham foirne. Ar a bharr sin tá ar dhaoine eile a bhíonn ag feitheamh le haghaidh cóireála feitheamh níos faide.

Patient Appointments

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of patients who kept appointments with hospital consultants in each of Northern Ireland's hospitals in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1889/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on the percentage of patients who attended their inpatient appointment in each trust is only available centrally for the financial years 1998/99 and 1999/00 and is detailed in Table 1 below.

Information on the percentage of patients who attended their first outpatient appointment in each trust for the financial years 1997/98 to 1999/00 is detailed in Table 2 below.

Attendance rates are affected by the range of services provided by the trust. For example, mental illness clinics experience a higher than average number of people who do not attend appointments, while ante-natal clinics have a lower than average rate. In some cases the actual number of people involved is very small.

TABLE 1.
PERCENTAGE OF INPATIENTS WHO ATTENDED, BY TRUST

	1998/99	1999/00
BCH	96%	96%
Green Park	96%	95%
U C & H	96%	94%
Down Lisburn	98%	98%
Mater	98%	98%
Causeway	96%	97%
United	96%	96%
Craigavon Group	97%	97%
Newry & Mourne	98%	98%
Armagh & Dungannon	96%	96%
Altnagelvin	97%	97%
Sperrin Lakeland	96%	97%
Royal Group	96%	97%
Average	96%	97%

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE OF PATIENTS WHO ATTENDED THEIR FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT

Trust	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
Altnagelvin Hospitals	91%	90%	90%
Armagh and Dungannon	91%	90%	88%
Belfast City Hospital	91%	91%	90%
Causeway	92%	92%	92%
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	81%	83%	82%
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	90%	90%	89%
Down Lisburn	90%	89%	89%
Foyle	70%	72%	90%
Green Park Healthcare	93%	92%	90%
Homefirst Community	87%	83%	80%
Mater Infirmorum	86%	83%	82%
Newry And Mourne	89%	89%	88%
North and West Belfast	77%	67%	79%
Royal Group	89%	88%	88%
South And East Belfast	84%	79%	82%
Sperrin Lakeland	92%	92%	91%
UNDAH	92%	92%	91%
United Hospitals	93%	93%	92%
Average	90%	90%	90%

Níl an t-eolas ar chéatadán othar a fhreastalaíonn ar a gcoinne othair chónaithe i ngach Iontaobhas ar fáil ach ar bhonn lárnach do na blianta airgeadais 1998/99 agus 1999/00 agus i dtábla 1 thíos tá sé léirithe.

Tá an t-eolas ar chéatadán othar a d'fhreastail ar a gcéad choinne othair sheachtaraigh i ngach Iontaobhas do na blianta airgeadais 1997/98 go 1999/00 léirithe i dtábla 2 thíos.

Téann réimse seirbhísí a chuireann an tIontaobhas ar fáil i bhfeidhm ar rátaí tinrimh. Bíonn rátaí thar an mheán de dhaoine nach bhfreastalaíonn ar a gcoinní i gclínici galar meabhrach agus ráta níos ísle ná an meán ag clínici réamhbhreithe. I roinnt cásanna is fíorbheagán líon na ndaoine atá i gceist.

TÁBLA 1. CÉATADÁN OTHAR CÓNAITHEACH A D'FHREASTAIL DE RÉIR IONTAObHAIS.

	1998/99	1999/00
OCBF	96%	96%
Páirc Ghlas	96%	95%
PU&O	96%	94%
An Dún Lios na gCearrbhach	98%	98%
Mater	98%	98%
Clochán an Aifir	96%	97%
Aontaithe	96%	96%

	1998/99	1999/00
Grúpa Craigavon	97%	97%
An tIúr agus an Mhúrn	98%	98%
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	96%	96%
Alt na nGealbhan	97%	97%
Loch-cheantar Shliabh Speirín	96%	97%
Grúpa Ríoga	96%	97%
Meán	96%	97%

TÁBLA 2. CÉADATÁN OTHAR A D'FHREASTAIL AR A GCÉAD CHOINNE OTHAIR SHEACHTARAIGH

Iontaobhas	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
Ospidéal Alt na nGealbhan	91%	90%	90%
Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn	91%	90%	88%
Ospidéal Chathair Bhéal Feirste	91%	91%	90%
Clochán an Aifir	92%	92%	92%
Pobal Craigavon agus Dhroichead na Banna	81%	83%	82%
Grúpa Ospidéal Cheantar Craigavon	90%	90%	89%
An Dún Lios na gCearrbhach	90%	89%	89%
An Feabhal	70%	72%	90%
Cúram Sláinte na Páirce Glaise	93%	92%	90%
Pobal Homefirst	87%	83%	80%
Mater Infirmorum	86%	83%	82%
An tIúr agus an Mhúrn	89%	89%	88%
Béal Feirste Thuaidh agus Thiar	77%	67%	79%
Grúpa Ríoga	89%	88%	88%
Béal Feirste Theas agus Thoir	84%	79%	82%
Loch-cheantar Shliabh Speirín	92%	92%	91%
UNDAH	92%	92%	91%
Ospidéal Aontaithe	93%	93%	92%
Meán	90%	90%	90%

Help for Parents of Autistic Children

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the initiatives she is undertaking to help parents of children diagnosed as autistic.

(AQW 1891/00)

Ms de Brún: Support for children with autism and their parents is provided as an integral part of learning disabilities programmes of care. It is for boards and trusts to determine the needs of children with learning disabilities, including autism, and their carers. They have been developing a comprehensive range of supportive community services. I have secured additional financial resources of £0.5m for learning disability in the current year and £2m for 2001/02.

Soláthraítear tacaíocht do pháistí le huathachas agus dá dtuismitheoirí mar chuid riachtanach de cláracha cúraim míchumas foghlamtha. Boird agus Iontaobhais a chinneann riachtanais pháistí le míchumais fhoghlamtha, uathachas agus a bhfeighlithe san áireamh. Bhí siad ag forbairt réimse chuimsithigh seirbhísí tacaíochta pobail. Fuair mé £0.5m d'acmhainní airgeadais breise do mhíchumas foghlamtha sa bhliain seo agus £2m do 2001/2002.

Cases of Autism

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cases of autism recorded in children aged 0-13 years in each of the health board areas in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 1892/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil.

Protection of Children

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to review the vetting procedures of those working with children. (AQW 1900/00)

Ms de Brún: I intend to introduce legislative proposals for a Protection of Children Bill in the Assembly later this year. The policy proposals underpinning this legislation will be issued for public consultation in the near future.

Tá sé ar intinn agam moltaí reachtaíochta a thabhairt isteach do Bhille Cosanta Páistí sa Tionól níos moille i mbliana. Eiseofar moltaí an pholasaí atá ag tacú na reachtaíochta seo do chomhairliú poiblí ar ball.

Children's Organs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if, she will detail the number of enquires received by Altnagelvin, Craigavon, Ulster and the Royal Group of Hospitals by (a) telephone (b) in writing and (c) in person in respect of the retention of children's organs. (AQW 1903/00)

Ms de Brún: The number of enquiries regarding the retention of children's organs received by Altnagelvin, Craigavon, Ulster and the Royal Group of Hospitals are as follows:

Hospital	Telephone Enquiry	Written Enquiry	Enquiry In Person
Altnagelvin	136	2	1
Craigavon	58	1	None

Hospital	Telephone Enquiry	Written Enquiry	Enquiry In Person
Ulster and Community Hospitals Trust	17	6	None
Royal Group of Hospitals	2000+	30 - 40	None

Tá líon iarratas maidir le coinneál baill páistí a fuair Ospidéal Alt na nGealbhan, Craigavon, Uladh agus an Ghrúpa Ríoga mar a leanas:

Ospidéal	Fiosrúchán Gutháin	Fiosrúchán Scríofa	Fiosrúchán Go Pearsanta
Alt na nGealbhan	136	2	1
Craigavon	58	1	Faic
Iontaobhas Ospidéal Uladh agus Pobail	17	6	Faic
Grúpa Ríoga Ospidéal	2000+	30 - 40	Faic

Distribution of Centrally Managed Funds

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if, pursuant to AQW 1478/00, she will detail the distribution of the centrally managed £7.98m additional funds made available in December monitoring for (a) scanners and special acute hospital services (b) capital (c) clinical negligence claims (d) family doctors and (e) general practitioner registrars' training costs by (i) location and (ii) amount. (AQW 1904/00)

Ms de Brún: The information sought is as follows:

	Regional	Board Area (£k)			
		Northern	Southern	Eastern	Western
1. Scanner and special acute hospital services	-	-	175	375	
2. Capital	300	300	-	2,400	-
3. Clinical Negligence claims	3,000	-	-	-	-
4. Family doctors	-	450	370	100	380
5. GP registrars' training	130	-	-	-	-
Total	3,430	750	545	2875	380

Is mar a leanas an t-eolas a iarradh:

	Reigiúnach	Ceantar Boird (£k)			
		Tuaisceart	Deisceart	Oirthear	Iarthar
1. Scanóir agus géarsheirbhís i speisialta ospidéal	-	-	175	375	
2. Caipitil	300	300	-	2,400	-
3. Éilimh Neamairt Chliniciúil	3,000	-	-	-	-
4. Dochtúirí teaghlaigh	-	450	370	100	380
5. Oiliúint cláraitheoirí gnáthdhochtúirí	130	-	-	-	-
Iomlán	3,430	750	545	2875	380

Health Action Zones

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to identify Northern Ireland's health action zones and to detail (a) the amount of funding available to each action zone and (b) actual expenditure incurred by each zone. (AQW 1907/00)

Ms de Brún: There are currently two health action zones (HAZs) in operation – one in North and West Belfast and the other in Armagh and Dungannon, which were established in April 1999. Two more are to be established shortly in the Western and Northern Health and Social Services Board areas.

HAZs are each granted £150,000 per year for three years. This funding provides a support framework for locally agreed projects through the provision of needs assessment, key workers and the monitoring and evaluation of projects. It is then for the HAZs to attract further funding from other sources. To date, both of the current HAZs have operated within the original assigned budget amount.

Faoi láthair tá dhá Limistéar Gníomhaíochta Sláinte (LGS) ann – ceann amháin acu i gceantar Thuaisceart agus Iarthar Bhéal Feirste agus an ceann eile i gceantar Ard Mhacha agus Dhún Geanainn, agus bunaíodh iad i mí Aibreáin 1999. Cuirfear dhá cheann eile ar bun go luath i gceantair Bhoird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair agus an Tuaiscirt.

Tugtar deontas £150,000 in aghaidh na bliana go ceann trí bliana do gach LGS. Cuireann an maoiniú seo creat tacaíochta ar fáil do thionscadail a bhfuil aontú ann fúthu go háitiúil trí mheasúnú a dhéanamh ar na riachtanais, sainoibrithe a sholáthar agus faireachán agus meastóireacht a dhéanamh ar thionscadail. Is gnó é do na LGS ina dhiaidh sin tuilleadh maoinithe a mhealladh chucu féin ó fhoinsí eile. Go dtí seo, tá an dá LGS atá

anois ann ag feidhmiú taobh istigh den bhuiséad a leithroinneadh orthu.

Food Safety Advertisement

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of the food safety advertisement currently being televised.

(AQW 1910/00)

Ms de Brún: The food safety advertisement recently shown on television throughout the island of Ireland was arranged and paid for by the Food Safety Promotion Board. I am advised that the total cost of the advertisement was IR£218,238.07 broken down as follows:-

Production Costs	IR£53,785.14
RTE1/Network2	IR£74,340.00
TV3	IR£19,039.00
TG4	IR£3,211.00
UTV	IR£52,715.00
Channel 4	IR£15,147.93
Total	IR£218,238.07

Is é an Bord um Chur Chun Cinn Sábháilteachta Bia a shocraigh an fógra ar shábháilteacht bhia a taispeánadh ar an teilifís ar fud oileán na hÉireann le gairid, agus is é a d'íoc as. Insítear dom gurbh é ££218,238.07 costas iomlán an fhógra agus gur mar a leanas a dhéantar dealú air:-

Costais táirgthe	££53,785.14
RTE/Bealach 2	££74,340.00
TV3	££19,039.00
TG4	££3,211.00
UTV	££52,715.00
Cainéal 4	££15,147.93
Iomlán	££218,238.07

Travelling Community

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children born to the travelling community and, of these, how many were classed as (a) infant mortality and (b) infant morbidity in each of the last five years. (AQW 1912/00)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.

Infant Morbidity

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Trust Board area, infant morbidity in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1914/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil.

Single-Sex Wards

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the cost effectiveness of single-sex wards and whether they comprise best practice in respect of the provision of specialist treatment and to make a statement.

(AQW 1915/00)

Ms de Brún: Mixed-sex wards in specialist areas such as intensive care, coronary care, renal care and high dependency units are considered the most cost-effective way of delivering this form of care. Single-sex wards in specialist areas would require the establishment and running of separate units, thereby duplicating hi-tech and expensive equipment, as well as the training and recruitment of specialist staff. The current configuration of specialist treatment services represents best practice.

Meastar gurb iad bardaí gnéis mheasctha i ndianchúram, i gcúram croí, i gcúram duánach agus in aonaid ardspleáchais, mar shampla, an bealach is éifeachtaí costas leis an chineál seo cúraim a sholáthar. Bheadh aonaid scartha de dhíth le bardaí aon ghnéis i sainchúram a bhunú agus a reáchtáil, ag dúbláil mar sin trealamh ard-teicneolaíochta agus costasach chomh maith le sainfhoireann a oiliúint agus a earcú. Léiríonn cumraíocht seirbhísí sainchóireála faoi láthair an cleachtas is fearr.

In-Vitro Fertilisation

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if, pursuant to AQW 1466/00, she will detail (a) the position within each board area for access to drug treatment for in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and (b) if there are implications for such treatment under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

(AQW 1920/00)

Ms de Brún: None of the four Health and Social Services Boards currently commissions in vitro fertilisation (IVF) services. Patients receiving IVF treatment do so on a private basis, although historically the medications required during IVF treatment have been prescribed by general practitioners. Recently, however, some GPs in the Eastern Board area have stopped prescribing medications for patients undergoing IVF treatment at the Regional Fertility Centre at the RGH, on the grounds that clinical responsibility for the treatment and supervision of such patients remains with the hospital consultant.

I am concerned about the provision of sub-fertility services and, for that reason, this area will be included in the draft programme of equality impact assessments to be issued for consultation in the near future. In the

meantime, a group established by the Regional Medical Services Consortium, which commissions regional services on behalf of the four health and social services boards, has recently completed a review of these services and I am presently considering the group's draft report. It will help to determine how services for people experiencing fertility problems can be improved.

Ní choimisiúnaíonn ceann ar bith de na ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta seirbhísí toirchithe invítrea (TIV) faoi láthair. Faigheann othair, ag fáil cóireála TIV, ar bhonn príobháideach í cé gur ghnáthdhochtúirí go stairiúil a d'ordaigh na cógais a bhí de dhíth le linn cóireála TIV. Ar na mallaibh áfach, stad roinnt GDí i gceantar Bhord an Oirthir ag ordú cógas d'othair ag dul trí chóireáil TIV ag an Ionad Torthúlachta Réigiúnach ag an ORG, ar na cúiseanna gur ar an lia otharlainne atá freagracht chliniciúil as cóireáil agus as cúram a leithéid d'othair.

Tá mé buartha faoi sholáthar seirbhísí fo-thorthúlachta, agus dá bharr sin, cuirfear an réimse seo san áireamh sa dréachtchlár ar mheasúnuithe éifeachta cothroime a eiseofar do chomhairliú ar ball. Idir an dá linn, chríochnaigh grúpa a bunaíodh ag an Chuibhreannas Seirbhísí Réigiúnacha Míochaine, agus a choimisiúnaíonn seirbhísí réigiúnacha thar ceann na gceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta, chríochnaigh sé athbhreithniú ar na seirbhísí seo ar na mallaibh agus faoi láthair, tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh ar dhréacht-thuairisc an ghrúpa. Cuideoidh sí le cinneadh a dhéanamh faoin dóigh ar féidir seirbhísí do dhaoine a bhfuil fadhbanna torthúlachta acu a fheabhsú.

Teenage Pregnancies

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by trust board area, the number of teenage pregnancies and of these, how many can be attributed to single-parent situations in each of the last three years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1931/00)

Ms de Brún: It is not possible to provide information on the number of teenage pregnancies, as this information is not recorded. However, information on the number of births to teenage mothers (those aged under 20) is collected. Information on births according to marital status of the mother is not recorded according to health and social services trust area, but such information is available by district council area.

The table below shows (a) the number of births to teenage mothers according to district council area for the years 1997, 1998 and 1999 (the latest year for which such information is available), and (b) the number of such births where the mother was a single parent. Single parents have been defined as those women who registered the birth either as a sole registration, or as a joint registration with a father living at a different address.

**NUMBER OF BIRTHS TO MOTHERS AGED UNDER 20, AND
NUMBER OF BIRTHS TO SINGLE PARENTS (1), 1997, 1998 AND
1999**

District Council Area	Year:					
	1997		1998		1999	
	Total Births	Births to Single Parents	Total Births	Births to Single Parents	Total Births	Births to Single Parents
Ards	52	38	70	48	41	28
Belfast	433	372	445	383	480	418
Castlereagh	37	31	36	26	107	82
Down	64	48	56	44	54	44
Lisburn	93	77	90	78	66	50
North Down	48	36	44	35	45	35
Antrim	53	38	47	37	72	58
Ballymena	54	45	60	47	40	26
Ballymoney	22	21	19	15	32	22
Carrickfergus	35	24	46	36	25	18
Coleraine	42	33	54	43	59	38
Cookstown	26	20	25	20	26	24
Larne	35	26	22	19	23	19
Magherafelt	26	19	26	21	34	26
Moyle	18	12	18	15	7	6
Newtownabbey	69	58	72	59	60	52
Armagh	29	24	40	28	24	18
Banbridge	20	14	27	17	24	17
Craigavon	72	50	91	66	102	76
Dungannon	36	30	38	30	34	29
Newry & Mourne	73	58	90	68	77	57
Fermanagh	40	32	25	21	57	44
Limavady	34	27	39	34	43	37
Derry	155	133	167	145	178	163
Omagh	31	23	50	38	36	28
Strabane	47	43	38	36	45	45
Total	1644	1332	1735	1409	1791	1460

⁽¹⁾ Single parents are those women who registered the birth either as a sole registration or as a joint registration with a father living at a different address.

Ní féidir eolas a chur ar fáil ar an líon déagóirí a bhí torrach mar níl an t-eolas seo taifeadta. Bailítear eolas áfach ar an líon breitheanna ag máithreacha sna déaga (iad faoi aois 20 bliain). Ní dhéantar taifead ar eolas breitheanna maidir le stádas pósta na máthar de réir ceantar Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Séirbhísí Sóisialta, ach cuirtear a leithéid d'eolas ar fáil de réir limistéar Comhairle Ceantair.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos (a) an líon breitheanna ag máithreacha sna déaga de réir limistéar Comhairle Ceantair do na blianta 1997, 1998 agus 1999 (an bhliain is deireanaí ina raibh an t-eolas ar fáil), agus (b) an líon breitheanna dá leithéid ina raibh an máthair ina tuismitheoir singil.

Sainmhíníodh tuismitheoirí atá singil mar mhná a chláraigh an bhreith mar chláiritheoir aonair nó a chomhchláraigh agus an t-athair ina chónaí ag seoladh eile.

**LÍON BREITHEANNA AG MAITHREACHA FAOI AOIS 20
BLIAIN, AGUS LÍON BREITHEANNA AG TUISMITHEOIRÍ A
BHÍ SINGIL (1), 1997, 1998 AGUS 1999**

Limistéar Comhairle Ceantair	Bliain:					
	1997		1998		1999	
	Suim Breith eanna	Breith eanna ag tuismi theoirí a bhí singil	Suim Breith eanna	Breith eanna ag tuismi theoirí a bhí singil	Suim Breith eanna	Breith eanna ag tuismi theoirí a bhí singil
Na hArda	52	38	70	48	41	28
Béal Feirste	433	372	445	383	480	418
Caisleán Riabhaigh	37	31	36	26	107	82
An Dún	64	48	56	44	54	44
Lios na gCearrbhach	93	77	90	78	66	50
An Dún Thuaidh	48	36	44	35	45	35
Aontroim	53	38	47	37	72	58
An Baile Meánach	54	45	60	47	40	26
Baile Muine	22	21	19	15	32	22
Carraig Fhearghais	35	24	46	36	25	18
Cúil Raithin	42	33	54	43	59	38
An Chorr Chriochach	26	20	25	20	26	24
An Latharna	35	26	22	19	23	19
Machaire Fíolta	26	19	26	21	34	26
An Mhaoil	18	12	18	15	7	6
Baile na Mainistreach	69	58	72	59	60	52
Ard Mhacha	29	24	40	28	24	18
Droichead na Banna	20	14	27	17	24	17
Craigavon	72	50	91	66	102	76
Dún Geanainn	36	30	38	30	34	29
An tIúr agus Múrm	73	58	90	68	77	57
Fear Manach	40	32	25	21	57	44
Léim an Mhadaidh	34	27	39	34	43	37
Doire	155	133	167	145	178	163
An Ómaigh	31	23	50	38	36	28
An Sráth Bán	47	43	38	36	45	45
Iomlán	1644	1332	1735	1409	1791	1460

⁽¹⁾ Is iad na tuismitheoirí atá singil na mná sin a chláraigh an bhreith mar chlárú aonair nó a chomhchláraigh agus an t-athair ina chónaí ag seoladh eile.

Trust Board Expenditure

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail by trust board area, (a) the number of trips spent on official business outside Northern Ireland by trust board chief executives (b) the duration and purpose of each trip and (c) the total cost associated with each trip in each of the last four years for which figures are available. (AQW 1933/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Cuireadh an t-eolas a iarradh sa leabharlann.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of operations postponed because hospitals are awaiting disposable surgical instruments required to avoid the risks associated with the variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD). (AQW 1934/00)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.

Integrating Childcare and Early Years Education

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what progress has been achieved in integrating childcare and early years education. (AQW 1937/00)

Ms de Brún: Integrating childcare and early years education within a wider supportive framework of services is an important element of the Child Care Strategy. Some of the ways in which integration of services has been achieved include improved co-ordination arrangements for those children who have to move between care provision and education and the use of single centres to provide “wrap-around” care and education. There has also been increased use of school premises for day care, community based activities and after-school clubs.

A number of good practice networks have also been established as models for high quality integrated service provision. Good practice networks typically offer integrated childcare and education, including education for children with special educational needs. They also disseminate and stimulate good practice and offer support and training to other providers in their areas. At present there are three good practice networks: Harpur’s Hill Early Years Project (Coleraine), Ballybeen Women’s Centre (Dundonald) and The Dry Arch Centre (Dungiven).

In addition, the Education and Training Inspectorate, the Social Services Inspectorate and the registration and

inspection units within health and social services trusts are working together to devise common inspection standards for use in childcare and early education settings providing for children in their pre-school year.

Is gné thábhachtach de Stráitéis Cúram Leanaí cúram leanaí agus oideachas luathbhlianta a chomhtháthú laistigh de chreat níos leithne tacaíochta seirbhísí. I measc cuid de na bealaí ar éirigh le comhtháthú seirbhísí cúram leanaí a bhaint amach bhí socrúithe comhordaithe feabhsaithe do na páistí úd nach mór dóibh bogadh idir soláthar cúraim agus oideachais chomh maith le húsáid ionad aonarach le cúram agus oideachas “timfhillteach” a sholáthar. Tá méadú ar usáid suimh scoile le haghaidh cúram lae, gníomhaíochtaí lonnaithe sa phobal agus clubanna iarscoile.

Tá roinnt Gréasáin Dea-chleachtais bunaithe mar eiseamláir faoi choinne soláthar seirbhíse comhtháite d’ardcháilíocht. Is nós le Gréasáin Dea-chleachtais cúram leanaí agus oideachais comhtháite a ofráil, chomh maith le hoideachas do pháistí a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta oideachais acu. Scaipeann siad agus spreagann siad dea-chleachtas agus tugann siad tacaíocht do sholáthróirí eile sna limistéir s’acu. Faoi láthair tá trí Ghréasán Dea-chleachtais ann: Tionscnamh Luathbhlianta Chnoc Harpur (Cúil Raithin), Ionad Ban Bhaile Bín (Dún Dónaill) agus Ionad Áirse Tirime (Dún Geimhin).

Ar a bharr, tá an Fhoireann Chigireachta Oideachais agus Oiliúna, an Fhoireann Chigireachta Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus na hionaid chláráithe agus chigireachta laistigh d’Iontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta ag obair le chéile le caighdeán choitianta chigireachta a dhearadh le húsáid i gcúram leanaí agus i dtimpeallachtaí luathoideachais ag riar ar pháistí sa bhliain réamhscoile s’acu.

Children’s Organs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to consider providing financial assistance to families to cover associated expenses following the return of children’s organs that were retained by hospitals. (AQW 1939/00)

Ms de Brún: I am assured by the relevant trusts that they will meet all reasonable expenses associated with the return of children’s organs.

Gheall na hiontaobhais chuí dom go n-íocfaidh siad as na costais réasúnta uile a bhaineann le tabhairt ar ais orgáin leanaí.

Rosstulla Special School

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) confirm that she is aware of the under provision of speech therapy at

Rosstulla Special school in Newtownabbey and (b) outline the steps she is taking to address this situation. (AQW 1944/00)

Ms de Brún: I am aware of the problem concerning the provision of speech and language therapy at Rosstulla Special School, which has arisen as a result of a therapist resigning in January. Homefirst Community Trust is actively engaged in securing a replacement therapist.

Is eol domh an fhadhb a bhaineann le soláthar teiripe urlabhra agus teanga ag scoil Speisialta Rosstulla, a tháinig as teiripeoir a d'éirigh as an phost i mí Eanáir. Tá Iontaobhas Pobal Homefirst ag obair go gníomhach le teiripeoir athsholáthair a fháil.

Child Protection Joint Working Group

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to review the vetting procedures for those working with children and who move between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 1947/00)

Ms de Brún: The Child Protection Joint Working Group, which has been set up under the North/South Ministerial Council, is tasked with establishing a mechanism for the reciprocal identification of people who are considered unsuitable to work with children. Further developments in this area will be based upon the outcome of the working group's deliberations and the establishment of reciprocal arrangements for the exchange of information about applicants for work with children.

An Comhghrúpa Oibre ar Chosaint Páistí, a bunaíodh faoi choimirce na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas, atá freagrach as bunú meicníochta d'aithint chómhalartach daoine a shiltear mífhóirsteanach le bheith ag obair le páistí. Bunófar tuilleadh forbairtí sa réimse seo ar thoradh macnaimh an Chomhghrúpa Oibre agus ar bhunú socruithe cómhálartacha do mhalartú eolais ar iarratasóirí ag iarraidh obair a dhéanamh le páistí.

Health Trust Expenditure

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail by each health trust (a) the overall deficit in expenditure (b) all payments to senior staff for performance related pay (c) all severance payments made to officials and staff and (d) how much was paid to each chairperson/board member in attendance fees, salaries and expenses in the last two financial years for which figures are available. (AQW 1951/00)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to the information on trust deficits provided in answer to AQW 1513/2000. Details on performance related pay made to trust senior staff have been requested by the Public Accounts Committee and I will arrange to send the Member a

copy when they are made available to the Committee. The information requested for parts (c) and (d) is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Tarraingim aird an chomhaltar ar an eolas ar easpaí Iontaobhas a thug mé i bhfreagra ar AQW 1513/2000. D'iarr an Coiste Cuntas Poiblí ar shonraí ar phá bainteach le cleachtadh a íocadh d'fhoireann shinsearach Iontaobhas agus socróidh mé cóip a chur chuig an chomhaltar nuair a chuirfear ar fáil don choiste iad. Níl an t-eolas a iarradh do chodanna (c) agus (d) ar fáil go réidh agus ní fhéadfaí iad a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

New Deal

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to ensure that the New Deal agreement on junior doctors' working hours is being implemented. (AQW 1952/00)

Ms de Brún: My Department monitors New Deal compliance here every six months. The advisory group on junior doctors' hours considers the results of this monitoring and can recommend action at local level to resolve specific compliance issues. Also, the new contract and pay system introduced in December 2000 will provide fresh impetus to trusts to work with their junior medical staff to achieve New Deal targets and therefore reduce onerous working arrangements. In addition, my Department is in the process of recruiting dedicated staff to assist trusts in this task.

Déanann mo Roinns-e faireachán gach sé mhí ar an dóigh a gcomhlíontar an Conradh Nua anseo. Déanann an grúpa comhairleach ar uaireanta dochtúirí sóisearacha machnamh ar an fhaireachán sin agus thig leis bearta a mholadh go háitiúil le ceisteanna áirithe maidir le comhlíonadh a réiteach. Chomh maith leis sin, tabharfaidh an córas nua conartha agus pá a tugadh isteach i mí na Nollag 2000 spreagadh úr d'iontaobhais comhoibriú lena bhfoireann mhíochaine shóisearach le spriocanna an Chonartha Nua a bhaint amach agus, ar an ábhar sin, tromshocruithe oibre a laghdú. Lena chois sin, tá mo Roinns-e i mbun earcú foirne ar leith le cuidiú le hiontaobhais san obair sin.

Hospital Security

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to improve hospital security. (AQW 1953/00)

Ms de Brún: The question of security at hospitals is a matter for health and social services trusts to determine. Trusts are required by the Department to have policies

in place which are designed to ensure the safety of staff, patients and visitors. These are kept under constant review.

Titeann sé ar chrann na nIontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta cinneadh a dhéanamh ar an cheist slándála ag otharlanna. Éilíonn an Roinn ar Iontaobhais polasaithe, a leagtar amach le sábháilteacht na foirne, othar agus chuairteoirí a chinntiú, le bheith i bhfeidhm acu. Coinnítear faoi athbhreithniú i gcónaí iad seo.

Consultancy Services

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her projected spend on consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year.

(AQW 1955/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil.

Organophosphate Poisoning

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people suffering from organophosphorus poisoning in Northern Ireland in the years 1999, 2000 and the current year to date.

(AQW 1974/00)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Information on persons admitted to local hospitals with a diagnosis of toxic effects of organophosphate and carbamate insecticides is detailed in the table below. The data does not permit identification of cases due specifically to organophosphates.

1998/99	0
1999/00	3
2000/01 ⁽¹⁾	1

⁽¹⁾ April to December 2000

Níl eolas ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh.

Mionléirítear sa tábla thíos eolas ar dhaoine ligthe isteach chuig otharlanna áitiúla le fáthmheas éifeachta tocsaíní feithidicídí orgánafosfáite agus carbamáite. Ní cheadaíonn na sonraí aithint chásanna de thoradh orgánafosfáití go háirithe.

1998/99	0
1999/00	3
2000/01 ⁽¹⁾	1

⁽¹⁾ Aibreán go Nollaig 2000

Speech and Language Therapists

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the problems of recruiting speech and language therapists in the parliamentary constituency of East Antrim and to detail her plans to address this issue.

(AQW 1987/00)

Ms de Brún: There has been no formal assessment of the recruitment 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. However, to assist in the development of workforce planning for speech and language therapists, my Department has been engaged in a workforce survey, the results of which are expected in the next three months.

Ní dhearnadh measúnú foirmiúil ar earcaíocht teiripithe labhartha agus teanga. Tá Boird agus Iontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta freagrach as cinntiú go bhfuil go leor teiripithe ann chun an leibhéal seirbhíse a sholáthar a chomhlíonfaidh riachtanais mheasúnaithe a ndaonraí. Chun cuidiú le forbairt phleanáil mheithle oibre do theiripithe labhartha agus teanga, bhí mo Roinn mo páirteach i suirbhé meithle oibre, a bhfuiltear ag súil lena thorthaí i gceann trí mhí.

Occupational Therapy Waiting Lists

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the length of waiting lists for occupational therapy reports in the parliamentary constituency of East Antrim and to detail her plans to address this issue.

(AQW 1988/00)

Ms de Brún: Information on waiting lists for occupational therapy assessments is not collected on a parliamentary constituency basis.

I have identified £0.5m to recruit an additional 20 occupational therapists in the coming financial year. I have also approved implementation of the recommendations contained in the preliminary report of the Joint Housing Executive/DHSSPS review of the Housing Adaptations Service, designed to improve occupational therapy response times for the service. Those measures should assist in improving the occupational therapy service in all areas.

Ní chruinnítear eolas ar liostaí feithimh do mheasúnuithe teiripe saothair de réir dailcheantair parlaiminte.

Fuair mé £0.5m chun 20 Teiripí Saothair breise a earcú sa bhliain airgeadais seo chugainn. Cheadaigh mé cur i gcrích na moltaí sa Réamhthuairisc Chomhathbhreithniú an Fheidhmeannais Tithíochta/na RSSSP ar an tSeirbhís Oiriúnaithe Tithíochta fosta, a leagadh amach le hamanna freagartha teiripe saothair don tseirbhís a fheabhsú. Ba

chóir do na bearta seo cuidiú le feabhsú na seirbhíse teiripe saothair i ngach ceantar.

Speech and Language Therapy

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the length of waiting lists for speech and language therapy throughout the area served by the Homefirst Community Trust and to detail her plans to address this issue.

(AQW 1989/00)

Ms de Brún: There are 175 children and 90 adults waiting for assessment and 985 children and 91 adults waiting for treatment to commence in the Homefirst Trust area. The trust is responsible for the recruitment of therapists and is actively engaged in filling vacancies in the speech and language therapy service. My Department has been engaged in a workforce survey, the results of which are expected in the next three months, which should assist in the development of workforce planning for speech and language therapists.

Tá 175 pháiste agus 90 duine fásta ag fanacht ar mheasúnú agus 985 pháiste agus 91 duine fásta ag fanacht ar chóireáil i limistéar Iontaobhas Homefirst. Tá an tIontaobhas freagrach as earcaíocht teiripithe agus tá sé páirteach ar bhonn gníomhach i líonadh folúntas i seirbhís an teiripe labhartha agus theanga. Bhí mo Roinn páirteach i suirbhé foirne oibre, a bhfuiltear ag dúil lena thorthaí taobh istigh de thrí mhí. Ba cheart go gcuideíonn seo le forbairt phleanáil foirne oibre do theiripithe labhartha agus teanga.

Hospice Service

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her plans to provide financial assistance to the hospice service and to make a statement.

(AQW 1992/00)

Ms de Brún: It is for the health and social services boards to assess the need for palliative care services within their areas and to reach agreement with voluntary sector providers as to the level of service provision which is appropriate to meet local needs. All four boards have contractual arrangements with the voluntary hospices operating in their areas. My Department provides grant aid, which comes to £104,000 in the current financial year, towards the central administrative costs of the Northern Ireland Hospice in Belfast. I do not at present envisage any change in this arrangement.

Titeann sé ar chrann na mBord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta riachtanais chúraim mhaolaithigh a mheas taobh istigh dá limistéir fhéin agus teacht ar aontú le soláthraithe den earnáil dheonach maidir leis an leibhéal soláthair sheirbhíse atá fóirsteanach le riachtanais áitiúla a chlúdach.

Tá socrúithe conarthacha ag na ceithre Bhord go léir leis na hospaisí deonacha go léir atá ag obair ina limistéir. Cuireann mo Roinn mo cuidiú deontais ar fáil, a bhfuil iomlán de £104,000 ann sa bhliain reatha airgeadais, faoi choinne costas riaracháin lárnach Ospais Thuaisceart Éireann i mBéal Feirste a íoc. Níl mé ag beartú aon athrú a dhéanamh ar an socrú seo faoi láthair.

Ear, Nose and Throat Consultants

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the length of the waiting list for appointments with ear, nose and throat consultants at Altnagelvin Hospital (b) the number of people on the list and (c) the average waiting time before they are seen by consultants.

(AQW 1997/00)

Ms de Brún: In the quarter ending 30 September 2000 (the latest date for which information is available), there were 306 persons waiting for inpatient treatment and 1,861 persons waiting for their first outpatient appointment in the ear, nose and throat specialty in Altnagelvin Hospitals HSS Trust.

Average waiting time cannot be calculated as that information is collected on the basis of time bands, as detailed in Tables 1 and 2 below.

TABLE 1. NUMBERS WAITING FOR INPATIENT TREATMENT AT ALTNAGELVIN HOSPITALS HSS TRUST, EAR, NOSE AND THROAT SPECIALTY ONLY, QUARTER ENDING 30 SEPTEMBER 2000, BY TIME WAITING

Time waiting for treatment (months)									
0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	Total
169	88	28	17	4	0	0	0	0	306

TABLE 2. NUMBERS WAITING FOR FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT AT ALTNAGELVIN HOSPITALS HSS TRUST, EAR, NOSE AND THROAT SPECIALTY ONLY, QUARTER ENDING 30 SEPTEMBER 2000, BY WAITING TIME.

Time waiting for treatment (months)									
0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	Total
659	518	371	211	102	0	0	0	0	1,861

Sa ráithe ag críochnú an 30ú Meán Fómhair 2000 (an dáta is déanaí atá eolas ar fáil), bhí 306 dhuine ag fanacht ar chóireáil othair chónaithigh agus 1,861 dhuine ag fanacht ar a gcéad choinne othair sheachtraigh sa Sainionad Cluaise, Sróine agus Scornaí in Iontaobhas SSS Otharlanna Alt na nGealbhan.

Ní féidir meánamanna feithimh a áireamh mar go gcuinnítear an t-eolas seo de réir bandaí ama, mar a mhionléirítear i dTáblaí 1 agus 2 thíos.

TÁBLA 1. LÍONTA NA NDAOINE AG FANACHT AR CHÓIREÁIL OTHAIR CHÓNAITHIGH AG SAINIONAD CLUAISE, SRÓINE AGUS SCORNAÍ IONTAOBHAS SSS OTHARLANNA ALT NA NGEALBHAN AMHÁIN, SA RÁITHE AG CRÍOCHNÚ AN 30Ú MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2000, DE RÉIR AMA AG FANACHT.

Am ag fanacht ar chóireáil (míonna)									
0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	Iomlán
169	88	28	17	4	0	0	0	0	306

TÁBLA 2. LÍONTA NA NDAOINE AG FANACHT AR A GCÉAD CHOINNE OTHAIR SHEACHTRAIGH AG SAINIONAD CLUAISE, SRÓINE AGUS SCORNAÍ IONTAOBHAS SSS OTHARLANNA ALT NA NGEALBHAN AMHÁIN, SA RÁITHE AG CRÍOCHNÚ AN 30Ú MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2000, DE RÉIR AMA AG FANACHT.

Am ag fanacht ar chóireáil (míonna)									
0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	Iomlán
659	518	371	211	102	0	0	0	0	1,861

Domestic Violence

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of domestic violence in urban and rural areas in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2004/00)

Ms de Brún: During 2000, there were 14,520 recorded domestic disputes, of which 7,335 involved violence. The data currently available does not provide a breakdown of these figures between urban and rural areas.

Le linn 2000, bhí 14,520 imreas tí cláraithe, ar fhoréigineach 7,335 díobh. Ní thugann na sonraí atá ann faoi láthair breacadh síos ar na figiúirí seo idir ceantair uirbeacha agus tuaithe.

Derg Valley Hospital

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her plans for the former Derg Valley Hospital building and grounds. (AQW 2017/00)

Ms de Brún: Following discussions between my Department, Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust and Mourne Derg Community Care, it has been agreed to lease the property to Mourne Derg Community Care. The lease will be for a term of 25 years and provides that the property will be used for the provision of a crèche and work and training initiative services.

The lease is currently with Mourne Derg's Solicitors for execution and it is expected that this will occur in the near future.

I ndiaidh caibidlí idir mo Roinn mo, Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Shliabh Speirín agus Cúram

Pobail na Muirne agus na Deirge, comhaontaíodh go dtógfadh Cúram Pobail na Muirne agus na Deirge an léas ar an áitreabh. Léas do théarma 25 bliana a bheidh ann ar an choinníoll go n-úsáidfear an t-áitreabh chun naíolann chomh maith le seirbhísí tionscnaimh oibre agus oiliúna a sholáthar.

Tá an léas ag Aturnaetha na Muirne agus na Deirge dá chur i gcrích faoi láthair agus táthar ag súil go dtarlóidh sé seo ar ball.

Regional Strategy on Health and Well-being

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what amendments she has made to the Regional Strategy on Health and Well-being in respect of targets set for mental health services. (AQW 2031/00)

Ms de Brún: I have not made any amendments to the regional strategy in respect of targets set for mental health services. Those will expire next year. I have set new targets for mental health service development next year as outlined in the Programme for Government.

Ní dhearna mé leasuithe ar bith ar an straitéis réigiúnach maidir le spriocanna leagtha amach do sheirbhísí sláinte meabhrach. Rachaidh siad as feidhm an bhliain seo chugainn. Leag mé spriocanna nua amach d'fhorbairt na seirbhíse sláinte meabhrach don bhliain seo chugainn mar a achoimríodh sa Chlár Rialtais.

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Current Pay Scales for Lecturers

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline his proposals to address the difference between the current pay scales for lecturers and that of teachers on the same point scale. (AQW 1893/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): The terms and conditions of service, including salaries, of lecturers in further education are a matter for the governing bodies of the colleges.

Educational Initiatives

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail which educational initiatives are currently operating in the

Republic of Ireland, are currently under consideration by his Department. (AQW 1895/00)

Dr Farren: There are no specific educational initiatives under consideration.

Lifelong Learning

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the steps he is taking to encourage more students to remain in full time education after the age of 16 years. (AQW 1899/00)

Dr Farren: My Department's policy is to promote lifelong learning, encouraging anyone over 16 years of age to engage in education and training to support economic, community and personal development, irrespective of the mode of attendance.

Consultancy Services

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail his projected spend on consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year. (AQW 1954/00)

Dr Farren: The projected spend on consultancy services by my Department in the 2001/02 financial year is £782,500.

Unemployment Figures

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the steps he is taking to reduce unemployment figures to meet the United Kingdom Government's target of 3% - 4%; and to make a statement. (AQW 1976/00)

Dr Farren: The policies, programmes and services of my Department are geared towards the Executive's priorities of Securing a Competitive Economy, Investing in Education and Skills and Growing as a Community, and therefore make a significant contribution to the creation of jobs and the reduction of unemployment. Investment in higher and further education, the promotion of lifelong learning and the implementation of welfare to work and welfare reform measures are all of central importance to the reduction of unemployment levels.

Expenditure on Consultancy Services

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the steps he has taken to ensure that expenditure on consultancy services represents value for money. (AQW 2036/00)

Dr Farren: In August 2000, my Department issued to staff a revised system for the use and control of

consultants to replace guidance issued previously by DED and DENI. The system complies with guidance issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel. A key element is the need to obtain value for money. The Department has a service level agreement with the Government Purchasing Agency for the provision of professional purchasing services.

Student Support Proposals

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline details of his student support proposals and to make a statement. (AQO 899/00)

Dr Farren: Further work on the detail of my proposals is in hand with the Department of Finance and Personnel and they will then go back to the Executive for final clearance. I hope that this process can be completed very soon.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the number of Individual Learning Accounts taken out in Northern Ireland. (AQO 902/00)

Dr Farren: From 4 September 2000, when they first became available, to the end of January a total of 10,890 Northern Ireland residents have opened an Individual Learning Account. This is an encouraging start to this important new initiative supporting lifelong learning.

Electronic Methods to Improve Efficiency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline his plans for the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and public access to information within his Department. (AQO 873/00)

Dr Farren: My Department will have developed a comprehensive e-Business Strategy by May 2001. The strategy will identify those internal processes and key services to the public that can be delivered efficiently and effectively through electronic means. The strategy will also establish an implementation plan taking account of priorities and available resources.

Tuition Fees

Ms E Bell asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to confirm that his policy with regard to tuition fees for students has been equality proofed under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQO 907/00)

Dr Farren: I can confirm that my proposals, including those relating to tuition fees, have been subject to a preliminary equality impact assessment under my Department's equality scheme. That Assessment will be available as part of the equality consultation under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which I will carry out once the Executive's clearance of my proposals has been given.

Taskforce on Employability and Long-term Unemployment

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the progress made in establishing the Taskforce on Employability outlined in the Programme for Government.

(AQO 898/00)

Dr Farren: The first meeting of the Taskforce on Employability and Long-Term Unemployment is arranged for 12 March. I have commissioned a scoping study, now underway, to review the existing evidence on employability, develop workable definitions and identify potential areas for action. This study, due for completion in April, will help inform the work and direction of the taskforce.

Age Diversity in Employment

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline his policy to ensure fair employment opportunities for older workers.

(AQO 928/00)

Dr Farren: Employers are encouraged to follow the guidance in the voluntary Code of Practice on Age Diversity in Employment, circulated by the then Department of Economic Development in June 1999. My Department also helps older workers back into employment through "New Deal 50 Plus". There is currently no legislation on discrimination in employment on grounds of age, though I would expect this to be considered in the context of the proposed Single Equality Bill.

Unskilled Occupational Background

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the proportion of persons from a family where the occupational background is unskilled or unemployed gaining access to higher education.

(AQO 927/00)

Dr Farren: There were 9,876 NI domiciled students accepted for degree place through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service in 1999, of whom 2.6% were from an unskilled occupational background.

The Department is not able to discern whether persons gaining access to higher education come from a family where the occupational background is unemployed.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to give his assessment of the take-up to date, of the Individual Learning Accounts within Northern Ireland.

(AQO 933/00)

Dr Farren: From 4 September 2000, when they first became available, to the end of January a total of 10,890 Northern Ireland residents have opened an Individual Learning Account. This is an encouraging start to this important new initiative supporting lifelong learning.

East Down Institute of Further and Higher Education

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail when the assessment of the economic appraisal in respect of the new building for East Down Institute of Further and Higher Education in Downpatrick will be completed, and to make a statement.

(AQO 881/00)

Dr Farren: On 22 January 2001, East Down Institute provided clarification on a range of issues in relation to their economic appraisal. The Department's economic and technical advisers are considering the latest response. Subject to the clarification of any further issues, it is expected that the economic appraisal will be approved within the next six to eight weeks.

Training and Employment Agency

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail (a) the remuneration paid to the chairperson and board members of the Training and Employment Agency (b) the terms of reference of the board and (c) the timescale of service.

(AQO 876/00)

Dr Farren: The annual remuneration paid to the chairperson is £23,035 and to each of the board members is £4,300.

The terms of reference of the board are that it advises the chief executive on:

- current and future training and employment requirements of the Northern Ireland economy;
- the relevance of the agency services to the needs of employers and individuals;
- promotion of training, including management development within industry;
- encouragement of training by private sector organisations.

The timescale of service is up to three years per term.

Strategic Planning for Post-16 Provision

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail discussions he has had with the Minister of Education on links between schools with sixth-form and further education colleges. (AQO 917/00)

Dr Farren: I met with the Minister in June 2000 to discuss a range of issues of mutual interest to our two departments including the 14-19 curriculum and the strategic planning for post-16 provision were both discussed at the meeting. Close contact between the Departments continues at official level.

Business Sponsorship for Vocational Training

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline his plans to attract business sponsorship for vocational training. (AQO 908/00)

Dr Farren: Most business sponsorship for vocational training takes the form of “in-kind” support through the employment of modern apprentices or through the availability of real work placement opportunities for trainees. I have no plans to change this arrangement bearing in mind the predominance of small firms here and the pressures they currently operate under and their willingness to provide the real work environment needed by trainees to complete their National Vocational Qualifications.

Occasionally, commercial sponsorship is obtained for specific seminars particularly in the IT or management areas and I will of course seek to maximise the input of the private sector in those areas.

The Employability of People in Rural Areas

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the steps he is taking to provide skills training to improve the employability of people in rural areas. (AQO 929/00)

Dr Farren: My Department offers a varied choice of skills training measures through approved providers who are located right across Northern Ireland. In addition to the 26 New Deal Consortia, the Jobskills Programme is accessible at over 120 locations with a wide-range of National Vocational Qualifications at levels 1 to 3 available. Furthermore, the further education sector provides an extensive range of vocational courses to suit most ability levels.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Free Travel for Pensioners

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the commencement date for the free travel for pensioners scheme. (AQW 1844/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): The free travel scheme will commence on 1 October 2001. From that date men and women aged 65 and over will be able to travel free on all scheduled bus and railway services throughout Northern Ireland at any time.

Road Accidents

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of road accidents occurring at the intersection of Station Road, Doagh, Longshot Road and the main Larne to Templepatrick Road in each of the last five years for which figures are available and to outline his plans to improve road safety at this junction. (AQW 1876/00)

Mr Campbell: The provision of information in relation to road accidents is a matter for the Northern Ireland Office and I have therefore asked that Department to respond directly to the member on this issue.

My Department's Roads Service is currently carrying out a minor works scheme to improve the sightlines for motorists exiting Station Road, Doagh onto the A57 Templepatrick Road. The scheme, which commenced on 12 February 2001, is due to be completed by the end of March 2001.

Raw Sewage Overspill

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of incidents of raw sewage overspill in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area in each of the last five years. (AQW 1878/00)

Mr Campbell: Raw sewage overflows from Water Service infrastructure can occur in a variety of ways. These 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 overflows 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 Newtownabbey Borough Council area is as follows:

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Reported pollution incidents resulting from sewage overflows to sea or waterways.	0	0	1	0	3
Properties flooded internally from sewage overspill incidents.	0	0	0	4	0

Off-street Parking

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development if, pursuant to AQW 1419/00, he will detail the geographical areas where off-street car parking charges were imposed. (AQW 1886/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service imposes parking tariffs in its charged off-street car parks in the following towns/cities:-

Antrim	Enniskillen
Armagh	Holywood
Ballyclare	Larne
Ballymena	Limavady
Ballymoney	Lisburn
Ballynahinch	Londonderry
Banbridge	Lurgan
Bangor	Newtownards
Belfast	Newry
Carrickfergus	Omagh
Coleraine	Portadown
Downpatrick	Strabane
Dungannon	

As this question is a follow up to AQW 1419/00, I should make it clear that excess and alternative charges are only applied in Pay and Display car parks. As Roads Service does not have such car parks in Armagh, Belfast and Newry, it does not receive any revenue from excess and alternative charges in those locations.

Also, in my earlier answer to AQW 1419/00, I stated that Roads Service received revenue totalling approximately £283,000 from excess and alternative charges in 1999/2000. I am advised that that figure should have read £329,000. The mistake — a clerical error — was noticed in researching the answer to the Member's recent question for which I apologise.

Regional Development Property

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to restrict or prohibit the erection of arches, bunting or other street decoration associated with the Loyal Orders on property belonging to his Department. (AQW 2089/00)

Mr Campbell: It is an offence under the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 for any person to erect an arch along or across a public road without the consent of my Department. In May 2000, my Department's Roads Service held a meeting with the Orange Order to discuss this matter and to encourage improved compliance from member lodges. Roads Service also published notices in the local press in June 2000 reminding anyone who wished to erect a traditional arch of the requirements of the legislation, particularly in relation to insurance and safety. This was done in the knowledge that the vast majority of arches are not officially sanctioned Orange Order arches. It is intended that similar notices will be published this year.

I do not condone any unauthorised use of Departmental property and my Department's Roads Service will remove materials that have been erected illegally on its property and are a danger to road users. Where there is no danger, Roads Service will seek to remove such materials on the advice of the police and where there is strong local support. To act without local support is likely to lead to a proliferation of such materials and put at risk the safety of staff tasked with the removal work. There is also the question of cost.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Disability Living Allowance

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development if he intends to establish a support unit for dealing with enquiries in respect of Disability Living Allowance similar to the Incapacity and Pensions Support Unit established by Social Security Agency. (AQW 1842/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): There is already a team within Disability Living Allowance Branch who deal with enquiries and complaints from MPs, MLAs and customers relating to Disability Living Allowance, as well as Attendance Allowance, Invalid Care Allowance and Child Benefit.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the number of appeals received where incapacity benefit has been withdrawn and (b) the outcome of the appeals in each of the last five years. (AQW 1909/00)

Mr Morrow: The number of Incapacity Benefit cases disallowed and the number of appeals received for each of the last 5 years are outlined in Table 1 below.

The outcome of the appeals heard in each of the last 5 years is broken down in Table 2 below.

TABLE (1) - THE NUMBER OF INCAPACITY BENEFIT CASES WHICH WERE DISALLOWED AND NUMBER OF APPEALS RECEIVED FOR EACH OF THE LAST 5 YEARS.

Year ¹	The no. of Incapacity Benefit cases disallowed	The number of Appeals received
95/96	11778	1537
96/97	23419	6570
97/98	23431	6566
98/99	27304	7121
99/00	28800	6290
00/01 ²	22907	5674

¹ Each year runs from April to March for statistical purposes.

² The figure for 00/01 is the situation as of 31 January 2001

TABLE (2) - A BREAKDOWN OF THE OUTCOME OF APPEALS HEARD IN EACH OF THE LAST FIVE YEARS.

Year ¹	The number of cases Allowed on appeal	The no. of cases Disallowed on appeal	The no. of appeals Adjourned	The no. of appeals Reviewed	The no. of appeals Withdrawn
95/96	193	271	42	16	60
96/97	3178	3151	650	138	303
97/98	3062	2830	631	131	240
98/99	3397	3231	714	130	290
99/00	3039	3035	884	260	291
00/01 ²	2107	2717	889	116	290

¹ Each year runs from April to March for statistical purposes.

² The figure for 00/01 is the situation as of 31 January 2001

NB: All the appeals received in one year will not necessarily be heard in that year. Therefore, the total number of appeals received is not the same as the total number heard in the same year.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by parliamentary constituency, the number of people receiving Disability Living Allowance in each of the last five years. (AQW 1911/00)

Mr Morrow: The number of people receiving Disability Living Allowance, in each of the last 5 years, by parliamentary constituency is detailed in the Table below.

THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE RECEIVING DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE, BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY, FOR EACH OF THE LAST 5 YEARS.

Parliamentary Constituency	No. DLA Claimants at 30 November				
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Belfast East	5,030	5,326	5,553	5,746	6,077
Belfast North	9,296	9,772	10,229	10,329	10,687
Belfast South	4,725	5,180	5,433	5,517	6,000
Belfast West	12,598	13,265	13,772	13,765	14,254
East Antrim	3,809	4,083	4,311	4,508	4,801
East Londonderry	3,708	4,097	4,460	4,707	5,120
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	4,293	4,837	5,349	5,711	6,335
Foyle	8,767	9,416	9,854	9,784	11,036
Lagan Valley	4,350	4,753	5,084	5,371	5,775
Mid Ulster	5,455	5,971	6,379	6,673	7,246
Newry & Armagh	6,800	7,399	7,834	8,342	8,922
North Antrim	4,146	4,473	4,835	5,111	5,601
North Down	3,014	3,255	3,473	3,686	4,052
South Antrim	5,054	5,423	5,705	5,892	6,189
South Down	5,497	6,101	6,665	7,060	7,782
Strangford	4,258	4,645	4,828	4,882	5,684
Upper Bann	7,440	8,082	8,460	8,690	9,169
West Tyrone	6,635	7,477	8,157	8,568	9,301
Missing Postcode	3,313	3,575	3,845	4,933	3,078
Northern Ireland	108,188	117,130	124,226	129,275	137,109

Winter Fuel Allowance

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of payments of Winter Fuel Allowance that are outstanding and how many of these he expects to have been paid by the end of February 2001. (AQW 1917/00)

Mr Morrow: There are just over 770 outstanding claims for Winter Fuel Allowance. Nearly all these claims were received in January and the vast majority will receive their payment in early March.

Consultancy Services

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his projected spend on consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year. (AQW 1928/00)

Mr Morrow: The projected spend by my Department for consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year is £1,817,700.

Multi-Element Improvements Schemes (MEIS)

Mr Derek Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of rural cottages awaiting replacement or multi - element improvement (MEIs) schemes by local council area and the average waiting time in each local council area. (AQW 1938/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, but the chief executive has advised that this information is not readily available in the format requested. However, the following table illustrates the number of rural cottages requiring either replacement or an MEI Scheme, by local council area:

	Programmed for Replacement or MEI Scheme	Not yet programmed for Replacement or MEI Scheme	Total
Bangor	49	-	49
Ards	33	27	60
Castlereagh	17	2	19
Lisburn	9	6	15
Downpatrick	22	6	28
Newtown-abbey	2	-	2
Antrim	-	2	2
Ballycastle	47	2	49
Ballymena	9	2	11
Ballymoney	15	30	45
Carrick	-	-	-
Larne	3	1	4
Coleraine	32	12	44
Londonderry	33	8	41
Limavady	28	7	35
Magherafelt	-	12	12
Strabane	42	3	45
Omagh	-	19	19
Cookstown	-	18	18
Banbridge	-	-	-
Armagh	-	7	7
Newry	-	-	-
Craigavon	1	22	23
Dungannon	15	5	20
Fermanagh	6	9	15
NI Total	363	200	563

A breakdown between replacement and MEI Schemes is not available, as the type of scheme to be carried out will depend in each case on the outcome of an economic appraisal.

Information on average waiting times within a local council area could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However, the Chief Executive has advised that most of the 363 properties listed in a scheme are programmed to commence within the next three years.

Consultation on Social Security Issues

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Social Security.

(AQW 2026/00)

Mr Morrow: Under Section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 I am required to consult from time to time with the Secretary of State for Social Security on social security, child support and pension matters. In this context I met recently with Jeff Rooker MP, the Minister of State at the Department of Social Security. We discussed matters of mutual interest such as social security fraud.

United Nations International Year of Volunteering

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what cross-departmental plans are in place to mark the United Nations International Year of Volunteering.

(AQO 956/00)

Mr Morrow: The United Nations has designated 2001 as an International Year to recognise, promote and develop volunteering. The International Year chimes with the Department for Social Development's cross-cutting Active Community Initiative, which will receive funding totalling £1.8 million over the next 3 years.

The United Nations International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV) was launched at an event in Parliament Buildings on 5 December 2000, hosted by the Chairperson of the DSD Assembly Committee.

An event publicising IYV is being arranged for the end of March 2001, to take place in Cookstown. The Department for Social Development is funding this event.

The Department is also funding the production of quarterly newsletters to publicise activities/events associated with IYV throughout the year

Electronic Methods to Improve Efficiency

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his plans for the use of electronic methods to improve efficiency and public access to information within his Department. (AQO 874/00)

Mr Morrow: My Department makes widespread use of electronic technologies and is actively seeking to modernise further its ways of working and to improve interfaces with customers and partners. The Department is co-operating fully in efforts being co-ordinated by the Central Information Technology Unit for Northern Ireland, to develop a strategic approach to the delivery of e-Government services to the people of Northern Ireland. We are also working with other Departments on the development

of appropriate strategies, initiatives, policies and procedures relating to electronic service delivery.

Rehousing Arrangements

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total number of families who are tenants of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and who have been rehoused in the private sector due to sectarian attacks and how many of these were in the Coleraine District Housing area. (AQO 924/00)

Mr Morrow: I wish to make my position absolutely clear on the increasing number of sectarian attacks on people's homes. This is an outrage and a scandalous state of affairs, and I have no hesitation in condemning it and those cowardly individuals responsible for it.

As to the number of attacks, the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has advised that, since November 2000, a total of 112 applicants have been accepted as homeless due to intimidation in Northern Ireland. Most of these would have been Housing Executive tenants. Of this total, 14 applicants have rehoused themselves in the private sector.

In the Coleraine area, a total of 8 Housing Executive tenants have been accepted as homeless due to intimidation since November 2000. Only one of those applicants is believed to have made his own rehousing arrangements in the private sector.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr Ervine 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 North Belfast parliamentary constituency as under DEES 1. (AQO 923/00)

Mr Morrow: Funding for the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme is not allocated on a constituency basis. The existing DEES is very much demand led. Funding is provided to the Scheme Manager who responds to requests from individual clients for the installation of energy efficiency measures.

In some respects the new scheme will be similar but greater emphasis will be given to focusing and targeting those in greatest need. This will be achieved through publicising and marketing the scheme and through the development of an effective referral network. In the circumstances, therefore, I cannot predict what the future allocation of funding will be.

Housing Benefit Review Boards

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Social Development to give his assessment on the future of the Housing Benefit Review Boards and to make a statement. (AQO 888/00)

Mr Morrow: At this time it is proposed to abolish Housing Benefit Review Boards.

I intend to bring forward legislation which will provide for appeals in relation to Housing Benefit to be heard by Social Security Appeal Tribunals with effect from 2 July 2001.

Claimants Whose Benefit Books are Recalled

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Social Development to explain what provision is in place for claimants whose benefit books are recalled. (AQO 919/00)

Mr Morrow: There are no specific provisions in place, as different circumstances and different benefits dictate different action. The Social Security Agency is committed to ensuring benefits are paid promptly to customers and systems are in place to identify customers whose books have been recalled and returned. Priority is given to these customers and every effort is made to ensure the minimum of disruption is caused to benefit payments.

Debtors

Mr Davis asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to his answer of 6th February 2001 to AQW 1455/00, to detail any discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive regarding the increased sums being written off due to debtors who cannot be traced and the dates of those discussions. (AQO 931/00)

Mr Morrow: I met the Northern Ireland Housing Executive on Thursday 22 February 2001 to discuss the write-off of areas due to debtors who cannot be traced.

Gardening Service for Housing Executive Elderly/Disabled Tenants

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Social Development to undertake to provide, through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, a gardening service for the elderly and disabled. (AQO 875/00)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive whose Chief Executive has advised that, under the Housing Executive's standard tenancy agreement, the maintenance of gardens and hedges is the responsibility of the tenant. There are no plans to amend the agreement. However, the Housing Executive acknowledges that this can be a problem for some elderly and disabled tenants and is therefore examining the possibility of making local service agreements with community groups for carrying out such environmental services.

Regenerating Rundown Areas

Mr Poots asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what consideration he has given to allow corporations with vesting powers to be set up by local authorities to regenerate rundown urban areas.

(AQO 879/00)

Mr Morrow: I have not given consideration to the setting up of such bodies for the purpose referred to by the member.

However, my officials are currently in discussions with other Government Departments on proposals for a new overarching regeneration strategy for rundown areas along the lines embraced by new TSN and reflective of the GB National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. We will be consulting more widely on the new strategy in the coming months including Assembly structures.

Criteria for Categorising Housing Estates

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Social Development what criteria he uses to categorise housing estates as mixed.

(AQO 920/00)

Mr Morrow: Whilst there are no set criteria to categorise housing estates as mixed, the definition of a non-mixed or segregated estate is one where the minority grouping constitutes less than 10% of households. This definition is used by social geographers in many countries to address issues of ethnic/religious housing segregation.

Community Development Initiatives

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his policy in promoting and enabling community development initiatives within large Northern Ireland Housing Executive estates and to make a statement.

(AQO 915/00)

Mr Morrow: I will promote such community development through strategies that draw together all the key players: the tenants, the Housing Executive and my own officials. In addition, my Department and the Housing Executive will continue to fund the Northern Ireland Tenants Action Project, an organisation which provides

advice, support and training to community groups to enable them to become involved in their estates.

Cold Weather Payments

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his plans to extend Cold Weather Payments to people who are in receipt of disability benefits.

(AQO 925/00)

Mr Morrow: Cold Weather Payments are intended to help those vulnerable groups who are most at risk during sustained periods of very cold weather and who are the least able to meet higher heating costs. People receiving Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance who are disabled, elderly, long-term sick or have a child under five years in their family are eligible for Cold Weather Payments. There are no plans to further extend the scheme.

The Cold Weather Payments Scheme is sometimes confused with the Winter Fuel Payments Scheme. The Winter Fuel Payments scheme was introduced in January 1998 to specifically help pensioners with their winter fuel bills. This winter, Winter Fuel Payments are being made to most people aged 60 or over including those who are disabled. The qualifying conditions apply equally throughout the United Kingdom and there are no plans to change them.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Assembly Premium

Mr Shannon asked the Assembly Commission to detail the criteria used to identify those staff entitled to the Assembly Premium.

(AQW 1843/00)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Fee): The Assembly Premium is payable to all those staff directly employed by the Assembly Commission. This is an interim measure pending a substantive review of the terms and conditions of all staff employed by the Assembly Commission. The Assembly premium applies to staff recruited through open competition and civil servants on secondment and is not payable to contract staff.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 9 March 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Commissioner for Children

Ms Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when they will reply to Assembly Members in respect of the debate on 30 January 2001 on the appointment of a Children's Commissioner.

(AQW 1945/00)

Reply: All members who raised questions during the debate on a Commissioner for Children on 30 January will by now have received written replies. The letters were issued on 21 February and copies have been placed in the Library.

Northern Ireland Executive: Brussels Office

Mr Neeson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) what vacancies have been advertised to staff the office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (b) the date and place of advertisement of the vacancies (c) what vacancies are to be advertised in the near future (d) the expected dates of future advertisements and (e) where future vacancies will be advertised.

(AQW 1948/00)

Reply: A trawl notice was issued across departments for the post of Head of Office in December last year and an appointment was made in February. A trawl notice for the deputy post in the Office will be issued shortly and an appointment is expected at the end of this month.

These posts were not externally advertised. Scotland and Wales have followed similar appointment procedures for the staff of their Offices in Brussels.

Two locally engaged staff will be appointed in due course to help run the Office.

It is anticipated these posts will be advertised in April or May in the appropriate Belgian press.

Consultancy Services

Mr Hilditch asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the projected spend on consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year.

(AQW 1990/00)

Reply: The planned expenditure on consultancy services for projects identified to date in 2001/02 is £714,000.

Public Service Agreements

Mr O'Neill asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) what recommendations have been made with regard to public service agreements (b) by whom they have been made and (c) who will decide whether or not they are adopted.

(AQW 2016/00)

Reply: The intention to produce public service agreements (PSAs) for each department was included in the draft Programme for Government. The Economic Policy Unit and the Department of Finance and Personnel have worked with departments to progress the exercise. To assist this process, consultants were engaged to provide advice. Ministers took views from their respective departmental committees prior to finalising their Public Service Agreements for inclusion in the Executive's Programme for Government and its presentation to the Assembly for endorsement. The Programme explains that further work will be undertaken to develop the Public Service Agreements.

Women's Voluntary Organisations

Ms McWilliams asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to recognise the contribution made by the women's voluntary sector in respect of adult education, childcare, family support and community development and to outline the timetable envisaged for the provision of mainstream funding for this sector.

(AQO 941/00)

Reply: We fully recognise the valuable contribution which women's voluntary organisations make.

There is a range of sources to which women's voluntary organisations can apply for support for projects and services, including Health and Social Services Trust, the Training and Employment Agency, the National Lotteries Charities Board and charitable trusts.

Denis Haughey, Sean Farren and Bairbre de Brun will meet members of the Women's Support Network later this month.

The Ministers have indicated their willingness to take part in the meeting to show their support for the valuable work undertaken by women's groups and to demonstrate their commitment to the equality agenda.

New Targeting Social Need

Mrs Nelis asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail how it is intended to progress new Targeting Social Need (TSN) in respect of the Travelling Community and to state how the Programme for Government can reduce the inequalities experienced by travellers. (AQO 977/00)

Reply: We are committed to tackling root causes of social exclusion among the Travelling Community.

New TSN is designed to benefit all those objectively shown to be in greatest social need. This includes members of the Travelling Community.

As part of the Promoting Social Inclusion element of New TSN, we have published for consultation the report of a Working Group on Travellers.

After the consultation we will consider the report's recommendations and views expressed in the consultation. We will then publish a short report identifying what we intend to do over the following 3 years.

Actions in the Programme for Government which will benefit Travellers include:

A commitment to bring forward and implement cross-departmental policies to tackle racial inequality within a 3 year strategic framework; and support for ethnic minority groups and projects.

Development of appropriate permanent accommodation which best meets Travellers' needs.

Appropriate measures to address the educational needs of Traveller children and children from other minority ethnic backgrounds.

The creation of a social Inclusion/Community Regeneration Fund, which will cover initiatives on community relations and cultural diversity.

A Single Equality Bill to be introduced in 2002 which will bring together existing anti-discrimination law and taken account of recent developments in Europe on discrimination in relation to race.

Implementing Departmental equality schemes, which require proofing of policies to assess their impact on equality of opportunity for persons of different racial groups.

These policies demonstrate our commitment to eradicating racism and to creating the equitable inclusive society we all wish to see in Northern Ireland.

Human Rights Abuses

Mr Poots asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what representations it has made to the Secretary of State regarding human rights abuses by paramilitary organisations. (AQO 952/00)

Reply: We have not jointly discussed this matter with the Secretary of State. Our respective parties have, however, met the Secretary of State on a number of occasions to express our total condemnation of acts of violence.

Promoting Community Relations

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what steps have been taken to promote community relations within Northern Ireland. (AQO 1003/00)

Reply: We refer the Member to the answer to Assembly Question 844/00, given on 19 February 2001.

Under the Executive's Community Relations Programme, funding is provided to a wide range of groups which promote community relations, with the bulk of the support channelled through the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council and the District Council Community Relations Programme. In the current financial year the Department's Community Relations budget, including research provision, amounts to some £5.5m. The Department of Education also has its own community relations programme for schools and young people amounting to £3.4m this financial year. In addition, under the EU Peace Programme "Pathways to Reconciliation" Measure which is administered by the Community Relations Council, over £3m was available for projects during this financial year.

Victim Support: Omagh Bomb

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline what Government Programmes are in place to support victims of the Omagh Bomb. (AQO 948/00)

Reply: Following the atrocity, a co-ordinated response to the needs of the victims was put in place by the Northern Ireland Office, which was responsible for all victims' matters at that time. The Omagh victims can presently avail of a range of help and support, including:

- the Victims Memorial Fund;
- Northern Ireland Office initiatives on core funding and capacity building for victims organisations;
- the forthcoming Peace II programme which will include a specific measure for victims;
- support for the Trauma Advisory Panels and specific projects to be funded by our Department; and
- help and advice from our Department's Victims Unit.

Community Relations Programme

Mr Hilditch asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what funding will be

made available for the Community Relations programme beyond 31 March 2001. (AQO 963/00)

Reply: Our Department's total budget for community relations for the year 2001/2002 will be £5.36 million. Final decisions on the allocation of these resources have not yet been made, but the total is likely to be distributed approximately as follows:

- a grant of £2.7 million to the Community Relations Council;
- £1.65 million for the District Council Community Relations Programme;
- £310,000 for research; and
- £70,000 to fund capital projects and organisations which fall outside the remit of the Community Relations Council.

Our Department will also be responsible for administering the "Reconciliation for Sustainable Peace" measure of the European Peace II programme, with total funding of over £11 million.

The Department of Education has a community relations programme for schools and young people with funding of approximately £3.4 million per year.

Public Service Agreements

Mr Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline the steps being taken to ensure that Public Service Agreements will contain specific linkages between objectives, budget allocations and key targets in respect of Targeting Social Need.

(AQO 974/00)

Reply: The Executive is committed to the objectives of the New Targeting Social Need policy. This is set out clearly in the Programme for Government and in the individual departmental Public Service Agreements. Each of the PSAs has as an integral part a commitment by each department to implement its New TSN Action Plan. New TSN Action Plans have been produced for each department and they contain the details of targets and actions. The Plans are due to be published shortly.

Programme for Government: Victims' Needs

Mr Savage asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what progress has been made in implementing the actions on addressing the needs of victims, as set out in the chapter entitled, "Growing as a Community" in the Programme for Government.

(AQO 1018/00)

Reply: Significant progress has been made on taking forward the actions relating to victims in the Programme for Government. A cross-departmental working group

has been established and a draft strategy on victims is being developed which will be subject to widespread consultation.

In addition, capacity building programmes both for victims groups and policy makers have begun; a programme of visits to victims groups has been established; and research will shortly be commissioned to determine victims' needs and the level and quality of services currently available to them.

Executive Programme Funds

Mr J Wilson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an assessment on the Executive Programme Funds. (AQO 1014/00)

Reply: The Executive Programme Funds received broad support in our consultation on the draft Programme for Government. The five Funds will be used to support programmes or projects of major importance to the Executive. They will assist the development of new policies and programmes and new, improved services and will have regard to and be fully consistent with the Executive's Priorities in the Programme for Government. The Executive is expected to consider departmental proposals for allocations from the Funds later this month.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Consultancy Services

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her projected spend on consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year.

(AQW 1956/00)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): Projected expenditure of external management consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year is estimated at some £0.48m.

Spend on the Promotion and Development of Organic Farming

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her spending on the promotion and development of organic farming in 2000/01 and proposed spending in 2001/02; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1983/00)

Ms Rodgers: My Department's total spending on the promotion and development of organic farming in 2000/01 will be some £660,000. This expenditure may be broken down as follows:-

- Payments to farmers under the former Organic Aid Scheme and Organic Farming Scheme - £450,000;
- Cost of Organic Conversion Advisory Service (provision of technical advice from Greenmount College) - £112,000;
- Organic Farming Model and Consumer Survey (most of this is payments to farmers to provide detailed data on actual organic farming costs in Northern Ireland to inform the provision of technical advice) - £55,000;
- Strategic Study of the Organic Farming Industry by independent consultants (to ensure that the organic production sector develops in the best possible way to take advantage of market opportunities) - £25,000;
- Administrative costs of the Organic Aid and Organic Farming Schemes - £18,000;

Projected expenditure on the promotion and development of organic farming for 2001/02 is, of course, speculative as it will depend upon how many of those farmers who have indicated interest in entering the Scheme actually do so. That said, our proposed spending for 2001/02 should amount to some £1.2 million pounds. Projected spending may be broken down as follows:-

- Payments to farmers under the former Organic Aid Scheme and Organic Farming Scheme - £1,053,000;
- Costs of Organic Conversion Advisory Service (provision of technical advice from Greenmount College) - £128,000;
- Administrative costs of the Organic Aid and Organic Farming Schemes - £19,000.

Increasing market opportunities have been identified for organic produce and I am doing everything possible to encourage the development of this sector in Northern Ireland. That is why I commissioned consultants to undertake a strategic study on how best to develop organic farming in Northern Ireland. The consultant's report should be received in early March and I shall, thereafter, initiate an extensive consultation exercise with all interested parties.

Spend on Promotion and Development of Sheep and Goats' Milk

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her spending on the promotion and development of sheep and goats milk and milk products in 2000/01 and proposed spending in 2001/02; and to make a statement. (AQW 1984/00)

Ms Rodgers: The generic promotion of milk, whether from goats, sheep or cows is a matter for the various commercial interests in line with EU State Aid rules. I nevertheless recognise that niche market opportunities exist and we are seeking to exploit these through the development of the goats and sheep milk units and new products. This action will provide valuable alternative

enterprises for producers and increased employment opportunities particularly in border counties. In 2000/01 my Department spent £60,141 on development costs for various projects and expects to pay a further £1000 in 2001/02. In addition £49,537 was paid in 2000/01 towards the cost of expanding processing facilities for goats milk products. The low expenditure in 2000/01 is because the various schemes are currently closed for applications and the Transitional Objective 1 Programme for 2000/2006 has not yet been approved by the EU.

Assistance to Fishing Vessels Following Cod Quotas

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will provide assistance to fishing vessels following reductions in cod quotas in the North Channel and Clyde Estuary. (AQW 2044/00)

Ms Rodgers: It has not been practice to compensate fishermen for loss of earnings due to reductions in the fish quotas. However the European Commission has approved 29m euros for assistance to the Northern Ireland fishing industry as a whole. Details of how this funding is to be allocated between different measures, including for the decommissioning of fishing vessels, have still to be agreed by the Commission as they are contained in the overall Northern Ireland Transitional Objective 1 Programme.

Special Advisor

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) whom she has employed as special advisor(s) (b) the qualifying criteria for the appointment and (c) the remit of the special advisor(s). (AQW 2048/00)

Ms Rodgers: I have appointed Conall McDevitt as a Special Adviser to me as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Mr McDevitt, was appointed on the basis of his ability to carry out the functions of the post. The remit of my Special Adviser is set out in Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the standard contract of employment for such advisers, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

Meetings With Pig Farmers' Representatives

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail those meetings she has held with pig farmers' representatives within the last year to discuss the state of the pig industry. (AQW 2074/00)

Ms Rodgers: I am taking the reference in your question to "the last year" to literally mean just that ie the 12 month period ending on 23 February 2001, the date on which your question was tabled. However, as the Assembly was suspended from 11 February to 31

May 2000, in practical terms, the period in question actually begins on 1 June 2000. Since then, I have met three delegations of pig producers accompanied by their political representatives, as well as having meetings with officials from the Ulster Farmers' Union on a similar number of occasions. I would add that I have responded positively, by agreeing to meetings, to all requests from pig farmers' representatives who wished to discuss this issue.

In addition, as you would surmise, my officials also have had a number of meetings with the farming unions and interested parties in relation to aid for the sector.

Indeed in January this year, they were involved, in conjunction with the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association, in a series of public meetings about the Pig Industry Restructuring Scheme. Subsequently, and as an immediate follow-up, they ran a number of workshops to provide guidance for those interested in the Ongoers element of the scheme, particularly on the content of business plans. Upwards of 1,000 producers attended the 4 public meetings and around 200 producers (approximately 25% of those still in the sector) attended the 10 workshops.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Karate in Northern Ireland

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of Karate organisations in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1972/00)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The Northern Ireland Karate Board (NIKB) is the Sports Council's recognised governing body for the sport in Northern Ireland and is directly affiliated to the European Karate Federation and the World Karate Federation. The NIKB is comprised of eight associations, each of which practices a slightly different style of the sport and some of the associations have a number of clubs attached to them. Individual Club members are licenced to take part in the sport and the number of licences which were current, in June 2000, totalled 1,043. In addition, karate is practiced by a number of clubs and other organisations which have chosen not to affiliate to the NIKB. Their membership numbers are not known to the Sports Council, but they operate under a fairly informal umbrella organisation entitled 'The Ulster Karate Council'.

Karate in Northern Ireland

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give a breakdown of funding made available to the sport of karate in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years. (AQW 1973/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The breakdown of funding made available to the sport of karate in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years is as follows:

	1999 £	2000 £	2001 £
NI Karate Board (annual exchequer grant from SCNI)	2,500	2,500	2,500
Ophir Karate Club (Millennium Small Awards Grant)		2,000	
NI Karate-Do Wado Kai			6,877

Recreational Shooting

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his policy on recreational shooting. (AQW 2071/00)

Mr McGimpsey: The term "recreational shooting" embraces a wide variety of shooting activities ranging, for example, from game shooting to target shooting. Underpinning all recreational shooting activity is the absolute need for firearms holders to comply at all times with the Northern Ireland Firearms legislation. Any individual wishing to participate in a recognised bona fide recreational shooting activity is advised to seek the assistance and instruction provided by the appropriate governing body within the shooting disciplines.

In pursuance of the objective of raising the performance level of sport in Northern Ireland the Sports Council currently recognise and invest in the activity programmes of three Northern Ireland Shooting Governing Bodies; namely the Ulster Rifle Association, the Northern Ireland Small Bore Shooting Union and the Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association. Each of these governing bodies has exclusive access to International competition programmes and responsibility for selecting elite performers to represent Northern Ireland at Major competition events such as the Commonwealth Games.

Distributing Funding in North Antrim

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the criteria used by Departmental agencies when distributing funding from the European Union and the International Fund for Ireland in North Antrim. (AQW 2075/00)

Mr McGimpsey: I am not aware of any agencies under my authority that are at present responsible for distributing European funds or funds from the International Fund for Ireland anywhere in Northern Ireland.

Procurement of the Odyssey Project

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to initiate a Northern Ireland Audit Office enquiry

into the tendering procedures associated with the procurement of the Odyssey Project to establish if this represented best value. (AQW 2100/00)

Mr McGimpsey: All major contracts awarded for the Construction of the Odyssey Project at Queen's Quay, Belfast were tendered strictly in accordance with European Union Procurement Regulations. These contracts included:

- Appointment of Design Consultants;
- Appointment of Project Manager;
- The Enabling Works Contract;
- The Main Construction Contract.

At all times The Odyssey Trust Company Ltd was advised and guided on tendering matters by its solicitors and other expert consultants.

In the light of this I see no need to initiate a Northern Ireland Audit Office enquiry into the tendering procedures associated with the procurement of the Odyssey Project.

EDUCATION

Pupils With Learning Difficulties

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to confirm that (a) pupils at Moderate Learning Difficulty (MLD) schools are denied the option of remaining at school beyond 16 years and (b) this is a situation based on past practice rather than one based upon legislation. (AQW 1942/00)

The Minister of Education (Mr McGuinness): The normal leaving age for pupils at special schools for moderate learning difficulties is the upper limit of compulsory school age (16). At 16 such pupils are generally considered capable of leaving the sheltered environment of such schools and beginning to make their own way in the world independently. Their transition from school to further education or training will have been prepared for from age 14, in consultation with parents, teachers and career officers. Beyond the age of 16, pupils with more severe difficulties, who are still considered to need a statement of special educational needs, will transfer to schools for severe learning difficulties (SLD). In such cases statements can be maintained up to age 19 where pupils need this. These arrangements are made in the best interests of the pupils, and are based on good practice rather than legislation.

Home Tutors

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Education to detail the qualifications required to become a home education tutor. (AQW 1959/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Since home tutors have to teach the same subjects as in school, they are expected to hold the normal qualifications required for appointment as a teacher. Occasionally because of excessive demands on

home tuition, Boards may not always be able to obtain the services of qualified teachers. A similar situation exists with regard to the appointment of substitute teachers.

Home Tutors

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Education to detail the maximum number of children assigned to a home tutor in each (a) education and library board area and (b) each local council area in each of the last three years and the current year to date. (AQW 1960/00)

Mr M McGuinness: The information is not available in the form requested.

There is no statutory or recommended maximum number of children who can be assigned to a home tutor. The actual number, however, will depend on a number of factors - age, medical condition of the child, geographical location, the number of subjects the tutor can teach at secondary school level and the number of hours per week that the home tutor is willing to work.

Home Tutors

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost per hour of a home tutor in each of the education and library board areas for (a) primary and (b) secondary level tutoring and what were the sums expended in each board area in each of the last three years and the current year to date. (AQW 1962/00)

Mr M McGuinness: Home tutors are paid the same hourly rate as part-time teachers. The current hourly rate for qualified home tutors at both primary and secondary school level is £14.47. The available information on expenditure is as follows: -

Board	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern
Year					
1998/99	*	£318,000	£211,000		**
1999/00	*	£297,000	£246,000	£368,000	**
2000/01 to 31.1.01	*	£320,000	£234,000	£266,000	**

* home tuition in the Belfast Board area is provided by Belfast Hospital and Jaffe Special Schools and home tuition expenditure is not recorded separately

** home tuition in the Southern Board area is provided by the Home and Hospital Peripatetic Teaching Service and home tuition expenditure is not recorded separately.

Home Tuition

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Education to detail the total number of children receiving home tutoring in (a) primary and (b) secondary level education broken down by (i) council and (ii) education and library board area in each of the last three years and the current year to date. (AQW 1963/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand from the Education and Library Boards that the information is not available for previous years.

The number of children in each area currently receiving home tuition provided by the relevant Board is as follows:-

Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern
158	109	90	130	144

These figures can change from day to day depending on the number of children unable to attend school.

School Building Programme

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps he is taking to address the backlog of building replacement and improvements required by all publicly funded schools. (AQW 1977/00)

Mr M McGuinness: On 1 March I announced details of an investment package to address the backlog of building work across the schools estate. The package was in two parts. The first part included 17 projects to be taken forward under the conventional school building programme representing an investment of over £62 million. The second part provided for up to 8 secondary school projects to be taken forward under Public Private Partnerships with a total capital value of some £70 million.

Public Liability Claims

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to detail the action he is taking to mitigate the impact of no-win, no fee litigation on schools' liability for injuries incurred in school playgrounds. (AQW 1999/00)

Mr M McGuinness: All school authorities are aware of their responsibility for the safety of pupils, the prevention of injury and thus avoidance of litigation. It is a matter for the owners of school property - education and library boards or voluntary trustees - to deal with public liability claims in light of their own legal advice.

Pre-school Education Places

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to detail when he will reach his target of 87% pre-school places and to make a statement. (AQW 2000/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I expect that, as a result of my Department's Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, some 9,200 new pre-school education places will have been secured by 2001/02, thus reaching the target of making places available for at least 85% of all children in their final pre-school year.

Home Tutors

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of home education tutors available at (a) primary and (b) secondary level in (i) each education and library board area and (ii) each district council area and how many were actually employed in each of those areas in each of the last three years and the current year to date. (AQW 2003/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand from the Education and Library Boards that the information is not available in the form requested, or for previous years.

Four Boards have registers of home tutors and current numbers on their registers are as follows: -

Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern
	108	127	250	85

Home tuition in the Belfast Board area is provided by the Belfast Hospital and Jaffe Special Schools.

At any time, the tutors actually employed reflect pupil needs: tutors are drawn from the list according to the age of the child, the subjects to be taught (if of secondary school age), the reason for absence from school, and geographical availability. If no-one suitable on the register is available, the board may make arrangements using peripatetic teaching staff, through the child's own school, or using a substitute teacher.

The latest available information about the number of home tutors actually employed in each Education and Library Board area in the current school year is as follows: -

Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern
(see above)	38	42	131	48

CCEA: "A" Level Remark Service

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of requests received by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to remark "A" level examination papers in (a) 1998 (b) 1999 and (c) 2000 and to give his assessment of the implications of any regrading. (AQW 2035/00)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand from the Chief Executive of CCEA that the information requested is as follows:

Year	Number of Re-marks Requested	% Upgrades
1998	2324	0.7
1999	1974	0.6
2000	905	0.7

The reduction in the number of requests is a result of the Council making more detailed information on results available to candidates. For candidates using the Council's accelerated remark service, a change in grade should have no implications for their ability to take up a university place. CCEA is the only examination board which sets a 15 day remark service and meets that target.

Religious Breakdown of Teachers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the religious breakdown of teachers employed in each of the following sectors (a) Controlled (b) Catholic Maintained (c) Voluntary (d) Integrated and (e) Irish Medium in each of the last two years for which figures are available. (AQW 2051/00)

Mr M McGuinness: It is not possible to provide these figures as information on the religion of teachers is not collected.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Textile Industry

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment on the prospects for future employment in the textile industry in the North-West. (AQW 1965/00)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The Kurt Salmon Associates (KSA) Report set out an action plan to address the problems faced by the textile and clothing industry in Northern Ireland. The KSA Report has been endorsed by the Government, industry bodies and the trade unions. An implementation team, including representatives from the industry in the North West, IDB and other parties, is taking forward the key recommendations. The Report anticipates a change in the nature of employment in favour of higher value added skills of merchandising, brand management, design, supply chain management and IT, as well as manufacture of higher value products.

Programme for Government: Social Economy

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he is taking in conjunction with the voluntary and community sectors to agree an integrated approach to the development of the social economy in order to maximise its contribution to economic growth as outlined in the draft Programme for Government. (AQW 1971/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in conjunction with the Department of Social Development and other interested Departments has recently appointed a consortium of Colin Stutt (consultant), Dr Brendan Murtagh (QUB) and Professor Mike Campbell (Leeds Metropolitan University) to carry out a study on the Social Economy for completion by end of April 2001 and covering the following areas –

- agree a working definition of the Social Economy;
- provide a profile of the existing social economy measures outlining the resources involved and key outputs;
- identify key policies of central importance and best practices in Northern Ireland and elsewhere;
- recommend a range of actions and programmes which are particularly suited to implementation at a local level;
- report on the present role of the Social Economy Agency; and
- develop a monitoring and evaluation framework including indicators.

The consultancy study will be 'participative' in that contact will be made with key social economy and community sectors, trade union and business interests and agencies. A website has also been set up to allow a wide range of interested parties to contribute. The address is http://www.colinstutt.com/social_economy.htm. An inter-departmental steering group has also been established to oversee the process and comprises representatives from DETI, DSD, DARD, DHFETE, LEDU and NICVA. The intention is that the study will inform the development of a strategy for development of the social economy for consideration by the Executive.

Causeway Tourist Site

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what types of partnership arrangements he is considering for the future development of the Causeway tourist site. (AQW 1980/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Moyle District Council, in conjunction with the National Trust, DOE Environment & Heritage Service and NITB are engaged in a process designed to identify, agree and co-ordinate the most appropriate way to take forward the development of the Causeway site. This process will identify and test various options for the provision of appropriate visitor facilities at what is Northern Ireland's only World Heritage site.

Rural Community Tourism

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he is taking to involve the rural community in the tourism industry. (AQW 1994/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The development of rural community tourism offers opportunities for the regeneration of rural areas. In recognition of this NITB in conjunction with DARD, and DOE Environment & Heritage Service have been working together on a collaborative bid for a natural resource rural tourism measure under the Peace II element of the next round of EU funding.

Carpets International: Grant Assistance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he intends to offer grant aid assistance to Carpets International to bring the roof of the factory to the standards required by health and safety regulations.
(AQW 2001/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The Company is renewing the factory roof on its own volition. I understand some 75 per cent of the work is already complete. It is not normal practice to offer grant assistance for normal maintenance of property.

Special Advisor

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) whom he has employed as special advisor(s) (b) the qualifying criteria used for the appointment and (c) the remit of the special advisor(s).
(AQW 2047/00)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) The Minister, Sir Reg Empey, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has appointed Ray Hayden as special advisor.
- (b) The selection criteria used for the appointment were:
 - He/she will need a wide network of political contacts in NI, and preferably beyond, and be able to present the Minister's positions and perspectives positively and sensitively, absorb the views of others in the political arena and gain understanding of the likely actions by both opponents and supporters.
 - He/she will need to have or be able to gain the confidence of those in the ETI Assembly Committee and in the North-South and East-West institutions and bodies relevant to the work of the Minister.
 - He/she will need to be able to maintain an overview of the operational activities of the Department and their impact.
 - He/she will have an understanding of how legislation is conceived and of its passage through the Assembly.
 - He/she will require to have an in-depth working knowledge of the UUP's economic policies and agenda for Government and be able to discuss

these appropriately with party members, other Ministers, Assembly members and with a wide range of people in the economics, business and political fields in and beyond NI.

- He/she will have to have a reputation for being discreet, but will need experience in and talent for developing positive public relations and excellent media handling.
- (c) The remit is set out in Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the standard contract of employment for such advisers, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

Cost of Gulliver Project

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the cost of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's "Gulliver" project and (b) the income the project has generated locally, since its inception.
(AQW 2057/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Gulliver is an innovative project developed jointly by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Bord Failte. The development cost borne by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board prior to Public Private Partnerships (PPP) arrangements in 1997 is £1.5m. Income generated locally over the past 5 years averages £129k per annum.

Accommodation Providers Subscribing to "Gulliver"

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) how many Northern Ireland accommodation providers currently subscribe to "Gulliver" (b) what proportion of all Northern Ireland accommodation providers this represents and (c) how many accommodation bookings were secured through "Gulliver" by local providers in 2000.
(AQW 2058/00)

Sir Reg Empey: 694 accommodation premises currently subscribe to Gulliver, representing 39% of all tourist accommodation in Northern Ireland. 3,165 automated bookings, to the value of £165k were secured through Gulliver to local providers in 2000.

Report on Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the action he is taking following the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General on the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.
(AQW 2059/00)

Sir Reg Empey: I can confirm that all weaknesses identified in the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General regarding the Northern Ireland Tourist Board

have been addressed fully and new control procedures are already in place.

Printers of “Where to Stay in Northern Ireland”

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) which company printed the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's brochure “Where to Stay in Northern Ireland” for 1999 (b) whether the printing contract was competitively tendered (c) how many copies of the brochure were printed (d) the cost of the contract and (e) how many of these copies were pulped.

(AQW 2060/00)

Sir Reg Empey: The 1999 edition of “Where to Stay in Northern Ireland” was printed after tendering by W&G Baird Ltd. Two other companies tendered for the contract and a total of 15,000 copies were printed at a total cost of £18,370. At the end of the year a total of 3118 copies were unsold and were pulped.

Marketing Carrickfergus Castle as a Tourist Attraction

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his plans to market Carrickfergus Castle as a major tourist attraction. (AQW 2064/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Carrickfergus Castle is owned by DOE Environment and Heritage Service and is promoted along with other major monuments by that agency. The opportunity for the property to be promoted by the regional tourism organisation, as part of the Causeway Coast and Glens Ltd brand, exists and is currently being considered by Environment and Heritage Service.

Benefits of the Gulliver Project

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the benefits realised for Northern Ireland accommodation providers as a result of the introduction of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's “Gulliver” system. (AQW 2073/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Gulliver permits details of every accommodation premises in Northern Ireland to be distributed to Tourist Information Offices throughout Ireland and provides international presence via the Internet. In addition, Gulliver provides on-line reservations capability for almost 40% of tourism accommodation providers in Northern Ireland.

Energy Infrastructure

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment on the draft

Programme for Government commitments on Energy Infrastructure. (AQO 906/00)

Sir Reg Empey: Promoting the development and reinforcement of the gas and electricity infrastructure on an all-island basis is essential to improve our competitiveness, create a downward pressure on prices, and secure Northern Ireland's position within a European energy market.

Attracting Investors to Mid Ulster

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what plans the Industrial Development Board for Northern Ireland has to attract investment to the Mid-Ulster area.

(AQO 911/00)

Sir Reg Empey: IDB promotes Northern Ireland in targeted overseas markets and works with local councils, including those in Mid Ulster, both to support the councils' own efforts and to ensure co-operation with IDB in the attraction of projects. IDB has recently acquired land for a new industrial estate in the Magherafelt area.

Viasystems Factory

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what action will be taken to safeguard the telecommunications jobs in the Viasystems factory located on the Antrim Road, Ballynahinch, and if he will make a statement. (AQW 2191/00)

Sir Reg Empey: IDB maintains a close working relationship with management at Ballynahinch and with its parent in the UK. The IDB and the company recently completed an “e-business” initiative regarding fast-turn manufacture that will lead to new business opportunities over the next 3/6 months.

In the short-term, the company will continue to monitor the market/business conditions closely and react to the situation in matching its workload and employment levels. The company will liaise closely with IDB.

Management at Viasystems in Ballynahinch are confident regarding medium-term prospects and will be working closely with IDB to develop the business.

ENVIRONMENT

Agricultural Occupancy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm when he will bring forward legislative proposals to allow an Agricultural Occupancy clause to

be exchanged from a new dwelling to the original farmhouse. (AQW 1536/00)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I have no plans to bring forward new legislation in this area.

The purpose of such conditions is to help protect rural areas where it is necessary to exercise strict planning control over new development in Green Belts, Countryside Policy Areas and along protected routes.

I believe that this control would be weakened if the condition could be transferred to the original farmhouse. Such a change would call into question the purpose of imposing the condition in the first place, and would also allow development, which is not based on agricultural need.

I am satisfied with the safeguards provided by the present system, which allows for an application to be made to have the condition removed or modified.

Water Quality - Three Mile Water

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his plans to monitor the water quality of the Three Mile Water and its tributaries. (AQW 1728/00)

Mr Foster: The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department has monitored the water quality of the Three Mile Water by regular sampling at a point close to Whiteabbey since the early 1990s. This monitoring regime will continue.

Based on the monitoring results the chemical and biological water quality of the river is classified each year. The biological quality of the river has ranged from 'fair' to 'poor' since monitoring began. The chemical quality of the river has been 'fairly good' over the same period.

The main reasons for the water quality problems in the river appear to be urban run-off and discharges from combined storm overflows on the sewerage system which serves the extensive built-up area through which the lower reach of the river and its tributaries flow. I understand that the Department for Regional Development is currently considering proposals for improving the sewerage infrastructure in the Whiteabbey/Newtownabbey/Monkstown area and a decision on the next stage should be taken by September 2001.

Following a review in 1999, river monitoring throughout Northern Ireland was extended to smaller water-courses with a mean daily flow of at least 5,000 cubic metres per day.

None of the tributaries of the Three Mile Water has a mean daily flow at this level. Therefore there are no plans to extend routine monitoring of this river system to include any of the tributaries.

Planning Applications - Telecommunications Masts

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications for the construction of telecommunication masts which were approved in each of the twenty six council areas in each of the last five years for which figures are available.

(AQW 1749/00)

Mr Foster: The information for the last five calendar years for which records are available is set out below.

District	Year					Total
	96	97	98	99	2000	
Antrim	6	10	3	6	20	45
Ards	5	1	5	13	17	41
Armagh	2	2	6	10	23	43
Ballymena	1	11	3	3	26	44
Ballymoney	0	3	0	4	5	12
Banbridge	0	2	4	5	10	21
Belfast	19	5	0	27	39	90
Carrickfergus	4	2	2	1	3	12
Castlereagh	4	1	0	4	12	21
Coleraine	0	11	2	4	11	28
Cookstown	2	4	2	4	8	20
Craigavon	7	9	5	4	17	42
Derry	2	5	0	4	17	28
Down	3	4	4	4	17	32
Dungannon	7	13	6	9	31	66
Fermanagh	3	28	23	19	28	101
Larne	1	4	4	3	9	21
Limavady	4	8	3	4	14	33
Lisburn	6	6	0	8	28	48
Magherafelt	3	2	2	2	7	16
Moyle	2	6	4	5	9	26
Newry & Mourne	3	1	4	9	19	36
N'abbey	4	2	2	2	16	26
North Down	4	3	0	7	19	33
Omagh	1	8	9	4	10	32
Strabane	1	6	3	4	9	23
Total	94	157	96	169	424	940

Historic Building Grant Funding

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans for dealing with historic building grant funding in the financial year 2001/02. (AQW 1795/00)

Mr Foster: [holding answer 22 February 2001]: The Environment and Heritage Service of my Department is

currently finalising its business plan and budget for 2001/2 for my approval. However it is likely that the allocation for Historic Buildings grant-aid will be of the order of £2m.

It remains my intention to begin accepting new applications for grant-aid from 1 April 2001. Letters of offer for eligible projects will be issued when all relevant cost information has been received. Offers of grant will be made on the understanding that payment should not be expected before the 2002/03 financial year.

Payments of grant will continue to be made during 2001/02 on projects for which applications were accepted prior to the suspension.

Projects Receiving Grant Aid From Historic Buildings Grant Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail those projects, including the amounts awarded, that have received funding from the Historic Building Grant Scheme since its establishment. (AQW 1796/00)

Mr Foster: *[holding answer 22 February 2001]:* Historic Buildings grants have been available since 1972. Some 8500 applications have been processed since then. The information sought is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Information about grant aid is published in the annual report of my Department's Environment and Heritage Service. Expenditure in the last 3 financial years in each of the four main categories of grant was as follows:

Financial Year	1997/1998	1998/1999	1999/2000
Private Grants	1,335,000	1,173,000	1,254,000
Church Grants	41,000	157,000	676,230
District Council	60,000	32,000	273,320
National Trust	498,958	223,760	292,437
Total	1,934,958	1,585,760	2,495,612

New Applicants for an Historic Buildings Grant

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment if, pursuant to AQO 680/00, he will confirm his intention that new applicants for an historic building grant cannot expect funding until after 1 April 2002. (AQW 1797/00)

Mr Foster: *[holding answer 22 February 2001]:* I can confirm that it remains my intention that new applications for historic buildings grant-aid will be accepted from 1 April 2001. However, offers of grant to eligible projects will be made on the understanding that payment should not be expected before the 2002/03 financial year.

Thirty Two Large Schemes Claiming an Historic Building Grant

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment if, pursuant to AQO 680/00, he will detail the thirty-two large schemes that have been issued with invitations to claim an historic building grant. (AQW 1832/00)

Mr Foster: *[holding answer 22 February 2001]:* Since I replied to AQO 680/00, officials in EHS have made final payments to a number of schemes which are as follows –

- Lissue House Hospital, Lisburn;
- Royal Belfast Golf Club House, Craigavad;
- The Former Corn Exchange, Belfast;
- McHugh's Bar, Belfast;
- Presbyterian Church, May Street Belfast; and
- St Nicholas Parish Church, Carrickfergus.

I am pleased to report that there are now 26 large schemes remaining. The details of these buildings are as follows:-

Privately Owned

- Women's Centre, 5 Guildhall Street, Londonderry;
- Magee College, Londonderry - (Phase 1, Phase 2);
- Portglenone House, Portglenone;
- 60 Newmills Road, Dungannon;
- Manor House, Moneymore;
- Erganagh Rectory, Omagh;
- Brownlow House, Lurgan;
- Carrickfergus Gas Works;
- Bridge House, Bangor;
- Good Shepherd Convent, Belfast;
- Campbell College, Belfast;
- Great Hall – Queens University;
- Music Dept - Queens University;
- Yorkshire House, Belfast;
- Northern Whig Building, Belfast.

District Council Owned

- Bangor Town Hall;
- St Georges Market, Belfast

Church Owned

- Holy Trinity Church, Portrush;
- Derryloran Parish Church, Cookstown;
- Enniskillen Methodist Church;
- 1st Presbyterian Church, Newry;
- Rademon Meeting House, Crossgar;
- Hillhall Presbyterian Church, Lisburn;
- St Comgall's Parish Church, Bangor;

- St Mark's Dundela – Phase 1B & Phase 2;
- Clonard Monastery, Belfast

My Department does not divulge financial information on individual buildings.

Planning Applications - Telecommunications Masts

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications for telecommunication masts in the Strangford parliamentary constituency that have been (a) approved and (b) refused in each of the last three years for which figures are available. (AQW 1975/00)

Mr Foster: The Planning Service does not currently record details of planning applications on a parliamentary constituency basis.

Details of planning applications, including applications for Prior Approval, for telecommunications masts in the Ards, Castlereagh and Down District Council areas, which comprise the greater part of the Strangford constituency, are as follows: -

District Council Area	Number Approved (A)		Refused (R)			
	1998		1999		2000	
	A	R	A	R	A	R
Ards	5	2	13	9	17	5
C'reagh	0	0	4	0	12	0
Down	4	0	4	1	17	7
Total	9	2	21	10	46	12

Waste Management Strategy

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his policy on waste management for Northern Ireland. (AQW 1979/00)

Mr Foster: Policy on waste management is set out in the Waste Management Strategy for Northern Ireland, published by my Department in March 2000. A copy of the Strategy is available in the Assembly Library.

The key objectives of the Strategy are to reduce the amount of waste generated, to re-use, recycle or recover as much of the waste produced as possible and to dispose of waste to landfill only as a last resort. The Strategy sets short and long term targets to achieve these objectives.

The Strategy requires District Councils to prepare Waste Management Plans for their areas by 30 June 2001. These Plans will show how the Councils intend to meet the targets and objectives of the Strategy and identify the network of waste facilities needed. Councils have formed three groups to prepare these plans at a sub-regional level. The requirement for plans and the timetable are dictated by the terms of the EU Waste Framework and Landfill Directive.

Vehicle Excise Duty

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment of the estimated number of unlicensed vehicles being used on Northern Ireland's roads and to detail the amount of revenue lost as a result.

(AQW 1991/00)

Mr Foster: The collection and enforcement of Vehicle Excise Duty (VED) are excepted matters. They are carried out in Northern Ireland by DVLNI under the terms of a formal agency agreement between DOE and the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions.

VED evasion is estimated through three yearly roadside surveys. The following table indicates the rate of evasion in Northern Ireland in the two most recent surveys:

Tax Class	1996	1999
Private Light Goods	10.5%	10.0%
Goods Vehicles	7.5%	7.0%

The percentage figures for 1999 represent around 75,000 unlicensed vehicles.

In 1999/2000 the estimated loss of revenue to the UK Exchequer from VED evasion in Northern Ireland was £11.9m.

The detection of unlicensed vehicles is primarily the responsibility of the RUC, although my Department also undertakes direct action through its road transport enforcement work and the wheel clamping initiative.

Planning Applications

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of (a) planning application requests (b) those approved (c) those refused and (d) refusals overturned on appeal in the parliamentary constituency of Strangford in each of the last two years for which figures are available. (AQW 2002/00)

Mr Foster: The Planning Service does not currently record details of planning applications on a parliamentary constituency basis.

Details of planning applications in the Ards, Castlereagh and Down District Council areas, which comprise the greater part of the Strangford constituency, are as follows:-

District Council Area	Number Received		Number Approved		Number Refused		Refusal o/t on appeal	
	98/99	99/00	98/99	99/00	98/99	99/00	98/99	99/00
Ards	903	951	770	727	38	47	1	5
C'reagh	494	595	409	429	31	36	3	2
Down	1150	1144	872	990	83	66	6	6
Total	2547	2690	2051	2146	152	149	10	13

Retrospective Planning Approval

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of cases of retrospective planning approval that have been granted by the Planning Service in each District Council area in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQW 2019/00)

Mr Foster: I refer the Member to the answer given to AQO 1006/00 on Monday 5 March 2001.

Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) what discussions he has had with the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in each of the last two years and (b) the nature of those discussions. (AQW 2024/00)

Mr Foster: I have had no discussions with the USPCA in the last two years.

Planning Service - Provision of Open Space

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment, if, in light of his recent admission that Planning Service had miscalculated the figures for the provision of open space in both the draft Lisburn Area Plan and the draft Craigavon Area Plan, he will ensure that the corrected figures are used when considering the recommendations of the Public Appeals Commission in relation to these two Area plans. (AQW 2025/00)

Mr Foster: The Planning Service did not miscalculate the figures for the provision of open space in these draft Area Plans. It is accepted, however, that the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) Standards were misinterpreted, by mistakenly including publicly owned golf courses, in the analysis of open space set out in the Technical Supplement. This analysis, which is a statistical assessment in reference to NPFA standards, was purely for comparative purposes.

The primary role of these Area Plans in regard to open space is to facilitate the requirements of the relevant District Councils, which have responsibility for assessing and providing for future open space needs, by the zoning of appropriate sites. During the consultation process followed in the preparation of these draft plans, each Council advised my Department on the future open space needs of their local areas, based on their own assessment.

The role of the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) in Area Plan Inquiries is to hear objections and make recommendations to the Department as to how they should be dealt with.

As regards the Lisburn Area Plan, my Department is currently assessing the recommendations from PAC

prior to Plan adoption later this year. The general issue relating to the overall provision of open space and recreation within the draft Lisburn Area Plan was not raised at the Public Inquiry.

As for the draft Craigavon Area Plan, my Department's acknowledgement of the misinterpretation with the accompanying Technical Supplement has been clarified by Public Notice. The Public Inquiry into the draft Plan is not programmed to commence until May 2001. There have been no objections raised regarding the general issue of overall provision of open space and recreation within the draft Plan.

Maintenance Costs of Carrickfergus Castle

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the cost of maintaining Carrickfergus Castle in each of the last five years. (AQW 2061/00)

Mr Foster: The costs of maintaining the historic fabric of Carrickfergus Castle were as follows:

1996/97	£95,000
1997/98	£120,000
1998/99	£100,000
1999/2000	£180,000
2000/2001	(estimate) £210,000

In addition to these costs, my Department incurs other costs, including marketing, building running costs, grounds maintenance, tour guides and the castle manager. These costs are offset by receipts from admissions, sales and events. Information on these costs and receipts for any year before 1997/98 is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

For each year since then, the running costs and receipts of the Castle were as follows:-

1997/1998	
expenditure	£158,853
income	£94,272
net cost	£64, 581
1998/1999	
expenditure	£209,040
income	£112,842
net cost	£96,198
1999/2000	
expenditure	219,729
income	£107,807
net cost	£111,922

Running costs figures for the current financial year are not yet available.

Number of Visitors to Carrickfergus Castle

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of visitors to Carrickfergus Castle in each of the last five years. (AQW 2062/00)

Mr Foster: My Department records visitors numbers at Carrickfergus Castle by financial year. The information sought is as follows:-

1996/1997	58,043
1997/1998	56,759
1998/1999	64,611
1999/2000	60,821
2000/2001 (to 1st January)	50,888

Within these totals, the number of those visiting free in school groups for educational purposes was as follows:-

1996/1997	14,946
1997/1998	15,441
1998/1999	14,734
1999/2000	14,984
2000/2001 (to 1st January)	10,520

Cultural Events at Carrickfergus Castle

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans to promote Carrickfergus Castle as a venue for cultural events. (AQW 2063/00)

Mr Foster: The Environment and Heritage Service of my Department maintains Carrickfergus Castle and features the Castle in its annual Events Programme.

In early May, the Castle will host an armourer who will display medieval weaponry and demonstrate his craft skills. On 28 July, the Castle will hold the annual Lughnasa Fair. In October, the Castle will house a travelling exhibition of photographs of historic monuments and buildings.

In November, a walking tour of the historic town will feature in the Queen's University Belfast Festival.

EHS is currently running a campaign advertising its historic monuments and featuring the Castle on Translink buses. The castle features prominently on a 'super colour' bus, which is routed throughout the Greater Belfast area.

EHS encourages applications from other bodies, such as the District Council, to hold cultural and other events in the Castle, subject to standard conditions of use.

Planning Regulations: Apartment Development

Ms Armitage asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment of the need to review the current planning regulations relating to apartment development. (AQO 945/00)

Mr Foster: My Department is seeking to strengthen planning policy to deal with this issue in two ways.

The Department is currently finalising, following public consultation, a Planning Policy Statement entitled "Quality Residential Developments". This will provide a policy context against which proposals for housing development both on greenfield lands and within existing urban areas can be considered, including their relationship with existing development. The Department is also preparing, for consultation, supplementary Planning Guidance in the form of a Development Control Advice Note giving guidance specifically related to proposals for small-unit housing within existing residential areas. I hope to publish both documents in the spring.

I understand that the Department for Regional Development will be preparing a Regional Planning Policy Statement entitled "Housing in Settlements", which will also provide guidance on this matter.

Waste Management

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his policy on waste management for the Parliamentary constituency of East Antrim. (AQO 964/00)

Mr Foster: Policy on waste management generally is set out in the Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy published by my Department in March 2000. The Strategy is a requirement of the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997.

District Councils are required by the 1997 Order to prepare, by 30 June this year, Waste Management Plans for public consultation. Once agreed by the Department, these Plans will form the waste management policy for the area which they cover.

The District Councils within the Parliamentary constituency of East Antrim are members of the Eastern Region Waste Management Group which comprises 11 Councils. The Group is currently developing a Waste Management Plan providing for the establishment of an integrated network of facilities within the area covered by the 11 Councils.

Planning Policy Statement 2 (PPS 2)

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of the Environment if he intends to review Planning Policy Statement 2 (PPS2) on Planning and Nature Conservation, in the light of the Department's recent guidance on protecting plants and wildlife under its 'Creating Places' quality initiative (paragraphs 2.21-2.24). (AQO 962/00)

Mr Foster: I have no plans at present to review Planning Policy Statement 2.

It is considered that the policies within Planning Policy Statement 2 generally provide a sufficient policy framework for the guidance contained within "Creating Places".

A revised Planning Policy Statement Programme will be published in the Planning Service's Corporate & Business Plan 2001-2003, taking account of available resources and priorities.

Applications for Development: Comber and Ballygowan

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail all current applications for development in the Comber and Ballygowan areas. (AQO 988/00)

Mr Foster: Within the development limits of Comber, as defined in the North Down and Ards Area Plan, which remains the statutory Development Plan for the area, there are twenty three current planning applications proposing various forms of development. Within the development limits of Ballygowan, the corresponding figure is nine.

It would not be practical to detail all these applications today, but I will write to the Member with details of these applications.

In addition, my Department is considering two major applications for housing development in the Belfast Urban Area Green Belt in the Comber area.

Road Safety Awareness

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans to increase road safety awareness. (AQO 947/00)

Mr Foster: I remain totally committed to increasing road safety awareness in Northern Ireland. I intend to publish a consultation document shortly seeking views on a new Road Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2010. This has been drawn up in conjunction with local departments, agencies and the RUC, and the issues have been discussed with the Environment Committee.

The Department is in the process of recruiting 10 additional Road Safety Education Officers, doubling the existing number. These officers play a vital role in increasing understanding of road safety and encouraging positive road user attitudes among children and young people, as well as other road users.

In addition, my Department will be increasing its targeted road safety publicity aimed at the main causes of road casualties – excessive speed, drink driving and failure to wear seat belts.

In November 2000 I launched, jointly with the Minister for the Environment and Local Government in

the South, a new anti drink drive commercial - Shame. This campaign is ongoing.

Work is also underway to prepare a publicity campaign promoting seat belt wearing, to be launched later this year.

Equality Scheme

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on his Department's Equality Scheme. (AQO 1005/00)

Mr Foster: I am pleased to report that my Department's Equality Scheme was approved by the Equality Commission on 8 February 2001.

The scheme confirms the Department's commitment to its statutory obligations on the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations and sets out the ways in which those obligations will be fulfilled. It covers all the functions, duties and powers of the Department.

An action plan has been drawn up to help implement the commitments in the scheme and an Equality Unit has been created within my Department to oversee the programme of work and to monitor and review progress regularly.

Initial training has been provided to staff on the new duties and a full training and communication plan is being prepared.

European Union Habitats Directive

Mr A Doherty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the impact on his Department of the recent decision of the European Commission to issue a Reasoned Opinion against the United Kingdom for failure to apply the European Union's Habitats Directive. (AQO 954/00)

Mr Foster: The reasoned opinion issued by the European Commission against the United Kingdom relates to licences issued by the statutory nature conservation authorities in the United Kingdom to relocate protected species where development is taking place. The Commission considers that the issue of these licences was not in accordance with the Habitats Directive.

The case arose following complaints to the Commission about the relocation of Great Crested Newts in England and Wales from sites where planning permission for development had been granted.

The Great Crested Newt does not occur in Northern Ireland and the need for my Department to issue similar licences for other protected species has not arisen.

The matter may, nevertheless, have some relevance to Northern Ireland. The Habitats Directive is transposed into Northern Ireland legislation by means of Regulations which set out the basis on which such licences may be issued. In consultation with the Department of Enviro-

nment, Transport and the Regions and the other devolved administrations, I shall wish to consider whether there is any need to amend the Regulations in light of the outcome of the reasoned opinion.

Public Service Vehicle (PSV) Licence

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment to detail criteria used when assessing applications for a Public Service Vehicle (PSV) licence. (AQO 966/00)

Mr Foster: The term Public Service Vehicle or PSV licence can apply either to licences issued for vehicles used as taxis or buses or to licences issued to the drivers of such vehicles. Different criteria apply depending on the licence applied for.

For a taxi driver's licence, the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 requires the Department to be satisfied that the applicant is a fit and proper person to hold a licence.

In fulfilling this obligation, the Department requires an applicant:

- to have had a full driving licence for at least one year;
- to demonstrate that he or she is medically fit; and
- to satisfy a repute check based on the applicant's criminal record.

In assessing repute, a conviction for murder or a serious sexual offence will lead to the Department refusing the application. For other offences, my Department operates generally to guidelines which require an applicant to have a clear record for twelve months, in the case of convictions for minor offences, or for three years, where serious offences are involved.

An applicant for a bus driver's licence is required to satisfy the same criteria and, in addition, to be 21 years of age or over.

There is a right of appeal to a magistrate's court against a decision by the Department to refuse an application on repute or medical grounds.

To obtain a PSV vehicle licence for a taxi or a bus, the vehicle must be presented for an annual inspection to ensure its roadworthiness. These tests are carried out by my Department's Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency.

Marble Arch Hatchery

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the steps he is taking to investigate the recent killing of thousands of fish at the Marble Arch Hatchery, Fermanagh. (AQO 995/00)

Mr Foster: The Erne and Melvin Enhancement Company Ltd reported on 26 January 2001 that the water abstracted by the hatchery from the Claddagh

River was contaminated with slurry. My Department's Environment and Heritage Service asked the Fisheries Conservancy Board to investigate. The pollutant was traced back to agricultural premises where statutory samples were taken for analysis with a view to prosecution should this be warranted.

On 11 February 2001, a report was made direct to the Fisheries Conservancy Board that a fish kill had occurred at the hatchery. On investigation it was discovered that the perimeter fence at the premises had been cut. It also would appear that the water in the fish tanks had been deliberately contaminated. Accordingly the matter was referred to the RUC who are undertaking an investigation. It is my understanding that the RUC is following a definite line of inquiry.

I deplore both of these events which led to the loss of thousands of fish at the hatchery and represented a serious blow to the programme for restocking Lough Erne and Lough Melvin.

Retrospective Planning Approval

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of cases of retrospective planning approval granted by the Planning Service in each of the last five years for which figures are available. (AQO 1006/00)

Mr Foster: The Planning Service does not have the historic information available and to obtain it would involve a manual check of over 100,000 applications.

This could only be done at disproportionate cost. I have however asked officials to start recording this information on the existing database, in respect of future cases.

North/South Ministerial Council - Environmental Co-operation

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline what progress has the North-South Ministerial Council made on environmental co-operation, in particular, the initial work programme on environmental research, water quality management and waste management as outlined in the Programme for Government.

(AQO 976/00)

Mr Foster: The Environment sectoral group of the North/South Ministerial Council has met on three occasions, the most recent meeting being in County Fermanagh on 23 February.

These meetings have been progressively developing a work programme to address the seven environmental areas for enhanced co-operation mandated by the inaugural plenary meeting of the Council on 13 December 1999.

I am required by the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to make a statement to the Assembly following each meeting. I last reported on the work of the Environmental sectoral group on 14 November 2000. The Assembly Official Report for that date contains a transcript of my statement. My report on the 23 February meeting is scheduled for 12 March.

Taken together these statements provide details of the progress being made in taking forward the North/South Ministerial Council work programme of environmental co-operation.

National Park Status for the Mourne Mountains

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what further progress has been made on the designation of National park status for the Mourne Mountains. (AQO 998/00)

Mr Foster: As I said during the debate on the Member's motion on this subject last October, I have asked my officials to prepare a report on the issues surrounding both the creation of National Parks and the designation of the remaining Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. I expect to receive this report in the very near future. I will then wish to consider the way forward in consultation with the Assembly Environment Committee.

This will involve consideration of a number of significant and complex issues. These include the role now played by National Parks elsewhere, the responsibilities undertaken by their management Boards, the financial implications and the operational arrangements.

In relation to National Park status for the Mournes, it would also be necessary to examine the implications for other areas. While I accept that there are some arguments in favour of National Park declaration, this requires full consideration of the issues, and I am not in a position to make a commitment to designation.

Driving Under the Influence of Drugs

Mr Poots asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the steps he is taking to address the issue of driving under the influence of drugs. (AQO 951/00)

Mr Foster: I share the concern of many that driving under the influence of both medicinal and illicit drugs is increasing in Northern Ireland and that this may be a factor in collisions. My Department and the RUC are seeking to establish the extent of driving under the influence of drugs and the extent to which drug-taking impairs driving. Officials are also closely monitoring the research programme of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in Whitehall on issues such as this. When further evidence is available we will consider

what needs to be done by way of publicity and enforcement to address the issue.

Recent research in Great Britain indicates that, of drivers killed in road traffic collisions, 4% had consumed medicinal drugs and 18% had taken illicit drugs, mainly cannabis. The figure for illicit drugs represents a six-fold increase when compared with a previous study in the mid 1980s.

An independent survey last year, on behalf of my Department, found that almost one-third of young people aged 18 to 28 in Northern Ireland admitted to having been driven by someone who had been taking drugs.

However, from the research that has been carried out in Great Britain and elsewhere, there is, as yet, insufficient conclusive evidence on the causal links between drug taking and driver impairment and the extent to which this contributes to the number or severity of road casualties. Until research can provide clearer evidence, the scope to develop specific measures to tackle the problem is limited.

My Department continues to keep this under close review, and I can confirm that RUC Officers have been provided with guidelines to assist in recognising if driver behaviour is affected by drugs. The RUC is also considering the provision of formal drug-driving recognition training, including co-ordination testing.

I will also be considering, in the context of the new Road Safety Plan, on which I hope to go to full public consultation shortly, the need to strengthen Police powers to test for drug-driving.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Consultancy Services

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his projected spend on consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year. (AQW 1968/00)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The Department of Finance and Personnel has a projected spend of £3,469,000 for consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year.

Disadvantaged Traveller Children

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how the Executive Programme Fund addresses the needs of disadvantaged Traveller Children. (AQW 2014/00)

Mr Durkan: I refer you to my answer to AQW 1894/00 given on 28 February 2001.

Unemployment Differential Statistics

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm the date for publication of unemployment differential statistics compiled by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. (AQW 2021/00)

Mr Durkan: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency publishes unemployment differential statistics annually as part of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) Religion Report. The most recent report, which was based on the 1999-2000 LFS was published on 1 March.

In addition, the Agency plans to publish a "Source Book on Fair Employment Statistics" later this month. This publication will also include unemployment differential statistics.

Labour Force Survey - Protestants Employed

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of Protestants employed and the percentage of the workforce they represent in each of the last ten years for which figures are available. (AQW 2027/00)

Mr Durkan: The numbers of Protestants employed and the percentage of the workforce they represent are shown in the table below based on estimates from the Labour Force Survey.

Year	Number of Protestants Employed (rounded to nearest thousand)	Proportion of all in employment (all religions)	Proportion of (workforce) all those economically active (all religions)
1990	358000	58.5%	51.7%
1991	345000	56.8%	49.9%
1992	366000	60.3%	52.9%
1993	347000	57.4%	50.2%
1994	354000	58.1%	51.4%
1995	363000	57.2%	50.7%
1996	374000	57.1%	51.5%
1997	388000	56.7%	52.0%
1998	385000	55.7%	51.5%
1999	381000	54.7%	51.2%

Notes

1. Estimates are derived from the Labour Force Survey and are subject to sampling error. Population estimates are rounded to the nearest thousand.
2. Percentages are based on unrounded figures.
3. All estimates are based on those aged 16+.
4. The term workforce is defined as those economically active (in work or actively seeking work).
5. 'All religions' includes all Protestants and Roman Catholics as well as those with other religions, those with no religion and those who refused to give information on their religion.

Labour Force Survey - Roman Catholics Employed

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of Roman Catholics employed and the percentage of the workforce they represent in each of the last ten years for which figures are available. (AQW 2028/00)

Mr Durkan: The numbers of Roman Catholics employed and the percentage of the workforce they represent are shown in the table below based on estimates from the Labour Force Survey.

Year	Number of Roman Catholics Employed (rounded to nearest thousand)	Proportion of all in employment (all religions)	Proportion of (workforce) all those economically active (all religions)
1990	219000	35.7%	31.6%
1991	216000	35.5%	31.2%
1992	199000	32.8%	28.7%
1993	209000	34.5%	30.2%
1994	216000	35.6%	31.4%
1995	235000	37.1%	32.9%
1996	238000	36.4%	32.8%
1997	254000	37.1%	34.1%
1998	264000	38.2%	35.3%
1999	267000	38.4%	35.9%

Notes

1. Estimates are derived from the Labour Force Survey and are subject to sampling error. Population estimates are rounded to the nearest thousand.
2. Percentages are based on unrounded figures.
3. All estimates are based on those aged 16+.
4. The term workforce is defined as those economically active (in work or actively seeking work).
5. 'All religions' includes all Protestants and Roman Catholics as well as those with other religions, those with no religion and those who refused to give information on their religion.

Labour Force Survey - People Not Protestant or Roman Catholic Employed

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of people not counted as Protestant or Roman Catholic employed and the percentage of the workforce they represent in each of the last ten years for which figures are available. (AQW 2029/00)

Mr Durkan: The numbers of people not counted as Protestant or Roman Catholic employed and the percentage of the workforce they represent are shown in the table below based on estimates from the Labour Force Survey.

Year	Number of People not counted as Protestant or Roman Catholic Employed (rounded to nearest thousand)	Proportion of all in employment (all religions)	Proportion of (workforce) all those economically active (all religions)
1990	35000	5.8%	5.1%
1991	47000	7.8%	6.8%
1992	42000	6.9%	6.1%
1993	49000	8.1%	7.1%
1994	39000	6.3%	5.6%
1995	36000	5.7%	5.1%
1996	43000	6.5%	5.9%
1997	42000	6.2%	5.7%
1998	42000	6.0%	5.6%
1999	48000	6.9%	6.4%

Notes

1. Estimates are derived from the Labour Force Survey and are subject to sampling error. Population estimates are rounded to the nearest thousand.
2. Percentages are based on unrounded figures.
3. All estimates are based on those aged 16+.
4. The term workforce is defined as those economically active (in work or actively seeking work).
5. 'All religions' includes all Protestants and Roman Catholics as well as those with other religions, those with no religion and those who refused to give information on their religion

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Long-Term Care

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she intends to introduce, in line with the Royal Commission on Long Term Care's recommendation, free care for the first three months of residential care from April 2001. (AQW 1964/00)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): As I said during the debate in the Assembly on long-term care on Tuesday 27 February, I am minded to bring forward proposals to remove the value of the resident's home from the means assessment for the first three months in a care home, whether that stay is of a temporary or permanent nature. That will depend on additional resources being made available.

The three-month disregard will take the resident's home out of the initial assessment of means. This will give residents time between entering a care home and, in some cases, needing to realise the value of their home to help pay for their care in the longer term.

Mar a dúirt mé le linn na díospóireachta sa Tionól ar chúram fadtéarmach Dé Máirt 27 Feabhra go bhfuil sé ar intinn agam moltaí a thabhairt chun tosaigh ar luach theach an chónaitheora a baint den mheasúnú maoinne den chéad trí mhí i dteach cúraim, is cuma más buan sealadach tréimse an fheithimh. Beidh seo ag brath ar acmhainní breise curtha ar fáil.

Bainfidh an neamhaird tugtha ar feadh trí mhí teach an chónaitheora amach as an mheasúnú tosaigh maoinne. Tabharfaidh seo faill do chónaitheoirí idir teacht isteach chuig teach cúraim, agus i roinnt cásanna, an riachtanas luach a dtí a fháil le cuidiú lena gcúram san fhadtéarma a íoc.

Tá an Roinn s'agam le rialaithe athraithe a dhéanamh ar ball maidir le Rialacháin Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta (Measúnú ar Acmhainní) (TÉ)1993, le hathruithe a chur i bhfeidhm i dtaca le rialacha muirir do chúram cónaitheach agus do theach altránais a bhí socraithe nó curtha ar fáil ag Boird mar a d'fhógair mé Dé Máirt 27 Feabhra 2001.

My Department is to make amending regulations in the near future, in respect of the Health and Personal Social Services (Assessment of Resources) Regulations (NI) 1993, to implement the changes to the charging rules for residential and nursing home care arranged or provided by Boards that I announced on Tuesday 27 February 2001.

Altnagelvin Hospital: ENT Treatment

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to improve the delivery of Ear, Nose and Throat services at Altnagelvin Hospital. (AQW 1996/00)

Ms de Brún: In Altnagelvin Hospital all Ear, Nose and Throat patients are seen within Charter Standards. The number of people waiting for inpatient ENT treatment at the hospital continues to fall, reducing from 396 in January 1999 to 212 in January 2001. I am tackling waiting lists as one of my key priorities and I have already issued a comprehensive framework setting out a strategic approach to achieving reductions in waiting lists. That has been backed by additional investment of £5million this year and a further £8million next year.

In ospidéal Alt na nGealbhan breatnaítear ar gach othar Cluaise, Sróine agus Scornaí laistigh de Chaighdeán Chairt. Leanadh le titim i líon daoine ag fanacht ar chóireál CCS ag an ospidéal, ag laghdú ó 396 in Eanáir 1999 go 212 in Eanáir 2001. Tá mé ag dul i ngleic le liostaí feithimh mar cheann de mo phríomhthosaíochtaí agus d'eisigh mé cheana creat cuimsitheach ag leagan amach cur chuige straitéiseach le laghduithe i liostaí feithimh a bhaint amach. Cuireadh infheistíocht bhreise £5 mhilliún mar thaca leis seo i mbliana agus £8 milliún eile ar an bhliain seo chugainn.

Altnagelvin Hospital: ENT Waiting List

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that the Altnagelvin Hospital has a target to meet in respect of reducing the Ear, Nose and Throat waiting list and whether or not the Hospital is meeting this target. (AQW 1998/00)

Ms de Brún: Whilst there are no specific targets for the ENT service in Altnagelvin Hospital, I expect all patients to receive their treatment as quickly as possible. As regards that particular specialty in Altnagelvin, I expect figures to continue to reduce in line with my overall target for the reduction in waiting lists, which I shall be announcing in the near future as part of a programme of identified HPSS priority action areas.

Cé nach bhfuil spriocanna ar leith ann don tseirbhís ENT in Otharlann Alt na nGealbhan, tá mé ag súil go bhfaighidh gach othar a gcóireáil a luaithe agus is féidir. Maidir leis an speisialtóireacht ar leith seo in Alt na nGealbhan, tá mé ag súil go laghdóidh na figiúirí ar aghaidh faoi réir mo sprice iomláine do laghdú i liostaí feithimh a bheidh mé ag fógairt ar ball mar chuid de chlár gníomhréimsí tosaíochta SSSP aitheanta.

Patient Participation Groups

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to support patient participation groups attached to local General Practitioner surgeries by providing financial resources to assist their sustainability. (AQW 2030/00)

Ms de Brún: There are several patient participation groups currently in operation and any expenses incurred are met from the GP practice income. However, the proposals for new arrangements in primary care, published in the consultation paper “Building the Way Forward in Primary Care”, envisage a stronger role for service user and community input to decisions at the primary care level. Depending on the views received as part the consultation, I will be examining how service user and community input can be supported in whatever new primary care arrangements emerge from the consultation exercise.

Tá roinnt Grúpaí Rannphárte Othar ag obair faoi láthair agus seastar costais ar bith déanta ó ioncam chleachtas an an Ghnáthdhochtúra. Beartaíonn na moltaí do shocrúithe nua i bpríomhchúram, foilsithe sa pháipéar comhairleach “Ag Tógáil an Bhealaigh Chun Tosaigh i bPríomhchúram” áfach, ról níos láidre d’ionchur úsáideoirí seirbhísí agus pobail ag an leibhéal príomhchúraim. Ag brath ar na tuairimí a gheofar mar chuid den dul i gcomhairle, beidh mé ag scrúdú an dóigh ar féidir tacaíocht a thabhairt d’ionchur úsáideoirí seirbhísí agus pobail i gcibé socruithe nua príomhchúraim a thiocfaidh chun cinn ón chleachtadh comhairleach.

Consultancy Services: School of Nursing

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the School of Nursing at the Queen’s University, Belfast invited tenders for consultancy services purchased in each of the last three financial years. (AQW 2037/00)

Ms de Brún: That matter is not within my area of responsibility.

Ní thiteann an cheist seo ar chrann m’fhreagrachta.

Consultancy Services: School of Nursing

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the School of Nursing at the Queen’s University, Belfast gained prior approval from the Department for the use of external consultancy services. (AQW 2038/00)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my response to AQW 2037/00.

Luaim don Bhall an freagra a thug mé ar AQW 2037/00.

Consultancy Services: School of Nursing

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how much the School of Nursing at the Queen’s University, Belfast spent on external consultancy services in this current financial year and in each of the last three financial years for which figures are available. (AQW 2039/00)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my response to AQW 2037/00.

Luaim don Bhall an freagra a thug mé ar AQW 2037/00.

Consultancy Services: School of Nursing

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether she approved the use of consultancy services in the School of Nursing at the Queen’s University, Belfast. (AQW 2040/00)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my response to AQW 2037/00.

Luaim don Bhall an freagra a thug mé ar AQW 2037/00.

Promoting the Prevention of Smoking

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action being taken to promote the prevention of smoking, particularly among teenage girls and young women. (AQW 2041/00)

Ms de Brún: A Bill to ban tobacco advertising and promotion both here and in Britain was introduced in

Parliament at Westminster on 14 December 2000. I have also established an inter-sectoral Working Group on Tobacco to develop and oversee the implementation of a comprehensive action plan to tackle smoking. The plan, which will be published later in the year, will include specific measures aimed at young people and also at helping existing smokers to quit.

My Department has also funded the production of a television advertisement, the development of a website and the launch of a magazine aimed at discouraging smoking among young people. The advert, which was first broadcast in March 2000, has been running since 19 February 2001 and will continue until the end of March 2001. The website can be found at www.up-2-you.net

In addition, Departments, both North and South, are concerned at the trends that show an increase in smoking among young girls. We will be sharing information and exploring opportunities for collaborative working on anti-smoking campaigns.

Cuireadh faoi bhráid na Parlaiminte Bille I Westminster le cosc a chur ar fhógairt agus ar chur chun cinn tobac ar 14 Nollaig 2000 anseo agus i Sasana araon. Bhunaigh mé chomh maith Grúpa Oibre idirearnála ar Thobac le cur i bhfeidhm plean cuimsitheach gnímh a rachaidh i ngleic le tobac a chaitheamh a fhorbhairt agus maoirseacht a dhéanamh air. Beidh, sa phlean a fhoilseoidh níos moille anonn sa bhliain, bearta ar leith aimsithe ar dhaoine óga agus le cuidiú a dhéanamh le lucht caite tobac éirí as.

Thug an Roinn s'agam airgead le fógra teilifíse a sholáthar, le suíomh idirlín a fhorbairt agus le hirisleabhar a sheoladh aimsithe ar chur in éadan caitheamh i measc daoine óga. Leanfaidh leis an fhógra a chraoladh ar dtús i Márta na bliana 2000, a bhí sa siúl ó 19 Feabhra 2001 agus a leanfaidh go deireadh mí Mhárta 2001. Is féidir teacht air ag an suíomh idirlín www.up-2-you.net

Lena chois sin, tá inní ar an dá Roinn sa Tuaisceart agus sa Deisceart araon faoi threochtaí a thaispeánann méadú ar chaitheamh tobac i measc cailíní óga. Beimid ag roinnt faisnéise agus ag taiscéaladh deiseanna le comhoibriú ar fheachtais i gcoinne caitheamh tobac.

Nicotine Replacement Therapy

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there is evidence for the effectiveness of nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) and what plans she has to expand its use.

(AQW 2042/00)

Ms de Brún: Evidence-based work reported in the Journal of the British Thoracic Society demonstrates that NRT approximately doubles cessation rates compared with controls such as a placebo or no NRT, irrespective of the intensity of the support. Strong evidence that NRT is effective is limited to adult smokers of 10 cigarettes or

more per day who are not suffering from manifest smoking-related diseases.

Guidance on smoking cessation services, including current arrangements for the supply of NRT products, was widely distributed by my Department in December last year. In addition, my Department has recently completed a consultation exercise involving professional bodies and other interested parties on a proposal to allow all NRT products to be prescribed by GPs. My officials are currently assessing the responses and I will make an announcement shortly about the way forward.

Léiríonn obair bunaithe ar fhianaise in Iris Chumann Tóracasach Shasana go méadaíonn go garbh TAN rátaí scoir faoi dhó i gcomparáid le rialúcháin amhail an placebo nó gan TAN, is cuma faoi dhlús na tacaíochta. Tá fianaise láidir go bhfuil TAN éifeachtach teoranta do dhaoine fásta a chaitheann 10 dtóitín nó níos mó sa lá nach bhfuil ceann de na galar a bhaineann le caitheamh tobac go soiléir orthu.

Dháil an Roinn s'agam i Nollaig na bliana seo caite treoir go forleathan ar sheirbhísí scoir maidir le caitheamh, agus le socruithe soláthar tairgí TAN san áireamh. Ar a bharr, chríochnaigh an Roinn s'agam le gairid cleachtadh comhairlithe a bhain le comhlachtaí proifisiúnta agus páirtithe leasmhara eile ar mholadh le cead a thabhairt do gach tairge TAN bheith tugtha ar oideas ag gnáthdhochtúirí. Tá na hoifigigh s'agam faoi láthair ag meas na bhfreagraí agus tabharfaidh mé fógra ar an bhealach chun tosaigh gan mhoill.

Special Advisor

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) whom she has employed as special advisor(s) (b) the qualifying criteria used for the appointment and (c) the remit of the special advisor(s). (AQW 2049/00)

Ms de Brún:

- I can confirm that I have appointed Leo Green as a special advisor.
- My special advisor was appointed on the basis of his ability to carry out the functions of the post.
- The remit is set out in Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the standard contract of employment for such advisers, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.
- Tig liom a dhearbhu gur cheap mé Leo Green mar Chomhairleoir Speisialta.
- Ceapadh mo Chomhairleoir Speisialta ar a ábaltacht le dualgaís an phoist a dhéanamh.
- Tá na téarmaí tagartha leagtha amach i gCuid 1 de Chlár 2 den ghnáthchonradh fostaíochta do a leithéid de chomhairleoirí, ar cuireadh cóip de sa Leabharlann.

Strategic Review of the Ambulance Service

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail those recommendations outlined in the Ambulance Service Strategic Review that have been implemented. (AQW 2053/00)

Ms de Brún: The Strategic Review of the Ambulance Service resulted in over 70 recommendations designed to improve the performance of the Ambulance Service over the next 5 years. However, early priority has been given to fleet replacement and the Ambulance Service plan to replace at least 10 vehicles during 2001, which will bring to over 90 the total number of new vehicles brought into service since 1999.

Work is also well advanced on several other issues, including piloting a call prioritisation system, aimed at targeting resources on those who will benefit most, and preparatory work for the introduction of Digital Trunk Radio.

In addition, the Ambulance Service has implemented most of the Review's recommendations relating to management and personnel issues, such as the development of a Human Resources strategy, a staff performance management system and an equality scheme. Cross-border co-operation on ambulance services is also continuing on both an informal and formal basis.

The remaining recommendations are being considered further as regards the costs and the practical issues involved in their implementation.

Tháinig 70 moladh leagtha amach le feidhmiú na Seirbhíse Otharcharr thar na cúig bliana seo chugainn a fheabhsú as an Athbhreithniú Straitéiseach ar an tSeirbhís Otharcharr. Tugadh tosaíocht luath do mhalartú scuaidrín feithiclí áfach, agus tá rún ag an tSeirbhís Otharcharr 10 bhfeithicil ar a laghad a mhalartú le linn 2001, a shuimeoidh go breis agus 90 an méid iomlán feithiclí nua a bhíodas i seirbhís ó 1999.

Tá obair ag dul go maith chun tosaigh ar roinnt ceisteanna eile, píolótú córais tosaíochta glaoigh, a bhfuil cuspóir aige acmhainní a dhíriú orthu siúd a bhainfidh níos mó tairbhe astu, agus obair ullmhúcháin do thabhairt isteach Raidió Dhigitigh san áireamh.

Ina theannta sin, chuir an tSeirbhís Otharcharr an chuid is mó de mholtaí an Athbhreithnithe maidir le bainistíocht agus le ceisteanna pearsanta i bhfeidhm, ar nós forbairt straitéise Acmhainní Daonna, chórais bhainistíochta ar chleachtadh foirne agus Scéime Cothroime. Tá comhoibriú trasteorann ar sheirbhísí otharcharr ag leanúint ar aghaidh fosta ar bhonn neamhfhoirmeálta agus foirmeálta araon.

Tá tuilleadh machnaimh á dhéanamh ar an chuid eile de na moltaí maidir leis na costais agus leis na ceisteanna praiticiúla bainteach lena gcur i bhfeidhm.

Ambulance Service: Rapid Response Vehicles

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps she is taking to ensure that the new Rapid Response Vehicles in the Ambulance Service are being used according to appropriate guidelines. (AQW 2054/00)

Ms de Brún: The Report on the Strategic Review of Ambulance Services recommended that, in order to deliver cost effective emergency care, the Ambulance Service should develop the use of single staffed rapid response units. The introduction of this service is dependent on the introduction of the medical-priority based dispatch system, which is to be piloted later this year, and also on the priority that boards accord to this service as regards the availability of additional resources.

Mhol an Tuairisc ar Athbhreithniú Straitéiseach na Seirbhísí Otharcharr gur chóir don tSeirbhís Otharcharr úsáid ionad mearfhreagartha duine aonair a fhorbairt chun cúram costas-éifeachtach éigeandála a chur ar fáil. Braitheann tabhairt isteach na seirbhíse seo ar thabhairt isteach an Chórais Seolta bunaithe ar Thosaíocht Mhíochaine atá le píolótú níos moille i mbliana, agus ar an tosaíocht a thugann Boird don tseirbhís seo ó thaobh infhaighteacht acmhainní breise di.

Speech Therapy - Homefirst Community Trust

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her proposals with regard to the levels of speech therapy in Special Schools in East Antrim and to make a statement. (AQW 2055/00)

Ms de Brún: Homefirst Community Trust has appointed replacement therapists covering Rostulla and Roddensvale Special Schools and they will take up post shortly. The trust is actively engaged in filling other vacancies in the speech and language therapy service. I understand that the Northern Health and Social Services Board has funded 3 additional posts from October 2000 and is funding a further additional 4.5 posts. My Department has been engaged in a workforce survey, the results of which are expected in the next three months. That should assist in the development of workforce planning for speech and language therapists.

Cheap Iontaobhas Phobal Homefirst teiripithe ionaid ag cumhdach Scoileanna Speisialta Rostulla agus Roddensvale agus gabhfaidh siad lena bpostanna ar ball. Tá an tIontaobhas páirteach ar bhonn gníomhach i líonadh folúntas eile sa tseirbhís teiripe labhartha agus teanga. Tuigim gur mhaoinigh Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Tuaiscirt 3 phost breise ó Dheireadh Fómhair 2000 agus go bhfuil sé ag maoiniú 4.5 phost eile. Bhí an Roinn s'agam páirteach i suirbhé meithle oibre, a bhfuiltear ag súil lena thorthaí i gceann trí mhí. Ba chóir

dó seo cuidiú le forbairt phleanáil mheithle oibre do theiripithe labhartha agus teanga.

Health Implications from Telecommunications Masts

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there are any health implications from the use of telecommunications masts and to make a statement. (AQW 2067/00)

Ms de Brún: The Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones, led by Sir William Stewart and set up to assess the current state of research into possible health risks from mobile phones, presented its report last May. It concluded that the balance of evidence indicates that there is no general risk to the health of people living near base stations, on the basis that exposures are expected to be small fractions of guidelines. The guidelines referred to are those of the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection on the limitation of exposure of the general public to electromagnetic fields. It also recommended a precautionary approach to the use of mobile phones and base stations until more research findings become available.

Chuir an Grúpa Saineolaithe Neamhspleácha ar Ghutháin Phóca, a bhfuil An Ridire William Stewart i gceannas air agus a bunaíodh le staid reatha an taighde ar na baoil fhéideartha sláinte ó ghutháin siúil a mheasúnú, a thuairisc amach i Mí na Bealtaine anuraidh. Chríochnaigh sí go léiríonn formhór na fianaise nach bhfuil baol ginearálta ann do shláinte dhaoine a chónaíonn cóngarach do stáisiúin bhunáite, ar an bhonn go bhfuiltear ag meas nach mbeidh an nochtadh ach cuid bheag de na treoirlínte. Is iad na treoirlínte, a ndearnadh tagairt dóibh, treoirlínte an Choimisiúin Idirnáisiúnta ar Chosaint Radaíochta Neamhianaithe ar theorannú nochtadh an phobail le réimsí leicreamaighnéadacha. Mhol sí fosta cur chuige réamhchúramach maidir le húsáid ghuthán siúil agus stáisiún bunáite go dtí go gcuirfear tuilleadh torthaí ón taighde ar fáil.

Information on Northern Ireland Beef

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1748/00, to provide the Health Departments of European Union Countries with information regarding Northern Ireland beef. (AQW 2070/00)

Ms de Brún: It is a matter for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide information regarding beef and other agricultural products.

Is faoin Roinn Talmhaíochta agus Forbartha Tuaithe atá sé eolas a chur ar fáil maidir le mairteoil agus táirgí talmhaíochta eile.

South Tyrone Hospital: Gordon Thompson Building

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to utilise the Gordon Thompson Building within South Tyrone Hospital for the specific benefit of the people of the South Tyrone/Mid Ulster area and to make a statement.

(AQW 2099/00)

Ms de Brún: The purpose of the Gordon Thompson Building at South Tyrone Hospital is to provide an educational building for staff. Since the centre opened in 1994, it has been and continues to be an invaluable asset to the Health and Community Social Services provided in the Dungannon and Armagh Area.

Tá sé mar aidhm ag Foirgneamh Gordon Thompson ag Ospidéal Thír Eoghain foirgneamh oideachais a chur ar fáil don fhoireann. Ó osclaíodh an t-ionad in 1994, tá sé ina shocmhainn ríluachmhar go fóill do na Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pobail a chuirtear ar fáil i limistéar Dhún Geanainn agus Ard Mhacha.

Road Traffic Accidents: Cost of Treatment

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Board area, (a) the cost of treatment arising from road traffic accidents for which records are available and (b) the percentage of total revenue costs recovered from the relevant insurance companies in respect of such treatment in each of the last three years. (AQW 2102/00)

Ms de Brún: The cost of treatment arising from road traffic accidents is not available as Health and Social Services Trusts do not analyse treatment costs on the basis of cause of injury.

The percentage of total revenue costs of such treatment recovered from relevant insurance companies over the last three years is not available. The figures in the table below represent the amount recovered by HSS Trusts from insurance companies paying compensation to people injured in road traffic accidents.

Board	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
Eastern	217,806	345,535	464,964
Western	43,910	67,689	79,580
Northern	58,545	65,903	38,546
Southern	27,172	12,596	164,424
Totals	347,433	491,723	747,514

Source of information:- FR31 from each HSS Trust

The existing arrangements for recovery of treatment costs have proved difficult to administer and ineffective as regards recovery of costs. Therefore the Health and

Personal Social Services Bill includes provisions for the introduction of a new and simplified recovery procedure from 2 April 2001, which should significantly increase the income from insurance companies.

Níl costas cóireála de dheasca timpistí trácht bóthair ar fáil as siocair nach ndéanann na hIontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta anailís ar chostais chóireála bunaithe ar chúis an ghortaithe.

Níl céatadán costais iomlána ioncaim de chóireál a athshlánaíodh ó chomhlachtaí bainteacha árachais le trí bliana anuas ar fáil. Léiríonn na figiúir sa tábla thíos an tsuim a d'athshlánaigh na hIontaobhais SSS ó chomhlachtaí árachais ag íoc cúiteamh le daoine a gortaíodh i dtimpistí trácht bóthair

Bord SSS	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
An tOirthear	217,806	345,535	464,964
An tIarthar	43,910	67,689	79,580
An Tuaisceart	58,545	65,903	38,546
An Deisceart	27,172	12,596	164,424
Iomlán	347,433	491,723	747,514

Foinse eolais:-FR31 ó gach Iontaobhas SSS

Léirigh na socrúithe mar atá anois maidir le costais coireála a athshlánú go raibh deacrachtaí lena riar agus mí-éifeachtach i dtéarmaí costais a athshlánú. San áireamh leis an Bhille Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta mar sin tá forálacha ann faoi choinne nós imeachta athshlánaithe atá nua agus níos simplí ó 2 Aibreán 2001 ar

Remuneration of Night Shift Nurses

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what system of pay is used to determine the remuneration of night shift nurses when they are on leave. (AQW 2113/00)

Ms de Brún: The remuneration of night shift nurses during their statutory entitlement of four weeks annual leave is governed by the Working Time Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998 and the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. Due to the complex nature of the legislation and the diversity of working patterns of staff employed in the HPSS, a working group representing HPSS employers, staff organisations and my officials has been established to agree the appropriate method for calculating payments. Agreement is expected shortly.

Remuneration for annual leave in excess of the four weeks statutory entitlement is determined in accordance with the terms and conditions of service applicable to nursing staff. These provisions do not allow for enhanced payments for night shift working to be paid to staff while on leave.

Tá íocaíocht banaltraí sealóibre oíche le linn a saoire bliantúla reachtúla ceithre seachtaine atá siad i dteideal, leagtha amach san Ord Rialacha Ama Oibre (TÉ) 1998 agus san Ord Cearta Fostaíochta (TÉ) 1996. Mar gheall ar ghné choimpléascach na reachtaíochta agus ar éagsúlacht phatrúin oibre na foirne fostaithe sna SSPS, bunaíodh grúpa oibre ag seasamh d'fhostóirí SSPS, d'eagraíochtaí foirne agus do mo chuid oifigeach leis an mhodh chuí d'áireamh íocaíochtaí a chomhaontú. Táthar ag súil le comhaontú ar ball.

Cinntear íocaíocht do shaoire bhliantúil níos mó ná na ceithre seachtaine reachtúla atáthar i dteideal, de réir téarmaí agus coinníollacha na seirbhíse maidir leis an fhoireann banaltrachta. Ní chuireann na forálacha seo san áireamh íocaíochtaí méadaithe do shealobair oíche, le bheith íoctha don fhoireann agus iad ar saoire.

Chief Executive Travel Expenses

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of travel expenses and subsistence allowances paid to the Chief Executive of each Health and Social Services Trust in each of the last four years for which figures are available.

(AQW 2183/00)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is shown in the table below.

Board Area	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
EHSSB				
Belfast City Hospital	32.30	123.60	1081.40	3482.25
Down Lisburn	302.01	436.96	534.87	321.19
Green Park	Not given	Not given	3723.62	5893.23
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	521.33	174.77	362.26	1496.25
North and West Belfast	7066.00	9772.00	8417.00	9128.00
South and East Belfast	5708.00	6209.00	10179.00	1602.00
Royal Group of Hospitals	1064.00	2702.00	6254.00	2891.00
Ulster Community & Hospitals	9343.00	11757.00	9104.00	7196.00
Totals	24,036.64	31,175.33	39,656.15	32,009.92
NHSSB				
Causeway	500.00	105.53	35.00	296.90
Homefirst Community	NIL	763.00	NIL	249.00
United Hospitals	NIL	NIL	886.00	311.00
Totals	500.00	868.53	921.00	856.90
SHSSB				

Board Area	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
Armagh and Dungannon	70.55	62.00	NIL	NIL
Craigavon and Banbridge Community	660.00	100.00	770.00	NIL
Craigavon Area Hospital	184.00	725.00	73.00	604.00
Newry and Mourne	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Totals	914.55	887.00	843.00	604.00
WHSSB				
Altnagelvin Hospitals	561.00	945.00	610.00	1151.00
Foyle	1820.60	3655.43	3010.80	4501.41
Sperrin Lakeland	822.00	1482.00	2086.00	1756.00
Totals	3,203.60	6,082.43	5,706.80	7,408.41
N I Ambulance Service	1,710.13	1,805.72	5,976.22	2,828.94

Léirítear an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

Ceantar Boird	1996/97 £	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £
BSSSO				
Otharlann Cathrach Bhéal Feirste	32.30	123.60	1081.40	3482.25
An Dún Lios na gCearrbhach	302.01	436.96	534.87	321.19
An Pháirc Ghlas	Níor tugadh	Níor tugadh	3723.62	5893.23
An Otharlann Mháithreachais	521.33	174.77	362.26	1496.25
Béal Feirste Thuaidh agus Thiar	7066.00	9772.00	8417.00	9128.00
Béal Feirste Theas agus Thoir	5708.00	6209.00	10179.00	1602.00
Grúpa Ríoga na nOtharlann	1064.00	2702.00	6254.00	2891.00
Pobal agus Otharlanna Uladh	9343.00	11757.00	9104.00	7196.00
Iomláin	24,036.64	31,175.33	39,656.15	32,009.92
BSSST				
An Clochán	500.00	105.53	35.00	296.90
Pobal Homefirst	NÁID	763.00	NÁID	249.00
Otharlanna Aontaithe	NÁID	NÁID	886.00	311.00
Iomláin	500.00	868.53	921.00	856.90
BSSSD				
Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn	70.55	62.00	NÁID	NÁID
Pobal Craigavon agus Dhroichead na Banna	660.00	100.00	770.00	NÁID
Otharlann Ceantair Craigavon	184.00	725.00	73.00	604.00

An tIúr agus an Mhúrn	NÁID	NÁID	NÁID	NÁID
Iomláin	914.55	887.00	843.00	604.00
BSSSI				
Otharlanna Alt na nGealbhan	561.00	945.00	610.00	1151.00
An Feabhal	1820.60	3655.43	3010.80	4501.41
Sliabh Speirín	822.00	1482.00	2086.00	1756.00
Iomláin	3,203.60	6,082.43	5,706.80	7,408.41
Seirbhís Otharcharr Thuaisceart Éireann	1,710.13	1,805.72	5,976.22	2,828.94

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail his plans to inform student/parents about childcare available in their area. (AQW 1969/00)

The Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (Dr Farren): The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy, which is the joint responsibility of DHSS&PS, the Department of Education and DHFETE, includes a commitment to establish a childcare information system in order to make childcare more accessible.

The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years (DHFETE, DHSS&PS and DE officials) will shortly convene a multi-agency project board to take forward this work, with the aim of establishing by March 2002 a system that will provide parents with childcare information that is local, reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive.

In the meantime local childcare information is available from the following sources:

- the four Childcare Partnerships (based in the HSSBs);
- local HSS Trusts;
- the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA);
- PlayBoard (for out-of-school-hours childcare);
- NIPPA (for pre-school playgroups) and
- childcare providers themselves.

Student Funding

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the average amount of funding per student at the Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Ulster in each of the last four years. (AQW 1978/00)

Dr Farren: The average amount of funding per full-time equivalent student funded by my Department is as follows:

AVERAGE FUNDING* PER FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT STUDENT

Academic years	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01
University of Ulster	£4,148	£4,274	£4,376	£4,467
Queens' University	£4,502	£4,673	£4,768	£4,906

* Based on the annual teaching grant and assumed tuition fee income for each institution.

The level of funding per full-time equivalent student at a university depends on the subject being studied. Differences in the average funding levels between universities are accounted for by the different distribution of subjects studied by students in each university.

Rural Community - Information Technology Training

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail the steps he is taking to make the rural community aware of the availability of Information Technology training currently being promoted by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. (AQW 1993/00)

Dr Farren: My Department works closely with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to ensure that the rural community has access to learning opportunities that are relevant and timely. My officials are aware of the opportunities available and have ensured that Learndirect, the free information service, has information on courses and that Individual Learning Accounts support appropriate training.

European Community Canada Programme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, pursuant to AQW 1689/00, to outline his plans to assist higher education institutions in bidding for support for projects under the European Community Canada Programme for co-operation in higher education and training and to make a statement. (AQW 2043/00)

Dr Farren: I have no such plans. The bidding process is a matter for the higher education institutions themselves.

Special Advisors

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to detail (a) whom he has employed as special advisor(s) (b) the qualifying criteria used for the appointment and (c) the remit of the special advisor(s). (AQW 2050/00)

Dr Farren:

- I have appointed Mr Brendan Mulgrew as my special advisor;
- Mr Mulgrew was appointed on the basis of his ability to carry out the functions of the post;
- Mr Mulgrew's remit is set out in Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the standard contract of employment for such advisers, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

Youth and Long Term Unemployment

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to outline his policy to reduce youth and long term unemployment and to make a statement. (AQW 2132/00)

Dr Farren: The main initiative for tackling unemployment is the New Deal programme which has already helped a significant number of young people and adults make the transition from benefit to work.

An enhanced New Deal 25+ programme, which will offer a flexible package of help, tailored to meet the individual needs of participants, will be introduced from 9 April this year.

New Deal

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to give his assessment of the effect of the New Deal on the employment prospects of young people. (AQW 2133/00)

Dr Farren: The evidence from surveys is that most young people who have participated in New Deal feel that it has improved their chances of finding permanent work. An independent survey of 18-24 year olds found that eight months after they had left New Deal 50% reported being in employment.

Student Dropping Out of Further and Higher Education Courses

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment to provide his assessment of the number of Northern Ireland students dropping out of further and higher education courses and what arrangements are in place to monitor this issue. (AQW 2137/00)

Dr Farren: An exercise aimed specifically at reporting retention information at the NI further education colleges has been commissioned and the first results should be available later in 2001.

Non-completion rates for higher education institutions in the UK are calculated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). They are available only

at institutional level, therefore it is not currently possible to identify students by country of domicile.

There are fewer students finishing with neither an award nor transfer (drop-out) in NI institutions than the UK average. In the University of Ulster, the figure at 12% is significantly lower than the benchmark level at 16%. In QUB the figure is 10%, compared to a benchmark level of 9%.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Consultancy Services

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his projected spend on consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year. (AQW 1927/00)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): Projected spend on external consultancy services in the 2001/02 financial year is estimated at £1.839m.

Principal Private Secretary

Mr McNamee asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether an additional post of Principal Private Secretary has been created in his Department and to make a statement. (AQW 2020/00)

Mr Campbell: A new post of Principal Private Secretary at Grade 7 level was trawled within the Northern Ireland Civil Service with a closing date of 13 February. However, it has subsequently been decided that some of the duties and responsibilities for this post require further refinement. The context for the post has, therefore, been revisited and a new competition for a Grade 7 vacancy will take place shortly. This post will, like the original proposed post, be located in the Department's Central Policy and Management Unit. The new post will include many of the duties specified in the original trawl notice plus other duties arising from a restructuring of the Unit.

Special Adviser

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) whom he has employed as special adviser(s) (b) the qualifying criteria used for the appointment and (c) the remit of the special advisor(s). (AQW 2046/00)

Mr Campbell: I appointed Mr Richard Bullick as my special adviser. He took up the appointment on 9 October 2000.

In advance of his selection and appointment, I established selection criteria as recommended in paragraphs 7 and 8

of the Code of Practice on the Appointment of Special Advisers, which is made available to Ministers to provide advice and guidance on the method of appointment of Special Advisers.

The remit of the Special Adviser is set out in Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the standard contract of employment for such advisors, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

Maritrade

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail discussions he has had with Maritrade regarding the proposed new ferry from Carrickfergus to Belfast. (AQW 2056/00)

Mr Campbell: I met with the Managing Director of Maritrade, and others associated with the project, on 23 November 2000 to hear details of their proposals for the provision of a low-wash ferry service on Belfast Lough. Since then my officials have maintained close contact with the company and have assisted the promoters in seeking to establish the new service.

I understand that the company hopes to begin the service this summer and that it will link both Carrickfergus and Bangor with Belfast (Laganside).

I very much welcome the initiative shown by Maritrade in seeking to develop this innovative service and wish the company every success with the project.

Water Rates

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Regional Development if he intends to introduce water rates and to make a statement. (AQW 2078/00)

Mr Campbell: I am not considering the introduction of domestic water rates at this present moment. However, I will be paying close attention to the progress of the Department of Finance and Personnel's review of rating policy, and its implications for the future funding of water and sewerage services.

The Member will be aware that non-domestic consumers currently pay for water and sewerage services through metered water and trade effluent charges.

A2 Carrickfergus to Belfast Road - Traffic Problems

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps he is taking to alleviate traffic problems on the A2 Carrickfergus to Belfast road. (AQO 973/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department aims to alleviate traffic problems on the A2 Carrickfergus to Belfast road, and on other main arterial routes, by pursuing an integrated

transport strategy that will make best use of the existing road network and develop and encourage the use of alternative modes of transport.

In that context, Roads Service has plans to widen 2 sections of Shore Road between Greencastle and Merville Garden Village and between Shore Avenue and Island Park to 4 lanes. These schemes, along with other proposed major road schemes on arterial routes into Belfast, will be considered as part of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan.

Also, the anticipated delivery of Translink's new rolling stock, comprising 23 new train sets, during late 2003/04 and the proposed refurbishment of the railway line between Belfast and Carrickfergus in 2002/03, should encourage more commuters to switch from cars to train. In the longer-term, Translink will consider the provision of more Park and Ride facilities at stations along this line.

Irish Language

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps he has taken to remove any restrictions within his Departmental remit on the use of the Irish language. (AQO 992/00)

Mr Campbell: The use of the Irish language within this Department will be considered within the context of part 3 of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, once ratified.

NI Street Works Register and Notification System

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what progress has been made on the production of a computerised system for the verification and registration of road works and to make a statement. (AQO 965/00)

Mr Campbell: I refer the Member to my response to his Assembly Question (AQO 302/00) on 20 November 2000 when I advised that a computer-based Northern Ireland Street Works Register and Notification System is already in place. It has been operating successfully across the country since September 2000.

Irish Language on Road Signage

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the legislative proposals he is taking to promote the use of the Irish language on road signage. (AQO 975/00)

Mr Campbell: I have no proposals to promote the use of the Irish language, or any other language, on road traffic signs. As I have previously stated in the House, the cost of changing signs throughout Northern Ireland

would be several million pounds. I believe that the public would expect me to concentrate the resources available to me to improve the road infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

Utility Companies - Excavation of Public Roads

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment on Road Service control of road openings by utility companies. (AQO 981/00)

Mr Campbell: At the outset I want to make clear that Roads Service has no power to prevent utilities from making a road opening. Utilities provide essential services for our society so they have been given a statutory right to excavate public roads to install and maintain pipes and cables. The number of utility openings has more than doubled from 21,000 in 1992 to 46,000 last year.

Against that background Roads Service has been working with the utilities to manage this activity. It has:

- operated a computerised Street Works register across Northern Ireland since September 2000;
- formally implemented 2 of the 5 planned Codes of Practice, with alternative statutory provision in place for the Safety Code and is using the remaining two Codes on a non-statutory basis; and
- established a formal training and accreditation system for utility staff employed on roadworks.

Much has been done, but more is needed. For that reason I welcome the Northern Ireland Audit Office Report published on 22 February 2001 and will be looking forward to making further progress in this important area in close co-operation with the utilities.

A2 Bangor to Belfast Road: Traffic Congestion

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to improve traffic flow on the A2 road between Bangor and Belfast. (AQO 946/00)

Mr Campbell: Within the past year, my Department's Roads Service has modernised traffic signal equipment at 3 junctions along this route and has installed 4 slow scan CCTV cameras from which the prevailing traffic flows can be monitored. Also, Roads Service is currently in the process of commissioning an extension of its computerised Urban Traffic Control system to include 10 junctions on the route from Redburn Square, Holywood to Ballysallagh Road, Clondeboy. When completed, the system will enable the timings of traffic signals to be adjusted to cater for the variety of traffic flows throughout the day and it will assist in maximising the operational efficiency of junctions along the route.

My Department aims, however, to tackle the growing problem of traffic congestion on all main arterial routes by pursuing an integrated transport strategy that will make best use of the existing road network and develop and encourage the use of alternative modes of transport. As regards the latter, the imminent completion of the Bangor Bus and Rail Station, the refurbishment of Central Station by early 2002, the relaying of the Belfast to Bangor railway line within the coming months and the anticipated delivery of new rolling stock during 2003/04, all provide the potential for encouraging motorists to switch to public transport when travelling along this corridor.

Safer Routes to Schools Initiative

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development to undertake to extend the safer routes to schools initiative to include places of worship.
(AQO 968/00)

Mr Campbell: The Safer Routes to Schools Initiative was prompted by the need to address the increased traffic congestion and pollution caused by the school run, particularly during the morning peak period in school term. I am not aware of any significant traffic congestion or road safety issues that would support extending this initiative to include places of worship.

My Department's Roads Service does, however, address road safety problems in other ways. For example, it has a specific programme of works targeting accident reduction and problems relating to specific locations are considered for appropriate remedial action within that programme.

Modernisation Fund

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what steps have been taken on the establishment of a special modernisation fund for the provision of new roads and water and sewerage infrastructure in Northern Ireland and to make a statement. (AQO 999/00)

Mr Campbell: I have consistently highlighted the massive infrastructure funding needs facing us and Members will be familiar with the requirement for £3 billion for water and sewerage over the next 20 years and £2 billion for roads and transport over the next ten years. In light of those figures, I am very much in favour of a special one-off injection, which a modernisation fund might provide to address deficiencies in these areas. In the meantime, I have asked for extra resources under four of the new Executive Programme Funds. In particular I have bid for some £90 million, over 5 years, from the Infrastructure/Capital Renewal Fund to help me tackle these serious deficiencies.

Traffic Calming Schemes

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of traffic calming schemes that have been implemented in each month since he took office.
(AQO 1009/00)

Mr Campbell: Since my appointment as Regional Development Minister my Department's Roads Service has commenced construction on 26 traffic calming schemes throughout Northern Ireland as follows:-

August 2000	4
September 2000	1
October 2000	2
November 2000	3
December 2000	3
January 2001	0
February 2001	13

Traffic Calming Measures

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his policy on traffic calming measures.
(AQO 969/00)

Mr Campbell: I am aware of the growing number of requests for traffic calming measures throughout Northern Ireland, particularly in the greater Belfast area. The number of potential schemes far exceeds the resources available to my Department's Roads Service for such work. Accordingly, a scoring system has been developed using criteria that have been drawn up to identify those sites where the greatest benefits may be achieved, primarily in accident reduction. The criteria include, for example, the history of personal injury road accidents, the volume and speed of traffic and the road environment. In addition, increased emphasis is given to accidents involving children and the elderly.

Members may recall that, in response to an Oral Assembly Question on 18 December 2000, I announced my intention to introduce 10 pilot traffic calming schemes across Northern Ireland to explore ways of progressing schemes more quickly and, at the same time, ensuring full and meaningful consultation with local people. I will be announcing full details of this initiative later this month.

Sewage Disposal System - Hamlets

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps he is taking to ensure that hamlets have an adequate sewage disposal system.
(AQO 950/00)

Mr Campbell: Water Service plans to invest £7.5 million over the next 5 years to provide public sewerage

facilities to some 1,500 properties in approximately 42 rural hamlets.

Approximately 83% of properties in Northern Ireland are served by the public sewerage system. In addition, Water Service provides a desludging service for approximately 40,000 private septic tanks. Properly installed and maintained septic tanks are a satisfactory means of disposing of domestic wastewater across the United Kingdom and will continue to be the most cost effective system for many rural properties.

The provision of a public sewerage facility to every hamlet in Northern Ireland would require hundreds of millions of pounds of public funding and would divert resources from other high priority areas of investment.

A5 Road from Magheramason to Newbuildings

Mr Hay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to upgrade the A5 road from Magheramason to Newbuildings, County Londonderry. (AQO 991/00)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service is considering a proposal to widen a two kilometre stretch of the A5 road between Magheramason and Newbuildings. The scheme, which would cost approximately £2 million to complete, will be assessed for possible inclusion in the 10-Year Forward Planning Schedule. Needless to say, there are many schemes competing for a place in this schedule. I hope to be in a position to announce details later this year.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

New Targeting Social Need

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the steps he is taking, through the Promoting Social Inclusion dimension of Targeting Social Need (TSN), to identify ways of tackling those factors that may cause social exclusion which may require a cross Departmental approach. (AQW 1970/00)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): Promoting social inclusion is seen as a high priority for this Department. Indeed in the Department's New TSN Action Plan, which will be included in the second New TSN Annual Report, one of the 4 key themes which has been identified is "Addressing Social Exclusion".

Although promoting social inclusion applies to all areas of the Department's business, it will have particular relevance in the areas of Urban Regeneration and Community Development. My Department will aim to

bring about social, economic and physical regeneration and redress disadvantage in cities, town and villages as well as continuing to make assessments of social exclusion across Northern Ireland. We will also aim to promote an active Voluntary and Community Sector and partnership between Government and the Sector.

Evidence of the work the Department for Social Development has already been involved in to tackle those factors that may cause social exclusion, is provided through the Promoting Social Inclusion (PSI) Working Group on Travellers, which was established in June 1999. This Group, chaired by my Department, looked at all the issues affecting Travellers such as accommodation, health, social services, education and training. As well as members from the relevant central government Departments, the group included Travellers and representatives from the Traveller's support organisations. The report was submitted to OFMDFM in July 2000 who have subsequently issued it for public consultation. The consultation period will end on 30 April 2001.

I am totally committed to establishing the Department for Social Development as one of the foremost New TSN Departments. To do that I will ensure that my Department will continue to work both cross-departmentally and with partners outside Government to identify and tackle factors which contribute to social exclusion.

Travelling Community

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the resources he has targeted to the Travelling Community and to make a statement. (AQW 2015/00)

Mr Morrow: My Department has allocated a considerable amount of resources towards identifying the accommodation needs of Travellers and will continue to react to meeting those needs in the future.

Over the last two financial years an annual grant of £35,000 has been given to the Lee Hestia Housing Association to liaise and consult Travellers regarding accommodation. My Department is also funding four pilot group housing schemes that are designed and constructed specifically for Travellers. The first of these, at Omagh, has commenced and hopefully two others will commence in the next financial year. The start date of the fourth scheme is dependent on the completion of the statutory processes. The total cost of these schemes is estimated at over £10m.

For each of the next two financial years my Department has made available £100,000 to provide grant aid for the capital costs of providing authorised sites by District Councils, and immediate basic facilities on other sites.

Special Advisor

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) whom he has employed as special adviser(s) (b) the qualifying criteria used for the appointment and (c) the remit of the special adviser(s).

(AQW 2082/00)

Mr Morrow: I have appointed Mr Ian Crozier as a special adviser on the basis of his ability to carry out all the functions contained in the job description for the post. Furthermore, a detailed knowledge of Democratic Unionist Party policies and the necessary political skills were essential requirements. The remit is set out in Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the standard contract of employment for such advisers, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Properties

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties sold within (a) Magherafelt District Council area (b) Dungannon Borough Council area (c) Cookstown District Council area and (d) the revenue generated from their sale within the last three years.

(AQW 2097/00)

Mr Morrow: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has advised that detailed financial records at district council level are only available from the house sales computer records from the 1999/2000 financial year onwards and are as follows:

Council Area	1999/2000		2000/2001 (Jan)	
	Sold	Revenue	Sold	Revenue
Magherafelt	136	£1,980,559	115	£1,744,583
Dungannon	122	£1,679,032	88	£1,293,354
Cookstown	77	£1,026,344	93	£1,327,080

Social Security Agency: Quinquennial Review

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail when he intends to conduct a quinquennial review of the Social Security Agency. (AQW 2142/00)

Mr Morrow: The Second Quinquennial Review of the Social Security Agency was due to have been undertaken in the last year. However, I have decided to postpone the review for a further year mainly for 2 reasons. First, the Social Security Agency is about to embark on one of the most ambitious programmes to modernise the social security benefit system through implementation of the Welfare Reform and Modernisation initiative. In addition a central review of finance and personnel functions in the Northern Ireland Civil Service is underway and this could have a significant bearing on flexibilities to the chief executive.

Bilateral Concordat

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail when he expects to publish the bilateral concordat between his Department and the Department of Social Security. (AQW 2143/00)

Mr Morrow: The Secretary of State for Social Security and I have agreed the text of the concordat between the Department of Social Security and the Department for Social Development. Copies of the concordat have been placed in the Assembly Library.

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